

Letters to a White Liberal Summary / Outline

Introduction:

When Merton wrote “Letters to a White Liberal” in the early summer of 1963, in response to the signs of the times and Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” of April 16, 1963, he articulated the enduring spirituality of a contemplative in action. “Letters to a White Liberal” forms the basis for Seeds of Destruction, Merton’s book published in 1964.

By “white liberal,” Merton does not mean partisan progressives. Rather, he means any white person, especially Christians, who claim good intentions toward all people, including African Americans.

In Seeds of Destruction Merton writes: Contemplatives, lay and monastic, are called to witness God’s mercy, truth, and justice in the midst of earthly conflict. If he is to live a vow of poverty, Merton reflects, “(it) seems illusory if I do not in some way identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery. To have a vow of obedience seems to be absurd if it does not imply a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions of God’s will: the love of His truth and of our neighbor.”

From:

http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/sites/loyno.edu.jsri/files/Thomas_Mertons_Letters_to_a_White_Liberal_JSQ_Winter2012.pdf

Background on MLK’s Letters from a Birmingham Jail:

On April 12, 1963, on the ninth day of the Birmingham Campaign, Martin Luther King Jr. was violently arrested and put in the Birmingham Jail. The police made sure that he is not going to have a nice time there: he was put in a dark cell, in which there was no mattress, and was denied his lawfully guaranteed phone call. A friend of his managed to smuggle in his cell a newspaper of the day. In it, King happened upon an open letter titled “A Call for Unity” in which eight white Alabama clergymen condemned the protests “directed and led in part by outsiders” which supposedly made a mockery of the American justice system by taking justice to the streets. If they had been a little more honest, the signatories of the letter would have probably written MLK instead of “outsiders,” since that’s who they were referring to. It was time for the outsider to write something. So, inside the prison, he started writing a response – first on the margins of the newspaper, then on scraps of smuggled writing paper, and finally on a pad once he was allowed one.

A copy of Letters from a Birmingham Jail can be found at:

<https://www.christiancentury.org/sites/default/files/downloads/resources/mlk-letter.pdf>

Letters to a White Liberal:

The Introductory Note:

The developments that have taken place during 1964 have, if anything, substantiated everything these "Letters" have attempted to say. The Civil Rights bill has been passed, after the longest debate in the history of Congress, after the longest filibuster, after the most sustained and energetic efforts to prevent its becoming law. The new legislation is, in the main, worthy of praise. But as the "Letters" point out, it is one thing to have a law on the books, and another to get the law enforced when in practice not only the citizenry and the "Citizens' Councils" but the police, the state governments and the courts themselves are often in league against the Federal government. To what extent the law will remain a dead letter in the South, to what extent it will simply aggravate pressures and animosities in the North, where such rights are still guaranteed in theory more than in practice, is not quite possible to predict. One thing is certain: since this law will not be entirely enforced, and since, even if it were perfectly enforced it would still not be able to meet critical problems that are more strictly economic and sociological (jobs, housing, delinquency, irresponsible violence), we are forced to admit that the Civil Rights legislation is not the end of the battle but only the beginning of a new and more critical phase in the conflict. How comforting, how utopian a thought, if we would only convince ourselves that this new law marks the final victory in a patient and courageous struggle of moderate leaders, dedicated to non-violence and to scrupulous respect for social order and ethical principles! It is true of course that Birmingham and the Washington March in 1963 were symbolic of a long non-violent fight for rights. They marked the final stages of the campaign that made the Civil Rights bill an urgent necessity. At the same time the systemic lawlessness and violence with which the opponents of Civil Rights legislation have set their own "rights" above those guaranteed by the law, have effectively undermined the respect which the Negroes themselves may have had for the legal and administrative agencies that are supposed to keep order and protect rights. Thus the struggle for the bill has also demonstrated that, in order to exercise the rights which the law protects, the Negro (and anyone else whose rights are in fact denied) is going to have to obtain some form of power. Of course, the law specifically removes obstacles to the registration and voting of Negroes... Obviously, however, it is going to be a long time before Negroes can make full use of this particular form of power. And the use of Molotov cocktails and bullets against them when they attempt to vote, unfortunately encourages them to prefer bullets to ballots themselves. So it happens that now, after the passage of the bill, a new, tougher Negro leadership promises to emerge, no longer moderate and non-violent, and much more disposed to make sinister and effective use of the threat of force implied by the great concentration of frustrated, angry and workless Negroes in the ghettos of the North. We can now expect violent, though perhaps disorganized and sporadic, initiatives in force around the edges of the Negro slums... When the Civil Rights bill passed a Southern Senator tragically declared that this would "only add to the hatred." He was right... But he was not necessarily right in attributing this to the law as such. He simply knew that the law had not ended the struggle. He knew well enough that the law had left the white South more deeply and grimly entrenched in its refusals. That the Negro, North and South, was more determined to take matters into his own hands, since he was convinced that even the liberal white man was not prepared to give him anything beyond fair promises and a certain abstract good will.

It has been said often enough, but not too often, that the President (Kennedy) had already been killed a thousand times over by the thoughts and the words, spoken or printed, of the racists. His death was something that had been meditated, imagined, desired and "needed" in a profound and savage way that made it in some sense inevitable. This was something that John F. Kennedy himself evidently did not understand, or he would have gone into Dallas that day with less confidence and better protection. It is something that the majority of Americans still do not quite manage to believe. But it must be affirmed: where minds are full of hatred and where

imagination dwell on cruelty, torment, punishment, revenge and death, then inevitable there will be violence and death.

