

April Reflections

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A hundred years after the birth of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton on January 31, 1915, he is enjoying a remarkable renewal of interest in his vast literary output of books, articles, letters, and journals. Of special interest here are essays he wrote in the 1960s on racism collected in his books *Seeds of Destruction* (1964), which contains his "Letters to a White Liberal" as well as a letter to the late black writer James Baldwin, and *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (1968), which deals with race from a faith perspective.

After the Birmingham bus boycott and Selma marches generated support for the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Merton argued that the country had a great opportunity to make genuine progress on racial justice, a "providential hour" for whites and blacks to come together. He used the New Testament word "kairos" to describe the moment of opportunity, which could be "God's hour," the hour of vocation when we work together for "reform and creative change" so that "the demands of truth and justice may not go unfulfilled." (*Seeds of Destruction* p. 65)

It seems that today we have another kairotic moment created by the tragic deaths of four black males at the hands of white police officers: 18-year old Michael Brown on a street in Ferguson, Missouri; 43-year old Eric Garner on a sidewalk in Staten Island; 12-year old Tamir Rice in a Cleveland playground; and 50-year old Walter Scott on a grassy lot in North Charleston. These deaths have opened up a widespread public discussion of lingering racism in our country, focused on particular problems: the disproportionate number of blacks in the U.S. prison population; police forces that do not represent the diversity of the citizens they serve; very different perceptions by whites and blacks of the fairness of the legal system; a history of oppression that limits the economic advancement of African Americans; overt racism that still exists among some whites and blacks; and subtle forms of prejudice that prevent white citizens from full acceptance of our black brothers and sisters. The current public discussion of these problems can be enriched by considering Merton's writings on race, organized here into three pairs of related guidelines.

First, Thomas Merton cautions us as Christians to temper our expectations of what the institutional Church can do to combat racism, while encouraging us to do what we can to overcome prejudice. In this regard, Merton drew on the notion of "the diaspora situation" developed by the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984). Recognizing the profound character of Rahner's pastoral theology, Merton noted that "no Catholic theologian has so squarely faced the critical seriousness of the Church's task in the modern world" while avoiding superficial analyses and prescribing "quick remedies" for our social ills. Following Rahner, Merton recognized that the Church in the United States lives in a diaspora situation, a pluralistic democracy, which means it must engage in dialogue and collaboration with others in order to help build a more just society. It cannot recreate Christendom or impose its values on the whole society.

Accepting the limitation of the Church in shaping society frees individuals and groups of Christians to find creative ways of establishing a more just and peaceful social order, relying not on "Catholic power," but placing our efforts in the hopeful context of "the eschatological victory of Christ." Again with Rahner, Merton viewed our diaspora situation as a fact, a given, the product of an historical process, which, if calmly accepted, does not produce a paralyzing pessimism but an energizing hope that the grace already at work in the world will, assisted by creative Christian witness, bend toward justice. Setting aside utopian dreams of a perfectly just Christian society, Merton encourages us to find practical ways to work for proximate justice, to collaborate with others of good will in moving toward a more equitable society. By introducing a bit of Rahnerian sober realism into the discussion on race, Merton encourages us Christians, individually and in small groups, to find creative ways to assist our black brothers and sisters in their quest for an equitable place in our society.

Second, our Trappist guide teaches us to see the problem of racism in the United States in a global perspective while working to overcome it at the local level. Colonialism, which extended European control over parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas from the 16th to the 20th century, created a sense of white superiority which led to the enslavement and oppression of people of color around the world. Slavery was justified by white Christians on the basis of alleged black inferiority. Massive systemic injustice around the world fostered illusions of white superiority and engendered feelings of inferiority among the oppressed. Merton was taken by Gandhi's conviction that India's struggle for independence from British rule was a "Satyagraha campaign," a battle for truth, a decisive battle to reveal the fundamental truth that all people have inherent dignity and deserve respect and justice. He also had great admiration for the global outlook of Martin Luther King, who opposed the Vietnam War because he saw the essential connection between the suffering of African Americans and Vietnamese peasants. Colonialism also fostered the conviction that Western culture is superior to all other indigenous cultures, which had to be "westernized" to some degree to be governable and economically profitable. For Merton, the fundamental truth is that whites are just one part of the whole human family and can become fully human only through dialogue and collaboration with the other members of the human family. Otherwise we remain truncated, limited, less whole and less wise than we are called to be.

