The Social Thought of

THOMAS MERTON

The Way of Nonviolence and Peace
for the Future

by Rev. David W. Givey

Saint Mary's Press®

Editor's note: A number of updates have been made for the reissue of this book by Saint Mary's Press. Changes include for inclusive language, except in quoted material, and to some references to time when historical clarity is at stake. In some occasions, although dating has occurred, material has not been changed from the original because it gives important historical context. Readers will find that while topics such as nuclear war, civil rights, and the Vietnam War no longer dominate the popular consciousness as they once did, neither have they—or their contemporary counterparts—disappeared. And while those issues helped shape Thomas Merton's evolving spirituality and commitment to nonviolence, Merton's message loses none of its power applied to the equally stern challenges faced at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To my mother († November 29, 1976), who has taught me by the witness of her life, not only what it means to be a Christian, but how to live at peace in the world.

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Prologue

To many of his readers, Thomas Merton's critical and out-spoken writings on social events in the late fifties and early sixties came undoubtedly as something of a surprise if not a shock. What was this cloistered contemplative monk up to? Should he not be attending to his prayers and his solitary life before the Lord, and not getting involved in social issues?

As Abbot John Eudes Bamberger noted in an essay that appeared some years ago,[1] the monks of Gethsemani were not unduly surprised by the emergence of Thomas Merton as a social critic and commentator because he had been practicing for years, first of all on himself—he was his own severest critic—and then on the community of Gethsemani and the order to which he belonged. But it was always a positive form of criticism.

His criticism in the early 1960s was directed primarily against the injustice meted out to minority groups of our nation, especially blacks and Native Americans. His early critique was equally leveled at the two great power blocks, against capitalistic as well as communistic abuses of human rights and freedom. His penetrating "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" was a good example of his social concern in this area.

With the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, Merton spoke out strongly and courageously, even though it was at that time an unpopular cause. His plea was to make peace, not war. Merton also believed that the monk's essential role in society was his prophetic function. As the early monks fled the evils of the ancient cities for the desert solitudes of Egypt as a refusal to condone the social standards

of their day, so likewise the monks of our day have a duty to identify with movements of peace, and when the occasion arises, to denounce all war-promoting initiatives. Merton felt that monks must exercise their prophetic vocation above all by the witness of their lives of peace and harmony. In his own case, admittedly exceptional, Merton felt compelled in conscience to speak out against such evils—especially in regard to nuclear warfare, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, the arms race, and social injustices of all kinds. This was all the more true in a world where the rich get richer and the poor become poorer in Third World nations.

Instead of being a contradiction in terms of the contemplative monastic life, Merton was convinced that identification with the poor and alienated members of society was the duty of monks and flowed quite naturally from living out the Gospel message. Since monks are simply a community of believers who live the Gospel in a certain radical way, he felt deeply that they should above all espouse movements of peace and justice. Merton's pioneering efforts in this regard gradually affected other religious communities and eventually the entire Church in America. However, for a time Merton was forbidden by the Trappist Abbot General in Rome to write about nuclear warfare, but after Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* was promulgated, the ban was lifted.

As this excellent study of Thomas Merton's philosophy of nonviolence by Fr. David Givey demonstrates, although not a total pacifist (he did believe a person or a country had the right to defend itself against an aggressor with conventional weapons), Merton was certainly a nuclear pacifist, and he was dedicated wholeheartedly to nonviolence as the only way of achieving peace. There was no possibility of "winning" a nuclear war.

Some social activists have indicated publicly that had Merton lived he would have given up his ideals of nonviolence and would have joined hands with guerrilla revolutionary groups in an attempt to overthrow unjust governments. Since Merton is not alive to defend himself on such speculation, or to clarify his position, I believe this carefully thought-out work by Fr. Givey makes it obvious that there was a consistency in Merton's thinking on the subject of nonviolence as the only way to true and lasting peace.

The author has rendered a tremendous service in pointing out to us Merton's dedication to a philosophy of nonviolence at this particular moment in history. May his words be a source of encouragement to us all, so that we will continue to say *no* to the nuclear armament race and *yes* to a greater reliance on nonviolence as the only viable means of achieving peace in our times.

—Br. Patrick Hart, Abbey of Gethsemani

Note

1. Cf. John Eudes Bamberger, "The Monk," p. 46 in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Br. Patrick Hart (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1974).

Foreword

I entered the Vincentian seminary to begin my studies for the priesthood in 1969, the year after Thomas Merton died. During my years in formation, I found myself profoundly attracted to his writings. Although the Vincentians are an apostolic community, Merton's "seeds of contemplation" took deep root in my soul. Compelling and insightful as his words were and are, there was something larger than life, something more thought-provoking about them than mere spiritual reading. Merton offered a sense of peace for the soul.

