

Bearing Witness: Thomas Merton, Truth-Telling, and Racial Justice*

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Abstract: This article argues that truth-telling is central to Christian vocation and essential for confronting racial injustice in the United States. Drawing on Thomas Merton's contemplative theology and anti-racist writings, it develops a Christian account of truth-telling as a relational and communal practice rooted in self-examination, encounter, and responsibility. The first section examines race, whiteness, and white supremacy as socially constructed systems maintained by distortion, denial, and narrative control. The second articulates a theological framework for truth-telling grounded in Scripture, ecclesial accountability, and anamnesis. The final section traces Merton's gradual formation as a truth-teller, showing how his contemplative practice and encounters with Black writers and correspondents shaped his critique of racism as a "white problem." Rather than presenting Merton as a heroic figure, the essay proposes him as a guide for Christian formation, demonstrating that truth-telling requires humility, communal discernment, and the courage to confront complicity in injustice.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, SYSTEMIC RACISM HAS DOMINATED public attention through cases such as the killings of Trayvon Martin,¹ George Floyd,² and Breonna Taylor. Racism remains a deep wound at the center of the American story, one that has never been merely misunderstood but has consistently relied on lies, distortions, and resistance to truthfully naming these injustices. From its origins, the social construction of race and the upkeep of racial hierarchy have depended on narratives that obscure responsibility, deny violence, and normalize inequality.

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¹ Jennifer Preston and Colin Moynihan, "Death of Florida Teen Spurs Outcry and Action," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2012, archive.nytimes.com/thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/21/death-of-florida-teen-spurs-national-outrage-and-action.

² Chris McGreal, Lois Beckett, Oliver Laughland, and Amudalat Ajasa, "Derek Chauvin Found Guilty of Murder of George Floyd," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2021, theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/20/derek-chauvin-verdict-guilty-murder-george-floyd.

These dynamics persist through misinformation and disinformation across both mainstream and social media, where official accounts are often uncritically reproduced rather than interrogated.³

The case of Breonna Taylor offers a stark illustration of this pattern. In Louisville, Kentucky, the Metro Police Department, city officials, and state authorities engaged in systematic obfuscation, including false statements, misleading warrants, and delayed disclosures that distorted public understanding of her killing.⁴ When journalists, activists, and Taylor's family challenged these narratives, the public record slowly shifted. Even then, law enforcement initially denied or minimized violence against protesters, bystanders, and workers during demonstrations, further revealing how the truth about racial violence often emerges only through sustained resistance to official storytelling.⁵

This pattern of obfuscation and lies is hardly unique to the Taylor case. Persistent racist attitudes, systemic inequalities, and entrenched power imbalances intentionally obscure reality to preserve social arrangements that benefit some at the expense of others. One way to confront this distortion is through truth-telling, a practice that has long functioned as a critical response to injustice within the Christian tradition. Here, truth-telling does not refer simply to factual accuracy or transparency in public discourse. Instead, it names a practice of living and speaking in alignment with reality. It resists deception, exposes injustice, and remains accountable to the dignity of those harmed by falsehood. As a prophetic and communal practice, truth-telling seeks not only to correct errors but also to transform the

³ For an analysis on the media's reporting on the Breonna Taylor case, see Sarah J. Jackson, "The Headlines That are Covering up Police Violence," *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2020, theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/06/george-floyd-protests-what-news-reports-dont-say/612571/; Radley Balko, "Correcting the Misinformation about Breonna Taylor," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2020, [washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/24/correcting-misinformation-about-breonna-taylor/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/24/correcting-misinformation-about-breonna-taylor/).

⁴ On the police misconduct in the Breonna Taylor case see, for example, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "Ex-Detective Admits Misleading Judge who Approved Breonna Taylor Raid," *New York Times*, August 23, 2022, [nytimes.com/2022/08/23/us/kelly-goodlett-breonna-taylor.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/23/us/kelly-goodlett-breonna-taylor.html); David Nakamura and Mark Berman, "Louisville Police Engaged in Pattern of Misconduct, Justice Department Finds," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2023, [washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/03/08/louisville-police-misconduct-breonna-taylor/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/03/08/louisville-police-misconduct-breonna-taylor/).

⁵ See Kate Linthicum, "Protests Erupt After Grand Jury Does Not Charge Louisville Officers in Killing of Breonna Taylor," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2020, [latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-09-23/grand-jury-indictment-in-breonna-taylor-case](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-09-23/grand-jury-indictment-in-breonna-taylor-case); Madeline Holcombe et al., "Police Declare Unlawful Assembly After Windows Shattered During Breonna Taylor Protests," *CNN Online*, September 24, 2020, [cnn.com/2020/09/24/us/louisville-breonna-taylor-officers-indictment-protests/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/24/us/louisville-breonna-taylor-officers-indictment-protests/index.html).

conditions that allow lies to endure, especially in contexts shaped by racial injustice.⁶

I argue that truth-telling is foundational to the Christian vocation and that confronting racial injustice constitutes one of the most pressing moral challenges facing the United States. Thomas Merton's life offers a compelling case study of how one becomes a truth-teller over time. In his contemplative writings, Merton insists that truth cannot be separated from lived reality and warns against spiritual evasions that allow injustice to persist unchallenged. His later social essays and letters make this demand concrete, as he names racism as a "white problem" and insists that Christians cannot claim fidelity to the Gospel while remaining passive beneficiaries of racial injustice. Tracing Merton's gradual movement toward truth-telling reveals how Christian integrity is formed through contemplation, encounter, and the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths.

Merton's monastic life and his encounters during the Civil Rights era suggest that speaking truthfully against injustice requires more than moral conviction alone. As scholars have shown, Merton's engagement with the world became increasingly visible in his critique of racism, his denunciation of white supremacy, and his sustained reflection on whiteness within American society.⁷ This article advances that scholarship by arguing that Merton did not become a truth-teller in isolation. His anti-racist writings emerged from engagement with other truth-tellers, particularly Black writers, activists, and religious leaders, whose witness challenged his assumptions and sharpened his sense of Christian responsibility.⁸

⁶ This paper distinguishes between Enlightenment-based conceptions of truth-telling, centered on factual disclosure, and Christian theological approaches that view truth-telling as a communal and prophetic practice oriented toward love and justice.

⁷ See, for example, James Thomas Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic* (University Press of Kentucky, 1971); Daniel P. Horan, "A Spirituality of Resistance: Thomas Merton on the Violence of Structural Racism in America," in *American Catholicism in the 21st Century: Crossroads, Crisis, or Renewal?* ed. Benjamin T. Peters and Nicholas Rademacher (Orbis Books, 2018), 189–200; Daniel P. Horan, "Racism is a White Problem: Thomas Merton, Whiteness and Racial Justice," *The Merton Annual* 33 (2020): 63–82; M. Shawn Copeland, "The Watchmen and the Witness: Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Exercise of the Prophetic," *The Merton Annual* 30 (2017): 156–170; Albert J. Raboteau, "Thomas Merton on Racism in America: A View from the Margins," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 3, no. 1 (2006): 29–38.