Why, in this particular crisis... is there so much hatred and so dreadful a need for explosive violence? Because of the impotency and the frustration of a society that sees itself involved in difficulties which, though this may not consciously be admitted, promise to be insuperable... as long as white society persists in clinging to its present condition and to its own image of itself as the only acceptable reality, then the problem will remain without reasonable solution, and there will inevitably be violence. The problem is this: if the Negro, as he actually is (not the "ideal" and theoretical Negro...), enters wholly into white society then that society is going to be radically changed. This of course is what the White South very well knows, and it is what the white Liberal has failed to understand... there will be enormous difficulties and sacrifices demanded of everyone, especially the whites... These are the things which the South is able to see. But their reality does not justify the conservative conclusion which clings blindly to the present impossible state of things, and determines to preserve it at any cost, even that of a new civil war. We must dare to pay the dolorous price of change, to grow into a new society. Nothing else will suffice.

The only way out of this fantastic impasse is for everyone to face and accept the difficulties and sacrifices involved... This is what our society based on a philosophy of every man for himself and on the rejection of altruism and sacrifice... is not able to do. Yet it is something which it must learn to do. It cannot begin to learn unless it knows the need to learn. These "Letters" attempt to demonstrate the reality of that need and the urgency of the situation.

Letter I.:

The mystery of Christ is at work in all human events, and our comprehension of secular events works itself out and expresses itself in that sacred history, the history of salvation, which the Holy Spirit teaches us to perceive in events that appear to be purely secular. We have to admit that this meaning is often provisional and sometimes beyond our grasp. Yet as Christians we are committed to an attempt to read an ultimate and transcendent meaning in temporal events that flow from human choices... "History" then is for us that complex of meanings which we read into the interplay of acts and decisions that make up our civilization... We live in a culture which seems to have reached the point of extreme hazard at which it may plunge to its own ruin, unless there is some renewal of life, some new direction, some providential reorganization of its forces for survival.

Pope Paul VI, in opening the second session of Vatican Council II, has clearly spelled out the obligation of the Church to... become aware of her own true identity and her vocation in the world of today. He has said without any hesitation or ambiguity that the Church must recognize her duty to manifest Christ in the world, and must therefore strive... to make Him visible in her charity... Now this call to a universal examination of conscience, not only on the part of Catholics but also implicitly of all Christians, came exactly two weeks after a bomb exploded in a Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four Negro girls at Sunday School. On the same day, in the same city, an Eagle scout, of the white race who had been to Sunday School and to a racist rally, shot and killed a twelve year old Negro boy for no other reason than that he was Negro. These were not the actions of Catholics, but they took place in a region where many Catholics have explicitly and formally identified themselves with racial segregation and therefore with the denial of certain vital civil rights to Negroes. In Louisiana, not long before the Pope's address, Catholics had set fire to a parochial school rather than allow it to be opened to Negro students along with white. In Louisiana also a Catholic priest who had white and Negro children receive their first communion at the same time, though at different of the altar rail, was beaten up by his parishioners for this affront to Southern dignity.

In the light of these events, the following words of Pope Paul have a special seriousness and urgency: "If (the Church) were to discover some shadow, some defect, some stain upon her wedding garment... her primary duty would be to reform, correct, and set herself aright in conformity with her divine Model. At present, in a worldwide struggle for power... who appeal to their Christian antecedents as justification in their struggle to maintain themselves in power are being judged by the events which flow from their supposedly "Christian" choices. For example, we belong to a nation which prides itself on being free, and which relates this freedom at least implicitly to its source in Christian theology. Our freedom rests on respect for the rights of the human person, and though our society is not officially Christian, this democratic respect for the person can be traced to the Christian concept that every man is to be regarded as Christ, and treated as Christ... Now if we advocate this claim, and base our decision and choices upon it, we must not be surprised if the claim itself comes under judgement... if our actions do not fit our words, they will assume that we are either fools, deceiving ourselves, or liars attempting to deceive others.

Let me cite an example. Our defense policies and the gigantic arms race which they require are all based on the supposition that we seek peace and freedom, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. We claim to possess the only effective and basically sincere formula for world peace because we alone are truly honest in our claim to respect the human person... we fail to notice that the plans we have devised for defending the human person and his freedom involve the destruction of millions of human persons in a few minutes, not because the great majority of these persons are themselves hostile to us, or a threat to us, but because by destroying them we hope to destroy a system which is hostile to us and which in addition, is tyrannizing over them... Their oppressors have taken away their rights – but we will compound the injury by also taking away their lives and this in the name of the "person" and of "freedom"!

Another example: we claim that we are really solicitous for the rights of the Negro, and willing to grant him these rights some time or other. We even insist that the very nature of our society is such that the Negro, as a person, is precisely what we respect the most. Our laws... assert that since the Negro is a person, he is in every way equal to every other person and must enjoy the same right as every other person. Our religion adds that what we do to him, we do to Christ, since we are a free society, based on respect for the dignity of the human person as taught to the world by Christianity.

First, if we look to the south, ... we discover that belief in the Negro as a person is accepted only with serious qualifications, while the notion that he is to be treated as Christ has been overlooked. It would not be easy for a Christian to mutilate another man, string him up on a tree and shoot him full of holes if he believed that what he did to that man was done to Christ. On the contrary, he must somehow imagine that he is doing this to the devil – to prevent the devil from doing it to him... Only with the greatest unwillingness have some very earnest Southern Christians, under duress, accepted the painful need to ride in the same part of public conveyances with Negroes, eat at the same lunch counters, use the same public facilities. And there are still not a few of these Christians who absolutely refuse to worship Christ in the same congregations as Negroes... Nevertheless, the inner conflicts and contradictions of the South are not to be taken as justification for the smugness with which the North is doing just as poor a job, if not a worse job, of defending the Negro's rights as a person. The race "problem" is something which the southerner cannot escape. Almost half the population of the South are Negroes. Though there are greater concentrations of Negroes in northern slums, yet northern Negroes can be treated as if they were not there at all... The abuses thus tolerated and ignored are sometimes as bad or worse than anything in the South. It is clear that our actual decisions and choices, with regard to the Negro, show us that in fact we 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.... We tolerate shameful injustices which deprive them, by threats and by actual violence, of their right to vote and to participate actively in the affairs of the nation.

