

## Article

# Passion for Peace and Justice in the Prophetic Mysticism of Merton and Heschel

Cristobal Serran-Pagan y Fuentes

Department of History, Philosophy and Religious Studies, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 31698, USA; cserranpagan@valdosta.edu

**Abstract:** Thomas Merton's interfaith dialogue with the Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sets a resonating example of how these two religious figures from the twentieth century can learn from each other and respect their theological differences while still finding common ground in their social critiques, as fully revealed in their more mature prophetic writings from the 1960s. The purpose of this article is to show how both Merton and Heschel found, in their sacred humanism, a final integration between their mystical quest for God and their passion as modern prophets to denounce the social injustices of their time. Merton and Heschel have become exemplar cases of creative interfaith dialogue and witnesses for justice. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how their interfaith friendship brought them closer together when facing the Second Vatican Council's efforts to write a major document like *Nostra Aetate*, or "in Our Time".

**Keywords:** Thomas Merton; Abraham Joshua Heschel; prophetic mysticism; interfaith dialogue; the Second Vatican Council; *Nostra Aetate*

## 1. Introduction

This article examines the passion for peace and justice in the prophetic mysticism of Thomas Merton and Abraham Joshua Heschel, and explores the way modern mystics are fully engaged with the social and religious issues of their time. Both Merton and Heschel defined a prophetic mystic as one who bears witness to truth, justice, and love. An authentic mystic is one who has an immediate encounter with the divine, and is called to participate in the political and religious struggles of their time.

The purpose of this article is to show how both Merton and Heschel are viewed today as two of the great representatives on interfaith friendship in the ongoing modern history of interreligious dialogues. Merton was a Trappist monk and writer while Heschel was a Jewish rabbi specialized in the areas of philosophy of religion, mysticism, and ethics. The two of them are recognized today as living exemplars on how to integrate in life and thoughts their passion for peace and justice, by following their prophetic mysticism in deeds and words.

This article begins by introducing the lives of Merton and Heschel and then how Merton and Heschel came into contact through their common friends working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Next, I will compare and contrast the passion for peace and justice in Merton and Heschel. I will conclude with a few meditations on the relevance of Merton's and Heschel's prophetic legacies for us today.

## 2. Merton and Heschel on Interfaith Friendship

### 2.1. Merton's Life

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France on 31 January 1915. As he wrote in his autobiography, he was born "in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain [...]" (Merton 1948, p. 3). The story of Merton's conversion is fascinating. His Trappist brothers called him by his religious name Father



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M. Louis, making direct reference to his French origins. Merton the peacemaker learned from experience the tragedy of losing his own brother. In 1943, Merton received the tragic news that his brother John Paul was killed in action while he was flying in a military mission. Merton wrote a poem to his brother entitled, “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943”. In this poem, Merton prayed for the soul of his brother whose body is “lost and dead” in a “landscape of disaster” (Merton 1977, p. 36). Merton chose the path of the monastic tradition by entering the Trappist Order in 1941, although in the 1930s he had already adopted the Gandhian position and worked in Harlem with the foundress of Friendship House, Catherine de Hueck. Merton thought that by becoming a Trappist monk, he would be able to withdraw completely from the world so that he would be exempted from any sense of personal or collective responsibility for the evils caused by his own society. However, the later Merton will admit that he created this illusion. Merton no longer wanted to be a guilty bystander so he broke his vow of silence by denouncing the social atrocities and injustices that were committed in the name of Christianity and democracy. Merton became a controversial figure even within the Trappist Order and the Catholic tradition since he was, like Heschel, outspoken against the Vietnam War and against racism. Merton became a member of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation.

In 1958, Merton reported having a unitive inner experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Street (today renamed as Muhammed Ali Boulevard), the business and commercial district in Louisville, Kentucky. This epiphany, narrated in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, marks Merton’s transition from a life solely dedicated to prayer and contemplation to a life more engaged with the world. After this, Merton began addressing social issues more directly, and started to publicly denounce the Cold War in his letters and writings. Merton saw the divine reflected in all things and developed a sense of cosmic interconnectedness. In 1968, Merton was given permission to travel to Asia. Merton was interested in Zen Buddhism but went to Asia as a pilgrim not as a missionary to learn firsthand from his personal encounters with members of other faith traditions. In one of his trips in Asia, Merton narrates having experienced a spiritual aesthetic illumination facing the giant statues of the Buddha. He said: “All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear [. . .]. Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion” (Merton 1973, p. 235). After having met His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama and other religious dignitaries in India, Merton went to Thailand to attend a Benedictine conference. On 10 December 1968, Merton died after giving his talk on Christianity and Marxism. The official story is that he died accidentally after receiving an electric shock from a faulty fan. Ironically, Merton died in Asia after denouncing the American war in Vietnam, and his body was brought back to the United States with the dead bodies of American soldiers who served in Vietnam. To sum it up, as Anthony Padovano has found in his research:

