**Clarity from the Monastic Margins: Thomas Merton’s Social Insight**

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**Basic Intro**

Thank you, Pastor Andy. It’s an honor to be a part of this historic conference, and I want to thank the organizers for their invitation to share with you here today.

Last night Paul Pearson introduced Thomas Merton as “Poet, Monk, Prophet,” and during this session I want to explore the “prophet” aspect of Merton’s life a bit further as it relates to his work with social issues. By the time Merton arrived in Alaska, in September 1968, he’d been writing about social concerns for at least seven years and interacting with others about them for even longer. Many criticized this aspect of his work and Merton himself grappled with how to balance his vocation as a monk with his personal convictions and his friendships with social advocates. This was especially the case as things grew more chaotic during 1968 and the years leading up to it.

On one hand, he was looking for places of greater solitude to deepen his life as a hermit beyond what his monastery grounds in Kentucky would permit. That’s one of the reasons why he came to Alaska—to see if it might offer better options for that. Yet during 1968 he also continued to publically address social concerns. In July he published his book *Faith and Violence*, a collection of essays on nonviolence, race, the Vietnam War, and current trends in Christian thought. That year he also published four articles on nonviolence, one on race, and three that addressed the impact of western culture on indigenous people. So despite his quest for more solitude in the year of his Alaskan visit, he was not also ready to abandon his social commentary.

I’ve arranged my talk into four different parts that try to help illustrate different facets Merton’s social thought. The first looks at why seeing his monastic role as “marginal” is important for understanding his social writing; then I’ll share some key ideas that framed how he viewed or interpreted social issues; third, I’ll share some of the experiences that helped broaden his outlook before he started to actually publish about social issues, and finally I’ll talk about some of the themes he wrote about.

**Margins**

During the 1960s, many assumed that because a monk’s vocation removed him from public activity, he was disqualified from speaking about social events. But Merton saw the monk as someone “who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience,”[[1]](#endnote-2) and that this actually gave him distinct advantages for commenting on society. Merton expressed it this way in an essay:

The monastic and contemplative life … [implies] a very special perspective, … the viewpoint of one who is not directly engaged in the struggles and controversies of the world. … [This permits the monk to] give more thought to the interests of all, … the reconciliation of all [people] with one another in Christ. … To stand back from parochial and partisan concerns [for] a better view of the whole problem and mystery of [humanity].[[2]](#endnote-3)

He goes on to explain how the daily outpouring of “manufactured events” and “pseudo-news” by mass media, even in the Sixties, created its own addictive reality where “living without news is like living without cigarettes.”[[3]](#endnote-4) He adds:

My own experience has been that renunciation of [daily immersion in news media stories] … is to get out of the big cloud of dust that everybody is kicking up, to breathe and to see a little more clearly.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Merton saw this stance reflected the very origins of Christian monasticism itself. In 1960 he described how the original monks—the 4th century Desert Fathers—fled to the desert to avoid merging their faith with the political power of the Roman Empire. They saw their society:

“as a shipwreck from which each single individual [person] had to swim for [their] life. … They … did not believe in letting themselves be passively guided and ruled by a decadent state, and … believed there was a way of getting along without slavish dependence on accepted, conventional values.”[[5]](#endnote-6)

He recognized that other vocations could also have a “marginal” monastic quality. In an open letter to Latin American poets, he described them as:

 “not in tutelage to … political systems or cultural structures—whether communist or capitalist—but [poets] who dare to hope in their own vision of reality and of the future. … In this sense … we [poets] are all monks: for we remain innocent and invisible to publicists and bureaucrats.”[[6]](#endnote-7)

Then in 1968, after his Alaska visit and before his Asia trip, Merton attended a forum of European radical student leaders where a young French student told him, “We are monks also.” He reflected on that comment and a couple of months later, in his very last talk, on the day he died in Bangkok, he said it implies that:

 “The student seemed to be alluding to the fact that if one is to call himself in some way … a monk, he must have … reached some kind of critical conclusion about the validity of certain claims made by secular society, … [and] that the claims of the world are fraudulent.”[[7]](#endnote-8)

So in writing on social issues from a position “deliberately on the margins,”[[8]](#endnote-9) Merton hoped to offer us this kind of “monastic” insight that most of us in our “cloud of dust” otherwise miss; to help open our eyes to a more catholic view of the events around us—catholic with a small “c”: universal. As Pope Francis’s comment to Congress (2015) highlighted, his place on the margins enabled Merton to “challenge the certitudes of his time.”

