

THOMAS MERTON'S TROUBLING QUESTIONS ON VIOLENCE: FROM AUSCHWITZ TO VIETNAM

Donald P. St. John
Moravian College, USA

Abstract

This paper presents some of the major “questions” and points of inquiry concerning war and peace, ethics and conscience, language and duplicity directed at secular governments and religious institutions by the Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton (1915-1968). In a series of essays penned during the 1960s this popular spiritual writer shook his more conservative readers with his strongly worded attacks on the passivity of religious institutions in the face of extremely violent wars, genocidal campaigns and nuclear terrorism sponsored by the governments with which they were aligned. Merton draws lessons for his own era from the trials of Auschwitz personnel to the ruthless conventional and atomic bombings by the Allies, and uses them to raise troubling questions about attempts to justify the insanity of nuclear escalation and the vicious quagmire that was Vietnam. And in the midst of raising moral questions, Merton examines the language used to distort the reality of Auschwitz, Dresden and Hiroshima, of first strike capabilities and the “free fire zones” of Vietnam. This paper also attempts to demonstrate something of the prophetic fire and philosophical coolness of Merton’s thought as well as its literary power. The final section suggests that Merton’s questions are as troubling and germane today as they were when initially raised.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was one of the most prolific and influential Catholic writers of the twentieth century.¹ He combined the critical thinking of a philosopher, the moral outrage of a prophet, and the penetrating insight of a contemplative, delivering his message with the literary command and creative imagination of a writer and artist. These various voices of Merton did not always harmonize with each other, and sometimes one or the other would either fall silent or overwhelm the others. Nevertheless, and more times than one would expect, they pulled together to produce memorable works of prose and poetry.

Thomas Merton had the ability to raise troubling questions with great power and penetrating insight. Often they came unexpectedly, as when two contexts not normally related were shown to be connected or when surprising conclusions were reached after an argument took an unusual turn. Merton's unnerving ability to draw a moral lesson about a contemporary issue from a discussion purportedly about a past situation won him both friends and foes. This method was especially effective when Merton made connections between the moral behavior of Nazis and their religious sympathizers and the contemporary rhetoric and actions of Western political, military and religious leaders.

This paper will examine some of the more "troubling" questions Merton posed to his contemporaries, both secular and religious, occasioned by the horrific and continuing episodes of extreme violence, such as the genocide of Nazi death camps, saturation bombing of cities with conventional and nuclear weapons, nuclear brinkmanship and escalation during the Cold War, and finally the interface of superpower and guerilla forces in a rural setting (Vietnam). In this context, we will explore Merton's reflections on the moral implications of language and "logic" as they were used by the actual or potential perpetrators of extreme violence. Being a highly literate and literary person, Merton was fascinated with how language operates in extreme situations and how the logic of "necessity" ("I/we had to do it") works both to explain and justify the contemplation, initiation, or continuation of extreme violence.

We have chosen a few seminal essays that illustrate the range of Merton's thinking and have supplemented them with material from other essays to present a fuller view or to raise additional questions. It is important when dealing with a writer like Merton to keep the tone and flavor of

his own words, especially in the many places where *how* Merton expresses himself is important to grasping *what* he is saying. Sometimes Merton's ability to evoke a particular image, recreate a specific experience, or elicit a certain response (humor, disgust, anger, etc.) is crucial to grasping or sometimes being grasped by his message.

AUSCHWITZ

Language

Thomas Merton, a poet, novelist, literary critic and essayist, had a sophisticated appreciation for the use and abuse of language. In the summer of 1961, he wrote two unusual prose poems that signaled a willingness to experiment in new styles, a renewed interest in world affairs, and a decision to reengage the modern world in a significant way. He already had made a decision to engage in an apostolate to intellectuals and other persons of importance around the world. His famous correspondence with and public defense of Boris Pasternak in 1959 and 1960 marked the beginning of this new phase. Merton's prose poem "Original Child Bomb"² used wartime images, slogans, official statements, code words, and news releases in a cool journalistic recounting of the events leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His "Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces",³ a sardonic and ironic poem, recreated the style of language used by Nazi war criminals and found in documents pertaining to the running of death camps. If truth is the first casualty of war, language is its murder weapon. Gandhi understood this deeply and so did Merton. Merton was not so interested in the crude but honest language of personal violence, but in the ultimately more dangerous and subtle language utilized by governments and their bureaucracies, by military think-tanks, by politicians and even the mass media to express, conceal, encourage and normalize violence and its effects.

Merton's essay "Auschwitz: A Family Camp"⁴ was a lengthy review of *Auschwitz* by Bernd Naumann (1966) with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, one of Merton's favorite political philosophers. Naumann's is a disturbing work, filled with pages of testimony by former SS men, employees, and survivors of Auschwitz. The testimony was presented

during a twenty-month trial which began in Frankfurt in December, 1963. As Merton notes: “Language itself has fallen victim to total war, genocide, and systematic tyranny in our time”. At Auschwitz, language itself was so dangerous and so guarded in its use that all military and civilian personnel took what amounted to a “vow” of secrecy. Anyone revealing information about what was occurring at Auschwitz was accused of the unforgivable sin of “defeatist talk”. Truth became as much of an enemy as the Allies, perhaps more. When it was absolutely necessary to write or speak to outsiders, language had to be cast in “officialese”, which “has a talent for discussing reality while denying it and calling truth itself into question”. Merton would observe the same thing in relation both to the nuclear war and to Vietnam. Yet, truth could not be totally hidden. One of the unavoidable side effects of the use of so much doubletalk and doublethink, euphemisms and clichés was the unavoidable suggestion that something was missing, like a doughnut encircling its hole. The literature is full of euphemisms like: “special treatment”, “special housing”, “special custody”, “re-education”, “recovery camp for the tired”, “disinfectants”, “material for resettlement of the Jews”, and “Ovaltine substitute”.

Auschwitz language is merely an extreme example of all official bureaucratic languages in their “celebration of boredom, of routine, of deadness, of organized futility”. Yet it is unique in containing “a kind of heavy lilt in its mockery”. For example, “Work makes free”, the words over the entrance to Auschwitz, really mean that in here we work everyone to death; freedom is death and death is freedom. The sign, “To the Bath”, means that there we will purify and cleanse you of everything. Merton notes how a fetish for cleanliness characterized the crew caring for the gas chambers and crematoriums. Such fastidiousness left not a speck of dust to indicate that a human being had ever been there. And the S.S. order “Assigned to harvest duty”, means that you have been assigned to Auschwitz to “harvest” people. Merton suggests that the key to unlocking the coded Auschwitz language “is its pathological joy in death”.

The military and civilian “employees” of Auschwitz displayed a remarkable virtuosity at creating a virtual reality when placed on trial for war crimes. This led the judge at one point to sarcastically remark that from what the defendants said, no one had done anything at Auschwitz. One guard, when asked about the practice of shooting prisoners in the

back and then claiming they had tried to escape, indignantly responded that such a charge was ludicrous. Why would anyone want to escape from Auschwitz? After all, was it not “a family camp”? The surreal quality of that world was conveyed by an ex-prisoner who recalled seeing a group of children playing ball when a woman guard (there were woman guards) clapped her hands and shouted “All right now, let’s stop. Now we take showers”. The woman guard picked up one of the little girls and carried her down the steps to the “bath”. The little girl, noticing the eagle emblem on the guards’ hat, asked, “What kind of birdy is that?” The ex-prisoner sadly noted that that was the last time he saw that little girl. There was also the case of the one hundred and twenty children from the Polish town of Zamosc. Their parents were dead and so eventually they were led into an “examination room”. Klehr, an SS male nurse, was expert in injecting “patients” in the heart with phenolic acid. It cured all health problems. He waited for the boys and then proceeded to methodically “treat” them one after another. When he tired, others took over but they were not always up to the demands of the work. His successor “broke down under the strain and ran out of the room, refusing to kill any more children”. But a third SS man finished the task. Merton rhetorically asks: “Reason for the death of the little boys from Zamosc?” The answer given in testimony was: “As a precaution against ‘immorality’ in the camp”. As with its ovens, “Auschwitz had to be very, very clean!” observes Merton.

Merton was, of course, interested in more than the language of Auschwitz. As a highly moral and spiritual person he was intensely interested in finding answers to the many questions that troubled his own mind: questions about human nature and about the negative effects on the human mind and heart of social and political forces. Above all he wondered whether we could learn anything that might help us avoid similar horrendous events in the future. Merton’s first question flowed from his observation that the “demonic sickness of Auschwitz emanated from ordinary people, stimulated by an extraordinary regime”. Most grew up in Christian homes, attended church and received a good education in a civilized city. They lived and moved among respectable citizens in the years preceding and following Hitler’s rule. Yet, Merton asks, how is it that, during the years in between, “they could beat and bash and torment and shoot and whip and murder thousands of their fellow human beings, *including*

even their former neighbors and friends, and think nothing of it?” Merton used this troubling question to shake his readers out of their smug complacency and make them confront their own darker possibilities. Merton was not a pessimist regarding human nature, and he understood how important social environments are in shaping people. But he also knew how essential is the development of critical thinking, moral conscience and the spiritual qualities of compassion and love if one is to be empowered and equipped to criticize and counter the pressures toward acquiescence and conformity.

Merton’s second question flowed from the first: “How is it that Auschwitz worked?” It worked, Merton answered, because a lot of people, both inside and outside of the camp, “wanted it to work”. Instead of rebelling against its existence or resisting it, they put their energies into turning genocide into a reality. The few legitimate psychopaths who worked in this system could have gotten nowhere without the committed assistance of bureaucrats, managers and military police at the camp as well as the owners and employees of the companies that profited from the cheap slave labor provided by the camp and the many people who knew something was terribly wrong but did nothing.

Merton’s third question concerns the issue of individual conscience. Most individuals at the trial claimed that they were only following orders. But, Merton asks, “Was there no choice?” There were individuals who did refuse to torture and murder their fellow human beings. “Why was not this done more often?” Merton asks. Merton suggests that the relative “security” of the camps for employees was an incentive to stay silent. The camps were a safe assignment, preferable to being sent to the front, and they were not in danger of being bombed. There were also “privileges” that went with this kind of work: cigarettes, drinks, and extra rations. But, then there was the gratuitous violence perpetrated by camp workers; violence that went beyond their orders. Most of these acts “were forbidden even by Gestapo’s own rules”. In fact, some individuals were punished by the SS for their overly enthusiastic use of violence. One would think that there were plenty of opportunities to inflict pain and death on the inmates and a wide enough selection of perversities that extracurricular activities would not be necessary. But, regardless of whether individuals stepped over the official line or not, it was evident that “many of these men tortured

and killed because they thoroughly enjoyed it”.

