

**Thomas Merton: Prophet of Hope and Peace for the “Post-Christian Era”
by Pamela Proietti**

A scholarly review of Merton’s controversial 1962 book on morality of war and peace:

Merton, Thomas, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, edited with an introduction by Patricia Burton. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004 [1962].

When Merton first wrote this prophetic and thought-provoking book, Dom James Fox (Merton’s abbot) and Dom Gabriel, Abbot General, believed that a monk who voiced his thoughts about the possibility of nuclear war, the Cold War, and the conduct of war (among other controversial public policy issues) would arouse negative publicity for the church and generate too much controversy. Merton obeyed, but he was both angry and saddened to see this important book officially banned by Catholic Church authorities from publication, while “Machiavelli’s *Prince*, an unabashedly immoral book, had never been on the Index of books forbidden to Catholics” (Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, foreword, xiii; and p. 52).

Merton responded to Dom Gabriel’s decision with the promise of obedience but also with a vigorous defense of his book. Merton was convinced that especially the cloistered clergy have a special role to play in discerning Reality and providing a genuine prophetic utterance of moral protest against moral abuses by government and military authorities. Merton allied himself with Dorothy Day’s *Catholic Worker* movement and protested against the Vietnam War, which was frowned upon by his superiors. Merton would soon afterward write a book-length manuscript reflecting on the question that pitted him against his superiors in the Catholic Church hierarchy: Is a monk qualified to critique his government’s policies and laws—is he permitted to make statements about war and the conduct of war? What ought to be the role of clergy in public life? (Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. NY: Random House, Inc, 1965/66.)

More than four decades after he had written the manuscript for *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, Merton's prophetic Christian witness to the moral truth of the pacifist Christian tradition was finally published. Merton took his dark and seemingly pessimistic reference to the "post-Christian era" from a 1953 speech given by C. S. Lewis. C. S. Lewis had said: "The gap between those who worship different gods is not so wide as that between those who worship and those who do not." Merton's intended audience would seem to be all those human beings around the globe—including his Western audience—"who worship different gods," or who worship the one God Who is inevitably understood from each human person's unique cultural perspective.

At the center of his book, Merton examines both the just war theory of ancient Christian tradition and the modern "legacy of Machiavelli." Arthur Koestler suggested, in his famous novel *Darkness at Noon*, that the modern world is divided between those who still believe that human life is sacred and those Machiavellians who believe they have the right to experiment upon (and even to murder) *individual human beings* for the sake of the intended progress of *mankind*. Thomas Merton, like Koestler, understood that the amoral Machiavellian perspective has become the dominant view of politics in the post-Christian world of the third millennium. This prevailing Machiavellian moral perspective, combined with the regrettable tendency of Christian citizens in the West toward a passive acceptance of their government's policies in weapons manufacturing/use and waging of war, is the principal spiritual evil against which Merton battles in the arguments of this revolutionary, political, timely, and important book.

Merton's core arguments in the book demonstrate that a leader's decision to use nuclear weapons could never satisfy the traditional Christian moral criteria for *just war*—moral criteria that Christian thinkers had discovered centuries ago in the violent and pre-nuclear world of the

Middle Ages. The destruction resulting from a nuclear exchange would be beyond all proportion to the potential good to be achieved, violating one of the essential moral imperatives of *just war*.

As we enter the third millennium, Merton's prophetic warnings ring more urgently and more powerfully than when he first wrote them. Merton expresses his very grave concerns about the possible choices concerning war and peace to be made by future world leaders within a culture that is becoming increasingly Machiavellian, materialistic, and post-Christian/post-religious. Most useful for the ordinary lay reader, Merton provides, in the final chapter of the book, some very practical suggestions for ordinary American citizens concerning their moral duty to work toward the goal of peace and greater social justice within the predominantly amoral Machiavellian world of both their economic and cultural elites and their government leaders.

The central ideas about war and peace that Merton examines in this prophetic book will lead the reader toward many more questions than could be fully answered in Merton's slender manuscript; mostly questions about the most prudent/practical and most ethical path toward a more peaceful world. Yet Merton's book provides a persuasive reminder that in our time of Machiavellian political expediency, a time when most of our national and international leaders are ignorant of the true nature of morality, "*the fact remains that objective moral standards exist, whether people know them or not*. Choices are made and judged in the light of objective moral laws, and violation of these laws brings disaster" (p. 22, *The Dance of Death*). The purpose of the book, in Merton's own words: "to stand back from the imminent risks of the Cold War crisis, *seeking to judge the problem of nuclear war* not in relation to what seem to be our own interests or even our own survival, but simply *in the light of moral truth* (Merton, *Preamble: Peace—A Religious Responsibility*, p. 4).