Unfortunately, many of those same certitudes remain entrenched in our culture fifty years after his death. Merton’s social insight therefore continues to invite us to see our fragmented world not with the eyes of our own social and political center, where we are tempted to fearfully scan the horizon for threats to our own immediate, short term self-interests. Rather, he invites us to look with him from the margins and see more clearly a bigger picture beyond our dust cloud in the middle, a picture that shows all of humanity connected to each other and to God’s creation.

**Four guiding perspectives**

When Merton considered issues that society faced, he relied on at least four core perspectives to navigate the social terrain. They are connected and interdependent, held together in a mutually supportive web.

The first may seem obvious, yet especially in today’s environment of alternative facts and fake news, must still be named: Merton held to the notion not only that ultimate *Truth* actually exists, but that humans can access it to shape our vision for society. We may not be able to fully grasp its scope or harness its mystery, but we can encounter it and let it inform our responses to life. I have three quotes that help explain how he saw our encounter with Truth in a social context. For one, he said that social advocates are “not fighting simply for ‘[their]’ truth … [but] for *the* truth, common to [them] and the adversary, *the* right which is objective and universal.”[[9]](#endnote-10) He also described Truth as: “a Way and a Person … to be found and followed. Truth is to be lived. There are … no simple formulas that will suffice.”[[10]](#endnote-11) And elsewhere he asserted that: “the epiphany of hidden truth and of God’s redeeming love for [humanity] … is precisely the work of mercy,” and “the great gift” which pours out from God’s truth and love is “our mercy to others.”[[11]](#endnote-12) So rather than rely on propositional statements or verbal formulas, Merton felt that humans access the truth on which we build our social relationships by *living* it out in spiritual freedom and expressing it through mercy and love. And in doing sowe live out God’s Kingdom here and now, since, as Merton put it, “To build the Kingdom of God is to build a society that is based entirely on freedom and on love.”[[12]](#endnote-13)

Merton’s second point is based on his belief that we all embody some portion of that Truth, that we all carry within our own being a spark of God’s divine “Person.” He expressed this through his version of *personalism*. I’m still learning about Catholic personalism and its history, but as I understand, itemerged among European Catholic thinkers in response to challenges that followed the Enlightenment and French Revolution.[[13]](#endnote-14) Those events prompted some Catholics to revisit St. Thomas Aquinas’s ideas on what he called the “human person,” and led them to make a distinction between “personhood” as an identity grounded in God’s presence, on one hand, and modern ideas of the “individual” as something autonomous and self-sufficient of anything greater.

This concept of personalism is not a rigid or narrow philosophy, but more of a broad perspective on humanity. At one point Jacques Maritain—a key interpreter of Aquinas and a friend of Merton—counted at least twelve different versions of “personalism” in circulation. Like others, Merton also distinguished between the *person*, or what he sometimes referred to as the “true self”—which is guided by its grounding in God; and the *individual*, the false self—which we build through our own the ego and the demands of what he called “mass society.” Merton asserted that “the person must be rescued from the individual.”[[14]](#endnote-15)

Socially, Merton contrasted *communities*—made up of mutually grounded persons relating together—with *collectivities*—made up of those ego-driven individuals who shift their priorities with the latest social trend.

*Nonviolence* provided a third point of reference that helps connect the first two in practice. Merton was drawn to it even before he became a monk. He had defended Gandhi’s campaign as a high school student in England,[[15]](#endnote-16) and in the US he registered as a non-combatant prior to World War II.[[16]](#endnote-17) Over time the models of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others deepened his respect for nonviolence as a way of relating to others. He saw it as the best way to express truth through love and mercy—even with enemies and oppressors. For Merton nonviolence testifies “to the truth that is incarnate in a concrete human condition.”[[17]](#endnote-18) Even for the African-Americans who nonviolently sought greater freedom, “the struggle should be primarily for *truth itself*—this being the source of their power.”[[18]](#endnote-19) So in short, he’s saying that we cannot embrace the truth within others through violence that seeks to dominate them, we can only point toward truth and encounter it with others rather than coerce them to accept our own version of it.