During Merton’s lifetime, he published 60 books and 600 articles and became recognized as a spiritual guide, a contemporary critic, a poet, a mystic, and an activist for social reform. He broke stereotypical molds and eluded the traditional definition of a monk and a contemplative. He became active in civil rights, nuclear disarmament, and protest against the Vietnam war. During this time he became a hermit and continued to lead others by his writings from the hermitage. Merton’s appeal to Twentieth Century men and women appears to lie in the paradoxes in his life and writings. [. . .] Merton was always on a journey. (Padovano 1984, pp. 11–12)

## 2.2. Heschel’s Life

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland on 11 January 1907. Both parents came from a lineage of Hasidic rabbis and spiritual masters. He was trained both in Orthodox rabbinical seminaries and in secular universities, receiving his doctoral degree from the University of Berlin. Heschel wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Jewish prophets. His thesis would later be published in two volumes. Merton read them and was very grateful to Heschel for his excellent reflections on how the prophets were inspired by

God's revelations. The prophets are seen as reminders of God's words in their historical time and they served as witnesses of their faith into action. In 1938, Heschel moved to Frankfurt to be in charge of Buber's center as his successor but the Nazis came, arrested him, and deported him to Poland. He spent less than a year in Warsaw teaching Jewish philosophy and theology. Heschel was able to escape in time and went to London. Many of his relatives were killed by the Nazis, including his mother and two other sisters. Heschel got a visa to teach at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. This Jewish College was affiliated with Reform Judaism. His experience of teaching there for five years was one of loneliness but his English skills and his scholarship developed quite rapidly. Then, in 1946, Heschel moved to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City which was affiliated with Conservative Judaism. He spent the rest of his career teaching in the JTS as a professor of Jewish Mysticism and Ethics until his untimely death in 1972.

Like Merton, Heschel was the author of numerous books and articles. Unlike Merton, Heschel married Sylvia Straus. His love for music, aesthetics, and spirituality came from her. Sylvia was a concert pianist. His daughter Susannah is one of the leading Jewish feminist scholars in the world. While Merton's papers are mainly archived at Bellarmine University's Merton Center, Heschel's papers are located in Duke University's Rubenstein Library. Heschel's research interests cover a great variety of topics, from medieval philosophy in Maimonides and other Jewish thinkers to his studies of Kabbalah to the life and writings of his Hasidic spiritual masters. Clearly, Heschel, like Merton, was more interested in spirituality and mystical theology than critical studies or scholasticism, even though they mastered both in their research. Heschel felt isolated from some of his colleagues because they thought of him more as a mystic and less as a scholar when in reality, he was both. Heschel's main focus on the Jewish prophets brought him national and international recognition as an authority in Jewish studies. Like Merton, Heschel wrote poetic justice in his later writings, urging leaders and lay people to take a real stance against racism, poverty, and unnecessary wars such as Vietnam. Heschel's prophetic voice joined Dr. King and others in Selma. Heschel spoke like a true modern prophet. Heschel gained numerous enemies, even among his Jewish contemporaries, because he was highly critical of certain legalistic and exclusivist claims made by certain groups of rabbis and theologians. He questioned their understanding of the Jewish tradition, following the Torah, the Talmud, and the great philosophical teachings of Maimonides and others. But ultimately, Heschel gained the recognition that he deserved as one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. As Rabbi Michael Shire said in his introduction to Heschel,

...[Heschel] did much to bridge the growing divide between Jewish piety and Western academic thought by highlighting the importance of the prophetic critique of social injustice, as well as the prophet's religious experience as God's messengers... Believing that God and humanity meet in the human deed, he became closely involved in the issues of his time-Vietnam, civil rights, racism, poverty, Soviet Jewry and Israel. (Shire 2001, p. 121)

Heschel's moral and spiritual support for Soviet Jews got him in trouble with the FBI, who were behind the scrutiny of him, Merton, and King for their prophetic and social denunciations of U.S. foreign policies during the Cold War era.

### 3. Merton and Heschel on Interfaith Friendship

In Heschel, Merton found a spiritual friendship seeking holiness in a world of action. Their exchange of letters started in 1960 and ended in 1966. Merton's letters to Heschel are published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Merton got a copy of Heschel's book on *the Prophets* and told Heschel how grateful he was to read perhaps his very best book. In addition, Merton wrote:

I think the one that really appeals to me the most of all is God in Search of Man. I do not mean that I think it contains all your best and deepest thought, but it is what most appeals to me, at least now, because it has most to say about prayer.