⁸ In this paper, I use the term "anti-racist" to describe deliberate actions, practices, and commitments that confront and resist racial injustice. This aligns with Ibram X. Kendi's understanding of anti-racism as active opposition to racist policies, practices, and cultural narratives, while acknowledging that the term is contested in contemporary discourse. See Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (One World, 2023).

This article proceeds in three parts. First, it examines how whiteness, white supremacy, and racism function as socially constructed systems sustained by distortion and the denial of responsibility. Second, it develops a Christian account of truth-telling as a communal and prophetic practice central to Christian vocation. Finally, it traces Thomas Merton's gradual formation as a truth-teller, focusing on how his encounters with other truth-tellers shaped his anti-racist writings and his understanding of Christian responsibility in the face of racial injustice.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF RACE AND WHITENESS

Although race, whiteness, and white supremacy represent distinct facets of oppression, they function together as interrelated elements of a constructed reality that continues to organize social life in the United States.⁹ Race, in particular, operates through a false narrative that links physical appearance to intellectual, moral, and cultural capacities, despite substantial scientific evidence rejecting race as a biological or genetic category.¹⁰ This narrative endures through repetition across generations, institutions, and cultural practices, allowing historically produced assumptions about difference and hierarchy to appear as common sense rather than as fiction.

This constructed racial order persists not only through repetition but through an epistemological framework that shapes what is seen, known, and ignored. Racial hierarchies become embedded within social, political, and economic institutions, normalizing inequality while obscuring their own operation. As a result, one often misrecognizes racism as a matter of individual prejudice rather than as a systemic structure governing access to power, belonging, and dignity. This epistemic dimension produces forms of not-knowing that protect racial dominance by rendering injustice as invisible or inevitable.¹¹

Whiteness functions as what theologian Karen Teel describes as “a system of hegemonic power that operates to benefit people perceived

⁹ See Lucius Outlaw, “Toward a Critical Theory of ‘Race,’” in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 61.

¹⁰ See, for example, Michael Yudell, Dorothy Roberts, Rob Desalle, and Sarah Tishkoff, “Taking Race Out of Human Genetics,” *Science* 351 (2016): 564–565, doi.org/10.1126/science.aac4951.

¹¹ Charles W. Mills' *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press, 1997) remains foundational for understanding the epistemological dimensions of racial domination; see also Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (State University of New York Press, 2007).

to be white and to disadvantage people perceived to be of color.”¹² White culture presents itself as normative and unmarked, distinguishing itself from others without naming itself as racialized. This normativity becomes visible in the language used to describe social and religious belonging. Scholars routinely distinguish between Catholics and Black Catholics, or between Americans and African Americans, while terms such as “Caucasian Americans” or “European Americans” sound unfamiliar or unnecessary. These patterns reflect how whiteness presents itself as a universal standard rather than as a particular social position. In contrast, African American culture is rooted in the historical experience of slavery and its aftermath, which continues to shape Black life in the United States. While this experience does not exhaust Black identity, it remains central because the dehumanization and denial of dignity directed toward African Americans constituted a shared and formative reality.¹³

Whiteness also shapes how people understand themselves and others within the spaces they inhabit. Sociologist Elijah Anderson describes these environments as “white spaces,” where whiteness functions as an assumed and organizing norm. In such spaces, whiteness appears as ordinary and neutral, while one marks or scrutinizes Black presence. Anderson defines “white spaces” as locations “dominated by the presence of white people and the notable absence of Black individuals, creating discomfort and unease for Black people who enter them.”¹⁴ These dynamics reveal how whiteness shapes social rules and expectations, producing the daily judgments and prejudices that Black people encounter as part of ordinary life.

A further danger of whiteness emerges in the oversimplification of racism in public discourse.¹⁵ One often understands racism as a personal moral failure or as an abstract systemic problem, with little attention to how these dimensions operate together. When racism is framed primarily as a personal issue, people may dismiss accusations by insisting they are not personally racist, giving rise to colorblind narratives that deny histories of colonization and enslavement in the name of sameness. As bell hooks argues, the myth of “sameness”

¹² Karen Teel, “What Jesus Wouldn’t Do: A White Theologian Engages Whiteness,” In *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (Taylor and Francis Group, 2012), 19.

¹³ See Bryan Massingale, *Racism and the Catholic Church* (Orbis Books, 2010), 24.

¹⁴ Elijah Anderson, “The White Space,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 13.

¹⁵ For a more detailed examination of the intersection of truth and whiteness, see Vincent N. Pham, “Truth as White Property: Solidifying White Epistemology and Owning Racial Knowledge,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2023): 288–305.

reflects “the primacy of whiteness as signs of informing who they are and how they think.”¹⁶ Conversely, when we frame racism solely as a systemic problem, individuals may instead feel powerless, assuming that the structures are too deeply entrenched to be challenged. In both cases, these oversimplifications foster apathy and shield whiteness from critique.

Even when we acknowledge racism, whiteness often finds ways to preserve itself. Philosopher Barbara Applebaum argues that white individuals may recognize their participation in racist structures without meaningfully disrupting them. Such acknowledgments can function as strategies of moral self-management, allowing white people to name complicity while leaving the underlying relations of power unchanged. As Applebaum observes, “Whiteness continuously ‘ensnares’ and ‘ambushes’ white people so that whiteness finds ways to hide even as one attempts honest efforts to resist it.”¹⁷ Acknowledgment alone, therefore, can re-center white moral agency, rather than challenge injustice.

Whether white people dismiss racism or acknowledge their complicity, both responses remain structured by white supremacy. White people possess the social privilege to decide whether racism is real, exaggerated, or personally relevant, a privilege rooted in historical and structural advantage. Even recognition of complicity does not automatically disrupt racial injustice. Instead, expressions of solidarity or disavowals of racism can function as forms of self-protection, allowing white people to manage discomfort without relinquishing power.¹⁸

The constructs of race and whiteness are deeply connected, with one group gaining advantages while the other bears the weight of exclusion and oppression. This relationship creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which whiteness sustains racism by presenting itself as the standard against which all others are measured. As attention shifts away from harm toward the benefits white people receive, one normalizes inequality through social, geographical, economic, and cultural systems. Yet this interdependence also reveals that race and whiteness are neither natural nor inevitable. Because people constructed them, they remain open to challenge. Racism and whiteness persist not merely through misunderstanding but through

¹⁶ bell hooks, “Representation of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992), 167.

