

Louis Massignon and the Seeds of Thomas Merton's "Monastic Protest"

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During the second week of November 1964, Thomas Merton turned his thoughts toward hosting a retreat for several "peaceniks from the FOR,"¹ as he jokingly described them. Though not foreseen then, this peacemaker retreat would break new ground for interfaith collaboration in social activism and feed into later anti-war efforts. Its mix of Catholic, mainline Protestant and historic peace church voices helped to forge new relationships in peace activism and cross-fertilize theologies of social engagement. While tying down some retreat logistics with his friend Daniel Berrigan, Merton also asked if he would lead a discussion on some aspect of "spiritual roots of protest"—a phrase Merton would adopt as the retreat's theme and title. For his part, Merton shared that he would address the topic from a "monastic-desert viewpoint,"² or as he later named it on a handout, "The Monastic Protest. The voice in the wilderness."³

Merton's subject is not surprising. He was deeply invested in exploring monastic ideas and often applied desert imagery to monastic experience. Four years earlier he had published a small volume of sayings by fourth-century "desert fathers"—ascetic hermits who removed themselves to the wilderness in response to a society that conflated political power with Christian practice.⁴ Regarding protest, one year earlier he had written, "It is my intention to make my entire life . . . a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the world with him. . . . I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists and agitators. . . . [T]he faith in which I believe is also invoked by many who believe in

1. Thomas Merton to W. H. Ferry, n.d., Thomas Merton Center [TMC] Archives, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

2. Thomas Merton to Daniel Berrigan, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 85 [11/11/64]; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, "Retreat, November, 1964: Spiritual Roots of Protest," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981) 260; subsequent references will be cited as "NVA" parenthetically in the text.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

war, believe in racial injustices, believe in self-righteous and lying forms of tyranny. My life must, then, be a protest against these also, and perhaps against these most of all.”⁵ What may surprise, however, is that this monastic tradition did not of itself serve as Merton’s primary resource to prepare his retreat comments. For the most part, he instead sought inspiration for this task in several writings of Louis Massignon (1886-1962), a French Catholic mystic, linguist and scholar of Islam.

Massignon, Protest and Trappist Asceticism

Louis Massignon may be most familiar to readers of Merton as having introduced him to the concept of the *point vierge*, or virginal point, which the monk described as a “point of pure truth” that is at “the center of our being” and which “belongs entirely to God.”⁶ As William Shannon suggests, beyond serving to enrich Merton’s contemplative reflections, Massignon also influenced Merton’s engagement with the world through his openness to other religions and his activism on behalf of Muslim peoples.⁷ Massignon publicly challenged post-war treatment of Palestinians and supported Moroccan independence. He lobbied for fairness toward Algerians during their eight-year war for independence that began in 1954, and he publicly protested French use of internment camps and torture against them. When Paris police attacked and killed peaceful Algerian demonstrators on October 17, 1961, Massignon tried to recover bodies discarded in the River Seine to provide proper Islamic burials. His efforts elicited physical attacks at speaking engagements and criticism by embarrassed friends and family.⁸

5. Thomas Merton, “Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, August 1963,” *“Honorable Reader”*: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65-66.

6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.

7. See Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 275-76 (subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text); and William H. Shannon, “Massignon, Louis,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 287-88.

8. For details of Massignon’s life and thought see Sidney H. Griffith, “Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam,” *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) 151-72 (subsequent references will be cited as “Griffith” parenthetically in the text); Mary Louise Gude, *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) (subsequent references will be cited as “Gude” parenthetically in the text); Herbert Mason, “Foreword to the English Edition,” *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam. Vol. I: The Life of al-Hallaj*, trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982) ix-xlii (subsequent references

Merton's two-year correspondence with Massignon began in 1959. Massignon also forwarded publications of the *Badaliyah*, which was dedicated to prayer and fasting for Muslims, and the "Friends of Gandhi"; both were groups for which Massignon provided leadership and for whose periodicals he often wrote. Through this material and correspondence with mutual friends, Merton learned of Massignon's activism and religious views. He reported to one of these friends, Jean Daniélou, SJ, that Massignon had shared "about all the causes in which he is interested and I am going to try and do a little praying and fasting in union with him. . . . This is one way in which I can legitimately unite myself to the [testimony] and work of my brothers outside the monastery" (HGL 134 [4/21/1960]). After an arrest, Massignon reported to Merton that "we are laughed at for our 'non-violence,' but your approval and your prayer help us."⁹