Fourth, “what does all this add up to?” Merton fears that given the right situation places like Auschwitz can spring up again and people could easily be found to do this kind of work. What would it take? First, a legitimating authority willing to assume responsibility or to whom responsibility can be transferred for acts of violence. Second, an official ideology of hate that affirms one basic principle: “ANYONE BELONGING TO CLASS X OR NATION Y OR RACE Z IS TO BE REGARDED AS SUBHUMAN AND WORTHLESS, AND CONSEQUENTLY HAS NO RIGHT TO EXIST. All the rest will follow without difficulty”. If such a principle became acceptable there would be no need for monsters: “ordinary policemen and good citizens would take care of everything”.

One must remember that Merton was writing against the backdrop of the recent history of the civil rights movement with its scenes of police dogs, water cannons, racial hatred and racist murders, even of children. Merton was vehemently opposed to the way blacks were being treated in America, especially in the Southern U.S., where he lived. Merton wrote extensively on matters of race and in support of the civil rights and nonviolent movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although this essay does not deal with this aspect of Merton’s life and writings, its historical and biographical context must be kept in mind, especially when reading his writings on the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. In 1968, Dr. King would cancel a retreat he was to take under Thomas Merton to attend the Memphis boycott. He was planning to journey to the monastery at Gethsemane to see Merton soon afterwards. The meeting never took place. King was assassinated in Memphis and by year’s end Merton would be dead.

Merton’s “Chant”

Merton wrote “Chant to be Used in Processions Around Sites with Furnaces” in the summer of 1961, well before his review of the Auschwitz book or the Eichmann trial, but after his reading of William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.⁵ Merton’s prose poem broke new ground, both in style and in content. It reflected his

reengagement with the world and the crucial issues of his day. Merton “borrowed” the language for this prose poem from actual statements or documents connected with the trials of death camp personnel found in Shirer’s work. In this prose poem, the major voice is that of a commander of Auschwitz who uses language that appears on the surface to be too objective, unemotional, and rational. The reader knows to what he is alluding, i.e. a camp structured to take in thousands of living beings and destroy them: some gradually, most immediately. While this advantage allows the reader to “see through” the façade, the reader is led to wonder whether he or she is blind and deaf to his or her own linguistic universe when it presents violence as normal business or as an excusable necessity. A few rearranged excerpts from this poem are presented below.

The commander of the camp is the narrator and his voice and tone are so dispassionate that one suspects that they mask a sick smirk. He loves cleanliness and efficiency though death’s greedy grasp finally encircles even him.

I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent
How I commanded
I made cleaning appointments and then I made the travellers sleep and after that I made soap...
When trains arrived the soiled passengers received appointments for fun in the bathroom they did not guess...
How I often commanded and made improvements and sealed the door on top there were flowers the men came with crystals I guaranteed always the crystal parlor...
All the while I had obeyed perfectly
So I was hanged in a commanding position with a full view of the site plant and grounds
You smile at my career but would do as I did if you knew yourself and dared...

Violence, even mass murder, can be conducted in a business-like manner. There is always the necessary business correspondence for equip-

ment, arrangements and bills. Business language seems well suited in Merton's mind both for conducting for-profit transactions and ignoring any ethical implications. Merton had drawn from examples of correspondence he had come across in his reading. He was to develop this insight in his later discussion of structural violence. The commander is so enthusiastic over his newly purchased machinery which functions so coldly and efficiently that he begins to identify with the equipment itself.

A big new firm promoted steel forks operating on a cylinder they got the contract and with faultless workmanship delivered very fast goods

How I commanded and made soap 12 lbs fat 10 quarts water 8 oz to a lb of caustic soda but it was hard to find any fat

"For transporting the customers we suggest using light carts on wheels a drawing is submitted"

"We acknowledge four steady furnaces and an emergency guarantee"

"I am a big new commander operating on a cylinder I elevate the purified materials boil for 2 to 3 hrs and then cool"

For putting them into a test fragrance I suggested an express elevator operated by the latest cylinder it was guaranteed

Finding words with which to mask the horrendous murder of children or the gruesome task of gathering wedding rings from dead bodies was challenging and met by simply making words mean something other than what they would normally mean. Jewish inmates were recruited for some tasks and rewarded by being given "adequate food". This proves perhaps to the commander both that humans can be reduced to their basic needs but also that he is not a pure racist but that maybe there were the more and the less deserving inmates.

Children of tender age were always invited

By reason of their youth they were unable to work

They were marked out for play

They were washed like the others and more than the others . . .

Jewish male inmates then worked up nice they had rubber boots
in return for adequate food I could not guess their appetite . . .
Their love was fully stopped by our perfected ovens but the love
rings were salvaged
Thanks to the satisfaction of male inmates operating the heaters
without need of compensation our guests were warmed . . .

Finally, the commander—and Merton—cautions the reader against
assuming a self-righteous position. As he often does, Merton makes a
surprising connection between actions done in the past that the reader
finds repugnant and present actions in which the reader might be complicit.

Do not think yourself better
Because you burn up friends and enemies
With long-range missiles
Without ever seeing what you have done.

Eichmann was *Sane*?

The testimony of Nazi war criminals and the historical record of
the Third Reich demonstrate the power of language to justify, conceal,
and normalize the most atrocious kinds of brutal violence. But it was the
famous Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann so penetratingly reported on by
Hannah Arendt that most affected Merton and moved him to reflect on
some of the implications of that trial.

In a journal entry dated March 23, 1963, Merton writes that per-
haps his reading of a book on Nicholas of Cusa provides some . . .

comfort to which I respond inordinately after reading the first two
of Hannah Arendt's articles on the Eichmann case. It's incredible,
and shattering. The trial is not just an indictment of one man or
one system, but is in fact a sordid examination of conscience of
the entire west and one which has proved singularly inconclusive
because no one seems to grasp anything definite about it (if they
have even *tried* to grasp anything). All that remains is a sense of
loss, of horror, and of disorientation. And even the horror is dif-
fuse and superficial. Where does one begin to respond to the

multiple indictment of our world? The stereotypical answers all collapse, and there are no new ones, and there is no faith!⁶

Yet Merton quickly recovers and cautions that the “total irrationality” of the trial should not make us distrust reason or humanity. Reason, conscience, humanity have not been destroyed by the “inane cruelties” of the times. Such thinking leads to “a more complete surrender to a more absolute irrationality, and a more total cruelty”.⁷

Merton notes that Eichmann had appealed to “blind obedience” or “corpse-like obedience” to explain his actions. Eichmann claimed that he lived his life from childhood in accord with Kant’s “moral precepts” and “conception of duty”. He later admitted that Kant did not approve of “blind obedience”. Eichmann also confessed that when following Hitler’s program for the “final solution”, he went beyond Kant’s principles and took as his grounds for blind obedience the dictum “Act as if the Führer would approve of it if he saw you!” This goes beyond duty, to an identification with the “legislator”. Eichmann seemed bothered by two exceptions he made to the rules. In those cases, instead of following his duty to his Führer, he allowed Jews to escape. “All along, the terrible thing about the Eichmann case”, Merton suggests, “was the fact that his motives were always *motives of conscience* and duty, not of fanaticism”.⁸

While Merton obviously is fascinated with Arendt’s “banality of evil” argument, this remains in the background, and is not the main concern of his essay “A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann”.⁹ Merton, as usual, wants to draw a lesson from Eichmann to apply to his ongoing concern with the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war. And he wants to raise a troubling question that goes to the core of his understanding of human beings: what are the implications of Eichmann’s being judged “sane” for our understanding of the human person and his or her relationship to society?

Merton’s famous essay begins with these words: “One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him *perfectly* sane. I do not doubt it at all, and that is why I find it disturbing”. Merton goes on to describe Eichmann as orderly, punctual, and unimaginative with a “profound respect for system, for law and order”. He was obedient and loyal. He didn’t develop

any psychosomatic illnesses and seemed to sleep well. He had some disturbing experiences but bore them “bravely” for the sake of the Fatherland in the spirit of duty and self-sacrifice.

Yes, “the sanity of Eichmann is disturbing”, because we usually equate sanity with “a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people”. We depend on the sane people to protect us from madness and destruction. But what if it is the sane ones who are “the most dangerous”? Merton biting suggests: “It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, *the sane ones*, have prepared”. We are naïve to think that a psychotic will push the button.

No one suspects the sane, and the sane ones will have *perfectly good reasons*, logical, well-adjusted reasons, for firing the shot. They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command. And because of their sanity they will have no qualms at all. When the missiles take off, *it will be no mistake*.

Merton then raises the question of whether the whole notion of sanity as the ability to act in a “cool, orderly manner”, adjusting to the needs and varying expectations of society makes any sense when that society has lost its spiritual values. If the test of sanity is “adjustment”, then perhaps these people could be perfectly adjusted in hell. If the people who planned, supported, and ran the death camps are deemed “sane”, then obviously the definition of sanity does not include empathy, compassion, or other qualities that indicate an ability to experience the suffering of others as one’s own. Sadly, the possession of these “spiritual” qualities is not deemed necessary for one to be declared clinically “sane”. Does that mean that a spiritual person who has developed these qualities to a high degree is not sane? Would that person not feel out of place in an insane society, much as a conscientious person would have felt as an employee of a death camp? Or perhaps Christians should be realistic and just try to “fit in”. After all, Christians have been “sane” in the past:

Torture is nothing new, is it? We ought to be able to ratio-

nalize a little brainwashing, and genocide, and find a place for nuclear war, or at least for napalm, in our moral theology. Certainly some of us are doing our best along these lines already. There are hopes! Even Christians can shake off their sentimental prejudices about charity and become sane like Eichmann.

Eichmann was sane, according to Merton. So were the military leaders on both sides during World War II who obliterated whole cities. And sane were those involved in the creation and detonation of the A-bombs and H-bombs, and sane are those who plan the strategy for the next war including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. These are the sane ones, the cool-headed ones who estimate “how many millions of people can be considered expendable in a nuclear war”. The truly insane people, of course, the real “crazies”, as every sane person knows, are the pacifists and the ban-the-bomb crowd. Merton thinks that perhaps sanity is “no longer a value or an end in itself”. Just as the dinosaurs proved counter-productive when things changed, so might sanity in a nuclear age. Perhaps, though, there is a chance for survival if we are a little less sane, a little more conscious of our “absurdities and contradictions”. But if we are sane, too sane, well “. . . perhaps we must say that in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally ‘sane’”.