This is what I can agree with you on, in the deepest possible way. It is something beyond the intellect and beyond reflection. I am happy that someone is there, like yourself, to emphasize the mystery and the Holiness of God. (Merton 1985, pp. 430–31)

The Trappist contemplative was moving towards a realm of action, where listening to the prophets as messengers and as witnesses of God's word meant a great deal in the context of the many challenges facing the U.S. and other countries around the globe in the 1960s. Merton found in Heschel a great Jewish prophetic voice resonating through modern times with great strength and courage. Merton saw Heschel as a modern prophet and poet, as a spiritual friend and guide, as a great Jewish scholar, and as a kindred spirit seeking to sanctify time through holiness in action. Merton met Heschel on 13 July 1964 at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Edward Kaplan has concluded after this extraordinary meeting that:

Their encounter, under the pall of the Ecumenical Council, confirmed Merton's deep sympathy for, and even identification with, Judaism and the Jewish people. [...] Central to their conversation was the declaration on the Jews at the Ecumenical Council soon to convene its third session. [...] Heschel ate dinner in the guest house with Merton and Father Flavian. The monks' unfamiliarity with Jewish dietary laws created quite a stir when the rabbi refused the steak (because it was not kosher), provided as a special supplement to the monks' normally vegetarian diet. As Merton noted: "Heschel did well on cheese, lettuce, etc. He enjoyed the wine and smoked a couple of long cigars". (Kaplan 2007, pp. 256–57)

After Heschel visited Merton to share with the Trappist monk his serious concerns about the latest draft on Catholic–Jewish relations issued by the Catholic representatives working in a committee run by Cardinal Augustine Bea, Merton expressed in a letter dated 13 July 1964 his warm and providential encounter with Heschel (Merton 1985, p. 432). Merton offered Heschel his monastic hospitality and invited him to come back whenever he wanted. Their friendship solidified and made their spiritual bond stronger. A day later, Merton wrote a letter dated 14 July 1964 to the Cardinal to express his sincere concerns after talking to Heschel, hoping to have some impact in the last negotiations of the final document, *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Times"—*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*). This document addressed the relationships between Catholics and non-Catholics. In particular, a big chapter was dedicated to the Jews in the context of the *Shoah*, and post-Holocaust. Heschel was becoming more frustrated with the changes in successive drafts, where Catholics still used the language of expecting the Jews to convert to the Catholic Church and blaming the Jews for killing Jesus as God (deicide). Merton did not accept this old Christian anti-Semitic charge. Merton denounced this bad theology of blaming the Jews for being "Christ-killer" (Merton 1966, p. 171). In addition, Merton told Cardinal Bea the opportunity for *metanoia* (or in Hebrew *teshuvah*, translated as repentance or return as an answer to G-d), where the Catholic Church has to ask for forgiveness from the Jewish people for their long history of past sins and anti-Jewish hatred. In this context, Merton showed his empathetic understanding and solidarity with representatives of the Jewish tradition that he greatly appreciated and valued, especially through his own correspondence with Heschel, Schachter, and Fromm. As John Moses has indicated in his acclaimed book in Europe and the U.S.,

It was through his extensive correspondence with Abraham Heschel, a Jewish rabbi and teacher, with Zalman Schachter, a Hasidic scholar, and with Eric Fromm, a writer and a psychoanalyst, that Merton deepened his appreciation of Judaism and of his earlier insights into the Jewish mystical tradition. Merton had great reverence for the Jewish scriptures, and especially for the psalms and the prophets. [...] and Merton was indebted to the writings of Abraham Heschel, the Jewish scholar with whom he corresponded on various matters over many years. He was familiar with Heschel's work, and his book *The Prophets* was welcomed by Merton

as something that he might use in his conferences with the novices. (Moses 2014, pp. 142, 183)

Merton was willing to share his suffering with his Jewish friend Heschel. After receiving from him a mimeographed statement to the Second Vatican Council, where Heschel said that the latest draft issued by the Council contained serious omissions and additions that will do harm to the Catholic–Jewish dialogue, Merton got more involved and gave Heschel his full support as a Catholic monk and spiritual friend. According to William Shannon,

[...] the things Merton had to say about Judaism were, in part at least, an expression of his concern for the anguish of his Jewish friends, especially Rabbi Heschel. I would point out that this is no rare thing in Merton's life: his being moved to personal involvement in an issue because it affected people who were dear to him and important in his life. (Shannon 2003, p. 224)