These acts of protest that Merton vicariously followed from across the Atlantic were not inspired by inclinations toward radical politics on Massignon's part—as a prominent scholar he in many ways assumed a posture of middle-class respectability. Rather, they instead flowed naturally from Massignon's deep religious commitments. His sense of God's presence among humanity emphasized mystical substitution of one's self for others and their sins through prayer, fasting and suffering. He found this quality in the primary subject of his life's work—a ninth-century Sufi mystic named al-Hallaj, who Massignon believed mystically contributed across the ages to his own conversion experience. Massignon felt that Gandhi's life and death also embodied this trait, and the Mahatma's efforts to reconcile India's Hindu and Muslim communities offered a model for Massignon's own work to reconcile French Catholics and Algerian Muslims. As scholar Sidney Griffith commented, "To resist the [Algerian] war, to give aid to its victims was a religious act for Louis Massignon, and every demonstration or 'sit-in' where he appeared was an occasion to practice the mystical substitution that was at the heart of his devotional life" (Griffith 158).

Massignon also admired Gandhi's *satyagraha*, his willful pursuit of truth, which Massignon saw in Islam as well (Gude 128). As Herbert Mason later commented, "He didn't believe demonstrations could stop the war, but only that they could bear witness to the truth in honor and friendship. And truth meant each one's truth, not just one's own. He insisted that peaceful prayer demonstrations be said at the graves of French soldiers and policemen as well as outside political prisons. . . . Bearing witness was not a judgment, but an act of invitation to see reality through another's eyes" (Mason, "Foreword" xxxvii). In a Friends of Gandhi

will be cited as "Mason, 'Foreword'" parenthetically in the text).

9. Louis Massignon to Thomas Merton, May 19, 1960 (TMC archives).

newsletter article that Mason translated and published in a 1961 issue of *The Catholic Worker* (and which Merton surely read), Massignon wrote, “When we use truth as a privilege and monopoly to force an adversary to humiliate himself as a liar, then the flickering conscience which he has . . . is unable to submit to our truth, because we have refused to recognize that he has a conscience at all.”¹⁰ Mason suggests that Massignon required recognition of three truths before acting in protest: “(1) the sources of possible injustices in [one’s self], (2) the humanity of [one’s] opponents, (3) the real state of things existing [now] as distinguished from the state [that one’s] dreams hoped to bring about” (Mason, *Memoir* 39).

Louis Massignon’s appreciation for Trappist asceticism also suggested a worldview sympathetic to Merton’s. Massignon saw these practices as “humanity’s ultimate recourse,” and he attributed the revolutionary collapses of French and Russian societies mystically to a weakening of Trappist orders in those cultures. He asserted that monastic asceticism in general “is not a private luxury preparing us for God, but is rather the profoundest work of mercy, which heals broken hearts by offering up instead its own broken bones and wounded flesh.”¹¹ Written in 1949, his comments echo words from Merton’s 1948 autobiography that reflect on a Mass during his first visit to Gethsemani: “This is the center of all the vitality that is in America. This is the cause and reason why the nation is holding together. These men, hidden in the anonymity of their choir and their white cowls, are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God.”¹² A decade later, during their months of correspondence, Massignon would seek Merton’s help in locating a French-speaking Trappist monastery that might dedicate themselves to prayer for Massignon’s elder son, Yves, who had died in 1935.¹³

Massignon and Merton’s 1964 Retreat Preparation

Merton’s encounters with Massignon during the early 1960s offer insight to help unlock the cryptic notes that survive of the comments he later

10. Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 40; subsequent references will be cited as “Mason, *Memoir*” parenthetically in the text.

11. Louis Massignon, “The Three Prayers of Abraham,” *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, ed. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 3-5; subsequent references will be cited as “Massignon, ‘Three Prayers’” parenthetically in the text.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 325.