HITLER AND THE FAILURE OF THE CHURCHES

Traditional Western Christianity has always held that there is a special connection between Christ and the “Spirit” of Western civilization. Conquistadores and colonialists brought both sword and cross, Western civilization and the Gospel to “heathen” cultures and in some cases even after a separation had developed between institutional Christianity and secular political institutions. While there were still some areas of “friction” between Christian teachings and the practices in secular Western societies, a general agreement developed that if the Church did not encroach on the powers of secular authority, it could do pretty much whatever it wants.

However, governments expected the churches to support them in time of war and would look unkindly at wholesale opposition and resis-

tance. “One of the few demands for heroic sacrifice still made by the Church was that the faithful put aside their scruples and fears and obey the nation without question when it summoned them to go to war, even against other supposedly “Christian” nations. Theirs not to reason why. The government knew best”.¹⁰

Merton notes that the “violence of believers” has played a significant part in the history of the West. If practice is a form of preaching, then by their practice Christians have often preached that violence and not nonviolence proves the strength of one’s faith. In the twentieth century during two world wars “Christians, on both sides, were exhorted to go out and kill each other if not in the name of Christ and faith, at least in the name of ‘Christian duty’”. Even more strangely, German Christians during WWII were urged to go out and kill and die “for a government that was not only non-Christian but anti-Christian and which had evident intentions of getting rid of the Church”. And so it was, notes Merton, that “God was drafted into all the armies and invited to get out there and kill himself”.¹¹ Recent studies on the role of the churches in Nazi Germany raised questions in Merton’s mind about the moral passivity of the Protestant and Catholic Churches. To examine this, he turned to the testimony of Christians who opposed the Third Reich and therefore their churches, sometimes at the cost of their lives. We shall consider three people about whom Merton wrote, what they taught him, and how he applied the lessons learned sometimes to the discomfort of his fellow Catholics.

The first person we shall consider is Fr. Ignace Lepp whose diaries, written during the Nazi occupation of France, had just been published (1962).¹² Lepp’s book struck a chord with Merton. Ironically, on the twenty-fourth anniversary of his baptism (November 16, 1962) and in the middle of his own period of enforced silence, he records in his journal that he is reading Lepp’s book and that “In a certain sense I am scandalized by my own Catholicism”. He complains that it is “bad enough” that one has “constantly to yield to officialdom and follow the decisions and regulations of bureaucrats”, but increasingly there are clear cases of “conflict between the dead regulation on the one hand and living, spontaneous moral action on the other”.¹³

Merton’s sympathetic review of Fr. Lepp’s book also provided him the opportunity to critically examine the use and abuse of authority by

the Church especially in dealing with individuals who presented a challenge to its passivity over issues of war and peace.¹⁴ Fr. Lepp opposed the Vichy puppet government and Nazism but received little support and considerable opposition from his fellow Catholic priests. Merton focused on what he characterized as a mentality of evasion which was responsible for the failure of bishops, clerics, and especially wealthy laity to resist and attempt to undermine the Nazi puppet government. The Bishops and clerics in Vichy France supported the Nazi installed regime because in their minds it was the only alternative to Communism. Such an either/or characterization of the situation reflects a “latent despair of freedom and of democratic government”, which is another trait of the psychology of evasion. There was not a genuine “choice” but a regressive “capitulation to power”. Lepp’s fellow priests could not understand or support his resistance activities and tried to dissuade him from being involved in the underground.

“The authoritarian character of the Church”, wrote Fr. Lepp, “has developed in many Catholics a tendency to evade all spiritual responsibility; they wait to be told what to do by authorities”. When ministers of the church encourage such morally immature ideas and practices, they abuse their authority and thereby weaken rather than strengthen the moral life of Catholics. Thus, the lay people do not take any initiative when serious social evils appear but passively await instructions from priests who themselves are frequently out of touch with the real world and give useless advice. “This results in an abdication of responsibility and passive submission to an evil that ought to be identified, denounced, and resisted, not ‘obeyed’”, says Merton. Not only that, men such as Fr. Lepp and Emmanuel Mounier who had the courage and Christian values to oppose evil were often refused comfort and support by their Church when imprisoned by Vichy. According to Lepp, Mounier, a courageous and articulate Catholic writer, went on a hunger strike but was refused “absolution on the grounds that he had disobeyed legitimate authority and was not prepared to repent his disobedience”.

This false understanding of Christian obedience, notes Merton, leads to a “mechanical and irrational submission” to an “official machine”. This is not the freedom of the “Sons of God” but a “compliance of functionaries”. Merton’s point could not be lost on the hierarchy and lay people

of his day. In fact, he directly challenges them, charging that the Church either refuses or is unable to face and to protest against injustice as well as the threat of nuclear war. "One of the grave problems of religion in our time", writes Merton, "is posed by the almost total lack of protest on the part of religious people and clergy in the face of enormous social evils". These people suffer from a moral blindness because "they are no longer fully capable of *seeing and evaluating* certain evils as they truly are: as crimes against God and as betrayals of the Christian ethic of love". Merton cites the rampant social injustice in Latin America and the possibility of nuclear war in North America which most Catholics "tend to accept passively and without question because it is 'better than being a Communist'. It is a 'lesser evil'". This is not a moral judgment but simply "a psychology of evasion, irresponsibility, and negativism" which cloaks itself in concepts such as "self sacrifice", "obedience to civil authority" and "defense of freedom and religion". Persons in authority encourage this evasive helplessness and take advantage of it. True Christian obedience should "liberate" a person from all forms of servitude and free him or her to criticize and refuse to cooperate with injustice and dehumanization no matter what the source. This understanding of freedom has gradually been replaced by a "psychology of subservient opportunism" which supports the worst habits of the "mass mind" and threatens both Christianity and democracy.

In "An Enemy of the State",¹⁵ Merton presents the case of the Austrian peasant Franz Jägerstätter who was beheaded by the Nazis for repeatedly refusing to take the military oath and for declaring Hitler's wars "unjust". Jägerstätter was a convert to Catholicism and thought that he was taking a very traditional Catholic stand. Unfortunately most of his fellow Catholics including clergy thought otherwise, and everyone from friends to judges tried to convince Franz to change his mind.

What were their arguments? First, they claimed that there was simply nothing that one person could do against the Nazi regime. Therefore, Franz should serve, and if he was forced to engage in immoral acts, those who gave the orders were responsible, not him. This sounds like the Eichmann defense. Jägerstätter disagreed, claiming that a Christian would be guilty of a grave sin if he or she simply obeyed whatever a civil ruler ordered, however immoral. Whether or not it shakes the regime, Christians are obligated to resist and to fight evil, not with physical weapons but

with spiritual ones. Second, they argued that since Bolshevism was anti-Christian and since Hitler at least tolerated the churches (for the present), his refusal to fight for Hitler was a refusal to defend the faith against godless communism. Merton, of course, would note many times in other places that this “mentality of evasion” with its lack of faith in democracy or in the power of Christ was a characteristic of the “Better Dead than Red” crowd, Christian and non-Christian, who would rather commit national suicide and genocide in a nuclear exchange than to live under godless communism.

Third, they accused him of pride and arrogance for presuming to be a better judge of what constitutes a “just war” than those in authority. This, of course, was an invitation to abdicate one’s responsibility as a moral creature with reason and free will. Fourth, they pointed out that thousands of Catholic priests and lay people were serving in the military. Was he better than they? Here was an invitation to join a herd of sheep who blindly follow where they are led. Fifth, the bishops had not officially opposed the war and, in fact, his own bishop had tried to convince him to serve. In other words, the moral failing of the bishops was to be replicated by their lay people. Fifth, he could contribute better to the salvation of others by joining the army where he could practice the “apostolate of good example”. As Merton points out, these arguments could be heard in his day (and in ours, one could add).

The Bishop of Linz neither openly condemned Jägerstätter’s action nor praised him as a moral hero. At best he could be considered a unique witness. But he was not to be a model for others. The bishop did not approve of conscientious objection as a legitimate Catholic option. Rather, he stated that the true heroes were “those exemplary young Catholic men, seminarians, priests, and heads of families who fought and died in heroic fulfillment of duty and in the firm conviction that they were fulfilling the will of God at their post. . . .” These men were acting out of “a clear and correct conscience” while Jägerstätter was “in error” even if “in good faith”, the bishop decreed.

Merton suggests that the bishop may have had things in reverse and that he and many of his clergy were the ones with “ill-formed consciences” due to their weak seminary training. Many in the hierarchy shirked their responsibilities for correctly forming the consciences of young people

in matters pertaining to war and peace. Merton was concerned in his day about the responsibility of “those who help men to form their conscience—or fail to do so”. The unnerving question was to what extent the “innocently erroneous” convictions of church people in Nazi Germany were shared by clerics and bishops of Merton’s day who were charged with the correct formation of consciences regarding war and peace. All of this “gives food for some rather apocalyptic thought”, given the nuclear saber rattling on both sides, Merton warns. The real question, then, raised by the Jägerstätter story was “*the question of the Church’s own mission of protest and prophecy in the gravest spiritual crisis [humanity] has ever known*”. [italics are mine]

There were those, however, who reached across political and ideological borders and who worked for peace and unity among all peoples. Some laid down their lives in this effort. One such person was Fr. Max Josef Metzger who was imprisoned and executed in 1944 in Germany. His life stood in stark contrast with that of many of his fellow Christians—a fact not lost on Merton in his essay, “A Martyr for Peace and Unity: Father Max Josef Metzger (1887-1944)”.¹⁶ Merton points out that when Germany invaded Poland and plunged the world into war, the German Catholic press, with some exceptions, supported Hitler’s war in order to stay in business. But this less than laudatory choice goes far beyond just the Catholic press. The situation in the modern world (both under Hitler and the nuclear cloud) often demands that Christians make heroic moral choices against war and on behalf of peace because the survival of humankind may hinge on enough people resisting evil. And yet “in order to preserve our institutional freedom of action” we can blind our consciences “with a false conception of duty and of sacrifice”. This allows us to quietly “participate in colossal injustices and barbarities”. Christians too often forget their primary duty to Christ and allow their “duties to Caesar” to justify cowardice, greed and deafness to the cries of suffering that can be heard everywhere. Merton laments that it is easier to prefer “infidelity to conscience and Christ” to social ostracism. And, when economic interests are involved, Christians can be easily persuaded “that the side of God is the side on which our bread happens to be buttered”.

