

Religion and Race in the United States by Thomas Merton

The idea of *kairos* – the time of urgent and providential decision – is something characteristic of Christianity, a religion of decisions in time and in history. Can Christians recognize their *kairos*? Is it possible that when the majority of Christians become aware that ‘the time has come’ for a decisive and urgent commitment, the time has, in fact, already run out?

There can be no question now that the time for a certain kind of crucial Christian decision in America has come and gone. In 1962, and finally in 1963, there were ‘moments of truth’ which have now passed, and the scene is becoming one of darkness, anarchy and moral collapse. These, of course, still call for a Christian response, a Christian decision. But it might seem that the responses and decisions of Christians will necessarily be less clear and more tragic because it is now apparent that there is little left for Christians as such to do to shape the events – or forestall the tragedies – that are to come. At best they can pray, and patiently suffer the consequences of past indecision, blindness, and evasion. They cannot lead and guide the nation through this crisis, but they can still help others, if they choose, to understand and accept the sufferings involved in order to make a creative and constructive use of the situation for the future. Are they really likely to do this? Who can say?

In the Negro Christian non-violent movement, under Martin Luther King, the *kairos*, the ‘providential time’, met with a courageous and enlightened response. The non-violent-Negro civil rights drive has been one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that has been seen anywhere in the twentieth century. It is certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States. It has come almost entirely from the Negroes, with a few white Christians and liberals in support. There can be no question that the Christian heroism manifested by the Negroes in the Birmingham demonstration, or the massive tranquillity and order of the March on Washington in August 1963, had a great deal to do with the passage of the Civil Rights bill. It must also be admitted, as Bayard Rustin, a Negro non-violent leader, has pointed out, that without the Christian intervention of white Protestants and Catholics all over America, the bill would not have been passed. The fact that there is now a Civil Rights Law guaranteeing, at least *de jure*, the freedom of all

citizens to enjoy the facilities of the country equally, is due to what one might call a Christian as well as a humanitarian and liberal conscience in the United States. However 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. They support the power-structure and therefore keep the Negro deluded and passive, preventing him from fighting for his rights.

The passage of the Civil Rights Bill has only brought the real problem to a head. The struggle for rights now enters a new and more difficult phase.

Hitherto the well-intentioned and the idealistic have assumed that if the needed legislation were passed, the two races would 'integrate' more or less naturally, not without a certain amount of difficulty, of course, but none the less effectively in the end. They have also assumed as axiomatic that if something is morally right and good, it will come to pass all by itself as soon as obstacles are removed. Everyone seemed to believe with simple faith that law and order, morality, the 'American way of life', and Christianity, are all very much the same thing. Now it is becoming quite clear that they are not so at all. Many Christians, who have confused 'Americanism' with 'Christianity' are in fact contributing to the painful contradictions and even injustices of the racial crisis. For the one thing that has been made most evident by the long and bitter struggle of the South, and now of the North, to prevent civil rights legislation from being passed or enforced or made effective, is that the legislators and the police themselves, along with some ministers and indeed all those whom one can call 'the establishment', seem to be the first to defy the law or set it aside when their own interests are threatened. In other words we are living in a society that is not exactly moral, which misuses Christian clichés to justify its lawlessness and immorality.

And so there are many who think that non-violence has not proved itself a complete and unqualified success. It is considered naive and over-simple. Certainly non-violence postulates a belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature. But this attitude of optimism can come to be confused with shallow confidence in the morality and intrinsic goodness of a society which is proving itself torn by vicious internal contradictions. This is not the true attitude of non-violent civil disobedience. But it is not made to seem so by those who have grown tired of being beaten by the police whenever they manifest discontent with life in the ghetto.

There is more and more talk of violent action on both sides, as it becomes increasingly clear that the Civil Rights Law has not really solved the racial problem and that in actual fact the ghetto existence of the Negro has only become better and more strictly defined by his inability

to take full advantage of the rights that have been granted him too late.

