

# **RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP: LESSON FROM THOMAS MERTON**

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**T**homas Merton was an excellent writer who lived as a trappist monk in the Abbey of Gethsemani located in New Haven-Kentucky. Merton wrote many books, articles, and letters about spirituality and social justice. Though he lived in the Abbey, his concern about the social life in community is powerful. In facing the Vietnam War, Merton proposed the nonviolent way as the practice Christians should use to withstand violence. This paper will explore Merton's concept of the nonviolent way as one of the important criterias of responsible leadership in a religious community (read: Christian community) and contrast it to the modern context of the war on terror by the United States (US) and its effect on other nations (Indonesia in particular). My thesis is that Merton's idea of the nonviolent way can be applied by Christians in standing against violence by religious extremists in Indonesia. Merton provided a great example of responsible leadership that religious community in Indonesia can learn in order to create a peaceful life together.

Keywords: Responsible Leadership, Thomas Merton, Nonviolent, Religion

## **INTRODUCTION**

Thomas Merton was an excellent writer who lived as a trappist monk in the Abbey of Gethsemani located in New Haven-Kentucky. Merton wrote many books, articles, and letters about spirituality and social justice. Though he lived in the Abbey, his concern about the social life in community is powerful. In facing the Vietnam War, Merton proposed the nonviolent way as the practice Christians should use to withstand violence. This paper will explore Merton's concept of the nonviolent way as one of the important criterias of responsible leadership in a religious community (read: Christian community) and contrast it to the modern context of the war on terror by the United States (US) and its effect on other nations (Indonesia in particular). My thesis is that Merton's idea of the nonviolent way can be applied by Christians in standing against violence by religious extremists in Indonesia. Merton

provided a great example of responsible leadership that religious community in Indonesia can learn in order to create a peaceful life together.

### **The War on Terror**

The international military campaign led by the United States and the United Kingdom with the support of other NATO as well as non-NATO countries is commonly known as the War on Terror (also known as the Global War on Terror or the War on Terrorism). The campaign was originally waged against al-Qaeda and other militant organizations with the purpose of eliminating them.<sup>1</sup> “In May 1996 the group World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders (WIFJAJC), sponsored by Osama bin Laden and later reformed as al-Qaeda, started forming a large base of operations in Afghanistan, where the Islamist extremist regime of the Taliban had seized power that same year.”<sup>2</sup> US President Bill Clinton launched Operation Infinite Reach following the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, a bombing campaign in Sudan and Afghanistan against targets the US asserted were associated with WIFJAJC.<sup>3</sup>

The war on terror did not only impact the life of the al-Qaeda group. One of the nations that was effected by this is Indonesia, a nation that has a larger Muslim population than any other country in the world. The US military actions in Afghanistan fueled social solidarity actions from Muslims in Indonesia. Here religion promotes a very strong social solidarity not only at the level of individuals but among groups. The existence of the internet and other mobile sources makes it easier to access information about the suffering of Afghan people which in its turn changed social solidarity from Muslims in Indonesia into anger and the intention of revenge. In 2002, a militant Islamist group that called themselves al-Qaeda followers sent the deadliest bombing that killed hundreds of people (the majority were international tourists) in Bali, Indonesia.

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<sup>1</sup> ETA, *Presidential Address to the Nation*, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/print/20011007-8.html> (accessed December 9, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Megan K. Stack, *Fighters Hunt Former Ally*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/dec/06/news/mn-12224> (accessed December 9, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> CNN, *US strikes terrorist targets in Afghanistan, Sudan*, <http://edition.cnn.com/US/9808/20/clinton.02/index.html?eref=sitesearch> (accessed December 9, 2012).

Violent actions such as this continue to take place in Indonesia by militant Islamist groups who often launch bombings where Christian people become victims as the way of ‘paying back’ for what the US military is doing in Afghanistan. Any new news/videos about the US military action towards al-Qaeda that circulate on the internet might trigger a new suicide bombing inside the church by the militant Islamic group. If one Muslim died in Afghanistan, one Christian must pay the bill in Indonesia. This anarchy continues to happen today where militant Islamic groups associate themselves as the Islam Defense Army (*Front Pembela Islam/FPI*) and believe that any US foreign policy in a Muslim country is also being addressed to them. These actions of militant Islamic groups are based on spiritual blindness. Although there is no direct connection between Christians who live in Indonesia and the US, FPI attribute many of the US military actions that destroy lives in Afghanistan on Christian people who live in Indonesia. The spiritual blindness derived by fear, with the emotional and often irrational reactions that accompany it, has become a part of the militant Islamic group mind set. The war on terror has successfully created Islamophobia in the US and Christian phobia in Indonesia.