However, the example of Father Metzger reminds us that “not everyone needs to be a passive utensil of the militarist”. Metzger had been

a chaplain in WWI and had seen the senseless horrors of war close up. After the war he spent his life working for peace. He founded organizations dedicated to “the works of mercy”. A special cause of his was Christian unity and he was a crucial player in *Una Sancta*, an ecumenical movement among Protestants and Catholics that began in 1939. He was a frequent participant in peace conferences and congresses. He was arrested several times by the Gestapo who tried to pin sedition charges on him without success. He had written that: “The ‘just war’ of which the moralists wrote in former days is now no longer possible. War today is a crime. We need to organize peace as men have organized war”.

Metzger was betrayed by an undercover Swedish woman who pretended to want to work for international peace. He was arrested for the last time in 1943. His “treason” was his efforts to procure the help of bishops in other countries to request from the Allies something short of the demand that Hitler surrender unconditionally, so that the cities could be spared thousands of deaths. He was executed by the Gestapo on April 17, 1944. He did not live to find out that the Allies were not disposed to receive such overtures.

Regarding the witness of Christians like Lepp, Jägerstätter, and Metzger, Merton writes:

The point to be emphasized, however, is not only that these Christians were nonviolent but that they resisted. They refused to submit to a force which they recognized as antihuman and utterly destructive. They refused to accept this evil and to palliate it under the guise of ‘legitimate authority’. In doing so they proved themselves better theologians than the professionals and the pontiffs who supported that power and made others obey it, thus cooperating in the evil.¹⁷

TERROR FROM THE AIR: THE (IL)LOGIC OF WAR

The Allies began the war against Germany in 1940 rightly convinced that if ever there was a just war, they were fighting it. Good and

God were on their side (no matter what the Vichy and German clerics said). In only five years (1940-1945) the Christian ethic of the “just war” was turned upside down. But it did not happen suddenly with the dropping of the A-Bomb. In fact, dropping the A-Bombs on Japan was but the horrific culmination of a series of decisions made during World War II concerning the morality of “area bombing” or “terror from the air”. These practices were made possible by new military technologies, encouraged by military leaders, acquiesced in by civilians, and justified by recourse to a logic and language of “necessity” and other appropriate obfuscations. For their own part, the Christian churches largely remained silent even though they knew that once the line between combatants and non-combatants was erased, the just war theory flew out the window along with the dove of peace.

Terror from the air began with the Fascist Generalissimo Franco of Spain at Guernica, a Christian city in the Basque country, in 1927. The Nazis, of course, practiced the indiscriminate bombing of civilians and civilian targets from the beginning of their expansion. They were rightly condemned by other countries for this immoral and barbaric practice. In his essay, “Target Equals City”,¹⁸ Merton notes that the British government took the high ground—at least for awhile—and declared that the RAF would adhere to traditional rules and would bomb only military and industrial targets. In 1942, however, Air Marshall Sir Arthur Travers Harris decided to abandon these traditional ethical guidelines. He argued that since the “precise bombing” of military and support sites during daylight hours was too dangerous, “area bombing” during the night would become standard practice even though it meant that the urban areas surrounding the targets would be destroyed and its civilians killed. This would save the lives of British airmen and the cost of planes. If that wasn’t justification enough, an additional reason was given: such bombings would “destroy enemy morale”. To achieve that end, Churchill declared: “There are no lengths in violence to which we will not go”. One spokesman bluntly remarked that: “Our plans are to bomb, burn and ruthlessly destroy, in every way available to us, the people responsible for creating this war”. And by “the people” he did not mean only the military and political leaders.

When America entered the war, Roosevelt announced that the AAF would bomb only strategic targets.¹⁹ By 1944, however, obliteration

tion bombing by the “yanks” had begun in earnest. Some Americans, especially pacifists, objected. Roosevelt, following the Brits, defended the tactic as “necessary” if the war was to be shortened. Public opinion polls were on the side of this thinking and tactic. Americans by a fifty-to-one margin supported saturation bombing and opposed their “overly scrupulous”, if not “defeatists”, compatriots who raised moral objections.²⁰ (Shortening the war mysteriously had become an ultimate and unquestionable end that justified, presumably, any means. But in order to shorten the war one must intensify the pressure and increase the damage. As the fire grows, larger logs must be thrown on.)

The old rule of “double effect” where one could “justify” the unintended and limited killing of innocent non-combatants when the action served a greater “intended” good became mote. These deaths were not unintended. America had every intention of inflicting horrific damage on German cities and death to their occupants. As Merton says, “This was pure terrorism. And the traditional doctrine of war excluded such immoral methods”.²¹ Dresden was a good example of what modern “conventional” weapons could do and how that possibility quickly pushed aside reason and morality. Wave after wave of bombers reduced this German city to rubble. There were more people killed in the saturation bombing of Dresden than as a result of the A-bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. And, although Dresden was an industrial city, no special attention was paid to industrial sites. The city itself was the target with its men, women, and children. In fact there was what one official called a “bonus”, in that the city was filled with refugees fleeing the advancing Russian Army. While some tried to defend the bombing “as an inescapable necessity”, it was bombed, in fact, for political reasons. It was “a ferocious and massive act of destruction . . . a calculated atrocity, perpetrated for the effect it might have on the Russian ally. But as ever in such cases, it was rationalized as an inescapable necessity”.²²

The Americans expanded their practice of targeting German cities to Japanese cities even as they were developing the Atomic bomb. In early 1945, General Curtis Lemay, another general acting under his own responsibility, launched a campaign of obliteration, bombing Japanese cities. Napalm bombs set Tokyo ablaze, fire storms sucked away oxygen, killing more people than were later killed in Hiroshima. Low-flying night

raids on fifty cities were conducted to destroy “phantom industries” located in neighborhoods amidst civilians.²³

Finally, the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were obliterated with one bomb each, leaving innumerable civilians dead and many others so burned and sick that they came to envy the dead. Claims that industrial targets were the intended bombing sites were quickly withdrawn. The purpose again was “to shorten the war” and to avoid American casualties. The story of backdoor diplomacy remained hidden, as was the split between the Emperor and the military. The demand for “unconditional surrender” was to remain the only option on the table. As the eighth “meditation” in Merton’s sardonic prose poem “Original Child Bomb” reminds us:

8. When they bombed Hiroshima they would put the following out of business: the Ube Nitrogen Fertilizer Company; the Ube Soda Company; the Nippon Motor Oil Company; the Sumitoma Chemical Company; the Sumitoma Aluminum Company, and most of the inhabitants.²⁴

There is an irrational logic to modern warfare, one that leads inevitably to committing acts that had once been considered unethical. It is then “rationalized as an inescapable necessity”.²⁵ Merton compares it to an addict who swears that he or she can control their drinking but finds that as they take each drink their resistance to having another one weakens until they end up where they swore they wouldn’t be. With nuclear weapons, Merton notes, indulging in the first “drink” could swiftly turn into a “binge” that would end with the destruction of the world.²⁶ War, even with modern conventional weapons, is no longer an activity that can be easily controlled rationally and morally once the terrible spirit is out of the bottle—and imbibed. There is one winner in war. The winner is war itself . . .

Though moralists may intend and endeavor to lay down rules for war, in the end war lays down the rules for them. He does not find it hard to make them change their minds. If he could, he would change God’s own mind. War has power to transmute evil into good and good into evil

. . . Now more than ever he is omnipotent. He is the great force . . . with his globe of sun-fire, and his pillar of cloud. Worship him.²⁷

Several times during his recounting of the history of obliteration bombing, Merton notes that the language of *necessity* was appealed to. One assumes that using the language of necessity (“I had to do it”) absolves the perpetrator of responsibility for his or her actions. The resort to such a rationale strangely resembles the most common Auschwitz defense. The language of necessity suggests that there is a will or force stronger than one’s own which is morally and perhaps ontologically superior. This powerful momentum of war overrules one’s misgivings and leads to the surrender of one’s will. Fr. Lepp and Franz Jägerstätter could have easily resorted to it and declared that the will of God impelled them to put aside their qualms about giving in to the Nazis. They could have said “The Church made me do it”. Other “religious” people would have understood and even praised their decision. Yet people like them—the death camp refuseniks, the peaceniks in America, or the scientists who objected to the use of the A-Bomb, spoke against the systems of authority that condoned genocide and mass murder. In all cases, the larger social order had an ideology/theology that it claimed superior to and more universally valid than the “opinion” or “viewpoint” of a single individual. The larger order also claimed to have a moral authority, either politically or religiously grounded, that overruled all individual claims to a different moral axiom. Any “sane” person or “devout” Catholic must acknowledge and adjust to such “obviously” superior forces. It was “necessary” for them to do so and in doing so they experienced the thrill of being swept along by the inevitable currents of history or of the divine will.

THE LANGUAGE OF WARS COLD AND HOT

The Cold War

Merton wrote “War and the Crisis of Language”,²⁸ in 1968, the final year of his life. In it he reflects on the use and abuse of language in both the Cold War and the Vietnam War. This was the latest episode of a

century-long corruption of language in the interests of war-making. “The incoherence of language that cannot be trusted”, says Merton, “and the coherence of weapons that are infallible, or thought to be: this is the dialectic of politics and war, the prose of the twentieth century”.

The language of the Cold War was characterized by the “more pompous and scientific jargon of the war mandarins in government offices and military think-tanks”. This language was “scientifically antiseptic, businesslike, uncontaminated with sentimental concerns for life . . .” The “men” huddled together in their war-rooms and around the conference tables of their think-tanks, trying to prove their “manliness” by playing with statistics about the deaths of millions, if not of the whole earth. Like Auschwitz language, “it is this playing with death, however, that brings into the players’ language itself the corruption of death: not physical but mental and moral extinction”.

Because of the irrationality of “winning” a nuclear war (winning equals suicide), the language of goals and noble ends quickly gives way to the language of strategies and tactics (process) which serves one purpose: “to mask this ultimate unreason and permit the game to go on”. The language of nuclear escalation is “the language of naked power” but is ‘all the more persuasive’ because it proudly displays its ethical illiteracy and because it affirms as realistic its own irrationality. The language of escalation expresses a massive death wish through a superb mix of “banality and apocalypse, science and unreason. . . .” Given currency through the mass media, this language can “quickly contaminate the thinking of everybody”. It can spread to other countries who are also eager to play the game. U.S. experts at the time were opining that the country could survive a war where only fifty million people were killed and China was predicting that it could spare 300 million people and still make it. In such a world, Merton concludes, “it is obvious that we are no longer in the realm where moral truth is conceivable”.