Merton was sharing his anguish with Heschel and expressing his frustration at his own Catholic brothers and sisters. Merton was very much troubled by the long history of hatred and anti-Semitism found within the Catholic Church and saw this Ecumenical Council as an opportunity to change the course of history and be on the right side with God. Merton's empathetic understanding towards Heschel and the Jews is well known. Merton was very sad when he read Heschel's statement: "I am ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death" (Shannon 2003, p. 224). According to Michael Cook, there were different reasons why the draft suffered two years of delays: "Then ensued two years of delays by Arab propagandists wary of the Vatican recognizing Israel and by conservative prelates desiring retention of the 'decide charge' and of the Jews' need to convert" (Cook 2016, p. 18). As a response, Merton wrote to Heschel a letter dated 9 September 1964, in which he acknowledged his own frustrations with his Catholic brothers working on this draft. Merton's reply said the following: "It is simply incredible. I don't know what to say about it. This much I will say: my latest ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin will surely be realized if I continue to go through experiences like this, being spiritually slapped in the face by these blind and complacent people of whom I am nevertheless a 'collaborator'" (Merton 1985, p. 434). Actually, Heschel found Merton's words very comforting at a time of great upheaval and difficulties awaiting the last draft. Heschel concluded that he was still hopeful that something can be done to repair this damage. Finally, in 1965, the final document came and did not please everyone. There were still problems with the language but with the passage of time, the relationship between Jews and Catholics had improved dramatically. Today, Heschel is seen as one of the major players in improving this ongoing interfaith dialogue between Jews, Catholics, and non-Catholics. Heschel adopted a more pluralistic view by the end of his life and saw that no religion can claim to possess the Truth. According to Edward Kaplan,

Neither Merton nor Heschel quickly jumped on the bandwagon of pluralism, pro-actively affirming the preciousness of all religions. But they did so when called upon, and with utmost respect and conviction: Heschel in his inaugural address at Union Theological Seminary, Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and especially in Merton's final writings on Asian spirituality. Both men recognized the sanctity of other religions, preparing future cooperation and mutual support against the demons of nihilism, dehumanization, and doubt, our inescapable heritage as fallible human beings. (Kaplan 2004, p. 146)

Their interfaith meeting and their religious pluralism remind us that mystics are ordinary human beings who can change their worldviews, and who can join hands together to repair the world (*tikkun olam*). As William Apel has observed in his book on interfaith letters between Merton and Heschel,

[...] the spiritual friendship of Merton and Heschel continued to deepen as their witness to the holiness of God and the dignity of humanity grew in ever-



expanding circles of ecumenical involvement and work for social justice and peace. But perhaps the ultimate sign of their interfaith kinship was an invitation from Heschel to Merton to write the introduction for a Time-Life edition of the Bible. No greater compliment could have been paid Merton by his interfaith friend. (Apel 2006, p. 80)

Merton, like Heschel, brought fresh air to a Church in need of an *aggiornamento*. Their mystical language served as a bridge between the traditionalist views of the Catholic Church and the modern views they both embraced from arts to humanities to sciences. For Heschel, the goal of interfaith dialogue was to experience mutual respect and trust and to gain mutual appreciation of each other's faith traditions. In his essay "The Ecumenical Movement", he wrote: "Respect for each other's commitment, respect for each other's faith, is more than a political and social imperative. It is born of the insight that God is greater than religion, that faith is deeper than dogma, that theology has its roots in depth theology" (Heschel 1972, p. 181). For the Jewish rabbi, there was no longer a need to look for debates of who is doctrinally right or wrong. Leaders from different religious traditions must look for common ground without overlooking their religious differences. As his daughter Susanna Heschel has quoted in "Reading Abraham Joshua Heschel Today":

"What is the purpose of interreligious dialogue?" He answers his own question: It is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another, to share insight and learning, to cooperate in academic ventures on the highest scholarly level and, what is even more important, to search in the wilderness for wellsprings of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for man. (Heschel 2021, p. xxxiii)

Heschel was a pioneer in breaking with the past Jewish establishment in their aversion to having dialogues with Christians. Some Orthodox Jews did not want to even try to dialogue with Christians because of their long history of hatred, persecution, and religious conversions. But Heschel did not give up his high hopes in bridging the gap that existed in those days between these two Abrahamic covenantal faith traditions. Perhaps Heschel's historical milieu after leaving Europe made him feel more at home in developing and cultivating interfaith friendships with Christians and people of other faiths. His numerous encounters with Christians proved to him that the common search for holiness in words and deeds is not the monopoly of any religious tradition. No prophet is fully embraced and loved in his own homeland, but now the two of them are highly admired and respected around the globe.