### **Responsible Leadership: Lesson from Thomas Merton**

Thomas Merton in the *New Seeds of Contemplation* stated that the root of war is fear.<sup>4</sup> The United States has been involved in many wars, in one way or another. Jimmy Carter stated that:

US gave at least tacit approval to Israel’s disastrous invasion of Lebanon in 1982, then sent in US Marines and bombed and strafed the villages around Beirut. US invaded and defeated Grenada. US invaded and destroyed a good portion of Panama. And on a more massive scale, US orchestrated the Persian Gulf War. In none of these cases did US first exhaust the opportunities for peaceful resolution of the dispute.<sup>5</sup>

Learning from these experiences, Americans need to have a deeper and consistent commitment to nonviolence. A powerful America could have a tremendously beneficial influence on the troubled regions of the world and could help both to resolve and to prevent needless wars. Merton explained the motives behind the militant actions like what the FPI in

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston & London: Shambala, 2003), 114.

<sup>5</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Essays on Leadership* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1998), 25.

Indonesia did by stating “when we see crime in others, we try to correct it by destroying them or at least putting them out of sight.”<sup>6</sup> It is the efforts to ‘correct’ the others that produce more violence.

Though Merton believed that fear was the source of conflict, fear is not always a bad thing. We sense fear around danger or a threatening situation. Fear is one of humanity’s basic survival mechanisms. To have fear is to be human. Fear dehumanizes us when it creates pride in our self as the only one who is right. When we think of our self as the only source of righteousness, then we will leave no room for the other to be right as we are. The need to be right according to Merton is the reason behind fear. Therefore, in building relations with the others it is key to remember that “we are all more or less wrong, and that we are all at fault, all limited and obstructed by our mixed motives, our self-deception, our greed, our self-righteousness, and our tendency to aggressivity and hypocrisy.”<sup>7</sup> Not one of us is perfect and we need to learn to trust the others who are not perfect just like us.

One form of fear that emerged because of the war on terror in America is Islam-phobia. One example of this was the very strict restrictions placed upon Muslims to travel to the US. The “fear of ideas” that has taken root in the US since September 11, 2001, creates refusal to grant visas to academics and intellectuals, many of whom are Muslims.<sup>8</sup> A sadly typical article by William Wagner, a Southern Baptist pastor and missionary, presented Islam as the threat to the West.<sup>9</sup> Another form of fear that arose because of the war on terror in Indonesia is Christian phobia. Christian phobia has caused many new restrictions for Indonesian Christians. For example, a new Indonesian government rule stated that a Christian church cannot be built if there are no approval signatures from Muslim citizens who live around the place where the church is going to be built.

Merton questioned the value behind one’s action when he asked “what is the use of postmarking our mail with exhortations to ‘pray for peace’ and then spending billions of dollars on atomic submarines,

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 2006), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Merton, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Tariq Ramadam, *What the West Can Learn from Islam*, <http://chronicle.com/article/What-the-West-Can-Learn-From/1752> (accessed December 9, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> William Wagner, *Muslim–Christian Encounters*, <http://www.4truth.net/fourtruthpbworld.aspx?pageid=8589953045> (accessed December 9, 2012).

thermonuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles?”<sup>10</sup> It is important to challenge the motives behind actions because that is where we can see a person’s true self emerge. It is time to question the values behind the war on terror because it is now clear that the war on terror itself, although started with the idea of fighting the terrorist, is creating a new type of terror itself. “President George W. Bush referred to it as a war on terror, but it is radically different from a conventional war since the enemy is not a state but a fanatical movement or non state actor that carries out destruction against civilians in a covert manner. After administration officials defined the war on terror as a campaign against terrorists and those who harbor them, the US armed forces embarked on a war against Afghanistan.”<sup>11</sup> The war on terror happened because Taliban refused to give up al-Qaeda who were responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attack. “In view of the enormous danger posed by contemporary terrorism, was the US military action against Afghanistan justified? Is war against states harboring terrorist organizations morally legitimate, even if they are not directly responsible for terror?”<sup>12</sup> The motive of the US in executing the war on terror was ambiguous. To this ambiguity of motives, Merton by using Gandhi, a religious-political nonviolence figure, explained about the inner intention and the meaning of one’s sincerity. “It was not enough to say ‘love’ and intend love thereafter proving the sincerity of one’s own intentions by demonstrating the insincerity of one’s adversary ... For Gandhi, a whole lifetime of sacrifice was barely enough to demonstrate the sincerity.”<sup>13</sup> Questioning the values behind one’s actions or one’s nation’s actions, will provide one step closer to alternatives that can be taken.