Merton did not claim to be a “pacifist”—for him “pacifism” was an ideology that limits free responses. Nor did he reject Catholic Just War doctrine. But he insisted, “Nevertheless, I see war as an avoidable tragedy and … solving international conflict without violence has become the number one problem of our time.”[[19]](#endnote-20)

Merton’s fourth key perspective also reflects his commitment to recognizing the truth within in each person. It moves beyond nonviolence toward others, to also call for our *solidarity* or *identification* with others,especially those oppressed. This openness to identify with the oppressed in turn helps *us* to connect with our personhood. Merton did not often use word “solidarity”—it is often more implied, and he sometimes couched it in mystical terms or as part of the incarnational work of Christ. But the idea is there. At one point he advocates for the “identification of oneself with the foreigner and stranger, this ability to find oneself in another, which alone can preserve world peace.”[[20]](#endnote-21) When preparing to discuss protest at a 1964 gathering of peace activists, he concluded that: “The *real* [spiritual] root [of protest is] identification with the underprivileged [and] dedication to their ‘universe’ as an ‘epiphany.’”[[21]](#endnote-22)

Identification is not the same as paternalistic benevolence or charity, where we assume we have answers that others need. And although he sometimes called himself a “stranger” to others, here he does not refer to the “stranger” or “foreigner” or “underprivileged” as his own voluntary “marginal” status. He refers instead to those forced to the margins because of something intrinsic, like involuntary poverty, race, gender, or national origin.

So, when we view these four perspectives as a whole,as a web of interdependent priorities held together in supportive tension, they offer a certain symmetry, where nonviolence and solidarity serve as core *social* postures that point toward the *transcendent* powers of truthfreely grounded in love and mercy and our human personhood shared in genuine community.

**Finding a “Social” Voice**

Merton began to publish commentary on specific social issues in 1961, but this public voice did not spring up out of nowhere; it had matured over time through various experiences that gradually expanded his social insights. Paul shared some of the earlier seeds that would blossom into his later social voice, such as his grappling with whether a call into poverty meant working at Friendship House in Harlem or entering Gethsemani Abbey. Paul also described Merton’s epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut streets in Louisville during March 1958 as a moment of pivotal insight.He poetically described that experience as a deepened awareness of solidarity with others around him, where he could recognize in each of them the “glory of God…like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.”[[22]](#endnote-23) It was a profound moment in Merton’s life, but it also reflects a point along an emerging continuum. As he wrote just one week *before* that epiphany: “Solitude can [no] longer mean, for me, indifference to or separation from what is happening to the rest of the human race.”[[23]](#endnote-24)

I like the phrase Ron Dart used to describe this period as one of “emerging from a winter of enclosure into a springtime of engagement.” His global awareness, perception of social matters, and sense of identification with others crescendo across these years, and I’d like to share several other points that help to plot out this trend. One suspects that his mid-1956 reading of Emanuel Mounier’s book titled *Personalism* offered one important catalyst to better focus his outward gaze. Also, his engagement with works on Karl Marx (starting in 1957)[[24]](#endnote-25) and his correspondence with Soviet bloc literary figures Boris Pasternak and Czeslaw Milosz [[25]](#endnote-26) helped him see how Soviet and fascist movements denied human personhood. He demonstrated his expanding personalism in 1959/60 essays on Boris Pasternak; topics of“Love,” “Christianity and Mass Movements”; and the preface to his 1960 book *Disputed Questions.*[[26]](#endnote-27) The following year, he inserted personalist ideas into revisions that transformed an earlier work into the book *New Seeds of Contemplation*.[[27]](#endnote-28)