#### 4. Passion for Peace and Justice in Merton and Heschel

True prophetic mystics are contemplatives in action who confront the real social injustices of the world. They are not passive citizens but agents of resistance, following God's Will. Their goal is to work for peace and justice in order to build the Beloved community. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, prophets not only are entrusted with God's Word but they also announce the deepest troubles of society by denouncing those who commit injustices against the suffering people, even at the expense of dying as martyrs themselves. As Christine Bochen has confessed in the afterword to Merton-Ruether's journals,

Driven by his passion for truth, Merton felt compelled to voice his opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the injustice of racism, and the immorality of the war in Vietnam. He was equally outspoken in his criticism of those in the Roman Catholic Church who kept their silence in the face of social evils that threatened to destroy humankind. [...] As monk and writer, Merton assumed a critical, one might say, prophetic role challenging social, ecclesial, and monastic institutions alike. (Merton and Ruether 1995, p. 102)

Those who knew Merton best understood the paradoxical Merton holding together his passion for peace and justice and his interior and mystical life. Merton's good friend John

H. Griffin knew the hardships Merton had to suffer and endure because he was a monk who followed his conscience, and in doing so he paid a big price which may have cost even his life. According to Griffin, “many saw hope in his voice and viewed him as a prophetic spokesman. But many others who might admire his ‘spiritual’ writings came to consider him a radical, a subversive, and the greatest of social sinners, ‘a troublemaker’, because of his more controversial writings” (Griffin 1978, p. 81). Merton was loved and hated by even his own Catholic brothers and sisters. Some were highly critical of his politics and his openness to other religious traditions, especially his Zen Buddhist appreciations. They thought he was planning to leave the Church when he left for Asia as a pilgrim, and there were rumors he became a Buddhist. One of his friends from Columbia University, Ed Rice, has reported to his readers: “The two main themes in Merton’s later life were peace—in various forms: social and racial justice, freedom, love, liberty—and the interior life, and neither excluded the other” (Rice 1972, p. 12). Merton’s new direction in the 1960s proves his two great loves by embracing Martha and Mary together. As Rice further commented on his beloved friend from Columbia: “He returned over and over again, once he had found his new direction in the 1960s, to these basic themes: war and peace, violence and nonviolence, and Buddhism. He began to run into opposition from the Trappist censors on a scale never before encountered” (Rice 1972, p. 111). Merton’s epiphany in Louisville became a turning point in his life. The late Merton turned from being a monk writing solely about the interior life to becoming a critical theorist and a modern prophetic voice addressing the most urgent issues of his times, from war to poverty to racism and ecological degradation. As Paul Pearson corroborates, “Merton’s growing sense of compassion led him to start writing voraciously on issues of war and peace, nuclear disarmament, civil rights, environmental concerns, and a whole myriad of other issues” (Pearson 2020, p. 23). Merton’s ecclesiastical superiors in the Trappist Order banned his writings on peace and war. They told him he was a monk and his major role was to be focused only on matters of the interior life. However, Merton had a great network of friends who were publishers in different religious magazines and journals, and they were able to help him publish some of his essays on social and political issues. As Michael Higgins emphatically stressed in his book on Merton and William Blake,

Within a short time Merton became one of the most outspoken and respected critics of the scourge of racism, the nuclear arms race, and the wild proliferation of unfettered capitalist and imperialist ambitions. He set his face against authoritarianism in any form—in the state as well as in the church [. . . They] were all eager to censor the political Merton, and indeed to silence him directly when he wrote on peace matters. (Higgins 1998, p. 46)

In 1965, Merton was allowed to become a hermit living in a cabin a mile away from the Trappist Abbey. The Trappist monk did not escape from his prophetic and social responsibilities towards God and the world. As a matter of fact, he became more in tune with the world’s sufferings from his solitude inside a cabin in the hills of Kentucky. As Mario Aguilar has noted,

The hermit then is for Merton a witness, a silent witness to a profound truth: the presence of God. Contemplation for a hermit does not become an esoteric exercise or realization but an awareness of the presence of God, in sympathy with others, that becomes a profound act of love, filled with the love of God. (Aguilar 2011, p. 72)

Merton’s critics argued against his silent contemplative chosen vocation. Robert Inchausti concluded in his remarks that

Merton’s critics might argue that in taking the long view, he took too long a view—and in defending the silent life, he sometimes slighted the outspoken, fallible, compromised, democratic self-in-progress burdened by historical particulars—. And there is an element of truth to this. (Inchausti 1998, p. 152)

Merton not only got in deep trouble with his Catholic ecclesiastical authorities but even with some white liberals such as Martin Marty and Rosemary Ruether, who criticized him for remaining a monk in Gethsemani and for not joining forces with the activists who were protesting and getting arrested outside the monastic walls in Kentucky. As Jon Sweeney astutely reported in his Merton biography,

But there were some who criticized him for attempting to speak prophetically and polemically from behind the walls of a monastery. The prominent church historian and public theologian Martin Marty was one such critic [ . . . ] The other critic was Rosemary Ruether] who [ . . . ] initiated a contentious correspondence with Merton along similar lines: criticizing him for talking and writing about action instead of acting. (Sweeney 2021, pp. 80–81)