13. Massignon to Merton, July 19, 1960 (TMC archives).

gave at the 1964 retreat. His remarks there revolved around two themes: a critique of technology and a monastic view on the spiritual roots of protest. He noted technology as a discussion topic in the handout that opened the retreat, and he peppered comments on it throughout their conversations. Merton focused his comments on monastic protest, however, in a presentation given during one of their sessions. This presentation emphasized the nature of social “privilege,” which drew on observations about “privileged collectivities,” “judgment of the privileged,” a caution that “privilege fossilizes,” the role of “hope,” Abraham and the story of Sodom, “substitution of oneself in the place of others before the judgment of God,” and Islamic ideas on asylum and personhood. These themes recur in a one-page outline¹⁴ that Merton used to give his presentation and in notes that Daniel Berrigan, Jim Forest and John Howard Yoder took of it.¹⁵

The sources of Merton’s comments become most evident, however, in the pages of his 1964 “working” notebook,¹⁶ which he used to take notes on readings or process ideas. Here Merton dedicated fourteen continuous pages to preparation for this gathering. The first five of these pages include quotations from Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Society*¹⁷ and record a list of points that reflect Merton’s own thoughts on technology. He undoubtedly wrote these pages during the first week in November 1964, about the same time as personal journal entries log his receipt of the book and capture reflections on it.¹⁸ The nine pages that immediately follow build his case for a monastic view on the spiritual roots of protest, and they reveal that Merton explicitly referenced six different essays by Louis Massignon as he prepared. In this case, journal entries that reference some of these essays hint that he worked with them up to the day before the retreat (*DWL* 166-67 [11/16/64; 11/17 64]).

14. Thomas Merton, “Notes for F.O.R retreat. Nov. 1964,” E.1 (TMC Archives).

15. Daniel Berrigan, retreat notes written on margins of mimeograph copy of Thomas Merton, “Identity Crisis and Monastic Vocation,” n.d., B/98, Daniel and Philip Berrigan Collection, #4602, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University; James Forest, “Gethsemani Retreat (The Spiritual Roots of Protest): Nov. 1964,” 13, John Howard Yoder Papers, #H12 (TMC Archives); John Howard Yoder, “Transcription of Original Notes by J. H. Yoder, Gethsemani c/o T. Merton 18-20 November 1964,” 1, John Howard Yoder Papers, #H12 (TMC Archives).

16. Thomas Merton, *Notebook 3, 1964-5*, L24-R27, Thomas Merton Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library; subsequent references will be cited as “*Notebook 3*” parenthetically in the text.

17. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

18. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 159-61, 163 [10/30/64; 11/2/64; 11/6/64]; subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text.

The remainder of this paper reviews examples of how these six Massignon essays appear among Merton's notebook pages. Merton appears to be mining this material in search of Massignon's spiritual sensitivities and insights toward Muslims that motivated his protest on their behalf, insights that Merton might apply to his own American setting. The nine notebook pages that address spiritual roots of monastic protest begin with a second list of points that gathered ideas on this theme and drew in part from Massignon's essay entitled "The Three Prayers of Abraham." This essay opens by discussing a unique chain of witnesses—beginning with the patriarch Abraham and extending into the present—who provide a special, ongoing, substitutionary presence that connects humanity with the divine. For Massignon, Trappist asceticism has played a key role in sustaining this presence through its rigorous disciplines of silence and prayer.

Massignon then examines three prayers offered by Abraham that have reverberated through the ages among the three Abrahamic traditions. One, his prayer to spare Sodom if only ten just men could be found there, established an Abrahamic call to extend hospitality to others. Massignon described the city as one of "self-love which objects to the visitation of angels, of guests, of strangers, or wishes to abuse them" (Massignon, "Three Prayers" 10). Abraham's unfulfilled prayer for Sodom continues to "hover forever over societies doomed to perdition . . . that they might be spared the heavenly fire" (Massignon, "Three Prayers" 12). Another prayer, to protect Ishmael following his exile into the desert, anticipated the rise of Islam and its insights about God's inscrutability and uncompromising demand for recognition of the one true God of Abraham. The third prayer, expressed in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, anticipated Mary's sacrifice of *her* son centuries later. Massignon laments how Abraham's descendants each presume their own privilege before God, while remaining fossilized and hardened. They crusade against and ghettoize each other, failing to recognize their common call to hospitality.