The Negro is integrated by law into a society in which there really is no place for him – not that a place could not be made for him, if the white majority were capable of wanting him as a brother and a fellow-citizen. But even those who have been theoretically in favour of civil rights are turning out to be concretely reluctant to have the Negro as next-door neighbour. This so-called ‘white backlash’ manifests a change from tolerant indifference to bitter hatred on the part of some Northern whites. It is virulent and passionate and one hears the word ‘nigger’ spat out with a venom which one had thought belonged to the past. And there are reasons, for violence and gratuitous attacks on white people by Negroes are common everywhere in the North. The Negro’s clear awareness that he is still despised and rejected, after years of bitter struggle and deception, has destroyed his confidence in legal and peaceful methods. Perhaps he is beginning to want something besides ‘rights’ that are purely Platonic – an opportunity to unburden himself of his bitterness by violent protest, that will disrupt a social ‘order’ that seems to him to have proved itself meaningless and fraudulent.

The problem is much more complex, much more tragic, than people have imagined. To begin with, it is something that extends beyond America. It affects the whole world. The race problem of America has been analysed (by such writers as William Faulkner, for example) as a problem of deep guilt for the sin of slavery. The guilt of white America toward the Negro is simply another version of the guilt of the European colonizer toward all the other races of the world, whether in Asia, Africa, America or Polynesia. The racial crisis in the United States has rightly been diagnosed as a ‘colonial crisis’ within the country itself rather than on a distant continent. But it is nevertheless closely related to the United States’ problems in South East Asia and in Latin America, particularly with Cuba.

When a nation is torn by contradictions, the problem can be apparently ‘simplified’ and ‘clarified’ if unpleasant choices are excluded and if one falls back on primitive positions – on crude and satisfying myths – for instance the myth that ‘it was all started by the commies’. If the Whites insist on attributing to Communism the responsibility for every protest which releases the frustrated energies of the Negro, the Negroes in the end will begin to respect and trust Communism. Up to the present they have been supremely indifferent towards it.

In one of the big riots of 1964, the one in Harlem in mid-July, when the streets were filled with people in confusion, running from the police; when bricks and bottles were pelting down from the roof-tops and the police were firing into the air (not without killing one man and wounding many others), the police captain tried to disperse the rioters by shouting

through a megaphone: 'Go home! Go home!'

A voice from the crowd answered: 'We *are* home, baby!'

The irony of this statement, and its humour, sum up the American problem. There is no 'where' for the Negro to go. He is where he is. White America has put him where he is. The tendency has been to act as if he were not there, or as if he might possibly go somewhere else, and to beat him over the head if he makes his collective presence too manifest. The American Negro himself has tried to return to Africa, but the plan was farcical. The Black Nationalists are even now agitating for a part of the country to be turned over to the Negroes – so they can live by themselves. One of the purposes of the violence which those Negro racists actively foment, is to make white society willing and happy to get rid of them. The fact remains that the Negro is now in the home the white man has given him: the three square miles of broken-down tenements which form the ghetto of Harlem, the biggest Negro city in the world, type of all the Negro ghettos in America, full of crime, misery, squalour, dope addiction, prostitution, gang warfare, hatred and despair. And yet if Harlem is a problem, it will not become less of a problem if we consider only the negative side. For those who think only of the prostitutes and criminals, Harlem becomes part of the general obsessive national myth of the 'bad Negro'. The majority of the people in Harlem are good, peaceable, gentle, long-suffering men and women, socially insecure but more sinned against than sinning.

What is to be wondered at is not the occasional mass demonstrations and rioting, not the juvenile delinquency and not the more and more deliberate excursions of small violent groups into other areas of the city to beat up white people and rob them. What is to be wondered at is the persistence of courage, irony, humour, patience, hope in Harlem!

In a spiritual crisis of the individual, the truth and authenticity of the person's spiritual identity are called into question. He is placed in confrontation with reality and judged by his ability to bring himself into a valid and living relationship with the demands of his new situation. In the spiritual, social, historic crises of civilizations – and of religious institutions – the same principle applies. Growth, survival and even salvation may depend on the ability to sacrifice what is fictitious and unauthentic in the construction of one's moral, religious or national identity. One must then enter upon a different creative task of reconstruction and renewal. This task can be carried out only in the climate of faith, of hope, and of love: these three must be present in some form, even if they amount only to a natural belief in the validity and significance of human choice, a decision to invest human life with some shadow of meaning, a willingness to treat other men as other selves.