Yet, in 1965, two years before Dr. King denounced the war in Vietnam, Merton the prophetic mystic and monk denounced the war in Vietnam, calling it an atrocity. Merton the contemplative activist was in his later years becoming more radical in his writings. As Leonardo Boff reminds us, “all true liberation arises out of a deep encounter with God, which impels us toward committed action” (Boff 1993, p. 59). Merton thought that the root of war and unnecessary violence is fear of others. The antidote for this fear is to cultivate a spiritual practice of love in action, which is based on mutual trust. Again, Merton’s personal conviction has its origins in his own contemplative vision of love’s transformative power, which led him to keep his high hopes in humanity intact. Merton believed that it is only through compassionate love that we can treat the other as one of us, because God is love. Furthermore, Merton took sides with those who suffer. He spoke truth to power. Merton himself wrote:

I am on the side of the people who are being burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed. They are the victims of both sides. To take sides with massive power is to take sides against the innocent. The side I take is then the side of the people who are sick of war and want peace in order to rebuild their country. (Merton 1968, pp. 109–10)

Merton, having a compassionate heart, showed solidarity to all victims of violence. In his cosmic understanding that all life is interrelated and interconnected, Merton knew that we are all children of God. And this is the theological reason why loving your enemy as well as your neighbor is the Christian thing to do. As Merton himself said:

The theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them. . . In any case, it is a theology of *resistance*. . . which is at the same time *Christian* resistance and which therefore emphasizes reason and humane communication rather than force, but which also admits the possibility of force in a limit-situation when everything else fails. (Merton 1968, p. 9)

The prophetic voice of Merton does not turn a blind eye to the social injustices in the world. Merton wrote:

A theology of love cannot afford to be sentimental. [ . . . ] A Theology of love cannot be allowed merely to serve the interests of the rich and powerful, justifying their wars, their violence and their bombs, while exhorting the poor and underprivileged to practice patience, meekness, longsuffering and to solve their problems, if at all, non-violently. (Merton 1968, p. 108)

Merton knew that he as a monk must speak out against social injustices and not remain silent. He sided with the African American community and endorsed the enlightened response by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who in the midst of personal and collective suffering had the courage to resist evil actions and racist behaviors. In addition, Merton built a network of people within and outside his monastic community in the hills of Kentucky. He corresponded with people from all over the world, including poets, artists,



intellectuals, spiritual and political activists, etc. In 1963, Heschel and King first met at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago. The person who was instrumental in introducing Heschel to King and to the civil rights movement was Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum (1925–1992). He was the director of interreligious affairs, serving for thirty years at the American Jewish Committee and later as the director of international affairs. Tanenbaum was a former student of Heschel but he was the one who really pushed Heschel to activism and to become involved in the Jewish–Catholic dialogues at the Second Vatican Council. As Harold Kasimow has confessed, “Heschel also developed a deep friendship with Thomas Merton, the most influential American Catholic monk of the twentieth century. Merton wrote that Heschel “is the most significant and spiritual writer in this country at the moment. I like his depth and his realism. He knows God”” (Kasimov 2015, p. 75). Merton also knew about Heschel’s activities through the Fellowship of Reconciliation and through common friends such as the Berrigans, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Jim Forest. According to Daniel Berrigan, a common friend to both Merton and Heschel:

In this matter of an unashamed publicly expressed faith, Heschel was as usual with the fashion. One knew where stood, as for example, one knew where Martin Luther King stood. Their faith was consistent, lucid, intense, political. They and their like announced God in God’s world, God suffering and rejoicing amid people, the people acknowledging God’s sovereignty in their passion for justice and peace, in their prayer and worship. Faith and life in the world was all one, it was to be proclaimed, as the prophets had done, from the housetops, in season and out. (Berrigan 1991, p. 70)

Merton “intended to host Dr. King, Vincent Harding, and Thich Nhat Hanh for a week-long retreat in mid-April, 1968, but Dr. King was assassinated” (Oyer 2014, p. 234). But the meeting never came to fruition. Merton was deeply wounded when he heard that Dr. King was killed. He saw King as a modern American prophet who spoke Truth to power, like the old prophets did. Merton felt that King knew he would be killed soon but in spite of all, the African American prophet put his whole life into what he deeply believed. It was a true statement of prophetic courage and sacrifice. Merton learned an important lesson from King’s martyrdom. He told religious sisters during a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani the following:

He [Dr. King] obviously knew his death was imminent. Yes, he had clearly accepted it. He may have felt that it was one last thing he could do that was not equivocal. This is a kind of pattern of what’s required for the prophetic vocation. Not that we have to go out and get shot, but that we have to have a clear grasp of the situation and be unequivocal about it. It may mean that sooner or later we will be faced with choices which require a break with the establishment. (Merton 1997, p. 73)