¹⁷ Barbara Applebaum, “Flipping the Script . . . and Still a Problem: Staying in the Anxiety of Being a Problem,” in *White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?*, ed. George Yancy (Lexington Books, 2015), 11.

¹⁸ See Applebaum, “Flipping the Script,” 1–2.

practices of deception, denial, and narrative control that distort reality to justify domination.

Because whiteness and racism generate and sustain racial injustice, any meaningful response must move beyond mere acknowledgment of inequality. It requires practicing truth-telling that exposes these structures as they operate and participate in the ongoing work of justice.

CHRISTIAN TRUTH-TELLING

Truth-telling is central to confronting systemic injustice because lies and distorted narratives have been essential to establishing and sustaining racism. As the preceding analysis has shown, racial hierarchy and structural inequality persist through stories, interpretations, and denials that justify discrimination. Truth-telling directly challenges these falsehoods by exposing the social arrangements they conceal by naming realities that power prefers to obscure. Yet, truth-telling is not a simple task. It demands a deep commitment to reality, a willingness to face uncomfortable encounters, and the courage to speak truth to power, even when such speech is met with resistance.

From a Christian perspective, truth-telling is not simply a matter of personal honesty or speaking truthfully in daily life. Rather, it names a distinctive moral practice rooted in the Gospel and oriented toward transforming unjust realities. Scripture calls Christians to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), to live in accordance with the Gospel, and to confess both personal and communal failures. In this sense, truth-telling carries a prophetic dimension. It calls the church not only to articulate what is true but also to confront realities it has often preferred to avoid, including its own complicity in injustice.

The church, therefore, bears a prophetic responsibility in its commitment to truth-telling. Such truth-telling requires an honest confrontation with the realities of racial injustice and cannot begin without self-examination. Christian truth-telling must begin by acknowledging both past and present failures, since credibility in speaking truth depends on a willingness to face uncomfortable truths about oneself and one’s community. Theological integrity demands a reckoning with racism, exclusion, and violence not only through words but through practices that embody transformation.

This section explores truth-telling as a dynamic and relational practice. First, it examines the formation of the truth-teller, emphasizing that truth-telling is not merely about stating facts but about cultivating a disposition oriented toward reality. To become a truth-teller, one must be shaped by practices that form the heart and mind, resisting the forces that distort and deceive. Second, truth-telling does not occur in isolation but emerges through relationships

with others. Encounters with those who suffer injustice, particularly those on the margins, inform and sharpen one's commitment to truth. Without such encounters, truth-telling risks remaining an abstract principle rather than a lived practice. Finally, truth-telling carries an inherent responsibility: it must aim to improve social conditions rather than satisfy self-righteousness. One must not reduce truth-telling to performative speech but must take the form of solidarity that seeks justice and healing for those most affected by injustice.

What is Truth-Telling in a Christian Context?

Theologian Mary Emily Briehl Duba offers a definition of truth-telling that captures several important distinctions. According to Duba, truth-telling is "the practice of living in a way that reflects and responds to reality, even when it is hard, and faithfully resists the powers that deceive."¹⁹ This definition emphasizes that truth-telling is not merely about stating facts but about living in response to reality as it is encountered. While truth-telling necessarily attends to particular social and historical contexts, this does not render it situational. Rather, it grounds truth-telling in concrete reality and guards against a form of moral relativism that treats truth as contingent.

Throughout history, appeals to truth have often been used to justify oppression rather than to confront it. In response to this distortion, Duba emphasizes that truth-telling places those who practice it in tension with agents who use their power to maintain the status quo. Truth-tellers emerge most clearly in situations where justice is denied and where one group seeks to maintain dominance over another by presenting inequality as natural or inevitable. In such contexts, truth-telling takes on a prophetic character. It names realities that power attempts to conceal and disrupts the narratives that maintain injustice.

Because human beings are innately social and depend on communal belonging, they often prioritize social cohesion over confrontation. As a result, truth-tellers frequently remain a small minority within their communities. Duba acknowledges that truth-telling is complex yet insists that everyone retains the capacity to gravitate toward it. Crucial here is the distinction between pursuing the truth, acknowledging the truth, and speaking the truth. While human beings naturally seek answers to questions of ultimate meaning, putting what one has come to know into practice is a far more demanding endeavor. Moreover, the challenge of truth-telling is deeply tied to human relationships and interactions, particularly in

¹⁹ Mary Emily Briehl Duba, "Does Truth Matter? Truth-Telling as Resistance and Hope in a Post-Truth Era," *Character And . . . Transitions* 7 (2021): 60.

contexts where social cohesion, conformity, and the desire to avoid conflict discourage honest confrontation with reality.

Theologian James Fodor expresses a similar concern by emphasizing the communal dimensions of truth-telling within Christian life. He argues that

Theological integrity . . . presupposes some sort of initiation into and familiarity with the forms of life of the believing community. For apart from participating in those ways of life (knowing how to make correct or even possible moves in Christian language-games), the very question of truth and truthfulness lose their purchase. Truth-telling and integrity lose all intelligibility.²⁰

Truth-telling, on this account, requires more than the repetition of Christian language or the outward performance of religious identity. One must engage in practices that form judgment, attentiveness, and accountability over time. Such formation is ongoing rather than complete, requiring continuous and consistent correction as individuals and communities learn to align their lives more faithfully with reality rather than with self-protective or inherited narratives.

Speaking truth in ways that aim to improve social conditions inevitably exposes truth-tellers to risk, particularly because truth-telling is linked to power and politics. Under such conditions, truth-telling may become something altogether different from its intended purpose. For this reason, Christian truth-telling requires attentiveness to the relationship between speech and action. Within Christian discourse, one cannot separate these two. To speak truthfully is also to live truthfully, since Christians understand truth not merely as a set of claims but as participation in God. Truth-telling, therefore, demands integrity of life, especially where speaking the truth entails vulnerability.

Despite the potential a Christian perspective on truth-telling offers society, the Christian community has not consistently lived as a community of truth-tellers. Christians have often obscured the very truths they are called to proclaim, particularly regarding systemic racism. This history requires the church to acknowledge its own culpability.²¹ While truth-telling can lead to healing, one cannot assume it is an automatic feature of the Christian life. Historical patterns of slave-based racism and ecclesial practices of exclusion

²⁰ James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Clarendon Press, 1995), 33.

²¹ See Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Orbis Books, 2017); Joseph Flipper, "White Ecclesiology: The Identity of the Church in the Statements on Racism by the United States Catholic Bishops," *Theological Studies* 82, no. 3 (2021): 418–439.

reveal how Christian institutions have helped to create and sustain racial injustice.²² Instead, the practice of truth-telling demands an examination of conscience that reckons honestly with this history before the church can credibly speak truth to power.²³

The Purpose of Truth-Telling

The concrete outcomes of truth-telling are multifaceted. A Christian practice of truth-telling is not exhausted by correct speech but unfolds through immersion in God's truth, the dismantling of dominant narratives, and sustained engagement in *anamnesis*. Together, these practices orient truth-telling toward repair. They aim to reshape moral perception, disrupt inherited distortions of reality, and cultivate forms of memory and responsibility capable of maintaining justice over time.