Here I can see you will protest. You will point to the Supreme Court decisions that have upheld Negro rights, to education in integrated colleges and schools. It seems to me that our motives are judged by the real fruit of our decisions... We have been willing to grant the Negro rights on paper, even in the South. But the 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... the Negro is still in no position to benefit by them without, in each case, entering into further interminable lawsuits every time he wants to exercise a right that is guaranteed to him by law. In effect, we are not really giving the Negro a right to live where he likes, eat where he likes, go to school where he likes or work where he likes, but only to sue the white man who refuses to let him do these things... Such laws are without meaning unless they reflect a willingness on the part of white society to implement them.

You will say: You cannot legislate morality. That phrase may be quite true in its own proper context. But here it is a question not of "morality" but of social order. If we have got to the point where the laws are frequently, if not commonly, framed in such a way that they can be easily evaded by a privileged group, then the very structure of our society comes into question. If you are knowingly responsible for laws that will be systematically violated, then you are partly to blame for the disorders and the confusion resulting from civil disobedience and even revolution... we are making laws simply because they look nice on the books. Having them there, we can enjoy the comfort of pointing to them, reassuring our own consciences, convincing ourselves that we are all that we claim to be, and refuting the vicious allegations of critics who question the sincerity of our devotion to freedom. But at the same time, when our own personal preferences are concerned, we have no intention of respecting the Negro's rights in the concrete; North or South, integration is always going to be not on our street but somewhere else... That is why the Negro now insists on making himself just as obviously visible as he can. That is why he demonstrates. He has come to realize that the white man is less interested in the rights of the Negro than in the white man's own spiritual and material comfort. If then, by making himself visible, the Negro can finally disturb the white man's precious "peace of soul," then by all means he would be a fool not to do so.

I do not claim to be a prophet or even a historian. I do not profess to understand all the mysteries of political philosophy, but I question whether our claims to be the only sincere defenders of the human person, of his rights, of his dignity, of his nobility as a creature made in God's image, as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, can be substantiated by our actions. It seems to me that we have retained little more than a few slogans and concepts that have been emptied of reality. It seems to me that we have little genuine interest in human liberty and in the human person. What we are interested in, on the contrary, is the unlimited freedom of the corporation. When we call ourselves the "free world" we mean first of all the world in which business is free. And the freedom of the person only comes after that, because in our eyes, the freedom of the person is dependent on money... the most basic freedom of all is the freedom to make money. If you have nothing to buy or sell, freedom is, in your case, irrelevant. In other words, what we are interested in is not persons, but profits... whenever we run into a choice between the rights of a human person and the advantage of a profit-making organization, the rights of the person will have difficulty getting a hearing. Profit first, people afterward. You ask me, indignantly, to confirm these vicious allegations?

It appears that the one aspect of the Negro demonstrations that is being taken most seriously in the South is that they hurt business... It was only when money became involved that the Negro demonstrations finally impressed

themselves upon the American mind as being real. We claim to judge reality by the touchstone of Christian values, such as freedom, reason, the spirit, faith, personalism, etc. In actual fact we judge them by commercial values: sales, money, price, profits. It is not the life of the spirit that is real to us but the vitality of the market...Money has no ontological reality: it is a pure convention... Yet we treat it as the final reality, the absolute meaning, in the light of which everything else is to be judged, weighed, evaluated, and "priced." Thus we end up by treating persons as objects for sale, and therefore as meaningless unless they have some value on the market. A man is to us nothing more nor less than "what he is worth." ...Our trouble is that we are alienated from our own personal reality, our own true self. We do not believe in anything but money and the power or the enjoyment which comes from the possession of money. We do not believe in ourselves, except in so far as we can estimate our own worth, and verify, by our operations in the world of the market, that our subjective price coincides with what society is willing to pay for us. And the Negro? He has so far been worth little or nothing... The Negro was so shadowy, so unreal, that he was nothing more than the occasion for a series of very profitable transactions which gave us a good solid reality in our own eyes and in the eyes of our society. But now, suddenly, we have discovered that there are some "real" Negroes. For them to be real, they must have the same kind of reality as ourselves. Reality is estimated in terms of (financial) worth. And so we are delighted to discover that there are a few Negroes who have money. Why has this rich Negro suddenly earned our benevolent attention? Because he is a person...It is now in our interest to recognize him, because we can use him against the others. So now, when the Negro claims he wasn't to take his full part in American society as a person, we retort: you already are playing your part as a person: "Negros over the years," we now declare, "have had a rapid rise in income."... "Large numbers of Negroes drive high-priced cars."... What are these statements supposed to mean? Simply that there is no need for the Negro to make such a fuss, to demonstrate, to fight for recognition as a person. He as received that recognition already. "Thirty-five Negroes are millionaires." (Thirty-five out of twenty million!)... What more do you want? These are the indications that the Negro has all he needs, for he has "opportunities," he can make money and thus become real. What opportunities? Even though a Negro millionaire may live in a "fine residential neighborhood" he is still living in a ghetto, because when he moves in, the whites move out... So that even when he is worth a million, a Negro cannot buy himself, in the land of the free, the respect that is given to a human person. Doubtless the mercy and truth of God, the victory of Christ, are being manifested in our current history, but I am not able to see how they are being manifested by us.

Letter II.:

Much as it might distress southerners, the fact that a Negro may now sit down next to a white woman at a snack bar and order a sandwich is still somewhat short of revolution. And if by dint of courageous and effective protest the Negroes who have a vote in deep southern states should actually manage to cast their votes on election day without getting shot: that itself does not make a revolution, though it may have something radically new about it. The question is, who will they be voting for? Ross Barnett?