Forty years have passed since my first encounter with Thomas Merton. And yet I still find that his ideas have something important to contribute to the development of Christian spirituality in contemporary society. Merton lived in different times, and the social, cultural, ethical, and religious "revolutions" of his day have given way to new challenges, no less confusing and even more frightening in where they might lead. Perhaps now, more than ever—as we confront a war with no apparent end in sight, the fear of terrorism from certain yet faceless enemies, the prospect of human torture once considered a thing of the past, the reckless augmentation of new nuclear arsenals from defiant world leaders, the increasing marginalization of the poor, the instability of global economies, and the blatant disregard for the value of human life in all its stages given the protection of law—we need once again to hear a voice that "speaks of peace for His people and His friends" (Psalm 85:9).

Merton once said that "We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God." The "peace" of which

he spoke is much more than nonviolence and the absence of war, although they are essential first steps. Merton's concept of peace is essentially and profoundly spiritual. It begins when one encounters God—the God who created us all in his image and likeness, the God who offers a "peace that the world cannot give" (John 14:27) without him. Whatever truly leads us to God, whatever makes us aware of his loving presence in our world, leads us to peace.

In his book *Seeds*, Merton wrote this:

> Prayers and sacrifice must be used as the most effective spiritual weapons in the war against war, and like all weapons they must be used with deliberate aim: not just with a vague aspiration for peace and security, but against violence and against war. This implies that we are also willing to sacrifice and restrain our own instinct for violence and aggressiveness in our relations with other people. We may never succeed in this campaign, but whether we succeed or not, the duty is evident. It is the great Christian task of our time. Everything else is secondary, for the survival of the human race itself depends upon it. We must at least face this responsibility and do something about it.[1]

Thomas Merton's writings reveal the journey of a soul in search of peace. His life was not an easy one, and his struggles were not unlike our own. His thoughts matured with the passage of time, and he did not hesitate, on the written page, to share the movements of his mind and heart toward God and his peace. A Catholic, yes, and a Trappist monk, but Merton's appeal grew truly universal in its outreach to those who shared his faith as well as those who sought God in other ways. God alone was the object of this search and, in his view, the only way to lasting peace.

In these days, long after my seminary days have faded, I find myself returning often to a simpler time in my life, reflecting on the influences that shaped my sense and view of the world. Again and again, the thoughts of Thomas Merton echo in my memory, as inspiring and true as ever. More than a mere collection of writings, his words reveal a path to peace and a way of life—at once patterned on the life of the Master and yet accessible to all people of good will.

What Fr. David Givey offers here is, in a sense, a travel guide for that path and a way to understand its movements, long after

Merton's pen ceased to write. Father Givey brings to life once again the man, the monk, and the mystic who helped to shape the soul of his own generation and who continues to offer a vision of "peace for the future" so profound that future generations will pray his famous prayer from *Thoughts in Solitude* as though it were written for them:

> My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
>
> I do not see the road ahead of me.
>
> I cannot know for certain where it will end.
>
> Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
>
> But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
>
> And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
>
> I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
>
> And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.
>
> Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
>
> I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.[2]

Let all people say, "Amen."

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Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds* (Boston: Shambhala Publication, Inc., 2002), p. 142.
2. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), part 2, chapter 2.

Introduction

Very much a man of his own time, Thomas Merton is uniquely a man for our time. His work and message are as much a challenge today, if not more so, than in the 1960s when he embarked upon his critique of violence, war, racism, and many aspects of American society.

Merton's warnings about the prospect of nuclear war, the spread of violence in society, and the grave responsibility of American Catholics to work for peace echo forth today like a great clarion call to action. Merton gives us his way of nonviolence as a means for achieving Christian goals in contemporary society. The way of nonviolence, as a way of life, and as a way of confronting society, becomes the way Merton offers to make peace a reality.

I have tried in this book to present Merton the social commentator and essayist. The focus will be on Merton's love of the world and his criticism of it. The lesser-known social dimensions of contemplation will be explored along with Merton's lifelong quest for unity. The main emphasis will be on Merton's Christian philosophy of nonviolence and all that it entails as a way of life.

This endeavor is a beginning; it is not at all a complete theory or philosophy. Merton himself never finished the formulation or expression of his thinking on nonviolence due to his tragic and untimely death in 1968. The challenge of Merton, however, lives on, and I have attempted here to synthesize and present that challenge along with the way of nonviolence as a way of life for the present and the future. What significance nonviolence has in the twenty-first century and which direction Christian nonviolence takes and whatever

influence it exerts are up to you and me. The bottom line of Merton's challenge, and this is part of its perennial value, is that if we believe in peace, then *we* must work for peace. If we want our society and the world to be less violent, then *we* must become nonviolent.