In contemporary discourse, one often describes truth as fragile, leading some to speak of a "post-truth" era.²⁴ For Christians, however, truth has always been grounded in God's unity and the Gospel's promise for the world. The Good News consistently reorients human lives by calling them into fidelity to what has been revealed in Jesus Christ. As James Fodor observes, "Therefore, it is necessary that Christians live [their lives] so as to be governed by fidelity to the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ."²⁵

If being Christian means living in response to God's grace, then we must understand truth-telling as an essential expression of that grace. It requires aligning both speech and life with what is just and true. One crucial aim of truth-telling, therefore, is the active deconstruction of dominant narratives that have long gone unchallenged. These so-called "master narratives," or what Bryan Massingale calls "stock stories,"²⁶ are structures of meaning shaped by colonial histories and continued by ongoing power relations. Confronting these narratives is not about apologizing for the past but about recognizing how such

²² See Joseph Flipper, "Whiteness as an Ecclesiological Heresy," *Church Life Journal*, September 2, 2020, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/whiteness-as-an-ecclesiological-heresy.

²³ Theologian Katie Walker Grimes contrasts "sacramental optimism," which assumes the church naturally embodies God's justice, with "sacramental realism," which acknowledges the church's deep entanglement in sin and injustice. See Katie Walker Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiracism as Corporate Vice* (Orbis Books, 2010), 223–237.

²⁴ See, for example, D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World* (General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2019).

²⁵ Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 76.

²⁶ Massingale, 98. Also see Anderson Jeremiah, "Prophetic Truth Telling as Christian Witness," *Political Theology Network*, July 5, 2021, politicaltheology.com/prophetic-truth-telling-as-a-christian-witness.

stories continue to operate in the present. To tell the truth is to expose the narratives we have inherited and internalized and to take responsibility for how they continue to shape institutions, communities, and moral imagination.

Additionally, truth-telling requires authentic solidarity. For theologian M. Shawn Copeland, solidarity does not begin with sentiment but with *anamnesis*, the intentional act of remembering those who have been exploited, erased, or silenced. In this sense, memory becomes a theological act. To remember rightly is to resist injustice, refusing the distortions that render suffering invisible. Truth-telling thus becomes a form of active solidarity, oriented not only toward victims of the past but toward those who continue to bear the weight of racial and social injustice in the present.²⁷

This theological grounding in wounded memory deepens when we understand truthful remembering as an ecclesial practice. Jeremy M. Bergen situates *anamnesis* not in individual acts but within the shared life of the church, a community bound across time by the Spirit. Grounded in the communion of saints, the church's identity is shaped by both grace and sin, faithful witnesses and historical wrongdoing. Truthful remembering, on this account, becomes a practice through which the church assumes responsibility for its past as part of its ongoing vocation, refusing narratives of innocence while remaining open to conversion and renewal.²⁸

Through this remembering, truth-telling becomes a communal practice ordered toward healing and restoration. It acknowledges pain without seeking to erase it and names complicity without collapsing into guilt. Because such truth-telling is not automatic, it requires formation through practices and encounters that shape our moral perception over time. Here, Thomas Merton's writings offer important resources. His engagement with Black writers and correspondents helped shape a vision of unity rooted in truth and justice, one that can guide contemporary efforts to become people who not only speak the truth but also learn to live it with grace and in solidarity with those who too often have been forgotten.

²⁷ See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Orbis Books, 2009), 100. Also see Shawn M. Copeland, "The Watchmen and the Witness," 167; and Anna Floerke Scheid, "Under the Palaver Tree: Community Ethics for Truth-Telling and Reconciliation," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 17–36.

²⁸ See Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 143–146 and 153–155.

TRUTH-TELLING IN MERTON'S ANTI-RACIST WRITINGS

There are several compelling reasons to examine Thomas Merton's anti-racist writings to better understand the practice of truth-telling. Merton's social location shaped how and at what cost he spoke truth to power. Scholars often describe Merton as having "turned to the world" during a period of intense racial injustice and civil rights struggle. As a white Euro-American male, his engagement with racial inequality was not inevitable. Instead, it required attentiveness to the "signs of the times," an exercise shaped by practices and encounters that many of his contemporaries either resisted or failed to perceive.

However, rather than viewing Merton as a heroic example of truth-telling, I suggest that we understand him better as a guide to becoming authentic truth-tellers. Therefore, I analyze how Merton followed several steps that led him to truth-telling. I will emphasize how Merton developed an inherent tendency toward truth through his early period of contemplation. Second, his engagement with African American writers and correspondents influenced his understanding of racial justice and further shaped his attitude toward truth. Finally, these experiences helped him develop an outlook that enabled him to confront the racial injustices of his time.

Merton's Contemplative Disposition Toward Truth

For Merton, contemplation was never merely an exercise or a discrete spiritual activity. To describe it as such suggests a practice one can take up at will, retreat into an "other-worldliness," and then abandon to return unchanged in ordinary life. This understanding reduces contemplation to a leisurely activity or an intellectual enterprise. Merton resists this reduction by insisting that contemplation is a way of knowing the unknowable God, a divine paradox one cannot grasp since it "is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self."²⁹ In this sense, contemplation is not an escape from reality but an epistemological reorientation that unsettles claims to mastery and opens the self to truth as a gift rather than possession. Truth, therefore, is not discovered apart from lived experience but emerges within the concrete conditions of one's life. Merton writes, "My whole life is a struggle to seek the truth . . . and the truth is found in the reality of my own life as it is given to me."³⁰ This struggle is necessarily historical, shaped by social conditions and

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions, 2007), 2.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 146.

by one's relation to others within them. In this way, the struggle for truth threatens not society as such but systems of moral complacency that depend on refusing responsibility for injustice.