The arrival of Latin American novices to Gethsemani Abbey in the 1950s also expanded Merton’s world. They introduced him to Latin American poets, and reading their poetry and corresponding with them helped weave his poetic and literary sensibilities into his social awareness.[[28]](#endnote-29) These contacts also exposed Merton to Latin America’s synthesis of Spanish Catholicism with its native cultures, a synthesis in which Merton saw alternatives to the views of US and Soviet power blocs.[[29]](#endnote-30) **[**In his 1958 preface to an Argentinean volume of his *Complete Works*,[[30]](#endnote-31) he described this new Latin awareness as a vocation “*to see and to understand and to have in myself // the life and roots … and the destiny and the Orientation of the whole hemisphere*.”[[31]](#endnote-32)

From about mid-1957 to mid-1958, Merton joined in the Abbey’s discussions about founding a monastery in Latin America.[[32]](#endnote-33) This exposure further deepened his solidarity with the region. As he wrote in the midst of this period, during the closing days of 1957:

In a world with a complicated economic structure like ours, it is no longer a question of my “brother” being a citizen in the same country. … In any time, social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life. In no time more than ours has this been so urgent—and too poorly understood.”[[33]](#endnote-34)

During this year he also commented more specifically on: “The great problem of every South American project – entering a country where the hierarchy … supported … injustice, and tyranny. And in that environment … being on the side of progress and social justice. For instance, something for the Indians … of Ecuador.”[[34]](#endnote-35) He calculated how much land a new monastery should use up based on Mexico’s land reforms of the 1920s and 30s.[[35]](#endnote-36) And the possibility of injecting North American values into Latin American culture haunted Merton. When his abbot shared that he wanted to send US monks to Latin America and then direct them from Gethsemani rather than recruit local Latin Americans, Merton feared “a horror” of “the monotony of good [but] empty headed, generous [but] rather dizzy American monks who are not horrified by commercialism”;[[36]](#endnote-37) “men without originality and not too inclined to be Latins or to understand Indians.”[[37]](#endnote-38)

Merton would revisit indigenous cultures during his last two years of life,[[38]](#endnote-39) but during the late Fifties he shows an almost mystical regard for the marginalized native peoples of Latin America. In 1958 he commissioned an Ecuadoran sculptor to carve a statue of Mary and Child that would reveal what Merton called “the truth about God being ‘born’ Incarnate in the Indians of the Andes. Christ poor and despised among the disinherited of the earth.”[[39]](#endnote-40) When completed, he felt statue of Mary as a native Andean revealed the “great mystery of poverty” and the child—“the Resurrection to be born from the despised peoples of Mexico and the Andes.” He also wrote to friends in France that the statue inspired “complete solidarity” with their protest against French brutality toward Muslims in its Algerian war in Africa,[[40]](#endnote-41) and how he admired their reliance on “salvation … coming from the most afflicted and despised.” He added, “I want badly to go ahead … in somewhat the same direction, but over here,” [[41]](#endnote-42) meaning in the Americas.

Besides his desire to identify with both North and South American hemispheres, Merton also wrote in his journal of hoping to “unite *in myself* … the thought of the East and the West of the Greek and Latin Fathers” to help reconcile Roman and Orthodox traditions,[[42]](#endnote-43) and also to “unite in myself all that is good in both Russia and America.”[[43]](#endnote-44) All these comments express a solidarity that seeks to reconcile human divisions.

The ecumenical nature of Merton’s emerging personalism also shows in his expanding correspondence to those of other faiths during the decade’s closing years, and his readingof the Hindu Gandhi.[[44]](#endnote-45)

And by the end of this period, during the summer of 1960, another journal entry shows how strongly his personalist views had come to inform his social vision by then:

To discover *all* the social implications of the Gospel not by studying them but by living them, and to unite myself explicitly with those who foresee and work for a social order – a transformation of the world – according to these principles: primacy of the *person* – (hence justice, liberty, against slavery, peace, control of technology, etc.). Primacy of *wisdom and love* (hence against materialism, hedonism, pragmatism, etc.). [[45]](#endnote-46)