The gratuitous violence in video games and movies and on the Internet and TV, however, makes the way of nonviolence even more difficult today than when Merton lived. The pervasiveness of violence in the world, with wars being waged in Afghanistan and Iraq, suicide bombers, and nightly news and Internet reports replete with violence, shootings, and death, makes the spirit of nonviolence seem almost impossible. But nothing is impossible to the person of faith. We must believe in peace, we must live the way of nonviolence—that is the clear and clarion call of Merton today.

Thomas Merton was a truly human person, an authentic and sensitive Christian. His questions are our questions, his doubts are our doubts, his fears are our fears. It is my hope, in this revised edition of this book, that his faith may also be ours, along with his courage and his way of nonviolence. Unless we, like Merton, are radically committed to becoming peacemakers, we do not deserve to be called Christians. His insights are grounded in the solid foundation of contemplation, his thoughts are enlightened by the Gospel message and sparked by the world around him. As we live in the post–"9/11" era, we, too, must be grounded in contemplation, founded upon the Gospels, and at the same time be a vital part of world events.

For many years, nonviolence was not spoken of in many circles. It often elicited looks of skepticism and even dismay. Up until the mid-eighties, it was still spelled as a hyphenated word, *non-violence*. It seemed to be a negative concept of a half-formed ideal. Today, Merton assuredly smiles from his vantage point atop the seven-storied mountain at the great journey made by his "radical" and innovative way of nonviolence. The renewed interest today in Merton certainly attests to the force and challenge of his writings on non-violence as a way of life and spirit for change. Nonviolence as a way of life is a dynamic force that acts as a catalyst for peace in a world filled with violence. It is a powerful spiral that can influence and redirect every aspect of life and society. Nonviolence confronts the American Catholic, peace-loving Christians, and all people of faith as a way of hope and a force for peace in the present and the future. Nonviolence

is desperately needed as a strong and powerful force, today more than ever before.

Merton's writings have a unique timeless quality that stirs the conscience, moves the heart, and touches the very soul of people in the depths of their reality. We cannot read Merton and be content to leave his words as a merely sentimental or emotional experience. His words, if we really have ears to hear, must fire us up to greater commitment and action on behalf of peace. If his way of nonviolence is a valid alternative to war and conflict, and I believe that it is, and if peace is ever to be established in the world, and I believe that it can be, then the beginnings of his ideas, presented here, must be taken up, refined, analyzed, developed, and constantly put before the hearts and minds of people everywhere. The challenge of Merton today stands boldly as a great peace initiative and strategy to overcome violence and terrorism.

Merton has been called "a man for all seasons," "a solitary explorer," "a man for our times"; is he likewise a contemporary saint in the wings? Certainly he would laugh. He loved to laugh, especially at himself. His cause, however, has been introduced — the cause of peace.

Miracles do happen, faith can move mountains. The next miracle is up to you and to me — to live the way of nonviolence and work actively for peace.

David W. Givey
November 4, 2008
Ocean City, New Jersey

The Evolution of Merton's Social Awareness

One of the most impressive characteristics of Thomas Merton is that he not only lived what he preached but that he personified in himself the ideals espoused in his writings.

Merton believed in being open, honest, and self-critical. He never hoped so much to be right as to ask the right questions, no matter how painful or ambiguous the response might be. This attitude of openness and receptivity to new ideas and of willingness to change in the face of added dimensions is nowhere more evident than in Merton's own changing attitude toward the world and his relation to it.

It was the same young radical student at Columbia University in the late 1930s, who fled the world and entered the monastery in 1941 and maintained for over ten years that his responsibility toward his fellow man was purely spiritual, who finally emerged in the 1960s as one of America's most outspoken and influential commentators of current social events.

Between 1950 and 1960, Merton's emphasis moved distinctly from the otherworldly to concerns of this world. His first years in the monastery were spent counseling Christians to leave the world to its own self-destruction and seek personal happiness in the security of a contemplative order.

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, however, Merton encouraged Christians to work within their society for the betterment of all peoples and especially to establish peace. Merton became

more and more involved with the social concerns of this world and felt himself to be an integral part of it, rather than an alien trapped within it.