We must admit that the southern politicians are much more fully aware of the revolutionary nature of the situation than are those northern liberals who blithely suppose that somehow the Negroes (both north and south) will gradually and quietly "fit in" to white society exactly as it is, with its affluent economy, the mass media, its political machines, and the professional inanity of its middle class suburban folkways. We seem to think that when the Negroes of the south really begin to use their vote, they will be content with the same candidates who were up last year and the year before. If those candidates who were under any such illusion, they would have long since done something that would get them the Negro votes.... If Negroes turn out full force to vote, and thereby establish themselves as a factor to be reckoned with in southern politics, the political machines of the past are going to collapse in a cloud of dust... There are quite enough Negroes in the South to make any

really free election catastrophic for the status quo. And Negroes, both South and North, are not going to waste time voting for people who sick police dogs on them and drench them with high pressure firehoses, while occasionally lobbing a bomb onto their front porches for good measure. So much for the South. But what about the North? Northern Negroes are perhaps able to put a candidate or two of their own into office: but this is only the beginning of what is suddenly becoming a very conscious and concerned drive for real political power... While in the South we can doubt that Negroes will risk their lives to vote for Southern white politicians... In the North, on the other hand, the big cities are not largely populated by Negroes (the whites live in the suburbs) and the Negroes can perhaps without too much difficulty gain control of urban congressional districts. The drive for political power is going to be more and more accelerated by the problem of jobs.... Negroes demand to be hired along with whites, there is going to be violent conflict over the limited number of jobs. With the best will in the world, nobody is going to be able to give jobs to Negroes without taking them away from whites... This represents, whether we like it or not, a radical threat to our present system- a revolutionary situation. And furthermore it accentuates the already clearly defined racial lines dividing the two sides in the conflict. This means that the Negro is going to continue to be what he has decidedly become: aggressively aware of the impact on white society of the mere threat of revolutionary violence. The Negro finds himself in the presence of a social structure which he has reason to consider inherently unjust (since it has seldom done him any real justice except in fair words and promises.) ... The very agitation and confusion which greet his demands are to him indications of guilt and fear, and he has very little respect for exhortations to "go slow" and "be patient." He feels he has been patient for a very long time and that anyone who cannot see this for himself is not being honest about it. He also feels that there is not hope of any action being taken unless he takes action himself, and that the steps taken by the government are mere political maneuvers leading nowhere. This means that a well-meaning liberal policy of compromises and concessions, striving at the same time to placate the Negro and to calm the seething indignation of the conservative whites, is not going to avert danger. It may, on the contrary aggravate it. Hence the "realism" again, of the conservatives, who think that the only thing is to stop violence now by the full use of all the repressive agencies – police, national guard, army, -- which they themselves still fully control. After all, the traditional line of thought of those who use repressive power to defend the status quo, is that they are justified in applying force to prevent a chaotic and explosive outbreak of revolutionary disorder, save lives, protect property (especially their own, of course) and maintain a semblance of national identity which would otherwise be dissolved in blood. Needless to say, this is identical to the argument which revolutionaries themselves advance for repressing all resistance once they themselves have achieved their aim and have seized full power.

Now, my liberal friend, here is your situation. You, the well-meaning liberal, are right in the middle of all this confusion. You are, in fact a political catalyst. On the one hand, with your good will and your ideals, your fine hopes and your generous, but vague, love of mankind in the abstract and of rights enthroned on a juridical Olympus, you offer a certain encouragement to the Negro (and you do right, my only complaint being that you are not yet right enough) so that, abetted by you, he is emboldened to demand concessions. Though he knows you will not support all his demands, he is well aware that you will be forced to support some of them in order to maintain your image of yourself as a liberal. He also knows, however, that your material comforts, your security, and your congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to you than your rather volatile idealism, and that when the game gets rough you will be quick to see your own interests menaced by his demands. And you will sell him down the river for the five hundredth time in order to protect yourself. For this reason, as well as to support your own self-esteem, you are very anxious to have a position of leadership and control in the Negro's fight for rights, in order to be able to apply the brakes when you feel it is necessary. This is probably one of the main reasons why you turned out for the Washington March. Doubtless you were not

thinking of any such thing, and I am not questioning your sincerity or your generosity. But there are unconscious motives in political action as well as everywhere else. They must be taken into account... the Negro feels that your principal contribution was to make the whole issue ambiguous and remove its revolutionary sting. He feels that you once again obscured the real issue, which is that American society has to change before the race problem can be solved. The atmosphere of congenial fraternity and nobility... seemed once again to indicate that liberal optimism and fair-weather principles would be enough, and that the Negro would move into the place that belongs to him in white American society. But to the Negro, that is only a liberal myth. He knows that there is at present no place for him whatever in American society, except at the bottom of the totem pole. Any form of social protest that assumes that the Negro has a place ready and waiting for him, in American society, is simply irrelevant, a mystification, and a fraudulent deception.... you thought you were in the Washington March because the Negro needed you there, you were really on the march because you needed to be there. The health of your soul demanded it, and for that reason I am glad that you were there, and wish that I had been there with you. But the private needs of your liberal conscience are of absolutely no interest to the Negro who has a much more urgent problem to solve. And your presence is not necessarily helping him solve it. This is why the Negro has mixed feelings about your support. He does not want you in his way. You are more a nuisance than anything else. And you, offended at this lack of appreciation, want to reassure the Negro – you are really on his side, and to prove it you will help him to get just a little more. You will be satisfied with the headlines. You will once again feel cozy with your liberal image – for a few days. Thus you make it possible for him, according to the fantasies of conservative thought to “taste blood.” And conservative thought is not always deluded in its choice of metaphors. On the other hand, when you come face to face with concrete reality, and take note of some unexpected and unlovely aspects of what you have hitherto considered only in the abstract, you yourself are going to be a very frightened mortal. You are going to see that there are more than ideas and ideals involved in this struggle. It is more than a matter of images and headlines. And you are going to realize that what has begun is not going to be stopped, but that it will lead on into a future for which the past, perhaps, offers little or no precedent. But since it is one of the characteristics of liberals that they prefer their future to be vaguely predictable... when you see that the future is entirely out of your hands and that you are totally unprepared for it, you are going to fall back on the past, and you are going to end up in the arms of the conservatives. Indeed, you will be so much in their arms that you will be in their way, and will not improve the shooting. These are frank and brutal facts, my good friend. But they are facts on which you must base your future decisions. You must face it: this upheaval is going to sweep away not only the old style political machines, the quaint relics of a more sanguine era, but also a great deal of the managerial sophistication of our own time. And your liberalism is likely to go out the window along with a number of other entities that have their existence chiefly on paper and in the head. What are you going to do? Are you going to say that though changes may be desirable in theory, they cannot possibly be paid for by a social upheaval amounting to revolution? Are you going to decide that the Negro movement is already out of hand, and therefore it must be stopped at any cost... In that case, you are retreating from the unknown future and falling back on a known and familiar alternative: namely the alternative in which you, who are after all on top, remain on top by the use of force, rather than admit a change in which you will not necessarily be on the bottom, but in which your position as top dog will no longer be guaranteed. You will prefer your own security to everything else, and you will be willing to sacrifice the Negro to preserve yourself.