By the next summer, Merton strove to move beyond these journal entries and private letters to begin publishing on specific issues. In August of 1961 he wrote to Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, that he felt “obligated to take very seriously what is going on, and to say whatever my conscience seems to dictate, provided of course it is not contrary to the faith and the teaching authority of the Church.” He goes on to lament the silence of Catholics on what he called “a critical issue like nuclear war,” one “on which the very continued existence of the human race depends,” and he then adds, “I don’t feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation …[or] monastic studies. I think I have to write about the big issues, the life and death issues.”[[46]](#endnote-47) And two months later, he noted in an October journal entry, “[I am] convinced again that … [in my] writing, contacts, letters, that kind of effort: … everything should yield first place to the struggle against war.”[[47]](#endnote-48)

**Themes**

For the rest of my time, I want to comment the various social themes that Merton proceeded to engage. Paul introduced these same themes last night using various archival materials. The approach I’m taking is to focus more on his public writings. To help with that I’ll be projecting some lists I compiled of those writings. I don’t expect you to fully process all these titles—I’ll be flashing a lot of words at you, but I hope they give a general sense of the scope and volume and nature of his published output.

As he hinted at in his journal and letter to Dorothy Day, nuclear weapons and warfare, became the first social issue on which he openly published, and as you can see, the first two items he published were poems.

The story of how he faired with these early efforts is fascinating. His first essay was actually a chapter from *New Seeds of Contemplation* titled “The Root of War is Fear.” This chapter had been reviewed and approved for publication by the censors of the Trappist Order, who determined what was and was not appropriate for a Trappist monk to publish. Merton felt that made it safe to go ahead and publish it in *The Catholic Worker* magazine, so he sent it to Dorothy Day. But before doing so, he added three extra paragraphs that explained how the chapter’s theoretical contents applied in practice to the current nuclear arms race.

In applying it to those current affairs he had crossed a line for the Trappist censors—contemplative monks were to contemplate transcendent spiritual matters, not current politics. Six months later, just as he had finished a book manuscript called *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, Merton received word that he could no longer publish on the topic of war and peace.But his censors did let him publish an anthology he was editing titled *Breakthrough to Peace*, provided his name did not formally appear as editor.

Although Merton obeyed the *letter* of his Order’s decision, he sought every means he could to continue broadly sharing his concerns. In one approach, he published articles in the *Catholic Worker* under three different pseudonyms: Benedict Moore, Benedict Monk, and (my favorite) Marco J. Frisbee. (Merton had a great sense of humor, by the way.) But his preferred method relied on the mimeograph machine. His abbot agreed that distributing mimeographed copies was not “publication” in the sense that the Order had prohibited, so he began mailing them far and wide. This material included his *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* manuscript and a collection of over 100 letters he had written to various people, which came to be known as his “Cold War Letters.” Between October 1961 and October 1962 his output in opposition to nuclear war was massive, such that one biographer referred to this time span as “the year of the cold war letters.”

As the times and the Trappist censors moved on, the Order’s restrictions on Merton eased. Eventually Catholic leadership began to take up the issue, as well. Pope John XXIII published his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (or “Peace on Earth”) in April 1963; the Second Vatican Council condemned total wars of mass destruction and supported conscientious objection to war in its December 1965 statement on “The Church in the Modern World.”

In his November 1964 book *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton managed to include many of the ideas he originally expressed in the earlier censored book, along with twenty-three of his original Cold War Letters.

Beyond the Church, the August 1963 Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty, signed by both the US and Soviet Union, was hailed by many peace activists as a major breakthrough and prompted many to shift their focus away from peace issues toward racial oppression and Civil Rights activism. Merton more or less followed suit. As with the issue of nuclear war, one of Merton’s earlier writings to address race was a poem: “And the Children of Birmingham.”[[48]](#endnote-49) It drew on the brutal violence against Blacks that the nation had seen broadcast from that city in the spring of 1963 and the 16th St. Baptist Church bombing that killed five girls. A year later, at the request of a Black tenor in Louisville, Merton also wrote eight poems about Black liberation that he collectively titled “Freedom Songs” with the intent they be put to music for the singer to perform. Those plans fell through, but four of the poems were eventually performed in 1968 at a memorial event for Martin Luther King, Jr. Merton also spread several essays and articles about race over the last six years of his life. Interestingly, as African American resistance turned more militant in the later Sixties, Merton refused as a White man to condemn them despite his own nonviolent convictions. He saw that shift as a logical conclusion to White America’s failure to adequately respond to an earlier nonviolent plea for full inclusion.