As a young man educated in England and the United States, who traveled extensively in Europe, Latin America, and the United States, Merton initially looked to the monastery for a sense of peace and as a way of shutting out the world.[1]

Although he later tried to repudiate this image, he described himself in his autobiography as the "stereotype of the world-denying contemplative—the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse."[2]

It was over a period of two decades that Merton's social awareness and concern for the world gradually emerged into full consciousness. In 1966 Merton was able to write, much to the surprise of many of his admirers: "I am . . . a man in the modern world. In fact, I *am* the world just as you are! Where am I going to look for the world first of all if not in myself?"[3]

Although Merton did not change his message about the evil of the world and the good monastic life, by the early 1950s his personal journals began to indicate that his attitude toward the world and the monastery was gradually changing. It was a slow, involved process of rethinking his basic presuppositions.

It took him ten years to reorganize his thoughts and re-evaluate his position on just what a monastic vocation involved. The seeds of social concern were beginning to germinate in the early 1950s and would eventually reach maturity and produce abundant fruit during the 1960s.

The early Merton was an "immobile nonentity" as he called himself; a product of psychological withdrawal, and it was time for a new Thomas Merton to emerge. "Coming to the monastery has been for me exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life . . . my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else."[4]

Merton began to realize that the element of protest was essential to monasticism, that contemplation and social involvement were

integral, and that each Christian had the responsibility and obligation to speak out.

This new perspective of turning again toward the world and involving himself in it and its problems eventually made Merton "one of the Church's most outspoken social critics . . . a thinker totally immersed in the problems of the world, a monk who was very much a man of the twentieth century."[5]

Authors have described Merton's change of attitude in varying ways, using different terminology and theories. The descriptions range from "startling" and "dramatic" to "great" and "new."[6] Some authors see the tension that existed in Merton between his love for solitude and his love for other people as an open contradiction,[7] rather than as a healthy dialectical tension compelling him forward and expanding his intellectual, spiritual, and personal horizons.

One commentator speaks of an "apparent contradiction" and opens the way to a real development within Merton. He states that Merton would often make some point, only later to assert what appeared to be diametrically opposed. The commentator goes on to say that this style of writing "does not mean that [Merton's] thought has not been expressed in clear and concrete terms. It merely indicates that his thought is always fragmentary and always 'historical' in the sense that it was always centered upon that portion of reality which he was confronting even though it still retained, at least in his own mind, a definite relationship with what has gone before and what is yet to come. But because his own personality was so dynamic and so enthusiastic, he tended to give the impression that what he said in each case was an adequate expression of the matter at hand."[8]

At times there are inconsistencies and even contradictions in Merton's writings, but they reflect his developmental and dialectical approach to truth. Although Merton is not a systematic writer, he is more of an essayist, giving his opinion and impression of a particular issue as it confronted him. Merton used writing to learn and to teach. He would write to find out what the proper questions were that should be asked. He often wrote probingly and inquisitively, looking for a response and perhaps a rebuttal.

Ultimately Merton drew closer to other people and to their world because he wrote about the problems and issues that confront modern people: alienation, violence, war, injustice, and the pursuit of

peace and nonviolence. Merton wrote: "I feel myself involved in the same problems and I need to work out the problems of the world with other men because they are also my problems."[9]

Higgins is on target when he sees a cyclic development in Merton's thought,[10] as is Mclnerny who writes of a growing "awareness of a sense of responsibility toward society."[11]

In this developmental approach to Merton's attitude toward the world, much of the gusto Merton had for life as a young bon vivant and student is again directed outward to society. The major difference, however, is that Merton's vision of the world in the later part of his life has been refined by his monastic experience and filtered through his deep prayer life imbued and immersed in solitude.

Toward the end of his life Merton wrote: "We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good."[12]

Naomi Burton, a longtime friend and editorial assistant to Merton, wrote: "More and more it seems to me, the concerns of the last years of his life were the same concerns that occupied him in 1940."[13]

In a publication edited by Gerald Twomey, several of the writers who were old friends of Merton use this developmental approach in assessing Merton's stand on social issues toward the end of his life.[14] This is especially true regarding Merton's perspective on peacemaking, nonviolence, racial justice, and social concerns.[15]

Merton himself was aware of this development when in 1962 he wrote: "Much that is spelled out in later books and articles is already implied in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. But it cannot really be seen until it is found in more articulate statements—or perhaps in more cryptic ones."[16]

Merton did not view these apparent contradictions in his life as negative elements. Instead, he saw his life as being "almost totally paradoxical . . . [where the] very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me."[17] Merton wrote about these paradoxical elements within himself as early as 1951 when he wrote in his journal, "Like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox."[18]

It is interesting and informative if we take Hegel's dialectical process and use it to analyze the development and progression of

Merton's thought. Like all analyses and analogies, it is valid only so far, but it does give a key to the dynamic process taking place in Merton's social consciousness.