Modern governments, including the governments of supposedly Judeo-Christian nations like England and America, routinely violate these higher moral laws; and sometimes, they will openly defend their right---even their *moral duty*---to do so! In the seventh chapter of the book, Merton provides a brief historical survey of the military decisions during the Second World War. This chapter is perhaps the most frightening in the book, because it provides recent historical evidence for how *Christian leaders* can be expected to act during stressful periods of prolonged and bloody warfare. The world saw the governments of both England and the USA begin their war efforts against Nazi Germany with the intention of conducting their own chosen acts of war according to moral standards, such as avoiding *the targeting of innocent civilian populations*. Yet, over the course of this long and bloody war, leaders of both governments were encouraged, mostly by their military leaders, to transgress the moral requirement to protect innocent civilians from the evils of war (as much as possible). Merton makes a truly powerful case for Christian pacifism in this particular chapter; decent Christian leaders like Churchill and Truman were both making decisions about the conduct of the war that were morally shocking and repugnant. Churchill was pushed by his military, especially Air Marshall Sir Arthur Travis Harris, to open up “obliteration bombing against German cities in 1942.” By the end of the war, “early in 1954, General Curtis LeMay had decided, on his own responsibility, to initiate a devastating new tactic of massive low-flying fire raids by night.” It was General LeMay who made the decision to set the entire city of Tokyo afire with napalm bombs, on the night of March 9-10, 1945...So frightful were the effects of this raid that it claimed as many casualties as the atom bombing of Hiroshima, an act of horrific injustice which President Truman had to directly order as “Commander-in-Chief” (Merton, pp. 61-62). The two atomic bombs dropped on civilians in Japan by Truman are acts that will never be forgotten, but many other savage acts during that

war were not even initiated on the order of elected government officials, but instead were chosen by military leaders with minimal oversight (Merton, chapter 7, *Justice in Modern War*, pp. 63-64). Objections to these atrocities on moral grounds was *confined to a minority*, even a minority with the Catholic Church, Merton stresses toward the conclusion of this shocking chapter!

Chapter nine is an extended exploration of the arguments being made in Merton's time in favor of the continued relevance of the Just War Theory. Merton's most detailed and persuasive critique of Fr. John Courtney Murray's defense of the continued relevance of the Augustinian Christian just war theory today is worth developing at length. Merton is the only commentator I've found who describes Augustinian thought as exhibiting "an excessive naivete with regard to the good that can be attained by violent means." Augustine justified use of violence in the pursuit of good ends—he understood the Church and Christians, as aiming toward good ends—justice and peace. Merton argues that Augustine's just war theory worked well in ages less destructive than our own. Merton stresses that Augustine's just war theory was developed in a medieval Christian era, when leaders of nations could be expected to be respectful, at least on the level of popular rhetoric, to Christian moral values. Augustine's just war theory is being used by Christian thinkers in examining the morality of governments policies about war and peace in our own times, despite the fact that we are living in a post-Christian and Machiavellian world, in a time and place where "the city of this world is no longer allied with the City of God, and when its citizens...are armed in spirit with the cynicism of Machiavelli and Clausewitz, and armed in the flesh with devices capable of destroying continents" (Merton, p. 43). Ours is a modern Machiavellian world far different from the world of Origen and Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

In the vast majority of the political and social rhetoric during the Cold War, it was assumed without question that "Western society and Christendom were still identified and that

communism equals the Antichrist” (Merton, p. 74). It was also falsely assumed that it was impossible to negotiate with the Communist enemies. The resolution of the Cuban Missile crisis between President John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev demonstrates that the attitude on both sides was a strong willingness to negotiate in order to maintain peace and avoid nuclear war. Merton understood what Kennedy came to understand during that stressful time: the Russian leaders were human beings, just as the Americans were. They had suffered during a long recent world war and wanted to maintain the peace for their own people and for others in the world.

Demonizing the Communist Russian or Chinese leaders was an attitude that leads us dangerously toward conflict and war. Merton asks, in his chapter about the Cold War, chapter 8: “What are we defending? Our religion or our affluence? Or have we so identified the two that the distinction is no longer possible?” (Merton, chap. 8, *Religious Problems of the Cold War*, p. 74).