But is precisely in this that you are contributing to the inexorable development of a revolution, for revolutions are always the result of situations in which the drive of an underprivileged mass of men can no longer be contained by token concessions, and in which the establishment is too confused, too inert and too frightened to participate with the underprivileged in a new and creative solution of what if realized to be their common problem. Is this the case at present in the United States? Instead of seeing the Negro revolution as a manifestation of a deep

disorder that is eating away the inner substance of our society, because it is in ourselves, do we look at it only as a threat from outside ourselves – as an unjust and deplorable infringement of our rights by an irresponsible minority, goaded on by Red agitators? This would be a totally fanciful view, which removes the crisis from the context of reality into a dreamworld of our own in which we proceed to seek a dream-solution. Have we forgotten that the Negro is here because of us? His crisis is the result of our acts, and is, in fact our crisis. Inability to see this might turn a common political problem into a violent conflict, in which there would be no possibility of real dialogue, and in which the insensate shibboleths of racism would drown out all hope of rational solutions. If this should happen, even those whites and Negroes who would normally be able to work together to find a common solution, will be driven apart, and the white man will become the black man's enemy by the mere fact that he is white. As Martin Luther King sees so clearly, if the Negro struggle becomes a violent conflict (and this is what would best please the racists whether they are white or black) it is bound to fail in its most rational and creative purpose – the real vindication of Negro rights and the definitive assertion of the Negro as a person equal in dignity to any other human person... In one word, there is a serious possibility of an eventual civil war which might wreck the fabric of American society...

My question to you is this: can you think of a better way of conducting yourself? Does all profoundly significant social change have to be carried out in violence, with murder, destruction, police repression and underground resistance? Is it not possible that whites might give closer attention to the claims of Negro leaders like Martin Luther King, who assert that they do not want violence, and who give every assurance... that the Negro is not out to kill anybody, that he is really fighting not only for his own freedom, but also, in some strange way, for the freedom of whites. (This is a new and quixotic concept to us, since we are fully convinced that we are the freest people that ever existed.) Is it true that even the smallest change of our present social framework is necessarily a disaster so great that any price, however immoral, can legitimately be paid to keep it from coming about? Is it not possible that whites and Negroes might join together in a creative political experiment such as the world has never yet seen, and in which the first condition would be that the whites consented to let the Negroes run their own revolution non-violently, giving them the necessary support and cooperation, and not being alarmed at some of the sacrifices and difficulties that would necessarily be involved? Is there no alternative but violent repression in which, reluctantly no doubt, you decide that it is better for the establishment to be maintained by the exercise of the power which is entirely in white hands, and which ought to remain in white hands because they are white (because, of course, Negroes are "not ready" for any kind of power)? This presupposes a simple view of the situation: a belief that when the chips are down it is going to be either whites or blacks and since whites have proved their capacity to "run the country" and "keep order," it is unthinkable even to permit the possibility of that disorder which, you take if for granted, would follow if Negroes took a leading part in our political life.

Conclusion: revolution must be prevented at all costs; but demonstrations are already revolutionary; ergo fire on demonstrators; ergo... At the end of this chain of thought I visualize you, my dear liberal friend, goose-steeping down Massachusetts Avenue in the uniform of an American Totalitarian Party in a mass rally where nothing but the most uproarious approval is manifest, except by implication, on the part of silent and strangely scented clouds of smoke drifting over the new "camps" where the "Negroes are living in retirement."

Letter III.:

How is Christianity involved in the Negro struggle? Dr. Martin Luther King has appealed to strictly Christian motives. He has based his non-violence on his belief that love and unite men, even enemies, in truth. That is to say that he has clearly spelled out the struggle for freedom not as a struggle for the Negro alone, but also for the