True, and it is also a surreal world like that of Auschwitz where one is sure that what one’s comrades or party says is true and what is being repeatedly reinforced by the highest authorities must be fact and therefore is to be accepted as the real picture of the world. Behind this these same keepers of meaning and of authority play on fear: fear of God’s wrath, of the death squad, of nuclear annihilation, even of social ostra-

cism. Only someone able to find and maintain an alternative base from which to think, judge, and feel can oppose such a totalizing world.

The interplay of reason and madness that ran through the language of nuclear “diplomacy” and escalation fascinated and frightened Merton. He made connections with other events and found insights in unexpected places. Reading Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (Random House, 1965), Merton was struck “by the way in which the ‘reason’ of the Age of Enlightenment unconsciously shares so much of the madness with which it was in dialogue”. Foucault described a method by which doctors tried to “fool” the inmates of insane asylums by adopting their own “logic” in order to act out scenarios that would push patients into a crisis where they would have to confront the illogical nature of their own delusions. For example, people who feared they were dead and hence would not eat food (because dead people don’t eat) were shown pictures of dead people eating. They were therefore disarmed by their own logic and began to eat.

This reminded Merton of the modern “language of power and war”. Our enemy is considered mad and must be treated as such. People of his ilk only understand force and violence. To enter his world, we employ the “language of escalation”, building up our stockpiles while threatening a pre-emptive use of the H-bomb. If we strike first, it will prove that force was necessary because we were facing “various bunches of madmen who understand nothing else”. Even as we conclude that words are of little use in dealing with such people, we continue to use the language of diplomacy and negotiation. But it is the mutual escalation of weapons that becomes the real “dialogue”. So there are terms offered, there is the appearance of dialogue on the political level but “the real dialogue is with weapons” even though this might contradict what our words are saying. After all, you are dealing with someone who is mad and who only understands the language of force. This is a circle, of course, because we begin with a tacit conviction that negotiation through words is meaningless and we do in fact “render the language of negotiation meaningless”.

One might note that in the nuclear rhetoric of the Cold War the argument from “necessity” is developed, promoted and reinforced by both sides. The spiral of reciprocal escalation turns: it is necessary for the U.S. to escalate because the U.S.S.R. escalated because the U.S. escalated,

and on and on. To use Merton's metaphor of drinking, the drunks are now buying each other drinks while loudly proclaiming their respective intentions to "control" things themselves. Or, following Foucault, when one enters the world of the madman one must discard one's old logic. Unfortunately, and unlike the case of the enlightenment doctors, one may also lose one's old identity and adopt the reality of the world of the madman. Like those who adopted and internalized the language of Auschwitz, one can rename reality and justify actions that one's old language would have found insane.

It is good to remember what was being justified and what was being permitted by silence in those early years of the 1960s. Writing in his journal on a hot August 21, 1962 Merton updates us on nuclear tests:

Up to mid-August__There have been *106 nuclear tests in the last year. 31 by the USSR, 74 by the U.S.A. and 1 by Britain* (in Nevada). The U.S. tests have been 29 in the atmosphere (the South Pacific) (three in Nevada), 1 high altitude and 44 underground (New Mexico). Total tests since the beginning. U.S.A. 229, USSR 86, UK 22, France 5. Grand Total 342 of which 282 in the atmosphere.

Nice going, boys!²⁹

THE CHURCH AND THE BOMB

The dramatic increase in the destructive capabilities of weapons during World War II, with the accompanying decrease in the moral capacity to control them, weighed heavily upon Merton's mind as he listened to the propaganda spewing forth from both nuclear powers. Also weighing heavily upon his mind was the fear that the current moral posture of the churches was not significantly different from the passivity that characterized the churches on both sides during WW I and II. In a letter to the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, in March of 1962, Merton explained why he had spoken out, and revealed something of the climate of the early 60s.

The chief reason why I have spoken out was that I felt I owed

it to my conscience to do so. There are certain things that have to be clearly stated. I had in mind particularly the danger arising from the fact that some of the most belligerent people in this country are Christians, on the one hand fundamentalist Protestants and on the other certain Catholics. They both tend to appeal to the bomb to do the “holy” work of destruction in the name of Christ and Christian truth. This is completely intolerable and the truth has to be stated. I cannot in conscience remain indifferent.³⁰

Merton recognized the coming together of conservative Protestants who had always considered America a “Christian” nation and Roman Catholics who in his time were flexing their muscles and flashing their credentials as loyal Americans. After all, a Catholic was now President and the political power in major U.S. cities was in the hands of Catholics. The formerly despised immigrants had become mainstream Americans. Merton himself had been a leading figure in this upsurge in Catholic respectability, influence and power. Now he was in the process of severely criticizing the Church for its cozy embrace of American political and military power. Merton raised troubling questions and engaged in harsh rhetoric over the inability – or even the unwillingness – of the Church to fulfill its primary mission as peacemaker and representative of the King of Peace, especially in the face of the current apocalyptic possibilities. If there ever was a time for the churches to speak up, Merton thought that this was it. But silence ruled the day, interspersed with feeble attempts by institutional theologians to justify nuclear war. By and large, the Church again ceded the moral ground to the State.

There was, of course, a longer history to this. Merton’s interpretation is that even as the State became secular in the West and wrested temporal authority from the “sacred” domain of the Church, it looked to the Church for certain social services such as moral training, “good works”, and in some cases, education of the young, but especially “moral” support in time of war. The Church responded too eagerly, in Merton’s view. As with Augustine’s promulgation of the just war theory, religious authority was exercised to persuade church members that following the secular authorities was their “sacred” duty. (One need only think of the position of the churches on both sides during the American Civil War). The Church

thereby also assured itself of survival and special treatment (tax breaks, no military service for clerics, etc.). However, as Merton notes, when the Church equates secular authority with divine authority and cedes to it the right to decide whether a war or its tactics are moral, the Church abdicates its mission.³¹ In short, just because the Church no longer coaches the team does not mean that its only possible role is that of cheerleader.

Merton thought that in the United States, most Christians just did not understand or were unwilling to face the profound moral and religious issues then facing humankind. The attitude of most priests and ministers was not much different from their countrymen who were agnostics and atheists. They confused the interests of the Church, America, NATO and the West in general. Hence, many claimed that a first strike was not too high a price to pay for freedom and religious liberty. But Merton insisted that “genocide is too high of a price and no one, not even Christians, not even for the highest ideals”, has a right to kill millions of noncombatants and “defenseless populations of neutral nations or unwilling allies”. Western society does not equal Christ and Russia is not the anti-Christ; the cause of the West is not the cause of God. (One can imagine the anger and outrage these kinds of remarks elicited from American Christians).³² In America, loyalty to a country that sees itself as a “city on a mountaintop” and claims to be influenced by Christian history and principles, becomes a “religious” justification for supporting the planned nuclear obliteration of the cities of America’s enemies. But, the Church “does not belong to any political power bloc”, Merton points out, and it exists on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Yet, some theologians attempted to justify the mass slaughter of civilians, including fellow Christians, in Russia and Eastern Europe. The Christian ethical sense had been corrupted “by theorizing in a vacuum, by juggling with moral clichés devoid of serious content, and the weakening of genuine human compassion”.³³ Merton is concerned in many places with the “bombardment” of a populace by and the circulation among them of patriotic slogans, catch words and clichés which substitute for rational and ethical thinking. Propaganda serves to build up an image of the enemy as subhuman and demonic and hence as an object of anger, hatred, or fear but certainly not of compassion.

One would have thought that following the awful spectacle of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, any “civilized” nation that threatened to inciner-

ate the human residents of major cities would be condemned for terrorizing these populations. (Incineration, a method used in the Nazi death camps, was now being threatened on each another by the two major victors over Nazi Germany). While Christian moral teaching allowed for a war that was defensive in nature, and where evil did not outweigh good, it never condoned terrorism.

In all-out nuclear war, there is no longer [a] 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 not for their military significance alone, but for their importance in a calculated project of terror and annihilation.³⁴

And yet, both the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in nuclear escalation under the umbrella of what was later dubbed, MAD: Mutually Assured Destruction. Writing in the early 1960s Merton noted that even a conservative estimate placed the U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons as equivalent to “*ten tons of TNT for every human being on the face of the earth*”.³⁵ While many considered a nuclear war “unthinkable”, the lessons of WWII demonstrated that, when pushed both by the logic and force of events and by expediency, leaders could initiate and justify what were heretofore “unthinkable” and grossly immoral actions. In fact, a campaign had been launched in America to acclimate people to thinking the unthinkable.

As the pressures of the cold war become more intense, the fallout shelter scare has had a direct and intimate connection with the policy of nuclear deterrence. It has been clearly and explicitly part of a campaign to “engineer consent” and make nuclear war more thoroughly acceptable, at least as a reasonable possibility, in the American public mind. This, in turn, is intended to convince our enemies that we “believe in” the bomb, and that, though we still utter pious hopes that it will never be necessary, we thoroughly intend to use it if we feel ourselves to be sufficiently threatened.³⁶

The moral passivity and patriotic activity that had characterized American Catholic support of obliteration bombing in WWII continued into the nuclear age. “Never was religious protest so badly needed”, claimed Merton. But “[s]ilence, passivity, or outright belligerence seems to be characteristic [of] official and unofficial Christian reactions to the H-bomb”. Merton observed that what debate there was within the Churches in the early 1960s concerning nuclear war “has been marked above all by a seemingly inordinate hesitation to characterize the uninhibited use of nuclear weapons as immoral”.³⁷ Moral theologians who wanted to save the notion of a just war tried to tie it to the policymakers’ concept of a limited nuclear war that was tactical in nature. But, in order to do that, they usually had to accept the idea of total nuclear war in self-defense. The idea that a nuclear war could be limited and somehow “won” by one side seemed to fly in the face of history-and commonsense. If one side felt itself to be losing, why would it not resort to “total” war? Hence, Merton found ludicrous the attempt by some theologians to reintroduce a just war defense to justify the American use of nuclear weapons.³⁸

In nuclear warfare, victims are estimated in “mega-corpses” or millions of deaths. And so Merton asks the churches how far they are willing to go in giving over the decision on whether to push the button that would inflict this carnage to politicians and military personnel? How do Christians really know that these people are “worthy of our confidence”? And do these individuals actually realize the full ramifications of what they are doing? Or are they merely following the protocols they and their cohorts set up, making the next move as dictated by their position in the chain of events defined by their job description and the specific orders given to them? Merton directs this troubling question to his fellow Christians: “To what extent can we assume that in passively following their lead and concurring in their decision—at least by default—we are acting as Christians?”³⁹ (Are we back to the non-responsibilities of the bureaucrats of the Third Reich—and the silent collusion of the churches?) In short, Merton is asking if the Church’s desire to be seen supporting the country’s nuclear strategy places it in a position where it accedes to the destruction of much of God’s creation and millions of human beings created in his image?