At the same time, contemplation is a response to God's call that speaks through the human person. Through contemplation, one becomes a vessel of God's love, an echo of God's response to the world, meaning one's voice must carry weight as it reflects the divine Creator. Because contemplation is grounded in grace, it affirms that every person has the capacity to share this love, which is an important claim for truth-telling. For Merton, to tell the truth is ultimately to participate in God's love for the world, a love that seeks communion rather than domination. In this way, truth-telling is a form of reciprocal love, responding to God's call and extending that love outward to others. While contemplation is not the only path toward truth-telling, it was the formative practice through which Merton came to understand truth as inseparable from love.³¹

For Merton, one of the greatest obstacles to truth is not simple ignorance but the social usefulness of lies. Lies often sustain a sense of order and stability, allowing individuals and communities to avoid confronting realities that would disrupt their comfort or advantage. In this sense, lies become the primary adversary of charity, as they can establish structures that benefit some at the expense of others. Merton, therefore, insists that the more significant danger lies not only in falsehood itself but in the anxiety provoked by questioning it, or, as he puts it, by daring "to ask the right questions—because they might turn out to have no answer."³² Such questioning threatens systems of comfort and innocence that depend on unexamined assumptions, fostering resistance and complacency rather than conversion. As a result, social life can devolve into what Merton calls a "flight from reality,"³³ in which we substitute apparent harmony for genuine communion and sacrifice truth for the sake of stability.

Another crucial dimension of Merton's contemplative anthropology is his account of the false self. Importantly, Merton does not understand the false self primarily in moral terms, as though it were simply the result of individual wrongdoing. Rather, as William Shannon explains, the false self is ontological since it is superficial, alienated, and unsubstantial. It is shaped by mass culture, social pressures, and the illusions inherited from one's surrounding world. Shannon describes it as an "external," "contingent," and ultimately "fictitious," a "smoke self" that clings to the surface but lacks enduring

³¹ See Andrew Prevot, "Contemplation in Times of Crisis," *The Merton Annual* 34 (2021): 41.

³² Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (HarperOne, 1955), xiii.

³³ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), 63.

depth or truth.³⁴ This false self lives on the margins of reality, providing a fragile sense of identity while obscuring authentic selfhood. Contemplation exposes this illusion by drawing the person away from socially reinforced appearances and toward a more truthful encounter with reality.

This dimension of Merton's thought becomes especially significant when read alongside his critique of racism and whiteness. Whiteness, understood as a social construct, functions in ways strikingly similar to the false self. It offers those who benefit from it a sense of security, privilege, and moral innocence, while simultaneously estranging them from authentic communion with others. To inhabit whiteness uncritically is to be formed by a set of illusions that mask dependence, complicity, and vulnerability. For Merton, overcoming the false self requires an awakening through contemplation, the exposure of superficial narratives, and a return to what he calls "the hidden ground of love." In this sense, confronting whiteness and confronting the false self are parallel spiritual tasks, as both demand relinquishing comforting illusions in favor of truth.³⁵

For Merton, the movement away from the false self is inseparable from a return to interiority, where the person discovers that their true identity is rooted not in achievement or social recognition but in God alone. Merton states, "The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. . . . I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him,"³⁶ meaning to discover the true self, therefore, is simultaneously to discover God, since the two are never separable. This interior awakening does not withdraw the person from the world but frees them from the illusions that distort their engagement with it. Such freedom requires solitude, which one should not understand as a form of escape, but as discipline. By stepping away from the noise of daily life, one learns to distinguish superficial desires from the deeper call to truth. In this sense, solitude prepares the person for authentic communion, enabling them to relinquish the familiar aspects of the false self and to live more truthfully before God and others. As Merton insists, the true self is not an abstract ideal but "our *whole reality*,"³⁷ disclosed only when one consents to being known by God.

Once a person begins to live from their true self, truthful speech becomes possible. Merton describes this capacity as *parrhesia*, a form of bold, truthful speech that arises from an authentic relationship with God. In its original state, *parrhesia* characterizes humanity's freedom

³⁴ See William Shannon, "Original Blessing: The Gift of the True Self," *The Way* 30, no. 1 (1990): 43.

³⁵ See Shannon, "Original Blessing," 41–45.

³⁶ Merton, *New Seeds*, 35.

³⁷ Merton, *New Seeds*, 280 (emphasis in original).

before God. Merton traces this back to Genesis 1–2, where Adam speaks freely with God in innocence and trust. This freedom of speech is lost when humanity's relationship with God is fractured, and with it the ability to see reality clearly. To recover *parrhesia*, therefore, one must recover unity with oneself. Such unity is made possible through contemplation and spiritual flourishing. As Merton insists, "I must therefore know myself, and know both the good and the evil that are in me."³⁸ Such self-knowledge does not lead to despair but to truthfulness, enabling the person to reclaim the life God has given them and to speak honestly from within it.

Parrhesia, for Merton, is never merely intellectual. It is "the perfect communication of man's intelligence with God by knowledge and contemplation,"³⁹ a state in which the will is aligned with divine love. Humanity's loss of *parrhesia* stems from disunion with God, a separation that distorts perception and speech alike. Yet Merton insists that sin does not extinguish *parrhesia*. On the contrary, it becomes most powerful when practiced by those who recognize their own brokenness: "*Parrhesia* is a far more marvelous thing in men who are sinners, who are forced to recognize themselves as burdened with guilt."⁴⁰ Truthful speech, then, does arise from humility. It is precisely the sinner, awakened through contemplation, who becomes capable of speaking truthfully.

Contemplation and Responsibility

Merton's contemplative awakening did not remain confined to interior transformation but gradually exposed him to the weight of historical and social responsibility. By the late 1950s, he began to recognize that his own spiritual life could not be separated from the injustices embedded in the world around him, particularly those sustained by American power and prosperity. In a moment of self-implication, Merton asks, "How to offer to God prayer as an act of justice when I am living in injustice?"⁴¹ This question marks a turn in his thought. Contemplation could no longer function as a private refuge or a source of spiritual consolation. Instead, it became a site of moral exposure, revealing how personal holiness is bound to collective conditions of suffering and exclusion. To pray truthfully, Merton suggests, requires

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Books, 1989), 95.

³⁹ Merton, *New Man*, 75.

⁴⁰ Merton, *New Man*, 94.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 341. Also see Ross Labrie's analysis of how Merton's contemplative thoughts evoked his desire for social action. Ross Labrie, "Contemplation and Action in Thomas Merton," *Christianity and Literature* 55, no. 4 (2006): 475–492.

confronting the ways one's own life is entangled in structures that deny justice to others.

Yet, this growing awareness did not come without inner conflict. By 1961, he describes himself as weighed down by distraction and spiritual fatigue, lamenting that he is covered with "bloodsuckers and barnacles" that cling to him and obscure his interior life.⁴² Yet this restlessness was not a retreat from the world but a sign of transformation. Merton's contemplative life no longer focuses on detachment from human struggle but on learning how to remain faithful amid its tensions. The monk's task, as he increasingly understood it, was not to escape the world's brokenness but to attend to it more honestly. This unsettled posture prepared Merton to listen beyond himself, to recognize the limits of his own perspective, and to seek truth through encounter with others whose experiences of injustice challenged and reshaped his own.