This global perspective must be combined with efforts at the local level to overcome specific forms of racial misunderstanding and injustice. Circumstances today direct our attention to the way the police and legal system function in local communities. Are black citizens proportionately represented on the police force? Are blacks disproportionately stopped and searched while driving; picked up and convicted of drug possession; and followed in stores? We know that community policing has lessened racial tensions in some cities, bringing

police into personal contact with African Americans in the neighborhood and creating greater mutual respect. Progress in local communities across the country is a crucial element in improving race relations. Merton wants whites to put more energy into listening to blacks, understanding their culture and learning from them. Friendly encounters between blacks and whites can create a climate of trust and promote mutual respect. In collaborating with blacks, whites are well advised to let them take charge of their own liberation, ready to help when asked, while concentrating on overcoming prejudice in the white community.

Third, Merton urges us to defend and promote non-violent strategies as the best way of achieving racial justice while staying open to the deeper meaning of violent protests. He did not develop a comprehensive theology of non-violence, but he was convinced that this strategy was in accord with the practice and teaching of Jesus, who did not approve the terrorist tactics of the zealots nor offer resistance when arrested. He did teach his disciples to love others, to put away the sword, to turn the other cheek and to do good to their persecutors. Non-violent strategies have the feel of the Gospel and are in accord with the fundamental Christian teaching of love of neighbor. They manifest the moral courage of the oppressed and offer the oppressors the opportunity to recognize their role in unjust systems.

Merton was impressed with the effectiveness of non-violence as practiced by both Mohandas Gandhi, who succeeded in freeing India from British rule, and Martin Luther King, who played an important role in the passing of civil rights legislation by Congress. Merton, the contemplative, and King, the activist, had an intriguing relationship. Merton admired King's unswerving commitment to non-violence despite heavy provocation. King appreciated Merton's spirituality and intended to make a retreat with him at Gethsemane, a good intention thwarted by his assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Merton, who saw King as a martyr for justice and peace, worried that his death would undermine black commitment to non-violent strategies. He was convinced that Christians who understand the thrust of the Gospel toward non-violence are best prepared to counter claims that King's tactics are obsolete and ineffective in a changing world. Violence creates enemies and breaks down trust. Non-violence recognizes that racism is at heart a spiritual problem that calls for discipline and requires conversion.

Merton, who worried about the possibility of future racial wars, would be surprised and pleased, I think, that so many of the recent demonstrations in New York and other big cities have been so peaceful. Today, many Christians, as well as secular activists, continue to support non-violent demonstrations and deplore violence and looting as harmful to the cause of racial harmony and equality. Christian non-violence is still alive.

By the same token, Merton thought it important to learn lessons from the violent outbursts of oppressed people at home and abroad. After the 1967 riots in Detroit that cost 43 lives, almost 900 injured, and millions in property damage, Merton interpreted the event in stark terms: an expression of black rage and hate; an attack on the white social order; a repudiation of white culture and its sense of superiority; a loss of confidence in non-violent tactics; a cry of desperation shared by oppressed people around the world.

Merton helps us understand the violence (gunfire, attacks on police, burning buildings, and looting) that occurred in Ferguson following the grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for shooting Michael Brown – a decision supported by a Justice Department report that Michael did not have his hands up but was moving toward the officer when he was fatally shot. Most protesters in Ferguson remained peaceful. Some commentators claim the extensive media coverage and the large presence of police and National Guard units set the stage for violence. As Merton suggests to us, the violence was not just a reaction to the grand jury decision, but was the eruption of long-simmering rage and frustration over a perceived pattern of racial prejudice and discrimination by a mostly white police force serving a predominantly black population. The violence was counterproductive and hurt blacks more than whites. It can serve, however, as another call to overcome the racism that poisons our society by working together to build a more just and equitable society. Joining in such collaborative efforts would be a great way to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Thomas Merton, contemplative monk with a passion for truth and justice.