Gandhi long ago pointed out that western democracy was on trial.

There is no need for me here to show in how many ways the American concepts of democracy and Christianity are here being weighed in the balance.

The problem of American Christianity is the same as the problem of Christianity everywhere else: Christianity is suffering a crisis of identity and authenticity, and is being judged by the ability of Christians themselves to abandon unauthentic, anachronistic images and securities, in order to find a new place in the world by a new evaluation of the world and a new commitment in it.

In the American crisis the Christian faces a typical choice. The choice is not interior and secret, but public, political and social. He is perhaps not used to regarding his crucial choices in the light of politics. He can now either find security and order by falling back on antique and basically feudal (or perhaps fascist) conceptions, or go forward into the unknown future, identifying himself with the forces that will inevitably create a new society. The choice is 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.

Those who are anxious to discover whether Christianity has had any positive effect on the civil rights struggle seldom ask an equally important question: has the struggle had an effect on Christianity? It has certainly had an effect on the Catholic Church. The case of Father William Du Bay, a young assistant in a Los Angeles Negro parish, is a direct outcome of the racial crisis. His protest was an admitted attempt not only to defend the rights of his Negro parishioners, but also to assert his own right to break through the absolutely iron-bound restrictions of clerical submission to canonical authority, not as an act of wilful disobedience but as a protest that the priest owes a *higher* obedience – to the demands of charity and justice – which cannot be shrugged off by simply leaving all responsibility to rest upon superiors. Whatever may have been the rights and wrongs of the case, which was a rude shock to Catholic authority, Father Du Bay was clearly trying to say that he did not believe that the inaction of his bishop entitled him to be passive himself, and that there is such a thing as public opinion in the Church. Not all Catholics have agreed, but all have taken note of this assertion!

The mystique of American Christian rightism, a mystique of violence, of apocalyptic threats, of hatred, and of judgement is perhaps only a more exaggerated and more irrational manifestation of a rather universal attitude common to Christians in many countries. The conviction that the great evil in the world today can be identified with Communism, and that to be a Christian is simply to be an anti-Communist. Communism is the antichrist. Communism is the source of all other problems, all conflicts.

All the evils in the world can be traced to the machinations of Communists. The apocalyptic fear of Communism, which plays so great a part in the Christianity of some Americans – and some Europeans – resolves itself into a fear of revolution and indeed a fear of any form of social change that would disturb the *status quo*.

This mentality which we have summarized as 'Christian violence' becomes more and more irrational in proportion as it implies both an absolute conviction of one's own rightness and a capacity to approve the use of any means, however violent, however extreme, in order to defend what one feels, subjectively, to be right. This is an axiom. This totalism admits no distinctions, no shades of meaning. 'Our side' is totally right, everyone else is diabolically wicked.

Naturally, this synthetic and sweeping 'rightness' is compounded of many unconscious doubts and repressed fears. Nor are all the fears repressed. But they take a more or less symbolic form. There is no question that the white racists of the South willingly admit a certain fear of the Negro. The fear is part of their mystique and indeed accounts for a great deal of its emotional power. It is the quasi-mystical obsession with the black demon waiting in the bushes to rape the virginal white daughters of the old South.

The literal truth outdoes all caricature, and it gives us a clue to the mentality and mystique of the 'Christian violence' which is coming into being here and there all over the United States, not only among fanatical sects and not only in the South. The intensity of emotion, the sacred and obsessional fear, rising from subliminal levels and reaching consciousness in a panic conviction of spiritual danger, judges all that seems menacing and calls it diabolical. But everything seems menacing and therefore the most innocent of oppositions, the slightest dissenting opinions, calls for the most extreme, the most violent and the most ruthless repressions. At the present time, the Southern pseudo-mystique of sexual and racist obsessions (and of course there have been rapes, and seductions, of whites by Negroes, as well as infinitely more rapes and seductions of Negroes by whites) now joins with the deeper and more universal fear of revolution. This combination results in a peculiarly potent climate of aggressive intolerance, suspiciousness, hatred and fear. When we consider that this self-righteous, pseudo-religious faith has its finger terribly close to the button that launches inter-continental ballistic missiles, it gives us food for thought.