white man. From the start, the non-violent element in the Negro struggle is oriented toward "healing" the sin of racism and toward unity in reconciliation. An absolutely necessary element in this reconciliation is that the white man should allow himself to learn the mute lesson which is addressed to him in the suffering, the non-violent protest, the loving acceptance of punishment for the violation of unjust laws, which the Negro freely and willingly brings down upon himself, in the white man's presence, in the hope that the oppressor may come to see his own injustice. The purpose of the suffering, freely sought and accepted in the spirit of Christ is the liberation of the Negro and the redemption of the white man, blinded by his endemic sin of racial injustice. In other words, the struggle for liberty is not merely regarded by this most significant sector of the Negro population, as a fight for political rights. It is this, and it is also much more. It is what Gandhi called Satyagraha – a struggle first of all for the truth, outside and independent of specific political contingencies. The mystique of Negro non-violence holds that the victory of truth is inevitable, but that the redemption of individuals is not inevitable. Though the truth will win, since in Christ it has already conquered, not everyone can "come to the light" – for if his works are darkness, he fears to let them be seen. The Negro children of Birmingham, who walked calmly up to the police dogs that lunged at them... were not only confronting the truth in an exalted moment of faith, a providential Kairos. They were also in their simplicity, bearing heroic Christian witness to the truth, for they were exposing their bodies to death in order to show God and man that they believed in the just rights of their people, know that those rights had been unjustly, shamefully and systematically violated, and realized that the violation called for expiation and redemptive protest, because it was an offense against God and His truth... The Negro following of Dr. King are convinced that there is more at stake than civil rights. They believe that the survival of America is itself in question. They believe that the sin of white America has reached such a proportion that it may call down a dreadful judgement, perhaps total destruction, on the whole country, unless atonement is made. These Negroes are not simply judging the white man and rejecting him. On the contrary, they are seeking by Christian love and sacrifice to redeem him, to enlighten him, so as not only to save his soul from perdition, but also to awaken his mind and his conscience, and stir him to initiate the reform and renewal which may still be capable of saving our society. But this renewal must be the work of both the White and the Negro together. It cannot be planned and carried out by the white man alone or even the Negro under the white man's paternal guidance. It demands some Negro initiative, and the white man cannot collaborate fruitfully until he recognizes the necessity of this initiative. The Negro is not going to be placated with assurances of respect and vague encouragement from our side. He is going to make sure that we are listening and that we have understood him, before he will believe in our attempts to help. The purpose of non-violent protest, in its deepest and most spiritual dimensions is then to awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice and of his sin, so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem, is really a White problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation which all its consequences, is rooted in the heart of the white man himself. Only if the white man sees this will he be able to gradually understand the real nature of the problem and take steps to save himself and his society from complete ruin. As the Negro see it, the Cold War and its fatal insanities are to a great extent generated within the purblind, guilt ridden, self-deceiving, self-tormenting and self-destructive psyche of the white man.

It is curious that while the Southern whites are surrounding their houses with floodlights, to protect themselves in case Negroes creep up to murder them in the dark, all the violence in the South to date has been on the part of the whites themselves. The tragic September bombings and shootings in Birmingham were a shocking contrast to the peace and dignity of the Washington March of August 28th... Curious that the ones who repeatedly lecture the Negro on law and order, themselves are in league with murderers and thugs. Such "order" is no order at all, it is only organized injustice and violence. Barbara Deming, a white New England woman who demonstrated with the Negro children in Birmingham, was sent to jail with them. The jail was of course segregated. She was thrown

in a cell full of white prostitutes and other delinquents, and found them not only furious and hostile towards her, but terrified lest the Negro children (who were still singing hymns after a sublime display of Christian heroism) might rape and murder them in jail. Curious that these white Southerners (people to be pitied indeed) from their half-world of violence, petty thievery, vice and addiction, were the ones who felt themselves menaced, and menaced by the clear eyes of children! The truth is they had good reason to fear. The action of the children was aimed directly at them. It was an attack...upon their inmost conscience. And unless that attack could be met and deflected, these people would not be able to continue as they were. In all literal truth, if they "heard" the message of the Negro children, they would cease to be the people they were. They would have to "die" to everything which was familiar and secure. They would have to die to their past, to their society with its prejudices and its inertia, die to its false beliefs and go over to the side of the Negroes. For a Southern white, this would be a real "death." Here is the radical challenge of Negro non-violence today. Here is why it is a source of uneasiness and fear to all white men who are attached to their security. If they are forced to listen to what the negro is trying to say, the whites may have to admit that their prosperity is rooted to some extent in injustice and in sin. And, in consequence, this might lead to a complete re-examination of the political motives behind all our current policies, domestic and foreign, with the possible admission that we are wrong. Such an admission might, in fact, be so disastrous that its effects would dislocate our whole economy and ruin the country. These are not things that are consciously admitted, but they are confusedly present in our minds. They account for the passionate and mindless desperation with which we plunge this way and that, trying to evade the implications of our present crisis... On a certain level, pathological if you like but none the less experientially real, Southern white society feels itself faced with destruction. It is menaced in its inmost being, even though that "inmost being" is in fact only a spectre. But we know from experience with other notorious historical forms of fanaticism, that societies which "experience their reality" on this oniric and psychopathic level are precisely those whose members are most convinced of their own rightness, their own integrity, indeed their own complete infallibility. It is this experience of unreality as real, and as something to be defended against objective facts and rights as through against the devil himself, that produces the inferno of racism and race conflict. The South is apparently in a state of perfect ripeness for this disastrous eruption of pathological hatreds and for all the fatal consequences that they bring with them. But the comparative sophistication of the North is no guarantee that the same evil is not present there, though perhaps in a more subtle form.

I have spoken of the ambiguity in the white Southern concept of "order." What is this? When in September of 1963 a cruel and senseless bombing, to carefully planned and executed to have been the work of an ordinary group of criminals, destroyed a Baptist Church in Birmingham and killed four Negro children, Governor Wallace called out the National Guard to "keep order." The Negroes immediately appealed to President Kennedy to send United States troops to protect them against this local Alabama militia. It was evident to all that the White conception of "order" had nothing whatever to do with the protection of the rights of lives of Negroes. In the Southern White mind the concept that a Negro might have rights in the same sense and in the same way as a white man simply doesn't exist. Hence the idea of "order" in the minds of people like Governor Wallace is simply that the Whites may be guaranteed safety in doing anything they like to the Negro without fear of retaliation. The function of the National Guard was purely and simply to ensure that the Negroes would not be able to fight back effectively after the bombing... much the same way that the SS kept order under Hitler. And again, much like their Nazi prototypes, these militia-men are there perhaps also to provoke violence in order to have something concrete to "prevent."... Subconsciously a vestigial Christian sense of guilt proclaims clearly the wrong that is being done and the remedies that are demanded. But this is filtered into a consciousness as a murderous threat to the symbolic "whiteness" which clothes the infantile Southern mind with its fixation on the mythical paradise before the Civil War. In fighting the Negro, the Southerner thins he is fighting sin, death, the devil,

Communism, immorality, lechery, hate, murder, hell itself. But what he is really fighting is the present. For this reason the "fear of attack" represents in actual fact, a very serious and earnest desire to be attacked... in order to find the psychopathic myth verified, and all its practical conclusions justified... The non-violent and religious protest of the Negro against white racism and injustice is precisely what the Southern White (in his image of himself as upright and Christian) is least prepared to tolerate or to understand... It has to be unmasked as pure malevolence, so that the appeal it aims at the white conscience may be discredited and ignored.