Learning from Black Writers and Correspondents

Merton did not first encounter racial injustices in the 1960s. In 1941, before he entered the monastery, he visited Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem. Drawn to its mission of racial reconciliation and service to the poor, Merton first faced the reality of systemic racism and urban poverty. The vibrancy of the Black community's culture and faith stood in stark contrast to the harsh living conditions he witnessed. Though he ultimately turned away from that work, entering the monastery in search of spiritual clarity, the experience lingered. Harlem became a place where he first realized that faith could not be separated from the suffering and struggles of others, even if he was not yet ready to face those tensions directly.⁴³

Years later, as Merton began to engage more deeply with the writings of Black authors, he found himself returning to the questions Harlem initially raised. These writers and correspondents deepened his understanding of truth-telling as a relational, uncomfortable, and morally urgent endeavor. He saw that monastic or intellectual isolation breeds illusion, while truth is revealed through dialogue with others. As Merton claims, "Man does not fully know himself so long as he is

⁴² Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 341.

⁴³ In his autobiography, Merton vividly describes the conditions Black Americans endured in Harlem, portraying them as "herded together like cattle," their lives constrained by systemic prejudice and deprivation. Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain* (Mariner Books, 1998), 378. For Merton's later reflection on his time at the Friendship House, see Robert A. Wild, ed., *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Catherine de Hueck Doherty* (Ave Maria Press, 2009), especially 1–29. For a historical analysis of this period, see Edward Vinski, *Thomas Merton, the Monk of Civil Rights* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), 25–42.

isolated in his own individual self-hood. His identity comes to light only when it fully confronts the ‘other.’⁴⁴ Black voices challenged Merton to confront the limits of his own experience, exposing the danger of speaking without listening and the temptation to settle into comfortable, partial truths.

Merton’s first direct engagement with a concrete case of racial injustice was his 1961 correspondence with airline pilot Marlon Green, who was challenging discriminatory hiring practices in commercial aviation. Green contacted Merton for moral and spiritual support during a period of deep frustration as he awaited further appeals in a case that would ultimately result in a unanimous US Supreme Court ruling in his favor.⁴⁵

Their exchange was limited but significant. Merton responded with encouragement, framing Green’s struggle as a Christian pursuit of justice undertaken for the good of society. He urged Green to persevere, insisting that resisting racial injustice was not optional but a moral obligation rooted in truth and charity. When Green visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in August 1961, their conversation lasted only about twenty minutes. Yet, it provided what Green later described as a source of consolation during a challenging period. Merton, for his part, recorded the encounter in his journal, noting Green as “a remarkable person”⁴⁶ who fought for justice against systems that publicly claimed openness while employing exclusionary strategies.⁴⁷

This encounter is significant because it marks his earliest documented relational engagement with an African American actively confronting structural racism in the United States. Unlike his later engagements with King, Baldwin, or Williams, this exchange was not mediated primarily by published texts but by personal encounter. Green’s struggle forced Merton to confront racial injustices not as an abstract moral problem but as a lived reality. This relational dimension would become foundational for Merton’s later understanding of truth-telling as a practice that emerges through encounter.

Merton’s engagement with high-profile African American writers and correspondents—particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, Fr. August Thompson, and Robert Lawrence Williams—marked a critical stage in his understanding of truth-telling and his slow but deliberate movement toward speaking out on issues of racial

⁴⁴ Merton, *New Man*, 67.

⁴⁵ *Colorado Comm’n v. Continental Airlines, Inc.*, 372 U.S. 714 (1963).

⁴⁶ See Gordon Oyer, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton’s Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology* (Orbis Books, 2021), 93.

⁴⁷ See Oyer, *Signs of Hope*, 121–132; see also Flint Whitlock, *Turbulence Before Takeoff: The Life & Times of Aviation Pioneer Marlon DeWitt Green* (Cable Publishing, 2009), 112–119.

injustice. On May 16, 1961, Merton recorded in his journal how reading Martin Luther King, Jr.'s account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott highlighted his particular interest in both King's activism and his personal spiritual development, or, as Merton wrote, "Certain here is something Christian in the history of our time."⁴⁸ He admired Martin Luther King, Jr., calling him "one of the few really great Christians in America,"⁴⁹ and he was moved by King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which he believed revealed the Church's failure to support the Civil Rights Movement. This is why, ultimately, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, marked a moment of crisis for Merton. His death led Merton to question the very heart of the Christian message. He asked whether *agape* love was merely a delusion in the face of such evil or whether one must continue to love even in seemingly impossible situations.⁵⁰ His crisis was ultimately resolved through dialogue and friendship, particularly in conversations with his Quaker friend, Jung Yungblut, reaffirming Merton's faith. The death of King shook Merton to the core, but the relational support of his friends and continued dialogue allowed him to reclaim faith in the power of love as the most authentic form of truth-telling in the face of injustice.

Merton's encounter with James Baldwin was also critical in shaping his views on racial issues. In 1962, he read Baldwin's article in *The New Yorker* that would become *The Fire Next Time*. His initial response to a friend revealed both admiration and discomfort, stating that while Baldwin's writing was "shattering" and "very fine," he thought Baldwin risked falling into a reversal of prejudice.⁵¹ Yet this hesitation gave way to a deeper engagement. By February 1963, Merton wrote in his journal that Baldwin's work was profoundly urgent and true, seeing the Civil Rights Movement not only as a cause for Black liberation but also as essential for the moral recovery of white Americans.⁵² Merton ultimately recognized that the liberation of Black people was intimately connected to the liberation of white people from self-deception and injustice.

Baldwin's challenge did not remain merely intellectual. In 1963, Merton publicly denounced the very framing of a "Negro problem," insisting instead that "there is only a white problem," and calling for

⁴⁸ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 119.

⁴⁹ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 325.

⁵⁰ See William Apel, "Crisis of Faith: Thomas Merton and the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr." *The Merton Annual* 31 (2018): 68.

⁵¹ See, for example, Paul M. Pearson, "'A Kind of White James Baldwin': Thomas Merton and James Baldwin," *Cithara* 62, no. 2 (2023): 54; Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), 213.

⁵² See Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 297.

justice at every level of society.⁵³ This marked his first move into public commentary on racial injustice. Although Merton never exchanged letters directly with Baldwin,⁵⁴ his engagement with Baldwin's work functioned as an examination of conscience. He repeatedly questions whether he was prepared to speak publicly, whether he grasped the moral stakes involved, and whether he risked misunderstanding realities beyond his own experience. Through Baldwin, Merton concluded that human wholeness is possible only when one recognizes that each person carries aspects of humanity the other lacks: "I am therefore not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother because he has the part of humanity which I lack."⁵⁵

Merton's 1963 letter to Baldwin also expresses a profound understanding of communal guilt and human brokenness. When he writes, "We don't see we are killing our own hope and the hope of the world," his reflections reveal a deep awareness of the illusions of white self-sufficiency and superiority. He continues that "the white man imagines he does not need the Negro, which enables him to think he can treat the Negro as an 'object' and do what he likes with him."⁵⁶ At the heart of this illusion, Merton identified a contempt for truth itself. When one rejects truth in favor of a fabricated self-image, it ceases to function as a moral corrective. Instead, this distortion produces what Merton described as barbarity rather than authentic religion.