Before planning this meeting with King, Merton was successful in organizing a retreat meeting with fourteen people who spent three days in November 1964 at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Among the participants, Merton invited the following witnesses who were pacifists: Abraham J. Muste, John Oliver Nelson, Dan and Phil Berrigan, Jim Forest, Tom Cornell, John Grady, Wilbur H “Ping” Ferry, John Howard Yoder, Anthony Walsh, Robert Cunnane, Charles Ring, and Elbert Jean. Merton took the middle way and recommended any activist to build a true fellowship, a beloved community rooted in the principle of serving God and humanity, and not just a political movement. Merton made it very clear in his interpretive talks given on Eberhard Arnold and the ideal of living in community. His personal opinion is well stated when he said:

I personally think that we should be in between; we shouldn’t be on the conservative side and we shouldn’t be on the radical side—we should be Christians. We should understand the principles that are involved and realize that we can’t get involved in anything where there is not true Christian fellowship. [...] Most activists do not go in for naked violence yet, but they will. (Arnold 1995, p. 55)

Merton would have preferred to have women invited to this meeting but in those days, the monastery was not welcoming women to stay in the guest house. Therefore, it was more a logistical problem than blaming Merton for excluding women in this historical meeting. I am sure Merton would have invited Dorothy Day, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, and other prophetic figures of his day. It is well-known how influential these women were in Merton's life and writings, especially through their exchange of letters. All of Merton's network of witnesses has expressed the great joy of sharing and communicating with a spiritual friend when God allows it to happen, and they kept giving support to each other spiritually and emotionally when things got tough.

Merton and Heschel as spiritual writers chose the vehicle of words as the most potent spiritual weapon against the social injustices they witnessed in their times. Merton, within the monastic Trappist context, spoke like a true modern prophet by denouncing the social injustices of his day. Heschel prayed with his legs in Selma while Merton supported Heschel and other clouds of witnesses from his cabin in the woods of Kentucky. This does not mean that Heschel was just a prophet and Merton a mystic. In fact, they both were modern prophets and mystics. As Bruce Epperly has said about Heschel's prophetic mysticism,

While there are many models of mysticism and spirituality, Heschel's unique contribution is his focus on prophetic spirituality. The prophet is one who experiences her- or himself as being encountered by God and given insights into God's vision for history, and who is sensitive to injustice and pain caused by the decisions of the powerful. The living God feels the pain of the world, and those who follow God are especially empathetic toward those who experience injustice, illness, discrimination, or neglect. [...] There is no ultimate distinction between spiritual and political, individual and communal, in prophetic faith. [...] Accordingly, Heschel's spirituality compelled him to march in Selma and to oppose publicly the Vietnam War. (Epperly 2020, pp. 85–86)

For Heschel,

The preoccupation with justice, the passion with which the prophets condemn injustice, is rooted in their sympathy with divine pathos. The chief characteristic of prophetic thought is the primacy of God's involvement in history. History is the domain with which the prophets' minds are occupied. They are moved by a responsibility for society, by a sensitivity to what the moment demands. (Heschel 2021, p. 48)

Merton was banned from publishing on war and peace. Unfortunately, before the Second Vatican Council, the Church was reluctant to embrace modern reforms. As a result, Merton suffered the consequences of being a pioneer in his effort to promote renewal within the Church. The ecclesiastical authorities tried to silence him, but he found ways to publish his material and spread his ideas which won the day. In our time, interfaith dialogue has become an integral part of the official teachings of the Catholic Church after 1965. Just recently, Pope Francis spoke in Japan of the use of nuclear weapons as evil, which is especially relevant as he visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Merton would have not faced censorship under Pope Francis on his writings on war and peace. Merton offered practical solutions to the problem of the war in Vietnam by indicating that the American government must act non-violently, de-escalate and stop the bombing raids, stop destroying crops, and engage in peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese.

Both Merton and Heschel knew that we are all created in the image and likeness of God (*imago dei*). This is why their mystical vision of the Divine led them to act with compassion and with a righteous sense of justice. For Heschel, "[t]o bring about the restitution of the universe was the goal of all efforts" (Heschel 1995b, p. 72). Our human task is to cleanse and repair the world by performing good deeds. For Heschel, the notion of *tikkun olam* or repairing the world is essential to understanding the uniqueness of the Jewish mystical perspective on compassion and the restoration of unity. In so doing, we get closer to God by way of redemption. The task of the prophet is to bring the eternal consciousness of God