There can be no question whatever that the mind of the average Southern White is not only unconsciously but even consciously and willfully tending more and more to identify itself with an explicitly Nazi brand of racism. Meanwhile another significant fact must be mentioned. Not only have the local Southern police conspicuously refused to take any serious action in solving nearly fifty bombings that have recently taken place, some with loss of lives, in Southern states. The F.B.I. have also failed to produce any results.... The conspicuous failure of the law to provide adequate protection or redress for Negroes subject to violent attack by Whites is having one very serious effect: it is causing Negroes to lose confidence in the efficacy of non-violence as a political tactic, because non-violence presupposes a basic respect for legality, and this is being completely destroyed by the inaction and hesitation of the Federal Government, along with the belligerent contempt of law and justice on the part of some Southern states. Unfortunately, not all Negroes can appreciate the Christian foundation of non-violent action as it is practiced by the followers of Dr. King. Many northern Negro leaders, and especially the organizers of the Black Muslim movement, categorically reject Dr. King's ideas as sentimental. They believe that his non-violence is a masochistic exhibition of defeatism which flatters the whites, plays into their hands, and degrades the Negro still further by forcing him to submit uselessly to violence and humiliation... This reaction against what is basically a Christian protest leads to another extreme: a black racism as intransigent and as fanatical as that of the white racists themselves.

If the Christian and non-violent element in Negro protest is finally discredited, it may mean that Christianity itself will become meaningless in Negro eyes. Those Negroes who attach the Christian leaders in the south are usually completely disillusioned with Christianity, if not bitterly hostile to it, because they are convinced that it has no other function than to keep the negro in passive and helpless submission to his white oppressors. When white Christians express admiration and sympathy for Dr. King, this is immediately interpreted by his Negro critics as evidence of their own negative thesis. As for the attitude of white Christians toward the Negro freedom movement, Protestants and Catholics alike are best confused and evasive in their sympathies... Here and there Christian leaders get together to make encouraging statement. Yet at the same time, even those white Christians most favorable to the Negro cause, have been quick to react against the protests in Birmingham and Jackson, censuring them and demanding "more patience" on the Negro's part, sincerely believing that the whole problem can be adequately settled only by the administration in Washington. This to the Negro is more than naïve. He cannot help but interpret it as an evasion and bad faith and consequently he has little or no confidence in any white Christian group... Evidently, many white Christians will be grieved and disappointed at this evaluation of their sincere concern over the Negro's struggle for his rights. They will remind the Negro that they have taken certain steps in his favor. They will expect him to be more grateful... First of all, it shows that these well-meaning critics do not grasp the real dimensions of the problem as the negro sees it. Like the average liberal, they think that the Negro is simply presenting a few reasonable demands which can be met by legislative action. And, as a corollary to this, they assume that if the Negro were to ask any more than this, he would be unreasonable if not rebellious. In actual fact the Negro is not simply asking to be "accepted into" the white man's society, and eventually "absorbed by it"... It is simply taken for granted that, since the white man is superior, the Negro wants to become

a white man. As we, liberals and Christians that we are, advance generously, with wide open arms, to embrace our little black brothers and welcome him into white society. The Negro is not only not grateful, he is not even impressed. In fact, he shows by his attitude that he is at the same time antagonized and disgusted by our stupidity... The negro knows precisely why the white man imagines that the Negro wants to be a White Man. The White Man is too insecure in his fatuous self-complacency to be able to imagine anything else.

Consequently, when the Catholic Church gives the impression that it regards the South as a vast potential pool of "Negro converts" in which a zealous and ardent white apostolate can transform a few million Uncle Toms into reasonable respectable imitations of white Catholics, this actually does very little to make the Negro respect the truth of Christ, practically nothing to help him understand the mystery of Christ in His Church. Especially when he observes that the converted Negro is still not welcome in every southern Catholic Church and even where he is admitted at all, he may only receive Communion after all the Whites... One has yet to find very many Catholics, including priests, who are really able to deal with Negroes on an equal footing, that is to say without the specious and fraudulent mediation of this image... it reflects such pitiful inability to see him, right before our nose, as a real human being and not as a higher type of domestic animal. Furthermore we do not bother really to listen to what he says, because we assume that when the dialogue really begins, he will already be thinking just like ourselves. And in the meantime we are not too disposed to offend the white racists, either... A genuinely Catholic approach to the Negro would assume not only that the White and the Negro are essentially equal in dignity (and this, I think, we do generally assume) but also that they are brothers in the fullest sense of the word.... They mutually complete one another. The white man needs the Negro and needs to know that he needs him... Our significance as white men is to be seen entirely in the fact that all men are not white. Until this fact is grasped, we will never realize our true place in the world, and we will never achieve what we are meant to achieve in it. The white man is for the black man: that is why he is white. The black man is for the white man: that is why he is black. But so far, we have managed only to see those relationships in a very unsatisfactory and distorted fashion.

First of all, there was the crude initial concept; the black man was for the white man, in the sense that he belonged to him as his slave. But in the relationship of master and slave there is no correlative responsibility... the master could do what he liked with the slave, and perhaps, incidentally, he might find himself, without realizing it, living to some extent for the slave whom he had come to trust and love. But though there was a germinating humanity in this "relationship," there was no sense of a real social obligation to slaves as such, who therefore were never really admitted to be human beings. Thus though the south of slavery days was a kind of Eden for the white man (and is still remembered in the collective southern myth as Eden), it was without human significance because it was empty of basic truth: the truth of Man was absent, because here were two different kinds of men who were supposed, in the order of nature, to complete one another as correlatives, and one of them was not admitted to human status. The Civil War came, and the Negro acquired a human status on the books of law: but only on the books. In actual fact his position gradually became even less human than before.