Vietnam

The claim by some that the Cold War with its nuclear standoff would bring world peace and eliminate conventional small wars would be proven wrong. In addition to a series of small “hot” wars, brutal violence was inflicted on millions of people by dictators and super-power client states whose only virtue was their loyalty to one bloc or the other. “Bad dictators” were those supported by our enemy, “good” dictators were those supported by us. The language used to explain these incongruities and justify these proxy wars was filled with euphemisms and doublespeak. This became even more apparent as the U.S. involvement in Vietnam deepened. Merton had warned early-on about the dubious nature both morally and geopolitically of what America was doing in Vietnam. He became increasingly aware of the widening gap between what was being touted as the case by Washington and what the events on the ground seemed to indicate. As for the latter, the language coming from the ground was itself beginning to take on a surreal tinge.

A U.S. Major, seeking to defend the indiscriminate shelling of civilians in a village in South Vietnam (supposedly the country America was there to defend), and with no visible appreciation for the irony, declared that “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it”. Merton pointed out that:

Here we see, again an insatiable appetite for the tautological, the definitive, the *final* . . . The destruction of the village and the killing of the people earn for them a final and official identity. The burned huts become “enemy structures”; the dead men, women, and children become “Vietcong”, thus adding to a “kill ratio” that can be interpreted as “favorable”. They were thought to be Vietcong and were therefore destroyed. By being destroyed they became Vietcong for keeps; they entered “history” definitively as our enemies, because we wanted to be on the “safe side”, and “save American lives”—as well as Vietnam.⁴⁰

The Cold War slogan: “Better Dead than Red” leapt into Merton’s

mind as he considered this piece of rationalization for another Vietnamese tragedy. In both cases, to be made “dead” is to be saved from becoming “red”, a fate obviously worse than death. Thus rescue and destruction become identical. “The logic of war-makers” applied this bit of Cold War Speak to the fate of Asian villagers on the other side of the world. In effect, says Merton, “we decide, in their place, that it is better for them to be dead—killed by us—than Red, living under our enemies”. The Asian caught in the middle finds himself in a no-win situation. If he is on their side—a “bad guy”—he certainly must be killed. If he is on our side—a “good guy”—then he should be willing to die for our highest value, freedom, rather than to fall under the sway of our enemy. Hence we protect his virtue (and ours) as well as defend his interests (and ours). Of course, one dare not ask the troubling question: “what might happen if he fell under Communist rule *and liked it!*”

All of these convoluted linguistic acrobatics deflect attention from the underlying “logic of *power*”. This is the same logic that Hitler expressed following his viewing of the aftermath of the Luftwaffe’s brutal bombing of Warsaw. “‘How wicked these people must have been’, he sobbed, ‘to make me do this to them!’” Ironically, Hitler is here confessing that these people are stronger than he is or that his hate for them is stronger than his moral sentiments. “They made me do it”, he is saying, “so don’t look at me; don’t blame me”. But there is a certain insecurity behind this pronouncement: a fear of dialogue. And so he speaks with weapons in order to silence, preemptively, all speech from the “Other”.⁴¹

The Vietnam War, of course, had other euphemisms such as “pacification”, “liberation” “winning hearts and minds”, and “free zone”. As to how the latter worked, an American Captain declared that the army had marked off a triangle and designated it a Free Zone. There were villages, of course, within the triangle. Unfortunately for the occupants, the Captain announced: “‘From now on anything that moves around here is going to be automatically considered V.C. and bombed or fired on’”. The villagers were to be considered “hostile civilians”. When asked how he would distinguish between hostile civilians and refugees, the Captain explained that there were only three categories of people in this area. First, the V.C., second, the V.C. sympathizers, and third, fumbling with language, but sure of the underlying logic, he blurted out: “‘I can’t think of the third just now

but . . . there's no middle ground in this war".⁴²

Merton also hears echoes from the "old frontier" in the language and attitudes of the military in Vietnam. The old myths, learned from history books, teachers, scout leaders, movies, church leaders, drill instructors and parents are adapted to new contexts. Many of the metaphors bandied about by the military clustered around images associated with "clearing" the jungles of Vietcong and "cleaning out" an area of "hostiles". Merton is reminded of how settlers and frontiersmen spoke about the necessity of clearing the woodlands or the plains of hostile Indians. This use of images connected with "cleansing", "purifying", and "clearing out" makes the aggressor himself feel clean, like someone engaged in a hygienically beneficial task. Other images such as "vermin", paint a slightly more negative view of the inhabitants who must be "cleared out" of towns and forests in order to make way for more "acceptable" folk. Of course, one has to hide the fact that innocent men, women and children are being sanitized by these housecleaning activities. At first, this killing of women and children, whether in the old west or Southeast Asia, is permitted as an unintended "side effect" of "something more important" that has to be done. Overtime there is "more and more killing of civilians and less and less of the 'something more important' which we are trying to achieve".⁴³ Of course, modern military weapons made the bombing of cities "infested" with civilians easier than cleaning out the frontier of "dirty Injuns".

One recalls that the operators of Auschwitz were also obsessed with cleanliness and with purification activities; the ovens had to be cleaned of any dust from the remains of Jews. Clearing the world of Jews, Indians or any other undesirables seems a "final solution". But if successful the result will be a world of soulless sameness: a non-threatening, non-diverse environment-socially and naturally. Everything would look like us-and we would eventually be so nauseated that we would have to clear the world of ourselves—which is perhaps the secret hatred behind it all anyways.

Of course, the act of "ethnic cleansing" borders on genocide. The Western and Christian "mission" to conquer the world for Cross and Crown brought Europeans to the American shores and led to both cultural and physical genocide. The international use of the term "genocide" began after the Second World War and was defined with the Holocaust in mind. But, as Merton points out, "the destruction of races is not new—just

easier”. Americans tend to forget that “a century ago white America was engaged in the destruction of entire tribes and ethnic groups of Indians”.⁴⁴ In North America the Puritans in imitation of the ancient Israelites came into the “Promised Land” and proceeded to “clear out” the idolaters. Theirs was a divine mission much as that of the Conquistadores in Latin America.⁴⁵ The explicitly religious myths that guided and justified the destruction of these “aliens” continue to propel America in a modified form today, Merton argues. But contrary to its myth, “the United States has received from no one the mission” to police the world or to dictate to other peoples how they should live.⁴⁶ Or how they should die!

Taking on a global presence and responsibility but carrying myths of divine missions and manifest destinies, America oversimplified the complexities of Southeast Asia and misunderstood its various peoples. As is usually the case, Americans were surprised when the effects of their “good” intentions turned out to be so different from what was anticipated. At best, the language of war, power blocs, “dominoes”, “friends and foes”, suffers from a lack of sophistication. At worse, it creates a virtual reality that traps its articulators and leads to an obliteration of the humanity of the “other” and anyone connected with him. As Merton so pointedly notes:

The tragic thing about Vietnam is that, after all, the “realism” of our program there is so unrealistic, so rooted in myth, so completely out of touch with the needs of the people whom we know only as statistics and to whom we never manage to listen, except where they fit in with our psychopathic delusions. Our external violence in Vietnam is rooted in an internal violence which simply ignores the human reality of those we claim to be helping.⁴⁷

Merton notes that the newspapers reported that a youth leader in the South who originally believed that the Americans could be trusted, changed his mind. He complained that while the Americans kept making declarations about how they have come to help his people, their actions and the effects of the war on the people made them hate the Americans. This, of course, surprised the Americans. While an American Catholic Bishop whispered words of comfort and encouragement into the ear of

President Johnson, a Buddhist nun in South Vietnam burned herself to death to protest the war. Billy Graham proclaims the war to be a “spiritual war between good and evil”. Merton wryly notes that Graham is right but not in the way he intends.⁴⁸ The myth declares that America doesn’t lose wars to “bad guys”. Neither Lyndon Johnson nor his supporters wanted to be the first to expose it as myth. As the anti-war movement grew in number and strength, generals like Westmoreland insisted that the war is winnable—with a few more troops, a little more napalm, several powerful air strikes (and, if all else fails, then threaten to “nuke ’em”).

Merton suggests that the language used by governments in war-time distorts reality since it only presents one side of a complex picture and is unwilling to solicit “other” voices. “Because the language of the war-maker is *self-enclosed in finality*”, it can only be expressed in speeches, threats, press releases, position papers, anonymous leaks, and white papers from think-tanks. It does not invite reasonable dialogue, it uses language to silence dialogue, to block communication, so that instead of words the two sides may trade divisions, positions, villages, air bases, cities—and of course the lives of the people in them. This was the language of nuclear escalation as well as of the Vietnam War.

In addition, one of the mistakes of the war planners was listening to the language of military-industrial-intellectual “experts” was bathed in overly optimistic predictions about the effectiveness of the superior military technology of the U.S. (no doubt with dollar signs in the eyes of some consultants). They thought that technology would allow the U.S. to do what neither the French nor the South Vietnamese army could do. False pride, wrapped in its presuppositions by technological thinking, becomes blinded to “decisive realities that do not fit those suppositions”. The U.S. cranks up its propaganda machine and enlists its network of statisticians to “prove” that it is winning the war and that its basic assumptions are coming true. Of course, as Merton notes, the Tet offensive of February 1968 shatters much of that façade.⁴⁹

During the Vietnam War, “officialese” had to carry the additional burden of denying the actual flow of events. “Modern politics is a matter of defining how you think things ought to be and making them come out that way by cunning or by force”.⁵⁰ Yet Vietnam shows that even with enormous technological power, one cannot always make one’s words

come true, says Merton. The language from Washington took on the twisted logic and defensive tone of a group that finds itself in a situation where its heroic myth keeps insisting that it should be on the edge of victory but reality keeps insisting otherwise. “We are getting to the point”, warns Merton, “where American ‘victory’ in Vietnam is becoming a word without any possible human meaning”.⁵¹ The word is kept but the meaning is ejected because alternative terms which might better describe the situation are unacceptable. They might be words of the enemy. And dialogue with the enemy is prohibited by the logic of power.