Thomas Merton in “Blessed are the Meek,” an article in *Passion for Peace*, states that “Nonviolence is perhaps the most exciting of all forms of struggle, not only because it demands first of all that one be ready to suffer evil and even face the threat of death without violent retaliation, but because it excludes mere transient self interest from its consideration.”<sup>14</sup> Indonesia was pushed by the changing political situation in Afghanistan to do something as a part of their solidarity to the people in Afghanistan. Sadly the ways religious extremist reacted in

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<sup>10</sup> Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Mark R. Amstutz, *International Ethics: Concepts, Theories, and Cases in Global Politics* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005). 4.

<sup>12</sup> Amstutz, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Merton, 88.

Indonesia mostly included violence that is directed to Christians who live there. Christians in Indonesia struggle to find the right model of resistance against FPI to rewarded violence with violence. This condition itself is sad because Islam is not a violent religion. Islam teaches love and peace to its followers. By practicing violence, the FPI is not being true to Islamic teaching. In fact, there is no religion that teach violence. Merton wrote about *satyagraha*, from the Buddhist teaching, a concept about declining to claim nonviolence when one actually meant violence.<sup>15</sup> To be in unity within our self, to really mean what we say is the key to life that open to others. One of the reasons for the violent actions toward minor religious community in Indonesia is the inadequacy of openness and this unablenss was based on anger and disappointment that US military actions in Afghanistan did not represent the early intention to bring peace in Afghanistan. This type of disappointment led to refusal of seeing the reality more clearly which creates spiritual blindness. The other reason is the fact that the root of militant Islamist groups in Indonesia is not yet wiped out by Indonesian government. This militant Islamist group existed before the war on terrorism and they fight for Indonesia to be a Muslim nation. Therefore, the war on terrorism in Afghanistan can also be seen as an additional excuse for militant Islamist groups to do more violence in order to achieve *Syariah* Islam (Islam law) in Indonesia. Indonesia itself is a democratic nation that acknowledges six large religions: Islam, Catholic, Christian, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The existence of militant Islamist group proved Indonesia as a nation that unable to be its democratic self.

The nonviolent way is what a responsible leader need to learn in order to terminate the chain of violence. According to the result of globethics.net international conference that was held in Bangkok, 2005, “A responsible religious leadership should take into account the particular contexts such as minority/majority situations of religions and currents within religions, the relation between religions and the State, the history of religions, the democratization process of religious communities, the demographic reality (variety of membership, manipulation of statistics for political or other reasons), the relationship between ideology and theology in a pluralistic context, and the gender sensitivity.”<sup>16</sup> The nonviolent way is possible and realistic because there is an urgency that all people and nations work on the issue of national

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<sup>15</sup> Merton, 82.

<sup>16</sup> GLOBETHICS.NET ELEMENTS FOR RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP. *A result of the Globethics.net International Conference. Bangkok, Thailand, 22-26 September 2005 (accessed April 9, 2014).*

and international security together, or all will suffer the violent consequences. Religion can be used to promote social solidarity not only at the level of individual religions but among religions. Religion also provides an appeal to the heart, human empathy, and higher values that inspire individuals and societies to transcend narrow self interest. The desire for peace is equivalent to a desire for dialogue, and the desire for dialogue arises when we think that we can learn something from others.