Merton's notebook list of points on spiritual roots focuses heavily on the theme of "privilege." In keeping with his handout's imagery of "the voice in the wilderness," Merton's initial point notes how the biblical prophets cautioned against the dangers of privilege and encouraged detachment from it. He also commented on the inverted "biblical dialectic" that often places spiritual privilege in unexpected hands, such as those of the stranger, the underprivileged, or the "younger son"—a likely allusion to the story of Isaac and Ishmael. Massignon's influence becomes explicit later in this list when Merton directly quotes a critique of Church institutions taken from "The Three Prayers of Abraham": "Certainly, it

would be desirable in these days of social action to be able to rely upon the public testimonies of communities constituted and consecrated for this purpose. But it is precisely the abuse of their privileges which fossilizes them and deprives us of their help” (Massignon, “Three Prayers” 5). He then references “the privilege of Abraham and his intercession for Sodom” without elaborating on its significance for his topic. Merton ends this list of comments with his own definition of the *real root* of protest: “Our identification with the underprivileged,” our dedication to them as an “epiphany” and “an intercessory for us.” This requires our willingness to suffer, to refuse our own privilege. It also requires us to “protest against the arrogance and stupidity of the privileged” and place our “true *hope* in the spiritual privilege of the poor.” Merton also named “inadequate roots,” such as our identification with “the ‘official policy’ of any church or party” or our “servility to ‘orthodoxy’” (*Notebook 3* L27-L28). Rather, Merton suggests, the fate of those who pursue the real spiritual roots of protest may instead involve living in “a sort of No Man’s Land exposed to missiles on both sides.”¹⁹ This phrase also originated from Massignon, who had used it to describe the life of Jules Monchanin, a Catholic priest who spent his life in India among Hindus.

Beyond these references, Merton also turned to Massignon’s comments about Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)—a soldier turned Trappist turned hermit in the Algerian desert, where he dedicated his last years to the indigenous Muslims he lived among. Massignon had developed a close spiritual relationship with Foucauld prior to the latter’s death at the hands of insurgents during World War I, and he viewed Foucauld as one of those timeless, substitutionary witnesses to God’s transcendence. He also believed that Foucauld, like al-Hallaj, had mystically interceded on behalf of Massignon’s own conversion in 1908. After the hermit’s death, Massignon helped publish Foucauld’s *Directory*, a monastic rule later used to found the Little Brothers of Jesus and other religious orders called to live among and serve the marginal. Merton cites from two essays on Foucauld,²⁰ particularly noting his commitment to discover the sacred in

19. Louis Massignon, “The Abbot Jules Monchanin,” *Opera Minora: Textes Recueillis, Classés, et Présentés*, vol. III, ed. Y. Moubarac (Beirut: Dar Al-Maaref Liban S.A.L., 1963; rpt.: Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969) 770, trans. Dr. Hollie Markland Harder; subsequent references to the anthology will be cited as “Massignon, *Opera Minora*” parenthetically in the text.

20. Louis Massignon, “Foucauld in the Desert before the God of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael,” *Opera Minora* 772–84, trans. Virginie Reali (subsequent references will be cited as “Massignon, ‘Foucauld’” parenthetically in the text); Louis Massignon, “An Entire Life with a Brother Who Set Out on the Desert: Charles de Foucauld,” *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, ed. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame, IN: University

others, attend to those most abandoned, and transfer their sufferings onto himself. He copied a quotation of Foucauld that emphasized working for our own personal conversion, since our real impact depends not on what we say and do, but on the extent to which our actions are those of Jesus working in and through us.