The 1965 US escalation in Vietnam also prompted Merton to respond in a couple of ways. For one, the parallel escalation of peace movement tactics to oppose the war troubled him. He feared it could alienate many who might otherwise be sympathetic to calls for peace. To Merton’s frustration, both of these escalations came just as he had transitioned to a full-time hermit. The clash between more frantic war-related activity outside the Abbey and his increased isolation inside came to a head in the fall of 1965. Within a four-week spread between October 15 and November 9, a Quaker named Norman Morrison burned himself to death in front of the Pentagon in protest (Nov. 2); several members of the New York Catholic Worker and the Catholic Peace Fellowship—of which Merton was formally listed as a sponsor—publically burned their draft cards (Oct 15 and Nov 6); and a volunteer at the New York Catholic Worker named Roger Laporte also burned himself to death, this time in front of the United Nations Building (Nov. 9).

When Merton learned of the last incident, his concern turned to horror. He hastily resigned as a CPF sponsor, though conversations with his activist friends helped him better understand those incidents, and he remained one of their sponsors. But the episode drove home to him the limitations of his situation. He confessed that, “I am too out of contact, never hear anything until it is all over, almost never have a chance for reasonable discussion or debate, and when I have made up my mind about something I discover that the whole situation has radically changed and calls for a new decision.”[[49]](#endnote-50) Because of that, he would speak out on specific issues only when personally compelled, and otherwise just address what he called “questions of more or less abstract principle.” [[50]](#endnote-51)

He followed this period of turmoil with a handful of pieces that articulated his own vision for nonviolent protest and distanced himself from some of the more extreme and borderline “nonviolent” actions of the peace movement such as draft card burning. He felt a better path for Catholic resistance to the draft was conscientious objection as provided by the draft law. These writings about his own nonviolent principles supplemented another set of articles he had already been writing that focused more on *others* who advocated, expressed, or modeled nonviolence.

Despite this greater focus on principles, Merton was nonetheless appalled by the Vietnam War itself, and he also made this known. Even in writings that questioned draft card burning, draft board raids, and increasingly aggressive actions of the peace movement, he spoke out clearly against the US role in Vietnam. His solidarity with the lives affected was at the core of his opposition, as was his horror at the brutality the war inflicted on innocent.

During his last two years Merton also revisited his earlier interest in indigenous cultures. Although these writings can be seen in terms of his concern about racial oppression, I think they also touch on how those cultures contrast with our Western culture, including its relationship to the natural world. They reflect Merton’s growing sense that this relationship fostered an ecological crisis. When he read Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring,* he saw parallels between how it described the damage pesticides did and the threats posed by our nuclear arms buildup. In fact he labeled his 1962 letter of response to Rachel Carson which Paul quoted last night as an “appendix” to his Cold War Letters.[[51]](#endnote-52) He publically expressed this concern most clearly in a 1968 essay titled “The Wild Places,” a review of Roderick Nash’s book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. In this review, he concluded that given the “ecological shambles created by business and war,” Americans needed to embrace an “ecological conscience” “centered in an awareness of [humanity’s] true place as a dependent member of the biotic community.”[[52]](#endnote-53)

An finally, a couple other topics that belong with Merton’s social writings are technology and the disintegration of language and communicationHe wrote only one essay about modern technology that I know of, though he commented on our “technological society” in many writings, and he briefly critiqued it in his 1966 book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. He saw technology as an autonomous force of its own that we humans now serve, rather than it serving us. We embrace technological changes as good in themselves without fully considering how they will impact human beings; our uncritical embrace of these changes has helped transform the neutral idea of “efficiency” into a virtue that we revere more than the basic quality of human life itself.

As for the disintegration of communication, Merton bemoaned how our use of language has grown more superficial, which reduces its ability to promote shared understanding. And as I noted earlier, he anticipated how mass media, especially when it is wedded to rapid technological change, can degrade rather than enhance our communication.