To assume the superiority of the white race and of European-American culture as axiomatic, and to proceed from there to "integrate" all other races and cultures by a purely one-sided operation is a pure travesty of Catholic unity in truth. In fact, this fake Catholicism, this parody of unity which is no unity at all but a one-sided and arbitrary attempt to reduce others to a condition of identity with ourselves, is one of the most disastrous of misconceptions... missionaries have assumed, with extreme generosity, that their only function was to give of their sublime fullness, and that it was never necessary for them to receive, to learn, to accept any kind of spiritual gift from the native and from his indigenous culture. Material contributions – yes. But nothing else. There has generally been no conception at all that the white man had anything to learn from the Negro. And not, the irony

is that the Negro (especially the Christian Negro of the heroic stamp of Dr. King) is offering the white man a "message of salvation," but the white man is so blinded by his self-sufficiency and self-conceit that he does not recognize the peril in which he puts himself by ignoring the offer. Is the white man really in a position to recognize the providential character of this hour? ... the white man will perhaps scrutinize him afresh in order to find out what he has to sell... The Negro, in fact, has nothing to sell. He is only offering us the occasion to enter with him into a providential reciprocity willed for us by God. He is inviting us to understand him as necessary to our own lives, and as completing them. He is warning us that... if we insist on regarding him as an enemy, an object of contempt, or a rival, we will perhaps sterilize and ruin our own lives. He is telling us that unless we can enter into a vital and Christian relationship with him, there will be hate, violence and civil war indeed: and from this violence perhaps none of us will emerge whole... It is, or at any rate, can be, God's hour... It is for this reason that the "prudence" and the (self-styled) wisdom of some white Christian leaders may well prove to be a sign of spiritual blindness, and as such it may be decisive in leading the Negro away from Christian truth and natural reason, to embark on a violent and chaotic fight for power characterized only by brutality and pragmatism... What the Negro now seeks and expects (or perhaps what he has entirely given up expecting) from the white Christian is not sermons on patience, but a creative and enlightened understanding of his effort to meet the demands of God in this, his Kairos. What he expects of us is some indication that we are capable of seeing a little of the vision he has seen, and of sharing his risks and his courage. What he asks is not the same old string of meaningless platitudes that we have always offered him in lieu of advice. He asks us to listen to him, and to pay some attention to what he has to say. He seriously demands that we learn something from him, because he is convinced that we need this, and need it badly. Negro writers, like James Baldwin, have repeatedly demonstrated that this conviction lends an extraordinary power to their words. There is no question that they have more to say than anybody else writing in America today... few are prepared to understand it because they simply cannot conceive of a white man learning anything worthwhile from a Negro. Still less can they imagine that the Negro might quite possibly have a prophetic message from God to the society of our time. In simple terms, I would say that the message is this: white society has sinned in many ways. It has betrayed Christ by its injustices to races it considered "inferior" and to countries which it colonized. In particular it has sinned against Christ in its lamentable injustices and cruelties to the Negro. The time has come when both White and Negro have been granted, by God, a unique and momentous opportunity to repair this injustice and to reestablish the violated moral and social order on a new plane. We have this opportunity because the Negro has taken the steps which made it possible.... Now the white man must do his share, or the Negro's efforts will have not fruit. The sin of the white man is to be expiated through a genuine response to the redemptive love of the Negro for him. The Negro is ready to suffer, if necessary, to die, it this will make the white man understand his sin, repent of it, and atone for it. But this atonement must consist of two things:

- 1. A complete reform of the social system which permits and breeds such injustices.*
- 2. This work of reorganization must be carried out under the inspiration of the Negro whose providential time has not arrived, and who has received from God enough light, ardor and spiritual strength to free the white man in freeing himself from the white man.*

... I state these two conditions as nakedly and unequivocally as I find them in the words of Negro leaders. My only comment is that in making these demands, they are committing themselves very heavily to provide answers, in case we should ever ask them any questions. The Negro is saying that in effect, he has answers... I, for one, am willing to hear more... Washington is professionally capable only of seeing this as a political issue. Actually, it is a spiritual and religious one, and this element is by far the more important. But is it the element that no one is ready to see. ... What is demanded of us is not necessarily that we believe that the Negro has mysterious and

magic answers in the realm of politics and social control, but that his spiritual insight into our common crisis is something we must take seriously... In any case the Negro demands that his conditions be met with full attention and seriousness. The white man may not fully succeed in this – but he must at least try with all the earnestness at his command. Otherwise the moment of grace will pass without effect. The merciful Kairos of truth will turn into the dark hour of destruction and hate. The awakened Negro will forget his moment of Christian hope and Christian inspiration. He will deliberately drive out of his heart the merciful love of Christ... He will become a Samson whose African strength flows ominously back into his arms. He will suddenly pull the pillars of white society crashing down upon himself and his oppressor... This is the message the Negro is trying to give white America. I have spelled it out for myself, subject to correction, in order to see whether a white man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them. For the rest, you have Moses and the Prophets: Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and the others. Read them and see for yourself what they are saying.

Letter IV.:

It was related that when Mohammed was seeking the light, he thought of becoming a Christian. He went to Nestorian Christians in a corner of Arabia, and sought a sign of the truth of Christianity from them. In order to see whether they had faith, he asked them to show him the credibility of the Christian message by walking barefoot on red hot coals. The Nestorians told him that he was mad. Mohammed saying nothing, departed from them. And soon the conviction that he sought came to him in the burning heat to the Arabian desert. It was a truth of stark and dreadful simplicity – to be proved by the sword.