Merton asks the most important questions that still confront all of those persons who are genuinely seeking to promote peace and justice in our world: (1) How can we forge an interfaith alliance with good and wise persons across national, cultural, and religious boundaries—in order to defend our common human treasure, i.e., our human civilization, against all those who are promoting hatred and violence and fear? (2) How could we rediscover that forgotten spiritual greatness within both Western and Eastern cultures--and thereby foster an ecumenical spiritual renewal that might overcome the widespread corporate greed, Machiavellian cynicism, and brutality among the Western powers, while also defeating that technologically savvy and spiritually nihilistic fascist philosophy spreading throughout most of the Islamic countries? What guidance does Merton offer to those persons of good will within both cultures who wish to confront and to overcome the path of cultural and moral destruction taken by their ruling elites?

Merton asserts that “we have to defend in every way possible the religious, political, and cultural values without which our lives would lack meaning (Merton, chap. 9, *Theologians and Defense*, p. 75). We cannot adopt the amoral/immoral attitudes and tactics of our enemies without becoming as they are. Steven Spielberg made a powerful movie about this moral danger, *Munich*, shortly after the events of 9/11. In this powerful movie, he asks what will become of Israel and the Jews if they turn their backs on what makes Jewish culture so noble and beautiful, if they turn instead toward embracing a Machiavellian outlook that makes them indistinguishable from their enemies. Merton quotes from a Lenten Pastoral Letter written by Cardinal Meyer of Chicago (1962):

The charity of Christ which makes us solicitous for our families and for our American society must also make us solicitous for the welfare of the whole world... We are overcome by evil not only if we allow communism to take over the world but if we allow the methods and standards of Communism to influence our own. If we adopt a policy of hatred, of liquidation of those who oppose us, of unrestrained use of total war, of a spirit of fear and panic, of exaggerated propaganda, of unconditional surrender, of pure nationalism, we have already been overcome by the evil,
(Quoted by Merton, chap. 10, *Working for Peace*, p. 93).

“We cannot expect a peaceful world society to emerge all by itself from the turmoil of a ruthless power struggle—we have to work, sacrifice, and cooperate to lay the foundations on which future generations may build a stable and peaceful international community. Every Christian is involved in this task, and consequently every Christian is obliged to seek information and form his conscience so that he may be able to contribute his own share of intelligent political action toward this end” (Merton, *ibid*, p. 93). Merton is not able to give specific moral guidelines that would fit every possible future situation. He certainly could not have envisioned, while writing during the Cold War conflict between the capitalist Western powers and the communist

states of Russia and China that future conflicts would occur primarily between these two former enemies, on the one side, and Islamic-inspired radicals from the Middle East, on the other side.

Merton wrote his book in the shadow cast by Machiavellian politics within the American-Soviet political and ideological conflicts of the Cold War. Yet the core message of his book is truly timeless-- the timeless warning of the true prophet, whose message reflects divine wisdom. We need to heed the wisdom of Thomas Merton and to apply his ideas to the problems of the present time—a time when we look into the moral abyss of a future of unending war between East and West, between extremely radical and violent elements within Islam and more fearful and violent factions within Christianity--an extended and very violent clash of competing cultures that could spell the destruction of all human civilization in the not-so-distant future.

Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and moderates within Islam, and including all persons of good will, are all bound by moral duty to work toward peace and greater justice in our times. How exactly this work toward peace will take place could not be foreseen by a monk who died in the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War conflict between Communist and Western capitalist powers. Merton could see the general moral direction of a post-modern world that was also becoming post-religious—as C S Lewis could also foresee. And this remains the primary danger in our own time and place: we are no longer ruled by /Christian leaders, although American custom still requires that they use Christian rhetoric in their public pronouncements. When Senator John McCain tried to challenge the use of torture on prisoners-of-war by our military, he was silenced by a president and executive branch that would not tolerate moral dissent from the Machiavellian practices they were engaged in in this present war against terrorism. Few came to stand alongside and defend Senator McCain, and others, who were

challenging the immoral and counter-productive policies of this latest war being fought by our government against the present enemy—radical Islam. Might this significant moral and political battle between Senator John McCain and Vice President Dick Cheney have turned out differently if more citizens had become actively involved in the debate? How we will proceed in the political conflicts of future years will be determined by those citizens who are prudent and courageous enough to openly challenge and confront our government and military leaders about those government policies and actions that we are morally obligated to oppose. During this conflict with Islamic terrorists, we have seen a lot of the public apathy and widespread passivity on the part of average middle-class American citizens that Merton despairs about in this book. He admits that getting accurate information is a difficulty confronted by citizens; and that they have many competing demands on their time. But, as both United States citizens and as Christian citizens of the City of God, we are morally obligated to take part in building a more just and peaceful world, both for ourselves and for those generations who will follow us.