It can be said that Merton's thought followed the dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. This necessarily involved apparent contradictions and tensions. These contradictions are either resolved in greater truth, as Merton's reconciliation of contemplation and worldly involvement, or they are excluded as Merton's complete shutting out of the world.

Viewed in this way, Merton's thought progressed in a dialogic process, forward and upward. It incorporated the most vital aspects and truths of each thesis-antithesis, always searching for a greater and greater synthesis of all the essential elements, especially that of contemplation and social concern. This process eventually culminated in an intellectual and social stance that was complementary rather than contradictory to his spiritual and contemplative orientation.

Merton's desire to live in genuine solitude and yet at the same time to assume more and more responsibility for the world was one of the greatest paradoxes in his life. More than a paradox, however, it is better described as a dialectic.

This dialectic was recognized in Merton by his Cistercian brother, John Eudes Bamberger, who, noting a tension between Merton's commitment to solitary contemplation and his concern for humanity, realized that open warfare never erupted (i.e., direct contradiction). This dialectic was kept in balance because of Merton's awareness of the two drives within him, which he realized were not mutually exclusive.[19]

This dialectical process was operative in Merton's fertile mind on several different planes. He had a special ability to synthesize the spiritual and the secular, the traditional and the transient, the eternal truths with the temporal presentation of these truths and contemplation with a world of action. He was, as one author stated: "an Erasmian humanist who could speak universal truths in contemporary terms."[20]

Merton himself went through a dialectical process in the Hegelian sense in regard to his intellectual, spiritual, and social stance vis-à-vis the world. In this process the thesis is denied or negated by the antithesis; this negation is then negated or denied by the synthesis,

which embraces what is true in both the thesis and antithesis and brings us one step nearer to reality and truth.[21]

This dialectical process continues over and over, each time resulting in a new and further thesis, negated in turn and reconciled in a new synthesis. The term *dialectic* is thus used for "that process of conflict and reconciliation which goes on within reality itself, and within human thought about reality."[22] We could add, and within the thinking, developing person himself.

We can apply this dialectical analysis to Merton's life and thought, which are so intimately linked. The original thesis would be his total immersion in the secular world during the time of his education, culminating with his years at Columbia University. The antithesis, or opposite, would be his growing concern for social problems, especially the poor, and his desire to be a social worker in Harlem. This paradox, or apparent contradiction, was resolved by his conversion to Catholicism, his entrance into the monastery, and his renunciation of the world.

This synthesis in turn became a new thesis during the 1940s, characterized by Merton's solitary life and almost total exclusion of the world and human affairs. The antithesis to this began to take shape in the early 1950s, with contradictory tendencies of love for the world and humanity and concern for social problems. This was gradually resolved into a new synthesis in the mature Merton, who was the consummate contemplative, critical of social problems and advocating nonviolence and the pursuit of peace.

The new synthesis illustrated Merton's mature intellectual stance during the 1960s and was characterized by contemplation in a world of action. After more than thirty years of development, always open to new and different points of view, Merton reconciled the diverse and seemingly contradictory elements of his thought. He tried to live in almost total solitude, moving to a hermitage the last few months of his life, and yet was more involved than ever in the social problems of war, injustice, and racism. It was tragic indeed that Merton's untimely death brought this dialectical process to an abrupt end. Just at a time when Merton was opening up to the East and incorporating elements of Eastern mysticism into his synthesis, he died in Bangkok while on a journey to the East. This brought his journey of truth to an end.[23]

It is interesting to note that Bailey, a Protestant, writing about Merton's mysticism, and only tangentially touching on his social concerns, comes to the conclusion that Merton's "more mature works are almost entirely dialogic in nature. They are nearly devoid of finality and dogma. The principles enunciated are couched in heuristic form suggesting incomplete knowledge, a journey in process."[24]

Bailey's assessment is insightful when he says that a close reader of Merton is actually reading the interior dialectic of the author. Rather than the ambiguities and apparent contradictions being signs of inconsistency or intellectual vacillation, they are really manifestations of his "continuing synthesis."[25]

Throughout his life Merton continually posited a new antithesis, an opposite idea, for each synthesis or idea, not only in his own works but often in those of others. He was not a systematic writer and did not feel bound to produce irrefutable logic enshrined in perfect systems. The evolution of Merton's thought is really the unfolding of his life.

A significant element in this analysis of Merton's developing awareness is that he always chose to resolve a thesis-antithesis duality by the application of Christian principles. This is one of the most significant contributions that Merton has made to contemporary social commentary—his Christian perspective and the application of Christian principles to ethical and social problems.