“One of the curious things about the war in Vietnam”, Merton notes, “is that it is being *fought to vindicate the assumptions upon which it is being fought*”.⁵² Here is the awful tautology again! If the only acceptable language is that which interprets what is happening so as to vindicate the original reasons behind our doing it, then if the course of events or new information threaten to prove our assumptions wrong we must either distort the meaning of present events so they comport with our assumptions or reveal the “real” meaning of our assumptions in order to fit with current events. Nothing must happen that would prove us wrong and empty the present of its justification, forcing us to change course and/or admit mistakes. (The difficulty with admitting mistakes is intensified when doing so implies that young men were sent to die in vain. The only way to “save” these heroic acts from becoming meaningless is to offer more lives as proof that they had not died in vain. Thus we get caught in a demonic spiral, in an historical tautology).

The problem is that these assumptions have been proven wrong, claims Merton. The administration originally tried to make Vietnam look like Korea, with North invading South with support from China. That way, the war could be fought like a “conventional limited war”. This turned out to be wrong and the U.S. got mired down in a guerilla war in the South. And, of course, the fact that the Vietnamese and Chinese were ancient and current enemies did not fit the narrative of China being behind the war. Merton had a prescient feeling that the Tonkin Bay incident was faked to allow Johnson to push Congress to pass a resolution that supported turning the war into the war we thought we were fighting. So, troop numbers were escalated and bombing raids were carried out on the North. Of course, unlike Korea, it was not the North that had attacked us

but we had invaded the North. Such minor details were irrelevant.⁵³

The United States government strove mightily to gain support at home and abroad for its version of the war by increasing its attempts to turn that version into reality. This effort had the unintended effect of further undermining the credibility of America as well as its “basic human integrity and sincerity”. “The *political language* of the United States, which was suspect before, has now been fatally denatured”, claims Merton. It has lost its “intellectual currency” because of its double-talk about the war, about race in America, about domestic programs that go unfunded. “The tragedy is not so much that America has come out of its pristine isolationism but that it has decided to rule the world without paying serious attention to anybody else’s view of what the world is about”. As a result, “language has been distorted and denatured in defense of this . . . attitude”.⁵⁴

Those who lead others into war claim that war is a reasonable if the last resort. Merton, however, insists that “war is not made by reason, its conduct is not governed by reason. To appeal against war to reason is to make an appeal that cannot have any serious effect on the war makers themselves”.⁵⁵ Officials, of course, must sound rational, appealing to “hard” facts and “irrefutable” evidence while shaping them so as to point to fearful scenarios should this “evidence” go unheeded. “The awful danger of war is then, not so much that force is used when reason has broken down but that reason unconsciously inhibits itself beforehand (in all the trivialities of political and military gamesmanship) *in order that it may break down, and in order that resort to force may become ‘inevitable’.*” In other words, the events that are pointed to as “evidence” that war or its escalation are necessary are themselves selected so that “*the occult determination to resort to force in any case*” will become reality.⁵⁶

EPILOGUE: ONE MORE TROUBLING QUESTION

Thomas Merton is no longer with us. And neither are the Soviet Union, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. The United States is the only Super-power. But one troubling question remains. We can be sure Merton would have asked it: Have things really changed?

Merton might have assumed that after the demise of the Soviet

Union in the early 1990s that the United States could scale back on its military expenditures and use its considerable ideological, moral, and economic resources to help the world enter an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity. Large arsenals of nuclear weapons would no longer be necessary or even useful in this era. In fact, the danger of nuclear blackmail or unscrupulous scientists selling plans or transferring weapons grade uranium to terrorists or rogue states would encourage both the U.S. and the ex-U.S.S.R. to dismantle and safely dispose of all nuclear weapons.

Hence, to the extent that the negative image of the United States had been linked to its dangerous nuclear weaponry, that image would have dissolved. And the extent to which its negative image was tied to its support for petty dictators, that image would have changed. Excuses for supporting right-wing dictators or ongoing structures of violence including death squads could no longer be made, absent Cold War competition. Military interventions would be used only to prevent genocides or brutal repression by governments of their own citizens. No Rwandas. No Srebrenicas. No Darfurs.

A new era would dawn in which the U.S. would seek international consensus before taking military steps that could result in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths. The idea of the U.S. unilaterally attacking a weaker country would be unthinkable. Without the Soviet Union there would no longer be a military that could come close to that of the U.S. Even involvement in a protracted war in Vietnam could be marginally understood given the Cold War background. Certainly, given American protestations that it abhors the idea of becoming an Empire, Merton's charge that the United States had "decided to rule the world without paying serious attention to anybody's view of what the world" was about, could never apply forty years hence when the U.S. would definitively lay to rest any charges that it desired to "rule the world".⁵⁷ The U.S. would certainly have shifted its heavy defense expenditures into peaceful uses like establishing educational and diplomatic institutions that would be dedicated to a sophisticated study of other cultures and a cooperative dialogue on how best to join with other nations in ushering in an era of reduced poverty and increased peaceful global existence.

In March of 2003, the United States of America, with little international support, bombed, invaded and then occupied an Arab nation

with a third rate military and a dictator that had been courted and armed by the Americans in the 1980s. One among many of the reasons given for the invasion of Iraq was the assertion that Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator, might give sanctuary and aid to an extremist religious Islamist group (one the U.S. gave aid to in the 1980s to fight the Soviet Union) responsible for the deadly attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York City on September 11, 2001.

The justifications for the Iraq war kept changing and turned out to be mainly a smokescreen behind which was hidden a desire and perhaps a decision to attack Iraq even prior to September 11, 2001. As a result, “language has been distorted and denatured in defense” of this duplicity as it had during the Vietnam war.⁵⁸ The claim that the Iraq War with its hundreds of thousands of casualties was absolutely necessary, only undertaken as a “last resort”, after reason and reasonable steps had proven insufficient, was a charade. Merton had written that, “The awful danger of war is then, not so much that force is used when reason has broken down but that reason unconsciously inhibits itself beforehand (in all the trivialities of political and military gamesmanship) in order that it may break down, and in order that resort to force may become “inevitable”.”⁵⁹ A series of orchestrated events with their predetermined outcomes are pointed to as “evidence” that the enemy is duplicitous, hiding something and hence an imminent danger to national security. They merely hid an “*occult determination to resort to force in any case*”.⁶⁰ Merton suggested that the language of war-makers in the twentieth century had proven useless as an instrument of peace. He would say the same thing of the language of American war-makers in the twenty-first century. Why? “Because the language of the war-maker is *self-enclosed in finality*. It does not invite reasonable dialogue, it uses language to silence dialogue, to block communication . . .”⁶¹

Are these remarks of Merton still relevant? One need only recall the frequent attempts to minimize or discredit the United Nations weapons inspectors, some of whom were Americans; the fear mongering and push for invasion through the use of such memorable lines by Bush and Condoleezza Rice as “The smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud”; the Cheney-inspired claim by President Bush in his 2003 State of the Union address that Hussein was trying to buy yellowcake

for the production of nuclear weapons (which of course would be given to terrorists); the presentation of “irrefutable evidence” of Iraq’s secret weapons program at the United Nations by the Secretary of State; and the intimidation of domestic dissenters by White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, who warned that “Americans need to watch what they do and watch what they say”. Even when veil after veil of lies had been torn from the face of truth, members of the administration continued to spout the party line on Sunday morning talk shows or in interviews with conservative news outlets. Statements, declarations, press releases, staged “interviews”, and manipulated press conferences continued the tradition of monologue and indicated no willingness for dialogue. The administration consistently displayed an arrogant contempt for democratic and legal processes—an ironic way for promoters of freedom in Iraq to act.

Playing the 9/11 card, the administration presented their war to Americans as a war of self-defense launched preemptively. They presented it to Iraqis as liberation from a dictator. Unrealistic images of Iraqis greeting Americans in Baghdad as if they were Americans in Paris, and the premature unfurling of a “Mission Accomplished” banner showed a horribly deficient understanding of the actual situation. The Bush administration, like the Johnson administration in the 1960s, tried to “turn the war into the kind of war it was supposed to be in America”. There had been aggression, but for the Iraqis like many Vietnamese, “the aggression was the other way around”.⁶² To the Iraqis and their sympathizers this war of necessity was a war of choice; this war of self-defense was an invasion and occupation.

For Merton, “American ‘victory’ in Vietnam [was] becoming a word without any possible human meaning”.⁶³ The opposing interpretations of what America’s presence and intentions in Iraq were, combined with a lack of serious planning for post-invasion conditions, contributed to the country spiraling into an inferno of sectarian conflict, I.E.Ds. (Improvised explosive devices) and suicide bombings caused by foreign and domestic terrorists and insurgents. In the midst and mist of it all came another mantra enclosed in finality: “We fight them (al Qaeda) in Iraq so that we don’t have to fight them here (in the USA)”. Merton claimed that the Vietnam War was “being fought to vindicate the assumptions upon which it is being fought”.⁶⁴ The Al Qaeda that Bush claimed was in Iraq

but wasn't, soon is. And so, fighting them in the present vindicates the past decision to go to war. As Merton noted, "Modern politics is a matter of defining how you think things ought to be and making them come out that way by cunning or by force".⁶⁵ If the political language of the U.S. had "lost all its value as intellectual currency" by 1968, it had become absolutely bankrupt by 2008.⁶⁶

Even wars begun with the best of intentions and with high purpose have a tendency to turn moral convention on its head. Merton certainly felt that had been the case with saturation bombing, nuclear bombing, and the treatment of civilians in Vietnam. He concluded that, "There is one winner, only one winner in war. The winner is war itself . . . War has power to transmute evil into good and good into evil".⁶⁷ This is especially true when a nation is convinced that God is on its side and hence need not suspect self-deception or the gradual corruption of ideals. If whatever one does is good by definition, there is no need to defend one's actions or apologize for one's tactics. Yet the administration realized that some people would object if they knew all of the facts, and some people were not as enlightened about such matters as the neo-conservatives—especially their political enemies. Therefore, it was decided that a certain level of secrecy might be prudent. Thus arose illegal wiretaps, "extraordinary renditions", and "enhanced interrogation techniques" — most infamously, the long-condemned practice of waterboarding. Just as the language of "necessity" justified the war itself, it could be used to justify actions that most Americans would find abhorrent if committed by "the enemy".