Keating and Charles J in their article “Christian Leadership” that was published by Globethics.net stated that, “Christian leadership is different from secular leadership in that it is expected to have a faith vision, a specific mission of influencing the activities of an individual or group in efforts toward accomplishing goals that contribute to the coming of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>17</sup> A responsible Christian leader is obligated to carefully examine the potential conflict between religious groups in Indonesia and provide the model of nonviolent encounter that is rooted in the teaching of Christ. In developing the model of Christian responsible leadership, Christian leaders must “improve both spiritually and humanly simultaneously. His or her faith must deepen at the same time as leadership skills are bettered.”<sup>18</sup>

### **To be in Unity with the Others**

Merton reminds us that it is only with the nonviolent way that we can reach openness, communication and dialogue.<sup>19</sup> As a Christian majority nation that marks themselves as in covenant with God, the new Israel, it is time for US leaders to be more aware about their actions and foreign policy. At least they can start by asking the question: “If we do this one action, what will happen to ‘the others’ there?” All too often, conflicts and wars arise when we fail to consider the views of others or to

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<sup>17</sup> Keating & Charles J, [http://www.globethics.net/library/overall-search?p\\_auth=iGjjH6cn&p\\_p\\_id=read\\_panel\\_portlet\\_WAR\\_digitallibraryspring25portlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=1&p\\_p\\_state=maximized&p\\_p\\_mode=view&p\\_p\\_col\\_id=column-3&p\\_p\\_col\\_count=1](http://www.globethics.net/library/overall-search?p_auth=iGjjH6cn&p_p_id=read_panel_portlet_WAR_digitallibraryspring25portlet&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_count=1), Globethics. Christian leadership (human and spiritual components to religious **leadership**) (*accessed April 9, 2015*).

<sup>18</sup> Keating & Charles J, [http://www.globethics.net/library/overall-search?p\\_auth=iGjjH6cn&p\\_p\\_id=read\\_panel\\_portlet\\_WAR\\_digitallibraryspring25portlet&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=1&p\\_p\\_state=maximized&p\\_p\\_mode=view&p\\_p\\_col\\_id=column-3&p\\_p\\_col\\_count=1](http://www.globethics.net/library/overall-search?p_auth=iGjjH6cn&p_p_id=read_panel_portlet_WAR_digitallibraryspring25portlet&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_count=1), Globethics. Christian leadership (human and spiritual components to religious **leadership**) (*accessed April 9, 2015*).

<sup>19</sup> Merton, 95.

communicate with them about differences between us. Among the major commissions that Jesus Christ, the founder of the church gave His disciples, is to promote peace. Given that the root cause of violence is social injustice (whether real or imagined), the church has to proactively work toward social justice. The church's leaders play an important role in promoting social justice now and in the past is commendable. The church's leaders should therefore put emphasis on the understanding that peace is not the absence of war but rather, enhanced social justice. With such emphasis the church should make its priority to seek social justice for all humans and communities in pursuit of peace as a commissioned by Jesus.

In this case, the church's leaders will have no moral authority to lead the world into a violence free globe if it is lacking in social justice and peace within itself. This calls for unity not just within the church but also between religions and beyond. Christ came not just for Christians but for all humanity. It also calls for proactive engagement in promoting social justice in all spheres of life for the medical truth that 'prevention is better than cure' applies also in this content; preventing violence is better than controlling it.

The PC USA, in the document "Iraq: Our Responsibility and the future", approved in the 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly 2004 said that:

Among other things, the resolution reaffirms our solidarity with Iraqi Christians and their churches, calls for pastoral support for U.S. military personnel and their families and recognizes the constructive role of many military officers and soldiers serving in Iraq. It also encourages continued prayer for peace and stability in Iraq, condemns in the strongest possible terms torture and abuse of prisoners, and calls for a mission plan to respond to the needs and concerns of our brothers and sisters in Iraq. Acknowledging the moral cloud surrounding the military invasion of Iraq, the resolution affirms the United States bears a legal and moral burden for the reconstruction of Iraq, working with the international community.<sup>20</sup>

The church as the custodian of human rights is called upon to demonstrate that the Christians are committed to peace and reconciliation, by nurturing the spirit of ecumenism, interreligious dialogue and tolerance in its response to acts of terror.

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<sup>20</sup> PC USA, *Iraq: Our Responsibility and the Future*, <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/iraq-responsibility.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2012).