Whether the issue was human alienation, the evil of the city, war and violence, or racism, Merton always sought to apply the Gospel message and Christian principles to the issue at hand. He especially tried to apply the basic Christian principle of nonviolence to social questions, as we shall see later. Merton saw everything through the eyes of the contemplative, but more and more it was the contemplative who was vitally concerned with the social problems of society.

Merton's unique perspective was, of course, both a limitation and a strength. It seems, however, that the strengths far surpass the limitations. His view was limited because the monastic life is not the totality of the Church or of society.

It is a strength, on the other hand, because it afforded Merton the open space needed for real evaluation and the distance necessary for true criticism. The monastic life also allowed him to be a man of single purpose—a lone warrior and solitary explorer. The

perspective from the monastery window was one of objectivity and insightful vision.

Rather than being embroiled in the day-to-day issues of life and its exigencies, Merton was able to retain his own solidarity and uniqueness. After quiet and mature reflection filtered through his own experience, he was able to comment on the most trying and vexing issues facing the human family. This gave him a voice that no journalist, editorialist, political analyst, or bishop could claim. It made what he said and wrote valuable because of its depth, worthwhile because of its perspective, and significant because of its spiritual vision and Christian scope.

We are still confronted with the obvious question: Why? Why this change in attitude and emphasis on the part of Merton? What accounted for the development that took place in his thought and writing that eventually lead to his contemporary Christian social ethic and philosophy of nonviolence?

These are crucial questions because his writings are so reflective of Merton the man. Merton was always an intuitive and creative writer. He treated issues and situations as they struck him, and he reflected and commented on them aloud through his writing. The formative factors of his own intellectual and personal development are keys in understanding much of what he wrote. Merton the man and monk can never be divorced from Merton the writer, poet, thinker, or social commentator.

When *The Sign of Jonas* appeared in 1953, it was difficult to predict what direction Merton's writings might take in the future. Observers did notice a significant modification of some of Merton's earlier views. One reviewer in the *New Republic* magazine pointed out the decisive change in Merton's outlook. This reviewer made a good comparison of Merton's experience to the experience of the man in Plato's allegory of the cave. The man is freed from his chains, rushes out into the sunlight, and though blinded for some time by the brightness, eventually recovers his sight, learns about the real world, and returns to the cave to help his fellow men slip out of their chains.[26]

In this comparison Merton rushed out of the shadowy world of New York City into the "real world" of light, the monastery, and his early writings revealed a man who was still blinded by the glorious

light. *The Sign of Jonas*, however, showed how well his eyes were adjusting and how he had come to feel the inevitable desire to return to the world to help those still in their chains.[27]

The appearance of *The Seeds of Destruction* in 1964 had proven to everyone that Merton was thoroughly immersed in the world's problems. This was followed by Merton's books and articles on non-violence, violence in society, war, and racism. It was obvious that he had reached a new state of development.

Innumerable factors contributed to the formation and evolution of Merton's social consciousness. We shall consider some of the salient and most consistent of these factors. Of primary importance as a contributing factor was Merton's vision of the role of a monk and his re-evaluation of the monk's place in the Church and modern world.

During his conversion stage, Merton had been convinced that the most moral stance he could take vis-à-vis modern society was simply to live fully and totally as a monk—a life that was a contradiction to everything that society held dear. He gradually came to see, however, that passive protest of that kind was no longer enough. Unless one spoke out and acted against the evil of society, he may, by silent complicity, share the guilt for these evils.[28]

More and more Merton came to the realization that "when speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts, perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to try to speak."[29]

Merton maintained that one of the essential tasks of the monk was to fulfill his "prophetic" function. The monk's prophetic function was not as concerned with seeing into the future as seeing into the present. He said that "to prophesy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new. This tension is discovered not in hypnotic elation but in the light of everyday experience."[30]

As a contemplative, Merton had a real insight into contemporary times and the deepest troubles confronting men and women. He felt that part of the role of the monk as prophet, like that of the poet or artist, was to be aware of immature and inadequate expressions of ideas that are given currency and refuse to be dominated or influenced by them.

Merton felt that poets, artists, and prophets have greater freedom and should use it for deeper insights and expressions of the reality of the human condition. "Unfortunately," he complained in 1966, "the confusion of our world has made the message of our poets obscure and our prophets seem to be altogether silent."[31]

To live as a monk is to live in constant protest against the evils of society and the world. Thomas Merton always considered the protest to be an integral part of the monastic vocation. Initially, he thought his leaving the world for the monastery would be protest enough, but soon realized that he was compelled to speak out in protest against the most blatant evils in society.