Merton’s influence was not limited to published writings, though. It also spread through his personal friendships and direct interactions. He mostly accomplished this though correspondence, although he enjoyed a regular flow of visitors, too. Perhaps some of his most significant face-to-face interactions came during a three-day retreat he hosted for 13 activists in November 1964. Five of these men were Protestant—giving it an “inter-faith” flavor that was rare for the time and reflects Merton’s love of ecumenical conversation. Under the theme of “The Spiritual Roots of Protest” they processed not so much strategy and tactics of activism, but, examined underlying motives for resisting public policies and social norms. They explored their assumptions about how society works, including the role of modern technology.

**Conclude**

To conclude this overview, I suspect that based on what I’ve highlighted this morning it might be easy to pigeon-hole Merton and maybe embrace or dismiss his social outlook as that of a typical progressive or liberal or even radical of the Sixties. But this would be a mistake.

Merton’s views were not grounded in the dust cloud of partisan political ideologies. He saw little difference in the political parties of his day and discouraged putting our hope *mainly* in political solutions. He challenged both peace activists and nuclear warriors alike to reconsider some of their assumptions. He even believed that the Soviet and Western blocs shared many of the same illusions, which made them more similar than dissimilar.

Earlier I spent some time describing Merton’s web of priorities because they, rather than party politics, ultimately shaped his social perspective. They spilled over into all his writings, making it hard to simply parse out his work into “social” or “spiritual” or “literary” or other labels. Merton refused to separate a spiritual quest for our own, personal, “true self” from how we relate to other beings. He saw a broader, interdependent picture of life on this planet that was still emerging though God’s creative presence.

It is his focus of tapping into those larger questions—not an obsession with pragmatic politics or policy mechanics—that renders his social insight still prophetic today. He recognized that regardless of the era, when we focus on the noise of our individual egos and the clatter of our mass society, we permit fear and violence to drive our response toward those who come from different places, who look different, who think differently, who challenge our “way of life.”

For Merton, the antidote to being driven by fear and violence came from our willingness to quiet those voices through silent contemplation. [Using Ron’s image—so we can hear the plucking of the harp.] Only then could the presence of our common Ground of Being begin to seep into our awareness, begin to guide us beyond the certitudes that those voices so confidently assert.

We do not all share Thomas Merton’s vocation to join an order of monks or nuns. Most of us will continue to navigate the daily challenges of our complex society outside a monastic enclosure or hermitage walls. Merton invites us, however, not to let those circumstance and their clamoring noises have the final say. He invites us, along with the poets and the students he named as fellow “monks,” to likewise edge closer to the margins and open ourselves to a transformed view of the social issues we face today.