Even if the intelligence provided by the "suspected terrorists" or "enemy combatants" in U.S custody proved useless, or if they had been erroneously imprisoned, they should be willing to be "inconvenienced" in the service of a good cause—the War on Terror. As Merton noted of the Catch-22 of Vietnam, the Vietnamese civilian was caught in the middle (in more ways than one) if he lived in a free fire zone. If he was a "bad guy" (V.C. or a Vietcong sympathizer), then death was deserved. If he was "a good guy" (on our side), then he should be "ready to die for freedom". We take it upon ourselves to decide, "in their place, that it is better for them to be dead" or traumatized, than to be Red or, in the case at hand, to live under a fundamentalist Muslim regime (not counting Saudi Arabia).⁶⁸ In one of his last essays Merton asks the troubling question,

“What next? The illness of political language . . . is characterized everywhere by the same sort of double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity, and pseudoscientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man. The self-enclosed finality that bars all open dialogue and pretends to absolute conditions of one’s own choosing upon everybody else ultimately become the language of totalist dictatorship, if it is not so already.”⁶⁹

Of the vitriolic language of extremist Islam, Merton would undoubtedly level the same criticism as he did to some revolutionary groups of his day. That is, as long as it “remains another language of power, therefore of self-enclosed finality, which rejects dialogue and negotiation on the axiomatic assumption that the adversary is the devil with whom no dialogue is possible”.⁷⁰

Ultimately Merton’s condemnation of war and violence and his pleas for peace rested on his religious humanism, which holds to the sublime dignity of the human Person rooted in the Person of God. He feared at times that his own language, while condemning violence, was itself too violent and could sow further seeds of conflict rather than bring peace. In many writings Merton worked out a vision of universal peace and a Gandhian-like program to pursue it. His dialogue through writings and meetings with leading thinkers and spiritual figures of all religious and political persuasions around the world was a witness to his positive belief in dialogue. The following is from a prayer composed by Thomas Merton and read in the House of Representatives on April 12, 1962. It still resonates today.

Almighty and Merciful God. . .

Save us then from our obsessions! Open our eyes, dissipate our confusions, teach us to understand ourselves and our adversary! . . .

Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us.

Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and beyond bearing. . .

Grant us prudence in proportion to our power,

Wisdom in proportion to our science,
Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might.
And bless our earnest will to help all races and peoples to travel,
in friendship with us,
Along the road to justice, liberty and lasting peace...⁷¹

Endnotes

¹Born in France on the eve of WWI, young Tom Merton fled with his family to America as the war clouds gathered. Merton returned to and lived in France (1925-1929) with his now-widowed father and then traveled to and was educated in England (1928-1934). Following his father's death in England and amidst personal turmoil at Cambridge University, Merton returned to America and entered Columbia University (1934-1938) to study English Literature and writing (B.A., M.A.). Merton converted to Roman Catholicism (1938), taught briefly at St. Bonaventure's College (1940-41), and, at the beginning of WWII (December 10, 1941) he entered the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. The Trappists, as they were also called, still lived a basically medieval existence separate from the world and under a vow of silence. During the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Merton broke most of the precedents of this silent life. Following the publication in 1948 of his bestselling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he soon establishes himself as one of the major voices of the post-war American Catholic renaissance, focusing on the revitalization of the spiritual and mystical traditions of the church. In the late 1950s Merton became more engaged with the world and until the end of his life wrote extensively on some of the important issues of the 1960s including: nuclear war, civil rights, church reform, eastern religions, Vietnam, Marxist humanism, and the American counter-culture. In a letter to Etta Gullick written in October, 1961, Merton revealed that "there is one task for me that takes precedence over everything else: working with such means as I have at my disposal for the abolition of war". He felt compelled to speak out especially on the issue of nuclear war because "there is such apathy and passivity everywhere, with people simply unable to face the issue squarely, and with only a stray voice raised tentatively here and there, it has become an urgent obligation". (*The Cold War Letters*; Orbis Books: Maryknoll, N.Y., 2006; 9).

Articles poured out over the next six months. Given who he was and how he could write, attitudes towards him on the part of many conservative Catholics including some members of the hierarchy changed dramatically. He was notified by his Abbot in April, 1962 that he had been forbidden by the Superior General of the Order to publish or submit to the censors for review, anything having to do with issues of war and peace. Merton obeyed but circulated letters and other writings privately and on occasion published under a pseudonym. However, things began to loosen up when many of his views showed up in April 1963 in *Pacem in Terris*, a

papal encyclical of Pope John XXIII. Merton half-jokingly wrote to his Superior General suggesting that the Pope was lucky he wasn't a Trappist. Merton was to find additional support for many of his views in December 1965 in an important document of Vatican Council II ("The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World").

With a new Abbot at Gethsemani, Merton began to travel more and undertook a trip to Asia in 1968 to explore and meet with leaders of eastern religions such as the Dalai Lama. After delivering a keynote address at a conference in Bangkok, Thailand, Thomas Merton returned to his room and was "accidentally" (conspiracy theories abound) electrocuted. The date was December 10, 1968 seventeen years to the day that he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. The body of this critic of the Vietnam War was flown home on a USAF transport plane that was also carrying the bodies of young Americans who had lost their lives in that war.

²Merton, Thomas. Original Child Bomb. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 3-11.

³Merton, Thomas. Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 261-262.

⁴Merton, Thomas. Auschwitz: A Family Camp. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 150-159.

⁵Shirer, William H. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*; Simon and Shuster, Inc.; New York.

⁶Merton, Thomas. *Turning to the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4. 1960-1963*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer; HarperCollins; San Francisco, 1996; 306.

⁷Merton, Thomas. *Turning to the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4. 1960-1963*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer; HarperCollins; San Francisco, 1996; 307.

⁸Merton, Thomas. *Turning to the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4. 1960-1963*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer; HarperCollins; San Francisco, 1996; 308.

⁹Merton, Thomas. A Devout Meditation in Honor of Adolf Eichmann. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 160-162.

¹⁰Merton, Thomas. Violence and the Death of God: Or God as Unknown Soldier. *The Nonviolent Alternative*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 205.

¹¹Merton, Thomas. Violence and the Death of God: Or God as Unknown Soldier. *The Nonviolent Alternative*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 205.

¹²Lepp. Fr. Ignace. *The Christian Failure*; The Newman Press, Westminster, MD, 1962.

¹³Merton, Thomas. *Turning to the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4. 1960-1963*; Ed. Victor A. Kramer; HarperCollins; San Francisco, 1996; 265.

¹⁴Merton, Thomas. Passivity and Abuse of Authority. *The Nonviolent*

Alternative; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 129-133.

¹⁵Merton, Thomas. An Enemy of the State. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 134-138.

¹⁶Merton, Thomas. A Martyr for Peace and Unity: Father Max Josef Metzger (1887-1944). *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 139-143.

¹⁷Merton, Thomas. *Towards a Theology of Resistance. The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 191.

¹⁸Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 96.

¹⁹Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 96.

²⁰Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 97.

²¹Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 95.

²²Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*; Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; New York, 1985; 130.

²³Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 98.

²⁴Merton, Thomas. Original Child Bomb. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 5.

²⁵Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*; Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1985; 130.

²⁶Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*; Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1985; 129.

²⁷Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1980; 94.

²⁸Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1980; 234-247.

²⁹Merton, Thomas. Turning to the World: *The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4. 1960-1963*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer, HarperCollins, San Francisco; 1996; 238.

³⁰Merton, Thomas. *The Cold War Letters*; Orbis Books; Maryknoll, N. Y., 2006; 114.

³¹Merton, Thomas. Violence and the Death of God: Or God as Unknown Soldier. *The Nonviolent Alternative*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York; 1980; 205.

³²Merton, Thomas. Christian Ethics and Nuclear War. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 83.

³³Merton, Thomas. Peace: Christian Duties and Perspectives. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 14.

³⁴Merton, Thomas. Peace: A Religious Responsibility. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 120.

³⁵Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 96.

³⁶Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 100.

³⁷Merton, Thomas. Peace: A Religious Responsibility. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 107.

³⁸Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York; 1980; 100-101.

³⁹Merton, Thomas. Peace: A Religious Responsibility. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 120.

⁴⁰Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 238-239.

⁴¹Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 239.

⁴²Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 239-240.

⁴³Merton, Thomas. Ishi: A Meditation. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 253.

⁴⁴Merton, Thomas. Ishi: A Meditation. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 248.

⁴⁵Merton, Thomas. Conquistador, Tourist, and Indian. *A Thomas Merton Reader*; Image Doubleday; New York, 1974; 306.

⁴⁶Merton, Thomas. The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 196.

⁴⁷Merton, Thomas. The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 195.

⁴⁸Merton, Thomas. The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 195.

⁴⁹Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 245.

⁵⁰Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 244.

⁵¹Merton, Thomas. The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 195.

I write during the summer of the Iraq “surge” and following years of the promise of “victory” and the redefining of what victory means. This writer also remembers how the power of “victory” as a symbol to rally support still held sway in 1968. To the “greatest generation” who had fought in Europe and the Pacific in WWII, “victory” had a profound significance. Their children might have taken to the streets to protest the Vietnam War but they were still willing to trust in their president and military leaders. Most of them also trusted in their religious leaders.

⁵²Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 244.

⁵³Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 244-245.

⁵⁴Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 245.

⁵⁵Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*; Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; New York, 1985; 131.

⁵⁶Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*; Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; New York, 1985; 131.

⁵⁷Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 246.

⁵⁸Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 245.

⁵⁹Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*, Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; New York, 1985; 131.

⁶⁰Merton, Thomas. *Love and Living*, Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; New York, 1985; 131.

⁶¹Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 244.

⁶²Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 245.

⁶³Merton, Thomas. The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 195.

This writer remembers the power that the concept of “victory” still had in the 1960s. For my father and other members of the “greatest generation” who had fought in Europe and the Pacific in WWII, “victory” had a profound significance, as did the implications of “loss”. The manipulation of that term and a deliberate mystifying of its meaning during Vietnam, and now in the war on terrorism, cynically extend conflict and bloodshed while the government looks for some face-saving way to extricate itself and its military from a morass. Public trust is needed however and is woefully lacking today.

⁶⁴Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 244.

⁶⁵Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 244.

⁶⁶Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 245.

⁶⁷Merton, Thomas. Target Equals City. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 94.

⁶⁸Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Al-*

ternative; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 239.

⁶⁹Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 246.

⁷⁰Merton, Thomas. War and the Crisis of Language. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 247.

⁷¹Merton, Thomas. Prayer for Peace. *The Nonviolent Alternative*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York, 1980; 269.