In order to be a responsible leader, Christians must learn to refine the concept of responsibility. Christians can focus on increasing the consciousness on the meaning of responsibility. Christianity entrusts its foundation not only to the rational effort, but it seeks to transcend the human rationality by proposing what Hans Kung calls the unconditional norms. The golden rule, for instance ‘Do no harm to other as you expect the other do as much to you!’ represents a recognized universal norm. Merton wrote that “the Christian, in his humility and faith, must be as totally available to his brother, to his world, in the present, as the child is ... the humility of Christian nonviolence is at once patient and uncalculating.”<sup>21</sup> It is the meekness and humbleness of Christians that will bring acceptance and openness of the others. Christians can achieve humility by treating the others as they want to be treated. But it still requires a condition which calls for a reciprocity. The reference for Christians is not primarily laws, but the personality of Jesus enables us to go beyond the demanded rationality of action. Jesus sacrificed himself through his passion and death for the salvation of human beings. This gives a legitimate value of self-sacrifice in favor of others so that a Christian moral norm is no more primarily based on reciprocity, but constitutes an unconditional norm.

As for the nonviolent way in Indonesia, it is time to think about models of encounter that can be used for Christians and Muslims in order to address the violence caused by militant Islamist groups and to improve relations between Christianity-Islam in the world in general. The others are not the enemy but partner in dialogue of life. In 2010, President of the US Barack Obama came to Indonesia and his short visit proved the intention of US as a peaceful nation that is willing to have dialogue with any nation in the world, especially in a Muslim majority country. In his visit President Obama spoke about the importance of Indonesia for him personally as one of the countries where he spent his childhood and for global peace as the largest Muslim population nation in the world. This speech has succeed in generating respect for the US that represented by Barack Obama and also gave the opportunity to militant Islamist group to finally ask themselves about their ideology of the Western world, especially the idea of US as the ‘evil nation.’ Obama as the leader of the most powerful nation in the world also was the only president who asked to eat a very common Indonesian food (usually eaten by poor people, the Indonesian meatball, *Satay* and fried rice) in his visit. This expressed the readiness of the US to be open and to be a partner of dialogue that understands the situation of poverty in Indonesia. This approach

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<sup>21</sup> Merton, 105.

indirectly pushed the troubled relationship between a Muslim nation and the US to be fixed.

Values that Obama represented in his visit are common Indonesian values such as openness, caring and respect. Being open is important in helping us to not being judgmental to others. Being open promotes talking, which reduces threatening feelings. Being caring is crucial because compassion is an essential element of good government. Courtesy and kindness, both to those we serve and to those we work with, help to ensure individuals are not treated solely as a means to an end. Caring for others is the counterbalance against the temptation to pursue the mission at any cost. Being respectful is vital because anybody and any nation wants to be treated with dignity. Respect promotes honoring others' privacy and allowing self-determination. Lack of respect leads to a breakdown of loyalty and honesty within a government and brings chaos to the international community. These values represent 'unconditional love' that Jesus taught in the Bible. These values can be used by Christians, religious people and anybody to renew the disunity between us in this world. It is values like this that can be used to erase spiritual blindness. Another action that needs to happen in Indonesia is to embrace groups of non-militant Islamist groups to work together towards change.

Raimon Panikkar, on the final page of his book *Cultural Disarmament*, wrote: "the desire for peace is equivalent to a desire for dialogue, and the desire for dialogue arises when we think that we can learn something from others, along with converting them to our point of view where possible. Fanaticism and absolutisms prevent persons from travelling together, because they make us believe ourselves self-sufficient or in full possession of the truth."<sup>22</sup> Human life is healthy only in relationship with others. It is not too late to straighten the relationship between religious people who are in conflict in the name of their religion Yahya Wijaya in his article "Theological Leadership in Christian Muslim Encounters: An Indonesian Perspective" stated that "In an age badly affected by terrorism and the rise of religious fundamentalism, genuine dialogue and relationships between communities of different religions, based on a thoughtful theological reinterpretation and fair political consensus, would be an alternative to prejudice and self-centered mission practices."<sup>23</sup> In that it becomes clear that there is no violence act that can

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<sup>22</sup> Raimon Panikkar. *Cultural Disarmament: The Way to Peace* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 103.

<sup>23</sup> WIJAYA, Yahya, Theological Leadership in Christian-Muslim Encounters. An Indonesian Perspective, in: Ch. Stückelberger and J. N.K.

be done in the name of religion; a violent act cannot be based on religious values.

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