

The Prophetic Merton – Once Again

By Monica Weis, SSJ

Once again, a hitherto virtually unknown statement by Thomas Merton, this time on the dangers of factory farming, has appeared. Shortly after arriving at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University last fall, prepared to give the first talk of a day-long conference on Merton and ecology,¹ I was attracted to a display in the reading room of the Center. Here were some selected passages by Merton on nature, such as his letter to Rachel Carson complimenting her on diagnosing one of the ills of our civilization.² Featured in the middle of the display was a letter from a British gentlemen requesting from Merton a brief statement on factory farming. Where did this come from? How had it happened that I had not included it in my new book that traces Merton’s growing awareness of ecological responsibility?³

According to Paul Pearson, archivist and director of the Center, the statement, which was listed in former director Robert Daggy’s original catalogue of Center holdings but had never been published, or even referred to, in scholarship related to Merton, just seemed to “emerge” when materials for the display were being prepared. Since I had arrived a few hours before the other speakers, I asked to see whatever files the Center had in order to sleuth out the context for this newly uncovered piece.

The Situation

On April 12, 1965, Roger Moody,⁴ from Edinburgh, Scotland, wrote a 2+-page letter to Merton, acknowledging admiration for his writing and his “reverence towards all life,” and requesting from Merton a statement on factory farming to be included the following summer in a “manifesto” against the practice. Included in the letter is a brief overview of the industrialization of animal husbandry, viewed as “gross perversions and totally unforeseen developments of free-range farming.” According to Moody, many well-known writers, academics, and politicians had already agreed to contribute to the *Manifesto*.⁵ The immediate goal of the “West of England Campaign Against Factory Farming” was to raise awareness of the injustice and unethical practices of factory farming, with an ultimate goal of eradicating the practice altogether.

In his one-page reply, dated April 26, Merton admits his ignorance of the “extent and real character” of the practice but includes a brief statement to be used in the *Manifesto*. Merton also offers to write “something longer” because the issue of factory farming is one more example of the “very significant and rather disquieting picture of modern man.” (Just two years before, Merton had written to Rachel Carson that the inappropriate and widespread use of DDT, which was Carson’s target in her seminal *Silent Spring*, was in truth a “diagnosis of the ills of our civilization” – a pattern in our culture Merton chose to label

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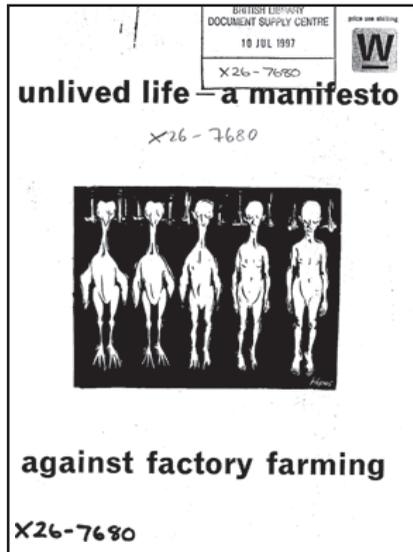
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as a veritable “dreadful hatred of life” [WF 70, 71].) Merton requests copies of the *Manifesto* when it is published⁶ and suggests that Moody might well contact W. H. (Ping) Ferry at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara because of his involvement with the American publication of Jacques Ellul’s critique of technology – another lens through which to examine the dangers of factory farming.

Here, published for the first time in America, is Merton’s initial response to Moody’s request:⁷

A STATEMENT ON FACTORY FARMING:

Since factory farming exerts a violent and unnatural force upon the living organisms of animals and birds, in order to increase production and profits, and since it involves callous and cruel exploitation of life, with implicit contempt for nature and for life, I must join the protest which is being uttered against it. It does not seem that these methods have any really justifiable purpose except to increase the quantity of production at the expense of quality: if that can be called a justifiable purpose. However, this is only one aspect of a more general phenomenon: the increasingly destructive and irrational behaviour of technological man. Our society seems to be more and more oriented to overproduction, to waste, and finally to production for destruction. Its orientation to global war is the culminating absurdity of its inner logic, or lack of logic. The mistreatment of animals in “intensive husbandry” is the part of this larger picture of insensitivity to genuine values and indeed to humanity and to life itself – a picture which more and more comes to display the ugly lineaments of what can only be called by its right name: barbarism.⁸