The American Negro is well aware of all these obsessions in his regard. He realizes better than the benevolent white liberal to what extent these subliminal fears exist in *all* white Americans. The tensions created by this dangerous situation are going to increase as the Negro, consciously or otherwise, renounces his hopeful and friendly expectations and begins

to test his capacity to shake the foundations of white society by threats of violence.

Well then : what of the *kairos*? Shall we say that it has passed and left the Christian Churches only half awake? It depends upon the sense the Christian gives to his *kairos*. It is certainly possible for us to recognize that we have missed a chance for significant social action and edify the world with those subtle and contrite self-examinations which we often substitute for purposeful activity. Or we can do worse, and involve ourselves in the righteous and apocalyptic fury of those whose 'Christianity' has emptied itself of serious meaning in order to become a fanatical negation, a refusal of reality, and a ritual hunting of communist witches.

For those whose Christianity is still a religion of truth and love, not of hate and fear, I think the first thing to do is to admit that our *kairos* is perhaps not always likely to be what we expect. Are we, for example, justified in assuming so complacently that *kairos*, in race crisis, means an opportunity for us as Christians to step in and settle everything with a few wise answers and the adoption of the right attitudes? Are we not called upon to re-valuate our own notions and see that 'right attitudes' are not enough and that it is not sufficient merely to have good will, or even to go to jail gloriously for an honest cause? We need a little more depth and a keener sense of the tragedy (or perhaps the comedy) of our situation : we are living in a world which is in many ways 'post-Christian' and acting as if we were still running things, still in a position to solve all the world's problems and tell everybody what to do next. It might help if we realized that in fact most people have lost interest in our official pronouncements, and while the fanatical type of Christian still thrives on the belief that he is hated, the rest of us are beginning to realize that the wicked world can no longer take the trouble to do even that. It is simply not interested.

This, as a matter of fact, is no disaster. It is really a liberation. We no longer have to take ourselves so abominably seriously as 'Christians' with a public and capital 'C'. We can give a little more thought to the *reality* of our vocation and bother less with the image which we show to the world.

If there is a *kairos*, and there still is, it is not a 'time' in which once again we will convince the world that we are right, but perhaps rather a time in which the crisis of man will teach us to see a few sobering truths about our own calling and our place in the world – a place no longer exalted and mighty, or perhaps even influential.

In fact we are learning that we are as other men are, that we are not a special kind of privileged being, that our faith does not exempt us from facing the mysterious realities of the world with the same limitations as everybody else, and with the same capacity for human failure. Our Chris-

tian calling does not make us superior to other men, does not entitle us to judge everyone and decide everything for everybody. We do *not* have answers to every social problem, and all conflicts have *not* been decided beforehand in favour of our side. Our job is to struggle along with everybody else and collaborate with them in the difficult, frustrating task of seeking a solution to common problems, which are entirely new and strange to us all.

The American racial crisis offers the American Christian a chance to face reality about himself and recover his fidelity to Christian truth, not merely in institutional loyalties and doctrinal orthodoxies (in which no one has taken the trouble to accuse him of failing) but in recanting a more basic heresy: the loss of that Christian sense which sees every other man as Christ and treats him as Christ. For, as St John said: 'We know what love is by this: that he laid down his life for us so that we ought to lay down our lives for the brotherhood. But whoever possesses this world's goods and notices his brother in need and shuts his heart against him, how can the love of God remain in him? Dear children, let us put our love not into words or into talk but into deeds, and make it real.' (I John 3: 16–18).

We do indeed have a message for the world, and the Word of God is still as alive and penetrating today 'as any two-edged sword'. But we have perhaps taken the edge off the sword of our short-sightedness and our complacency. The Christian failure in American racial justice has been all too real, but it is not the fault of the few dedicated and non-violent followers of Christ. It is due much more to the fact that so few Christians have been able to face the fact that non-violence comes very close to the heart of the Gospel ethic, and is perhaps essential to it.