Additionally, Merton's relationship with Fr. August Thompson, a Black Catholic priest, reveals how dialogue and reciprocal learning deepened his understanding of the issues. In 1963, Thompson contacted Merton for guidance after giving a candid interview where he exposed the inhumane experiences Black Catholic priests endured. Following this, Thompson again sought Merton's counsel after receiving a rebuke from Bishop Greco on November 26, 1963. In response, Merton encouraged Thompson, affirming that far from dishonoring the church, Thompson had borne witness to the church's ability to speak honestly about injustice.⁵⁷ However, he also advised caution. He counseled Thompson not to respond aggressively but with compassion, acknowledging the "absolute blindness and absolute self-

⁵³ Pearson, "White James Baldwin," 58.

⁵⁴ See Pearson, "White James Baldwin," 58–59.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Paul R. Dekar, "God's Messenger: Thomas Merton on Racial Justice," *The Merton Annual* 32 (2019): 148.

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 245–246.

⁵⁷ See Greg Hillis, "Letters to a Black Catholic Priest: Thomas Merton, Fr. August Thompson, and the Civil Rights Movement," *The Merton Annual* 32 (2019): 123–126; also see Dekar, "God's Messenger," 140.

righteousness of people who have been schooled by centuries of prejudice and injustice.”⁵⁸ In early 1964, Thompson again wrote to Merton regarding violence in his parish. Merton’s reply, on February 27, 1964, reflected his disillusionment and growing despair about the trajectory of American society, highlighting how entrenched blindness and confusion seemed to dominate both public discourse and ecclesial responses.⁵⁹

Merton’s relationship with Robert Lawrence Williams, a musician and the president-founder of the National Foundation of African Students in Boston, also reveals the relational nature of his commitment to racial justice. In March 1964, Williams asked Merton to compose poems on faith and brotherhood for musical settings in honor of the late President John F. Kennedy. Merton’s poetry became part of an educational and inspirational effort to uplift African American communities. Williams expressed his gratitude, identifying the poem “Earthquake” as a patriotic call for a new world order under Christ’s reign. Later that year, on October 17, Williams wrote again, thanking Merton for seeing “God in black faces and hearts,” and affirming that Merton’s love for African Americans was a divine gift that had been established in his heart long before he entered monastic life.⁶⁰

This exchange helped sharpen Merton’s awareness of how society sustained racial injustice not only through discrimination but also through distorted public narratives. He became increasingly frustrated with the mass media’s handling of ‘objective’ reporting. In a December 21, 1964, letter to Robert Lawrence Williams, Merton lamented that Americans, influenced by oversimplified media portrayals, divided the world into “good guys and bad guys,”⁶¹ failing to grasp the intricate realities of places like Vietnam, Africa, and Congo.

These encounters, whether with Green, Baldwin, Thompson, or Williams, were not just moments of instruction for Merton but part of an ongoing process of formation. His commitment to truth-telling did not arise from personal insight or reflection but was continually shaped by relationships with others, especially those whose lived experiences of injustice compelled him to confront uncomfortable truths about himself, the church, and American society. Merton’s willingness to engage in these conversations, to be unsettled, and to reflect openly on injustice reveals the vital connection between encounter and commitment in his practice of truth-telling. The

⁵⁸ See Hillis, “Letters to a Black Catholic Priest,” 127.

⁵⁹ See Dekar, “God’s Messenger,” 141–143.

⁶⁰ Dekar, “God’s Messenger,” 144–145.

⁶¹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 592.

comparison between Merton and Baldwin is striking. While Baldwin wrote from the perspective of Harlem and the literary world, Merton approached similar questions of identity, community, and justice from within the contemplative life of the church. Both confronted the destructive illusions of whiteness and the moral costs of self-deception, though from distinct social locations. Merton's early exposure to racial injustice at Friendship House, followed by years of silence and a renewed engagement in the 1960s, reflect a gradual reawakening shaped in large part by his encounters with Black writers and correspondents. Although Merton never claimed to fully grasp the suffering of Black Americans, these relationships activated and deepened his sense of responsibility. They clarified his understanding of truth-telling not as mere confrontation, but as a dialogical practice rooted in charity, in which all participants are called to transformation.

Merton the Truth-Teller

From the early stage of his monastic life, Thomas Merton sought to connect contemplation with the lived realities of people, recognizing that spiritual depth could not be separated from engagement with human suffering. While detachment was necessary for contemplation, he argued it should never lead to indifference to human dignity and justice.⁶² For Merton, truth-telling was not easy in a world shaped by institutional power and mass media distortions. He lamented that public discourse had been reduced to slogans and political expediency rather than moral reasoning.⁶³ Thus, Merton's commitment to truth-telling extended into his reflections on race and white supremacy, particularly in his response to the Civil Rights Movement, where he confronted structural racism, white supremacy, and white complicity. He saw in this movement not just a struggle for legal rights but a profound confrontation with the moral failures of white society.⁶⁴

The encounter with Black thinkers shaped his socio-political thinking, as evident in his writings, in which he engages with them. His 1963 essay, "Letters to a White Liberal," in response to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," delivers a strong critique of structural racism. Merton did not merely critique individual prejudices but highlighted the structural sins in which we live. He

⁶² Merton, *New Seeds*, 20.

⁶³ See Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 65.

⁶⁴ See David Golemboski, "The Familiar Perspectives of American History: Thomas Merton on Black and Indigenous Oppression in the United States," *The Merton Annual* 31 (2018): 115. For critiques of Merton's positional limitations and the charge that he functioned as a "white James Baldwin," see Marshall Soules, "Thomas Merton in Black and White: Entre les Deux," *The Merton Journal* 29, no. 2 (2022): 47–60; Hillis, "Letters to a Black Catholic Priest," 121.

often distinguishes between individual acts of racism and systemic racist structures. He states that “we [white Christians] are not interested in the rights of several million persons, who are members and citizens of our society and are in every way loyal Americans.”⁶⁵ And while we have granted Black people “rights on paper,” Merton asserts, those “laws have been framed in such a way that in every case their execution has depended on the good will of white society, and the white man has not failed, when left to himself, to block, obstruct, or simply forget the necessary action without which the rights of the Negro cannot be enjoyed in fact.”⁶⁶ Merton, thus, was particularly critical of how white society had obstructed real racial progress. Here, Merton exposes the hypocrisy white people embody when they are confronted with the demands of racial justice. The so-called “liberal” supports *de jure* laws because they want to maintain an image of themselves as benevolent, enlightened, and morally progressive individuals who side with justice. This image affirms their self-conception without requiring them to relinquish privilege or disrupt existing power structures. Yet, when facing the question of radical change, when people are pushed out of their comfort zone to make the changes an actual reality, Merton states, the liberal “will be quick to see [their] own interests menaced by his demands.”⁶⁷ Therefore, to promote substantial change, society as a whole must undergo a fundamental restructuring before these laws can achieve their intended objectives.

