

12. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: Reflections on War and Nonviolence*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 176 pp., \$14.95, paper, ISBN-13 978-0-8245-24159.

PASSION FOR PEACE: Reflections on War and Nonviolence is an important book. It contains the essence of Thomas Merton's thoughts on war and peace. It was first published under the title *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* in 1995. The editor of both books, William H. Shannon, a distinguished Merton scholar and the founder of the International Thomas Merton Society, abridged the original version, which contained thirty-two essays, into this compact version, which includes eleven essays and the appendix, "Merton's Prayer for Peace." Therefore, in order to review the new version, one needs some background knowledge about the original.

Most of the essays contained in the original volume were previously published in *Seeds of Destruction*, *Thomas Merton on Peace*, and *The Non-violent Alternative*. However, as Shannon explains in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, *Passion for Peace* differs from these earlier works because of the arrangement of the essays in chronological order, including writings on racism, and the placement of each in its proper context. The 1995 book consisted of two parts: Part 1, The Years of the Cold War Letters (October 1961 to October 1962), Part 2, Following the Years of the Cold War letters (1963 to 1968, the essays arranged by years). By adopting such methods the editor intended to present the book as "a kind of autobiography of Merton the social critic" (18). Though the abridged version is only about one-third of the original in quantity, it still retains characteristic features of the original.

We cannot find any explanations of why and how the editor abridged the original version. One would normally look for such explanations in an introduction, but the only introduction to this abridged volume is the one to the original edition. However, it seems that the editor took into consideration a reviewer's comment on the original version that, although his intentions were good, the results were not entirely successful. In other words, the out-of-print essays may merit republication, but nearly half of the essays in the original *Passion for Peace*, which are in other Merton books still in publication, will disappoint most Merton readers who are

familiar with his writings. Therefore, this new version of *Passion for Peace* has now been republished as a compact and essential edition.

Regrettably, the reduction in quantity has caused another reduction, that is, the book's originally intended characteristic, a kind of autobiography of Merton the social critic, is faint in the new edition. On the positive side, it is noted that the subtitle of the book has been changed from *The Social Essays* to *Reflections on War and Nonviolence*. Such a change, along with the reduction in the quantity of essays, narrows the focus of the social essays to the themes of war and nonviolence. In fact, the articles in the abridged version give readers a coherent voice on war, peace, and nonviolence, probably the most precious treasure of the book. In this sense, the new edition of *Passion for Peace* is a very relevant resource for readers who have just started to study Thomas Merton as a social critic and for Christians who are interested in a peace-making life, while the original is more useful for advanced scholars.

What are the main features of Merton's reflections on war, peace, and nonviolence? Merton has sharp insight into human beings' contradictory attitudes toward war. The first essay is the famous "The Root of War Is Fear," most of which is printed as chapter sixteen in *New Seeds of Contemplation* but now with three long uncensored paragraphs that contextualize his thoughts in the situation existent when Merton offered the essay for publication in the *Catholic Worker*. In these additional paragraphs Merton scathingly points out that the whole world is plunging headlong into disastrous war—"with the purpose of avoiding war and preserving peace" (24). The most frequently mentioned motive of war is peace. People tend to resort to force in order to get rid of what appear to them to be actual or potential threats to their own peace. They also are good at creating scapegoats upon whom they blame all the evil in the world and at making some plausible excuses that war is necessary for peace. This mysterious characteristic of human beings comes from fear of everything and hatred of ourselves, the roots of all war. In other words, war is a serious alienation from the true self and God.

Merton, however, believes that there are no logical reasons for making modern warfare, especially atomic war, legitimate. For Merton, in the present era to engage in war for making peace is "a true war-madness, an illness of the mind and the spirit that is spreading with a furious and

subtle contagion all over the world” (24). Therefore, he insists, “the only sane course that remains is to work frankly and without compromise for the total abolition of war” (52). It may be of great help to slow down the production of weapons or to negotiate for multilateral disarmament, but these are not the ultimate solutions for war, in which there are no winners but only war itself. Without the total abolition of war, a true peace in society cannot be guaranteed.

Then, how should Christians struggle for peace? As was mentioned previously, Merton declares that the root of all war is fear and hatred within human beings, so his strategies for peacemaking are essentially moral and spiritual rather than political. His strategies can be largely summarized as follows: (1) awakening people, (2) nonviolent action, and (3) establishment of a world government.

In his many writings on peace and war, Merton tried passionately to awaken and encourage his readers to be peacemakers. As a monk, awakening people by writing was one of the most essential ways for him to contribute to building a peaceful society. As Shannon mentions, Merton felt that his task was “to help people see that peace is indeed a viable possibility in our world” (14). He thought that Christians had a grave responsibility to strive for the total abolition of war and for the construction of a peaceful society. So Merton endeavored to awaken Christians by pointing out their “moral passivity” and its twin “demonic activism” (47) and encouraged them not to passively cooperate with violent political leaders and frenzied mass movements.

Danish resistance to Hitler is a good example, not only of Christians’ responsibility for peace but also of nonviolent protest. In his article “Danish Nonviolent Resistance to Hitler,” Merton highly appreciates the Danes’ nonviolent struggle to protect the Jews from the Nazis and interprets: “It is not so much that the Danes were Christian as that they were human” (66). In this sense, his understanding of nonviolence goes beyond the religious level, and the context of Christian peacemaking is Christian humanism rather than so-called Christian pacifism.

Merton believes that nonviolence, which he first learned from Mohandas Gandhi, is the most powerful method for transforming the world, a belief supported by the Gospel and the history of the early Church. It changes not only a society but also its individual men and women.

Therefore, nonviolence is not merely a political strategy for peacemaking but, as Shannon points out, “a way of life” (12) that frees the human being from his or her inner violence to become the true self.

The third strategy for peace, which Merton presents in his articles but does not fully develop, is the establishment of “a world government” (58) to regain control of the world.

Merton’s strategies and passion for peace are partly embodied in the United States’ Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. However, they cannot be reduced to their potential value for world peace-making movements. Therefore, the contents and feasibility of the strategies must be reappraised in the contemporary context, and the detailed ideas and methods to actualize them need to be fully developed. In this sense, the abridged version of *Passion for Peace*, as well as the original version, must be enriched by readers’ discussions and embodiments in their own world, because we still have the possibility that Auschwitz “can be set up tomorrow anywhere and made to work with the greatest efficiency” (145).

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