into our present time and into our human situation. This means human actions are required to choose out of their own personal freedom to do God's Will, hoping that the good deeds done by His co-partners in this ongoing cosmic drama of creation will minimize evil and will alleviate the unnecessary suffering of so many creatures. As Heschel himself stressed in his philosophy of Judaism: "The world is in need of redemption, but the redemption must not be expected to happen as an act of sheer grace. Man's task is to make the world worthy of redemption. His faith and his works are preparations for *ultimate redemption*" (Heschel 1994, p. 380). Clearly, this statement will not be welcomed in some Christian circles because it contradicts its own interpretation of God's omnipotence and the whole doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Both Merton and Heschel knew first-hand that fear of the other is the root cause of all wars, conflicts, and violent responses in history. Merton wrote in his essay "The Root of War is Fear" that "[if] you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed-but hate these things in yourself, not in another" (p. 19). According to Heschel, "[t]here is a longing for peace in the hearts of man. But peace is not the same as the absence of war. Peace among men depends upon a relationship of reverence for each other" (Heschel 1972, pp. 181–82). As the Jewish rabbi has observed, "[w]e have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; thus we offered sacrifices on the altar of war" (Heschel 1987, p. 148). Furthermore, he said: "Either we make an altar for God or it is invaded by demons. There can be no neutrality. Either we are ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil" (Heschel 1987, p. 151). To remain neutral in situations of evil is to become a guilty bystander, as Merton reiterated in his writings on peace and war. For Heschel, "[w]e should have insisted in the spirit of the prophetic vision that more knowledge should also mean more reverence, that more civilization should also mean less violence" (Heschel 1965, p. 100). In sum, Heschel believed that "[i]n the eyes of the prophet, justice is more than an idea or a norm: justice is charged with the omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be!" (Heschel 1965, p. 100). As I can attest following their numerous publications, both Merton and Heschel have left us with a rich legacy of spiritual writings on peace and justice.

## 5. The Prophetic Legacies of Merton and Heschel

The prophetic legacies of Merton and Heschel are beacons of hope for humanity because they never gave up as witnesses for truth, peace, justice, and love. As Heschel often reported: "God's dream is not to be alone, to have mankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation. By whatever we do, by every act we carry out, we either advance or obstruct the drama of redemption; we either reduce or enhance the power of evil" (Heschel 1965, p. 119). Or as Heschel wrote in a different book: "The task is never to forget that by each sacred deed we commit, by each word we hallow, by each thought we chant, we render our modest part in reducing distress and advancing redemption" (Heschel 1973, p. 299). For Heschel, God is always waiting for us to redeem the world. God needs the help of humans to perform good deeds. Without our human help, God cannot fulfill His ultimate eschatological promise of salvation. This is the real messianic task of cosmic restoration, of rebirth, of renewal, of *tikkun olam* or healing the world. Merton shared in this Jewish messianic view of salvation for all, since he knew that the world is still a work in progress and also an unfinished business that requires our partnership with God in building the Earth.

Merton and Heschel integrated, in their lives and thoughts, the mystical life and the prophetic life in different ways. By responding to their inner calling, they were able to partake in the divine life in building the kingdom of God here on earth. Merton's and Heschel's prophetic messages of compassion and love are still relevant to us in an age of polarization and ongoing wars and conflicts. For Heschel, "[t]he deepest wisdom man can attain is to know that his destiny is to aid, to serve. [...] For the pious man it is a privilege to die" (Heschel 1995a, p. 296). This selfless service motif found in Heschel as well as in Merton proves their shared vision of a new creation where we are all called to become

co-partakers in building the Beloved community in the here and now, regardless of whether we believe in the same God or not.

This article has demonstrated that although Thomas Merton was different from Abraham Joshua Heschel in many ways, the Trappist monk was very fond and sympathetic to the prophetic mysticism held by Heschel. As mystics, both Merton and Heschel converge as co-partakers in building the earth and finding God in all things. In turn, the mystics must respond to this great gift of God's grace with humility in their hearts by taking upon their shoulders the great burden and shared sense of responsibility to build the heavenly kingdom on earth. As Merton has reiterated in his messages of hope, "It is precisely because I believe, with Abraham Heschel and a cloud of witnesses before him, that 'man is not alone,' that I find hope even in this most desperate situation" (Merton 1968, p. 117). Consequently, Merton and Heschel found hope in joining hands with people of goodwill and of other faith traditions. Christians have often thought that heaven, their true home, was physically located in a far celestial realm and thereby this universe is not our true home. This theology is rarely found in Judaism because their emphasis is not on being found in the afterlife but on doing good deeds here on earth. However, Merton and Heschel took the awesome responsibility of building the earth seriously. Their spiritual legacy still resonates with many people around the globe, and their inspiration serves us well in building a more lasting, peaceful, and just world in which to live. The fact that a Catholic monk and a Jewish rabbi were able to meet in person and form a strong spiritual bond beyond any disputes of religious dogmas or doctrines proves that hope is always present in our ongoing healing and repairing of the world. I am positive both Merton and Heschel, if they were alive today, would join hands and efforts to heal the divisions and polarizations that we find in the U.S. and abroad, from Russia to the Middle East. Without any doubt, spiritual dialogue among people of different faiths is a firm step towards peace and reconciliation.

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