1. “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” Appendix VII in *The Asian Journal*, 305. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. “Events and Pseudo-Events,” *Faith and Violence*, 146, 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. “Events and Pseudo-Events,” 150, 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. “Events and Pseudo-Events,” 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. *The Wisdom of the Desert*, 3, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. “Message to Poets,” *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 155, 158 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” 329. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Cunningham in “Merton/Marginality,” 1978 *Christian Century* (citation ref). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. *A Search for Solitude. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 3: 1952-1960,* ed. Laurence S. Cunningham*,* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 20 Apr. 1958, 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. “The Climate of Mercy,” Love and Living, 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. *Disputed Questions*, 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Per *Catholics on the Barricades* (citation ref). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1964), 222. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. *The* *Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1948), 342. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. *Nonviolent Alternative,* 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. *Nonviolent Alternative*, 212. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. “Peace and Protest: A Statement,” *Nonviolent Alternative,* 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. *Disputed Questions*, 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protests: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 242. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. *Conjectures*, Image edition, 156-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. *Search for Solitude*, 13 Mar. 1958, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. His first journal entries to quote/reflect on Marx appear 13 May and 18 May 1958, *Search for Solitude*, 89-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Merton’s correspondence to Pasternak in *Courage for Truth*, 87-93; Merton/Milosz correspondence in *Striving Towards Being*. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Merton first published the essay on Pasternak titled “The People with Watch Chains” in July 1959 *Jubilee*, “The Pasternak Affair in Perspective” in November 1958 *Thought*, “Love and Person” in September 1960 *Sponsa Regis*, “Love and Maturity” in October 1960 *Sponsa Regis*, and “Christianity and Mass Movements” in July 1959 *Cross Currents*. All were republished the following year as chapters in *Disputed Questions*, the two *Sponsa Regis* essays under the title “The Power and Meaning of Love” and the last under the title “Christianity and Totalitarianism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. *New Seeds of Contemplation* published January 1962; Merton drafted revisions in 1961. His peronalist insertions are especially explicit in chapters 4-8. Merton’s added sentence, “The person must be rescued from the individual” (38) paraphrases a quote from Mounier’s *Personalism* that Merton noted in his 1956 journal: “The person only grows in so far as he continually purifies himself from the individual within him” (*Search for Solitude*, 19 Aug. 1956, 69). The original *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949) discusses the pitfalls of a “false self” (chapter 2) but does not address a “true self,” nor “person,” “community,” or “collectivity” as in *New Seeds*. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Saabrücken: LAP LAMBERT, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. This comes through clearly in his 1961 “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants” [*The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 372-91]; about the same time Merton noted this in his journal: “The important thing is to keep alive the concept of a Third World, genuinely free and peaceful and not committed to power politics based on a nuclear threat” [*Turning Toward the World*, 5 Oct. 1961,169]. Poks elaborates on theme (*Consonance*, esp. 16-52). In 1963 Merton suggested that the Cuban revolution may have offered potential for a “third force” in geo-politics, but the Church’s rigid anticommunism forced it into the Soviet realm. See Merton to Napolean Chow, 14 May 1963 in *Courage for Truth*, 169-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. *“Honorable Reader”: Reflections on my Work* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991), 35-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. *Search for Solitude*, 15 Feb. 1958, 168-69; Merton’s emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. US monasteries in the 1960s (presumably also the 1950s) were encouraged to pursue Latin American relationships: “[T]he Church has urged dioceses and religious houses of the united States to send priests and religious to help in South America,” Merton to Archbishop Paul Philippe, n.d., *ca*. 23 Oct. 1965 [*From the Monastery to the World*  (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 242]. In 1966 Gethsemani assumed responsibility for Miraflores Abbey in Chile, originally founded by Spencer Trappist Abbey in Massachusetts [Dianne Aprile, *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox. 150 Years in the Life of America’s oldest Trappist Monastery* (n.p.: Trout Lily Press, 1998), 161-62]. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. *Search for Solitude*, 29 Dec. 1957, 150-51; Merton’s emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. *Search for Solitude*, 29 Aug. 1957, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. *Search for Solitude*, 16 Feb. 1958, 169-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. *Search for Solitude*, 23 Mar. 1958, 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. *Search for Solitude*, 8 May 1958, 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. See especially Merton, *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1976). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. *Search for Solitude*, 6 Mar. 1958, 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. *Search for Solitude*, 8 May 1960, 388. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Merton to Mason, 3 Sep. 1960 as quoted in Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 122-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. *Search for Solitude*, 28 Apr. 1957, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. *Search for Solitude*, 11 Apr. 1958, 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. *Search for Solitude*, 16 Jan. 1958, 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. *Turning Toward the World*, 6 June 1960, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. 23 Aug 1961 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. 30 Oct 1961 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. *Collected Poems*, 335-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Merton to Douglass, 6 Nov. 1965, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 161. Self-immolation as protest was not new, especially in the Buddhist tradition, and Merton perhaps did not take into account the precedents on which they rested: Alice Herz (16 Mar, 1965) and Hiroko Hayasaki (12 Oct. 1965) had done so in the US against the Vietnam war; five Vietnamese Buddhist monks had self-immolated in protest of repression by the regime of Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem in the summer of 1963. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_self-immolations> [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Merton to Douglass, 6 Nov. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. As reported by William Shannon in *Witness to Freedom*, p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. “The Wild Places,” *Preview of the Asian Journey*, 105-106. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)