
THOMAS MERTON

Thomas Merton was born in France on 31st January 1915. Both his parents were artists, from New Zealand and America. The family moved to America when he was one year old and although he was baptised he received no religious education and never attended church.

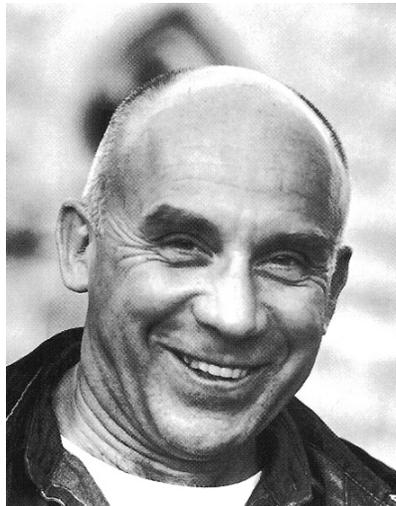
In his early twenties he became a convert to Catholicism, and subsequently had a tremendous struggle deciding whether or not he had a vocation as a writer or teacher, or to the monastic life. He eventually reached a decision quite suddenly in December 1941, and entered the community of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, where he remained as a Trappist monk until his death in December 1968.

The Trappists were mostly enclosed (rarely left the monastery) and had a particular tradition of silence. Even so, millions of people became aware of his life and convictions through the many spiritual books, poems and articles that he wrote.

Peace - a Christian Responsibility

The longer he spent in the monastic life, the more Merton became conscious that a monk has a responsibility for the world, rather than being separated from it. He emphasised the responsibility of Christians to work not just for their personal salvation but also for social justice for the poor and marginalised in society.

He also began to express his views on issues of war and peace, especially with the beginning of America's war with Vietnam. Even though he did not see active service in the Second World War, its events had helped form his attitude to the morality of war in the 20th century.



He renounced violence as a way to peace. He regarded war as one of the clearest examples of human estrangement from God, and suggested that responding to the problem of war was an urgent priority for those in religious life, and for Christians in general. In fact, in an article in the *Catholic Worker* in 1961, he wrote:

"The duty of the Christian is to do the one task which God has imposed on us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war..."

Peace demands the most heroic labour and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and much more purity of conscience. The Christian fight for peace is not to be confused with defeatism."

Merton established very deep ties with several pacifist groups (and others active in work for social justice and the renewal of the church) such as the *Catholic Worker*, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Catholic Peace Fellowship. He gave them critical support and encouragement through his letters, and helped them to develop their own pastoral role in society.

"Christians have got to speak by their actions. Their political action must not be confined to the ballot box. It must be clear and manifest to everybody. It must speak loudly and plainly the Christian truth and it must be prepared to defend that truth with sacrifice, injustice and even imprisonment or death... This means an unremitting struggle for justice in every sphere - in the workplace, in race relations, in the 'third world' and above all in international affairs."

As a result of these links, and his outspokenness on the subject of war and peace, he became a rather controversial figure, especially for those in his monastic community. His superiors considered his writing about war and peace as *"not the right kind of work for a monk"*. They had already subjected his writing to severe censorship, but, in 1962, his superiors silenced him completely, forbidding him to write at all on issues of war and peace. Eventually they realised that this had been wrong and a change of heart led to a gradual *"breaking"* of the silence.

Merton was a great advocate of nonviolence, and devoted a lot of his writing to explaining what nonviolence is all about, particularly stressing that it has nothing to do with passivity and everything to do with religious life. To Merton, nonviolence was not just a subtle strategy for getting your own way, but an attempt to focus people's minds on where the truth lies. He saw it as a realistic alternative to violence and killing, by trying to win peoples' minds instead of destroying their bodies.

In the preface to his autobiography, in 1966, he wrote: *"It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and the injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole [human] race... and the world with [it]. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favour of peace"*.

A gift to the Church

Towards the end of his life, Merton struck up a friendship with a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who shared his rejection of war and profoundly strengthened his own nonviolent convictions. Hanh had risked his life in order to bring home to Americans the realities of the Vietnam war.

Thomas Merton influenced many people, both through his writing and his general attitude to life and people. It is partly due to him that Catholic pacifism has become more common, and now receives official support from the highest level of the Church, as an appropriate faith response to the questions of war.

Read:

Thomas Merton's Struggle with Peacemaking
Pax Christi USA. Price £2.50

Words of Peace: Thomas Merton
Pax Christi USA. Price £2.00

Making Peace in the Post-Christian Era: Thomas Merton's challenge to the 'war on terror'
Pax Christi. Price £3

Peace in a Post-Christian Era, Thomas Merton,
Orbis Books, 2004 Price £9.99

All available from Pax Christi