A fifth Massignon essay that Merton cited in his notebook is titled "The Respect for the Human Person in Islam and the Priority of the Right to Asylum over the Responsibility to Wage Justified Wars."²¹ Here he describes the Islamic grounding of personhood within one's personal testimony to a transcendent God, in contrast to Western notions of personhood that depend instead on social standing. He also emphasizes how through this standard Muslims grant personhood to Christians and Jews. Merton especially noted Massignon's correlation of this view of personhood to the Islamic concept of asylum, which granted refuge to foreigners during war and to fugitives. Massignon felt this priority of asylum retained the vestige of a primitive sense of hospitality, which sees the "guest" or "stranger" as one sent by God. In contrast, Western hospitality has become at best a "commercial ploy." The Christian West's abuse of Islam's primitive hospitality during their encounters reveals its own forgetfulness and contempt of the Bible. Written in 1952, the essay criticizes post-war treatment of displaced Arabic people. He prophetically noted a growing transition among refugees in camps from a "very beautiful Muslim resignation to divine will" to a growing desire to regain their land with armed force (Massignon, "Respect" 554). He also observed that "the 'biblical,' 'Abrahamic' religious meaning of hospitality toward foreigners [has diminished] because of contact with us, and increase[s] a dreadful belief in the inevitable advent of war between the rich and poor [such that] . . . I would not guarantee that [Muslim hospitality] can last a long time" (Massignon, "Respect" 545).

Massignon and Technology

Merton drew on other resources besides Louis Massignon to address spiritual roots of protest at the 1964 retreat, but none permeated Merton's preparation as he did. Moreover, Massignon also provided support for Merton's other theme, his critique of technology. Toward this end, Merton placed additional Massignon excerpts at the end of his earlier notes

of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 21–38.

21. Louis Massignon, "The Respect for the Human Person in Islam and the Priority of the Right to Asylum over the Responsibility to Wage Justified Wars," *Opera Minora* 545, trans. Dr. Hollie Markland Harder; subsequent references will be cited as "Massignon, 'Respect'" parenthetically in the text.

on Ellul, rather than within the latter nine pages of material on spiritual roots. One noteworthy example addresses the *point vierge*. From one of the essays on Charles de Foucauld (Massignon, “Foucauld” 780), Merton copied a phrase that includes this term—the same essay and phrase, in fact, that introduced the term to Merton in 1960. Drawn from a public talk Massignon had given, it was first published in an issue of *Les Mardis de dar-es-Salam* (Griffith 165), the journal of a center in Cairo dedicated to Muslim-Christian dialogue, which Massignon had forwarded. Merton’s personal journal entry that May shared his initial reaction to the article as a “Deeply moving prayer of Louis Massignon on the Desert, on the tears of Agar, on the Moslems, the ‘*point-vierge*’ of the Spirit seemingly in despair, encountering God.”²² In offering his thanks for receipt of the journal, Merton quoted directly from the essay commenting, “Louis, one thing strikes me and moves me most of all. It is the idea of the ‘*point vierge . . .*’ [‘. . . the center of the soul, where despair corners the heart of the outsider’]” (*WF* 278 [7/20/60]).

When drawing upon this same phrase for the peacemaker retreat, however, Merton quoted more of the original sentence, which expands the context in which Massignon had written it. In his 1964 notebook, the excerpt reads: “under pressure from a so-called Christian civilization, and technically superior, the Muslim faith reached the *point vierge*, the center of the soul, where despair corners the heart of the outsider” (Merton, *Notebook 3* R27). In other words, Massignon originally wrote it in critique of the impact that Western, technological society had on the integrity of Islam. In this brief quote, and Merton’s placement of it with his technology notes, we catch a glimpse of how important one’s awareness of technological society and its impact was for Merton. It helped him link technology with Massignon’s concern about the privileged fossilization we risk and therefore with our complicity in crushing the *unprivileged* who would help connect us to our true spiritual roots.

A more significant essay that informed Merton’s view of technology was titled, “A New Sacral.” Massignon wrote it in 1948 for the journal *Dieu Vivant*, which he had co-founded three years earlier. This journal gave voice to the disillusionment and desolation that engulfed Europe following World War II. Massignon shared its pessimism toward technological solutions, though as a scholar he respected the scientific method as such. His 1946 article, “The Future of Science,”²³ criticized how modern

22. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals*, vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 5 [5/30/60].