To accomplish this, the monk must discover himself so that he can give himself totally to God and gain the insight and vision necessary to be a prophet and critic of society. Merton believed that modern society, with its emphasis on mass-man, mass media, and conformism was itself one of the greatest obstacles to our discovering our true identity. Merton thus felt compelled to protest all that in society stifled our spontaneity, our search for self and God.

Merton's life in the monastery led him to the realization of the social implications of solitude and the contemplative. As he was fond of saying, the true solitary goes into the desert "not to escape other men but in order to find them in God."[32]

A second important factor in understanding Merton's evolving attitude toward the world was his critical view of himself. He possessed a great ability to examine his own conscience, to criticize himself and be open to other opinions and points of view. This explains to a large degree Merton's ability to move from one emphasis to another and to be flexible and creative in his thinking and writing.

Merton was his own worst critic and thought that he had written too much. He once described himself, with characteristic humor, as "the author of more books than necessary."[33]

Questions were important for Merton, and he was forever asking them of himself and others. He believed that a person is known better by the questions she asks than by any answers she might give. He was a self-questioning person and a true thinker, which meant that he was constantly going over what he had written and looking at it from another perspective or point of view—again the dialectical approach to truth. He was continually reviewing his thoughts and testing them for stability and durability.[34]

A third factor in Merton's social development was his sense of history and the conviction that he and all Christians must take some responsibility for the world. Merton felt that since God was working in history, no one could be a true contemplative or a Christian without a sense of history and of historical responsibility.

Although not all commentators agree that Merton had a realistic sense of history, he demonstrated time and time again that he felt a responsibility to help direct the course of events in time. Bailey has a valid point when he states that for Merton the contemplative discovers himself within the dialectical movement of history and enters into conscious dialogue with history.[35]

As he became increasingly convinced that the atmosphere in the United States during the 1960s was in many respects like that in Germany in the 1930s, Merton sought to remind Americans and especially Christians of their responsibilities. He was upset with the indifference of so many American intellectuals in the face of tendencies toward political totalism. Merton acquired a deep appreciation for men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alfred Delp, Franz Jagerstatter, and Max Metzger, who had the courage to stand up against the evils of their day, when virtually their whole society opposed them.[36]

Addressing one of his most sarcastic letters to American intellectuals, Merton called upon them not to stand "innocently by" as social evils were perpetuated in society.[37] He forcefully stated that intellectuals cannot be "bystanders," for their waiting is harmful and only an excuse for inaction.

He consistently referred to the intellectuals as "we" who have the responsibility to resist the evils forced on society by "them," the "powerful ones" who rule and seek power over all "the others," the great majority. He considered this a personal challenge as much as a challenge issued to others.

If the intellectuals do nothing, then they must face the ultimate challenging question: "Do we have any choice left? Worse still: are we not the kind of bystanders whose very 'innocence' makes them guilty, makes them the obvious target for arbitrary terror?"[38]

A fourth factor in Merton's move from spiritual to social writer was his deep desire to be a saint and strive for sanctity. He was convinced that anyone who really wanted to become a saint, if he really put himself to the task, could be one. Some of Merton's earliest books were about the lives of the saints and potential saints,

and they afforded him great insight into the characters of those who were truly holy.[39]

A common characteristic Merton discovered among saints was their compassion for other human beings. The saints were real people whose primary saintly quality was their deep concern for the needs of others. Before a person could become a saint, Merton concluded, he or she must first become a person, "in all the humanity and fragility of man's actual condition."[40]

Just as Merton recognized the element of compassion in the lives of the saints, Twomey sees compassion as the key to the evolution of Merton's own social consciousness. He sees compassion as being the "wellspring of Merton's social concern" and as the quality which gives him insight into the social and political problems of society.[41]

For Merton, sanctity was not a matter of being less human, but more human than other people. This implied a greater capacity for concern, for suffering and understanding, and also for humor and joy and for appreciation of the good and beautiful things of life.[42]

Another dimension of Merton's opening out to the world was the realization that sanctity consisted in a person truly being herself. Rather than stressing the strong self-abnegation of which he wrote earlier, he now stated: "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."[43]

This quest for the true self became one of Merton's lifelong searches. This search for personal identity was an important factor in the social dimension of contemplation, which we will discuss later. This theme likewise reflects the basis of the search for peace that occupied much of Merton's later writing: "there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him."[44]

A fifth causative factor in Merton's social development was the renewal of monasticism, which gave him a greater knowledge of world affairs through greater access to sources of information. The first ten years of his monastic life were lived under very strict rules. The liberalization of the Trappist order in general and of Gethsemani Abbey in particular during the late 1940s and early 1950s was instrumental in the early change in Merton.