Cover of the *Manifesto* Pamphlet

Commentary

Notice that Merton’s “attack” makes the larger point that the practices of factory farming are violent, used primarily for monetary gain, and, sadly, exploit natural resources. Moreover, the practice underscores humankind’s propensity for “destructive and irrational behaviour” that is “oriented to overproduction, waste” and “production for destruction.” Merton’s connection of factory farming to the illogic of war is similar to his observation to Rachel Carson that once we identify a Japanese beetle or the Viet Cong as “the other,” our “logic” (or more accurately our illogic) supports the eradication of the pest by any means whatsoever, regardless of the consequences to human life (WF 72). Indeed, in the case of factory farming, our misplaced values make us guilty of barbarism.

In the file at the Merton Center, this brief paragraph (hereafter referred to as version A) is accompanied by an expanded one-page, three-paragraph statement (hereafter referred to as version B) typed on yellow paper (plus one

carbon copy) that is apparently the first draft of Merton's promised longer protest against factory farming.⁹ This expanded version has many typewriter and ink strikeouts as well as additions handwritten in red ink – including a long handwritten sentence on the back of the page. The file contains also a page-and-a-quarter, three-paragraph revised statement (hereafter referred to as version C) substantially the same as version B except for three handwritten alterations: two additional words and a one-sentence strikeout.

In comparing versions A and B, it is clear that Merton made his point clearly and forcefully in the one-paragraph statement – strong, emotive indignation at the practice he was just becoming aware of. The amplified version B includes detail that makes his argument more convincing. His argument is tighter and more measured.¹⁰ The opening sentence of version B, for example, adds to the implied definition of factory farming rhetorical *enargeia* (vivid diction). Factory farming is now identified as “a systematic, violent, cruel and ultimately purposeless use of force . . .” that operates “with calculated neglect of real needs and natures of these creatures” (animals and birds). Subsequent sentences in paragraph one are expanded with subordinate clauses to reveal more specifically Merton's objection to the practice. Paragraphs two and three of version B are expansions of Merton's position. Only the original phrases of “the mistreatment of animals in ‘intensive husbandry’” and “barbarism” are retained from the original version A. In the expanded version B, Merton connects the mistreatment of animals to humankind's contempt for “man, for nature and for God” – a deplorable and unfortunate outcome of our increasingly materialistic society, in which a human being is “a ‘thing’ to be manipulated and exploited for the sake of gain or for calculated political advantage.” Our deliberate “cruelty and callousness toward animals” is akin to industry's “implicit contempt for the consumer” who is sold an “inferior product” not only tainted with chemicals, but also drastically diminished in taste and food value. This is the “barbarism of man” that Merton protests against, one manifestation of a larger evil, namely, the “deep-seated spiritual and psychological corruption of a materialistic society in serious danger of self-destruction” (version B).

Such damning comments resonate with Merton's position on other aspects of social justice. Disdain for the black community and indigenous people, irrational commitment to nuclear proliferation, and inappropriate reliance on technology for its own sake are just a few of the social ills that garner Merton's discerning and sharp critique as he became more aware in the late 1950s and 1960s of his responsibility to speak out on injustices within the human community. Now in 1965, two years after his wake-up call from Rachel Carson to our responsibility for the health of the environment, Merton is again seeing the big picture and identifying its essential barbarism.

Context

Although Merton does not refer in his journals to this contact with Roger Moody and the West Campaigners Against Factory Farming (WCAFF), it is clear that social justice and environmental issues are important to his thinking and reading. After a bout with the flu and some time in the monastery infirmary, Merton writes on April 15, 1965, Holy Thursday, that part of our failure to imitate Christ's obedience to death is “our power to frustrate God's designs” and to “destroy natural goods by misuse.”¹¹ When healthy, Merton had been spending extended time in the hermitage, reading K. V. Truckler (a disciple of Karl Rahner) on the Christian duty to transcend the assumption that technology can help us “lead the world of nature to its natural perfection” (*DWL* 228). Merton

is also impatient with the “stupidity and barbarism of those who are despoiling His creation” (there’s that word again: “barbarism”) and prefers to live his “hermit life in simple direct contact with nature” (*DWL* 228, 229).