Merton’s reflections show how whiteness extends beyond isolated acts of racism to the systemic practice of obscuring Black personhood. Systemic racism and white superiority were deeply embedded in US American culture. He also did not hesitate to acknowledge that Christians participated in these injustices. For Merton, “the actions and attitudes of white Christians . . . contain a basic and axiomatic assumption of white superiority, even when the pleas of the Negro for equal rights are hailed with the greatest benevolence.”⁶⁸ He observed that the expectation was not simply for Black Americans to be integrated into society but for them to assimilate into whiteness. Therefore, people simply assume that “the *Negro wants to become a white man*.”⁶⁹ This, he argued, erases their distinct identity and dignity.

⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, “The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal,” in *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (Crossroad, 1996), 162.

⁶⁶ Merton, “Letters,” 162.

⁶⁷ Merton, “Letters,” 169.

⁶⁸ Merton, “Letters,” 181.

⁶⁹ Merton, “Letters,” 181 (emphasis in original).

Merton returned to these questions with urgency in his letters following acts of racial terror. Following a bomb explosion in a Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and the killing of a twelve-year-old Black boy, Merton emphasized that while it was not the action of Catholics who did the killing, it “took place in a region where many Catholics have explicitly and formally identified themselves with racial segregation.”⁷⁰ At the same time, people claim their Christian heritage, which holds that every person’s dignity must be valued and cherished. Merton states, “Our religion adds that what we do to him, we do to Christ.”⁷¹ But it becomes clear that the otherness of Black people stands in contrast to the seemingly Christian message, as Merton provocatively asks, “How, then, do we treat this other Christ, this person, who happens to be black?”⁷²

Merton becomes more explicit two years later in a 1965 article, “Religion and Race in the United States,” where he debunks the myth that racism is predominantly a phenomenon of the South. Here, Merton frames racism not as a regional moral failure but as a test of whether Christians are willing to risk truth over comfort. He states that “the Northern Negro is, generally speaking, disillusioned with the Churches and with the Christian preaching of moderation and non-violence. His feeling is that the Churches are part of the establishment.”⁷³ Therefore, Christians face a choice, one between “‘safety,’ based on negation of the new and the reaffirmation of the familiar, or the creative risk of love and grace in new and untried solutions, which justice nevertheless demands.”⁷⁴ What is at stake for Christians is the inherent concept of truth itself. They must decide whether they want to face the “fidelity of Christian truth” and to rebuke the “the loss of that Christian sense which sees every other man as Christ and treats him as Christ.”⁷⁵

Ultimately, Merton seeks to reclaim the true Christian position of treating everyone as Christ would treat them. Such change can only occur when white people recognize that racism “is really a *White* problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences, *is rooted in the heart of the white man himself*.”⁷⁶ The hatred and ignorance society displays daily reflect our innate draw towards injustice. The false self that we have nurtured over time

⁷⁰ Merton, “Letters,” 159.

⁷¹ Merton, “Letters,” 161.

⁷² Merton, “Letters,” 161.

⁷³ Merton, “Religion and Race in the United States,” in *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (Crossroad, 1996), 218.

⁷⁴ Merton, “Religion and Race,” 223.

⁷⁵ Merton, “Religion and Race,” 226.

⁷⁶ Merton, “Letters,” 175 (emphasis in original).

presents a significant social crisis. Merton insists that white people are not peripheral to racial injustice but its source: "Have we forgotten that the Negro is there *because of us*? His crisis is the result of our acts, and is, in fact *our crisis*."⁷⁷ For Merton, truth-telling necessitated a profound reckoning with complicity in the pursuit of racial justice. He challenged his readers to recognize that. But he was keenly aware that this might be a tough challenge as white complicity operates mainly in a passive manner, since "we have all more or less acquiesced in and consented to a state of affairs in which the Negro is treated unjustly, and in which his unjust treatment is directly or indirectly to the advantage of people like ourselves, people with whom we agree and collaborate, people with whom we are in fact identified."⁷⁸ Therefore, only radical change can address the racial crisis, which is a change Black communities have long demanded, and one white society has repeatedly resisted. The question, for Merton, remains whether white people acknowledge their complicity and commit to such change as well.

For Merton, the role of the truth-teller was not merely to expose injustice but to awaken white consciences to the reality of sin, showing them that racism was not just a societal issue but a spiritual crisis. Without this recognition, there could be no true freedom, for both the oppressed and the oppressor remained trapped in a system of dehumanization. To overcome these social issues, society must listen to Black voices. They are not rejecting white society but, in the spirit of Christian charity, trying "to awaken [the white man's] mind and conscience, and stir him to initiate the reform and renewal which may still be capable of saving our society."⁷⁹ And Merton knew that this change had to begin with white people surrendering their privilege and thought of superiority and normativity, if one really desires a radical transformation of society.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Merton's journey demonstrates that truth-telling and racial justice are inseparable realities. His growing awareness of racial injustice arose from a sustained commitment to contemplative practice, relational encounter, and social responsibility. Merton understood that truth is not static or self-evident; it demands engagement with the world, attentiveness to those who suffer injustice, and the courage to confront systems that uphold falsehoods.

⁷⁷ Merton, "Letters," 172 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven," in *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (Crossroad, 1996), 298.

⁷⁹ Merton, "Letters," 175.

For him, truth-telling required both personal integrity and the dismantling of the illusions that uphold racial hierarchies.

Merton's reflections on race and justice reveal that truth is not reducible to facts. It is a lived reality, an ongoing process of conversion shaped by humility and encounter. Authentic truth-telling open to being unsettled and transformed by others, especially those whose experiences expose the limits of one's own perspective. In the context of racial injustice, this means resisting the impulse to speak for others and learning instead to listen to marginalized voices.

Merton's insights remain urgent in an era where misinformation, historical erasure, and political distortions cloud our understanding of justice. His writings remind us that truth-telling is not merely an intellectual task but a moral and spiritual vocation. It is a practice of resistance against systems built on deception and a form of solidarity with those who bear the burden of injustice. Merton's legacy calls Christians to participate in a communal practice of truth-telling, one that binds contemplation to responsibility and moves society toward justice, reconciliation, and genuine human communion. **M**

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