By the 1960s Merton was writing that he had come in contact with other solitudes, with the loneliness, the simplicity, the perplexity of novices and scholastics of his own monastic community, and with the loneliness of people everywhere, even of those outside the Church.

He considered the majority of the mass media to be a source of grave confusion to the contemplative, and relied instead upon a highly selective source of books and quality journals and periodicals. His normal procedure in commenting on any given issue was to wait for several months for the topic to crystallize. He would then have a greater objectivity and perspective.

A sixth element that was instrumental in changing Merton's attitude toward the world was his opportunity to meet the world again after many years of monastic seclusion. He realized that after many years he could love the world that he had once seemed to hate and reject. His journeys into nearby Louisville served to reinforce his growing love of and involvement with other people.

In what seemed to be almost a mystical experience, he wrote about a journey into Louisville, in 1957: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others. . . . It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes. . . . I have the immense joy of being a man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate."[45]

A decisive event took place on June 22, 1951, during one of Merton's trips into Louisville, an event that provides a seventh factor in his change of attitude. On that day Merton visited the Federal District Court and became a citizen of the United States.

Merton had written in his journal *The Sign of Jonas* that he had not really possessed a nationality for the first thirty-six years of his life and had always been proud of his freedom. As a naturalized citizen of the United States, however, he began to feel more like a citizen of the Kingdom of God begun on earth.

In his book on Merton, the social critic Baker feels that much of what Merton wrote in the mid-1950s on war, the bomb, racial conflict, and nonviolence may well have had their origin in his oath of allegiance to the United States. "For as an American citizen," Baker said about Merton, "he came to feel more and more responsible for his country's salvation and perfection."[46]

An eighth and final factor of unusual significance upon Merton's view of the world was undoubtedly that of Pope John XXIII. Merton derived many of his principles of nonviolence and social justice from Pope John and especially his encyclical *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth).*

Merton was so impressed by this social encyclical that appeared in 1963 that he wrote an "official" interpretation and response to it and incorporated its key concepts into his future social commentaries.[47]

One aspect of Pope John's writings that Merton greatly agreed with was the pope's intent to preserve the independent authority of small and struggling nations. Merton was especially fond of quoting Pope John's words warning more powerful nations not to unjustly oppress struggling nations or to unduly meddle in their affairs.

Merton was influenced by Pope John's view of authority, which should be based on moral force and love and not on physical force or military strength. He was likewise encouraged by the good pope's optimistic view of man and the world.

These were two men who believed in people. Merton was quick to realize that Pope John was open to all people and to the world, and he was honest enough to ask himself, "Am I?" The power for peace in the great encyclical of Pope John, *Peace on Earth*, was based on its profound and optimistic Christian spirit, which embraced all peoples in every corner of the world. This perspective enriched and enlarged Merton's vision and served to strengthen and quicken the evolution of his own social consciousness so that it too could embrace the world and all its problems.

The World and Its Problems

With the publication of his *Disputed Questions* in 1960, Merton began to discuss some specific social questions. He admitted that some of the topics were more or less controversial. That did not mean, however, that he was engaging in controversy with anyone in particular. He was, on the contrary, "simply thinking out loud about certain events and ideas which seem to me to be significant, in one way or another, for the spiritual and intellectual life of modern man."[48]

A basic theme that runs throughout this book is that of the relation of the person to the social organization. Merton went so far

THE SOCIAL THOUGHT OF
THOMAS MERTON

Thomas Merton witnessed the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and the growing nuclear threat, absorbed the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, rejoiced at the publication of Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris,* lived the life of the world and the life of the monastic, practiced the ways of Zen—and emerged with a vision for and commitment to nonviolence and peacemaking.

That vision and commitment are no less compelling today than they were when this book first appeared in 1983, writes Very Reverend David M. O'Connell, CM, president of The Catholic University of America. In a new foreword to this book by Rev. David W. Givey, Father O'Connell writes:

> Perhaps now, more than ever—as we confront a war with no apparent end in sight, the fear of terrorism from certain yet faceless enemies, the prospect of human torture once considered a thing of the past, the reckless augmentation of new nuclear arsenals from defiant world leaders, the increasing marginalization of the poor, the instability of global economies, and the blatant disregard for the value of human life in all its stages given the protection of law—we need once again to hear a voice that "speaks of peace for His people and His friends" (Psalm 85:9).

Thomas Merton's is such a voice.