Presuming that Merton received and read Moody’s letter shortly after Easter,¹² it is interesting to note that Merton is also reading Lord Northbourne’s *Religion in the Modern World* at this time,¹³ and agreeing with Northbourne that humankind is on a “path to destruction.” In subsequent days, Merton’s journal entries celebrate the beauty of reciting lauds out of doors, the woods silent in the moonlight. He mentions his fascination with Flannery O’Connor’s novels that reveal “American meanness” and the “dark face of God,” as well as his reading of Tertullian, the notebooks of Jacques Maritain, and the recent news about the horrors of Vietnam and the struggle for civil rights in the South – the “moral landscape of damnation” (*DWL* 229-35). Against this backdrop of seemingly universal dis-ease, Merton receives Roger Moody’s request for a statement on the dangers of factory farming. Despite his rudimentary knowledge of the topic, Merton is primed to respond.

Significance

While all this data may seem interesting only to Merton aficionados, I believe there is a deeper meaning we can gain from Merton’s prompt response to Roger Moody. First, I think we have to acknowledge Merton’s intellectual acuity that is able to grasp not only the broad details of factory farming, but also the negative implications of it for the health and dignity of both animals and humans. Second, and almost as important, Merton shows compassion for the “little people.” He could easily have ignored this unsolicited letter from a stranger or left it in a “to do” pile to gather dust, but no: fourteen days after the letter from the UK was written, Merton constructs his strong paragraph of protest and by the end of the month, has a fleshed out a statement that reveals careful reflection, pointed analysis, and integration of his objection to *this* crime against nature into the macro picture of our misuse of all of creation. Merton’s statement gives witness once again to his ability to connect the dots and challenge us to higher levels of ethical behavior. Moreover, Merton is willing to take a public and prophetic stand on yet another social justice issue – and this is indeed a prophetic stand. Although in England the Harrison Group and the Brambell Committee were actively campaigning against factory farming (1964, 1965) and the agricultural correspondent for *The Guardian* was supporting the practice,¹⁴ it is really only within the last two decades that Americans have become sensitized to problems with feeding hormones to farm animals, the fallout of mad cow disease, and the cruelty of restraining animals’ movements and access to fresh water. A quick web search of the dangers of factory farming reveals that most of these studies, with Britain taking the lead, have been published since 1990.¹⁵

Here once again, Thomas Merton is in the forefront of eco-justice, encouraging us to develop an ecological consciousness. How is it that Merton, with his propensity for contemplation and the hermit life, can envision the negative ramifications of apparently salvific and cutting-edge human activity? If ever we doubted that Merton was ahead of his time or supposed that he was prophetic only on the dangers of nuclear war, this issue of factory farming should dispel any doubt.

1. *Letters to a Green Liberal: Thomas Merton’s Call to Ecological Responsibility* (October 16, 2010); other speakers included Kathleen Deignan, SND, Dennis Patrick O’Hara and Andrea Cohen-Kierner.
2. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus,