23. Louis Massignon, “L’Avenir de la Science,” *Opera Minora* 790-96, trans. Dr. Hollie Markland Harder.

science had begun to usurp the role of God through its ultimate claims to solve human need. He instead called us to place hope in our embrace of a “liturgical cosmos” that reflects our Creator’s mind. A reader objected to this claim, suggesting we are better served by embracing “a broader sacral view that integrates science and technology,” one that makes us “a very close collaborator with God.” In writing “A New Sacral,”²⁴ Massignon reacted strongly to this suggestion. He declared, in a statement that Merton copied among his technology notes, how the “inappropriateness of this sentence irritates anyone who knows, through prayer, that God is at the root of our actions, and that he is in no way an external ‘occupier’ who requests the ‘collaboration’ of his creation. We have felt the call from God, and we resent the ridiculousness of this condescending proposal to use technical tricks to perfect the work of the Creator” (Massignon, “Sacral” 798). As the essay’s translator, Dr. Hollie Markland Harder, points out, the terms “occupier” and “collaborator” carried significant emotional impact in post-war France.

Several other references to this essay in Merton’s material also suggest that it bridged the spiritual roots and technology themes for him. Participants’ notes of Merton’s presentation cited it, and in his handout Merton juxtaposed for discussion the two extremes of viewing our technological society as either “by its very nature oriented to self-destruction, or whether it can on the contrary be regarded as a source of hope for a new ‘sacral’ order” (NVA 260). In his notebook, Merton also placed quotations from it next to his spiritual roots comments, such as a reference to Fr. (now St.) Damien, who died from leprosy while serving in a Hawaiian leper colony. But perhaps the strongest evidence of how “A New Sacral” spoke to both of Merton’s retreat themes comes from his personal journal entry for November 16, two days before the retreat began. It essentially provides a synopsis of the essay and includes several of its images and allusions. This entry reads:

Technology. No! When it comes to taking sides, I am not with the *beati* who are open mouthed in awe at the “new holiness” of a technological cosmos in which man condescends to be God’s collaborator, and improve everything for Him. Not that technology is per se impious. It is simply neutral and there is no greater nonsense than taking it for an ultimate value. It is *there*, and our love and compassion for other men is now framed and scaffolded by it. Then what? We gain noth-

24. Louis Massignon, “Un Nouveau Sacral,” *Opera Minora* 797-803, trans. Dr. Hollie Markland Harder; subsequent references will be cited as “Massignon, ‘Sacral’” parenthetically in the text.

ing by surrendering to technology as if it were a ritual, a worship, a liturgy (or talking of our liturgy as if it were an expression of the “sacred” supposedly now revealed in technological power). Where impiety is in the hypostatizing of mechanical power as something to do with the Incarnation, as its fulfillment, its epiphany. When it comes to taking sides I am with Ellul, and also with Massignon (not with the Teilhardians). (*DWL* 166 [11/16/1964])

Then, perhaps with thoughts of protest fresh in mind, Merton ends this entry with a direct quotation from “A New Sacral,” which reads: “We cannot fail to denounce the so-called ‘harmlessness’ of the ‘apostles’ of these technologies, which subject the spiritual to the temporal and soils life at its source in such a hypocritical way” (Massignon, “Sacral” 802; see *DWL* 166).

These examples of how Merton used Massignon to buttress his technological critique suggest a more nuanced concern for the spiritual impact of technological society than he had observed from Ellul’s sociological tome. They suggest a clearer awareness of how relentlessly Western, “Christian” technological priorities impinged not merely on the interior world of participants in modern societies. Massignon seemingly reinforced for Merton the insight that this unquestioned loyalty to the advance of “progress” also forced those priorities upon other cultures encountered, violating their unique, indigenous integrity and compromising their own *point vierge*, as well as ours.

Merton’s Spiritual Roots of Protest

This review of Merton’s reading notes during the week before his retreat with peace advocates offers only a narrow window into his thought, one that does not fully define his ongoing priorities. In fact, only three months later Merton conceded to Daniel Berrigan that he had not yet “been able to type up the stuff from last November. . . . I have forgotten what I said and the notes aren’t much help, so really I will have to start all over again” (*HGL* 86 [2/26/65])—which it appears he never did. But regardless of its lasting impact, as this paper demonstrates, Merton’s exercise of preparing for this particular occasion relied heavily on Louis Massignon to express a “monastic” perspective on both protest and technology. And whatever their origin, sensitivities that echo Massignon also surface in some of Merton’s later writings on protest. For example, in two of the essays that comprise *Faith and Violence*, published in 1968, Merton’s comments include: “Christian non-violence does not encourage or excuse hatred of a special class, nation or social group. . . . [The Christian] will

not let himself be persuaded that the adversary is totally wicked and can therefore never be reasonable or well-intentioned, and hence need never be listened to.”²⁵ “If the ‘Gospel is preached to the poor,’ if the Christian message is essentially a message of hope and redemption for the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged and those who have no power humanly speaking, how are we to reconcile ourselves to the fact that Christians belong for the most part to the rich and powerful nations of the earth?” (*FV* 20). “We must always be tolerant and fair and never simply revile others for their opinions. The way to silence error is by truth, not by various subtle forms of aggression” (*FV* 44).

[P]erhaps our scientific and technological mentality makes us war-minded. We believe that any end can be achieved from the moment one possesses the right instruments, the right machines, the right techniques. . . . One thing that gives such a drastic character to the protest against war is the realization which the peace people have of this unjust suffering inflicted on the innocent largely as a result of our curious inner psychological needs, fomented by the climate of our technological culture. (*FV* 45-46)

Nearly thirty years after the retreat, when responding to a student paper on Thomas Merton, John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian present in 1964, shared some impressions from that event, their only face-to-face encounter. Yoder agreed with those who felt Merton “came to antiwar protest slowly, after others were running with it, and that he did not anchor it deeply in what he had been thinking about before.” Yoder suggested that Merton may have “felt left behind” by others tutored “in the power of the heritage of Dorothy Day.”²⁶ We must wonder, though, whether Yoder would have felt the same had he known more of Louis Massignon’s protests and Merton’s exposure to them. Perhaps he may then have viewed Merton more as working to integrate his 1964 discussions into a framework of protest that Massignon had already helped him construct, rather than to simply “catch up” with others.

The comments of Herbert Mason, who knew Dorothy Day as well as Merton and Massignon, may help. Mason notes Massignon’s insistence on recognizing the humanity of both victimizer and victim, on acknowledging

25. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 19; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.

26. John Howard Yoder to Lawrence Cunningham, 31 August 1993, 13, Yoder Papers, #H.12 (TMC archives).

that those we oppose also have a conscience,²⁷ and on understanding how lethal self-righteous, spiritual violence can be.²⁸ “[He] adhered above all . . . to the inescapable Truth, wherever [the Truth] led” (Mason, email). Mason saw Dorothy Day as driven more by ideology than Massignon, but felt that her fervor was tempered by compassion. She stood between victimizer and victim while “facing the victimizer without fear, and with an absolute refusal to meet violence with violence.” Mason adds, “both radical activists were disciplined persons. Their spirits and teachings confronted fully but are not limited to their times” (Mason, “Unexpected” 12). As for Thomas Merton, Mason viewed him as a “lifelong learner of new and strange unexpected things” and a “social idealist” whose humor helped curtail his enthusiasms (Mason, email). Perhaps in the end, Merton might be seen as standing in a narrow gap between these two activists, seeking Louis Massignon’s substitutional embrace of victim and victimizer, while also honoring Dorothy Day’s tradition of unflinching resistance to the oppressor on behalf of the oppressed.

But however we see him, there can be no question that the vision Thomas Merton shared at this 1964 gathering drew heavily from Louis Massignon and asked for those who would protest to first radically transform their hearts and lives. The transformation he sought would dismantle our false security of privilege and status within a technological society and replace it with wisdom gained instead through identification with the underprivileged, the abandoned, the poor.

27. Herbert Mason, “An Unexpected Friendship,” *Existenz* 7:1 (Spring 2012) 12; subsequent references will be cited as “Mason, ‘Unexpected’” parenthetically in the text.

28. Herbert Mason, November 28, 2012, email to author; subsequent references will be cited as “Mason, email” parenthetically in the text.

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