- Giroux, 1994) 70-72; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.
3. Monica Weis, SSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) – scheduled for release in May.
 4. Roger Moody was born in 1948 in Bristol, England. According to *Who’s Who in the World*, he was trained as a social worker and has become an activist for issues involving mining and indigenous people. In 1965 he was speaking out against factory farming and from 1968-71 he was co-editor of *Peace News* in the UK, a journal for which Merton had frequently written.
 5. Among the contributors listed by Moody in his letter: “Brigid Brophy, Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Martin, Richard Hauser (the sociologist and author of *The Fraternal Society*), Lord Francis-Williams, Olwen Battersly (Field worker for ‘War on Want’; and coordinator of the Vinobe Bhavé Bhoodan movement in this country), Swami Avyactanada (of the Vedanta movement), Ruth Harrison (author of *Animal Machines*), E. L. Grant-Watson (biologist, psycho-analyst, and naturalist); The Dean of Llandaff, Canon Douglas Rhymes, Dr. John Anthony Parr, Richard Lamb (Liberal Party spokesman on agriculture), Barbara Cartland (of the National Association for Health) and many others.” Not all of these names are included in the printed *Manifesto* of 40 individual statements; Iris Murdoch, for example, is listed as one of the supporters, along with other luminaries such as Jacques Maritain, Bertrand Russell, Benjamin Britten, Albert Schweitzer and Arthur Koestler.
 6. The WorldCat database includes the following: *Unlived Life: A Manifesto against Factory Farming*, compiled by Roger Moody (Bristol, England: Campaigners Against Factory Farming, 1965). There is one extant copy of the *Manifesto* at the British Library, but through the expert skills of Jennifer Burr and Chris Sisak, reference and interlibrary loan specialists at Nazareth College, there are now photocopies of this 32-page document (10" x 7.5") in the Merton Archives at Bellarmine University and in the Merton Collection at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY. The cover features a cartoon by William Pappas (originally printed in *The Guardian*) showing five hanging chickens that morph into human beings. Roger Moody writes in the Foreword that the *Manifesto* is the result of a year’s work to collect a “body of criticism in summary form.” The document includes eight photographs of restrained animals and statements from 40 individuals representing the arts and sciences, farm researchers and managers, and media specialists. Their statements are organized according to mini-chapters: Definition, Cruelty, Aesthetic, Health, and Economic Objections, Freedom from Hunger, Moral Objections, Toward Abolition, and The Larger Picture. Merton’s short statement headlines this last “chapter,” paired with a longer comment from John Wilkinson, a philosopher of science. Moody’s headnote identifies Merton as a “Christian philosopher” whose comment recognizes not only the “violence” to “Man’s habitat,” but also our short-sighted commitment to the “profits of today” (*Manifesto* 27). In the “Notes on Contributors,” Merton is identified as a “Trappist Monk, author of numerous works of Christian philosophy, including ‘Seeds of Contemplation’ and ‘No Man is an Island.’”
 7. Copyright (c) 2011 by the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust and used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.
 8. When the statement was included in Roger Moody’s *Manifesto*, several minor editorial changes were made: 1) substitution of a colon for “and” after “profits”; 2) omission of “and for life” after “nature”; 3) substitution of a dash for the colon after “quality”; 4) new paragraph beginning with “However”; 5) italics for “production for destruction”; 6) substitution of a dash for the comma after “inner logic”.
 9. This longer version of three paragraphs was not printed in the *Manifesto* and I can find no evidence that Merton actually sent the expanded version to Roger Moody.
 10. My thanks to Christine M. Bochen for this insight.
 11. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 227; subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text.
 12. Most traditional monastic communities were forbidden to receive mail during the penitential season of Lent; letters were collected and subsequently delivered to individuals after the Easter celebration.
 13. Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World* (London: J. M. Dent, 1963).
 14. Further information about the Brambell Report and the Harrison Group can be easily found on-line; see also the supportive comment by Stanley Baker, “Factory farms – the only answer to our growing appetite?” in *The Guardian* (29 December 1964) 12, in which the writer claims factory farming “will not be held back . . . by the humanitarian outcry of well-meaning but sometimes misguided animal lovers”; rather, “the more far-seeing would name the growth of intensive farming as the major development.”

15. The following are just a few of the critiques of this destructive practice: books – Gene Baur, *Farm Sanctuary: Changing Hearts and Minds about Animals and Food* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); Mark H. Bernstein, *Without a Tear: Our Tragic Relationship with Animals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009); David Kirby, *Animal Factory: The Looming Threat of Industrial Pig, Dairy, and Poultry Farms to Humans and the Environment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010); Paul Roberts, *The End of Food* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); documentaries – *Animal Rights on Trial, Food, Inc.* (directed by Robert Kenner) (DVD 2009); *Death on a Factory Farm* (directed by Tom Simon and Sarah Teele) (DVD 2009); *Meat the Truth* (directed by Gertian Zwanikken) (DVD 2008); web sites – www.thematrix.com; www.farmssanctuary.org; www.meat.org; www.peta.org; www.slashfood.com.