

THE COLORIZATION OF THOMAS MERTON: An Open Letter to the *ITMS*

by **Kenneth M. Voiles**

The editorial in the Winter 1990 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* contained a bit of information that, as I see it, urgently deserves our attention. By “our” I mean, of course, those of us who have found something deeply precious in the writings of Thomas Merton and thus seek not only to “spread the word,” but also to “keep it.” The bit of information to which I am referring is Robert E. Daggy’s mention of the existence of proposals presented to the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust to “update” Merton’s language — that is, proposals suggesting that Merton’s language be “de-sexed.”

I, for one, stand firmly opposed to such proposals. I hold such a position for three basic reasons. First, I contend that no one has the right to change or manipulate any author’s work unless explicitly given permission to do so by that author. Though I am not at all familiar with the intricacies or legalities of the trust that Merton left, I am inclined to believe that he did not request that the language of his writings be made “gender inclusive.” If he did, so be it. If he did not, I cannot see that anyone has the right simply to assume it.

Secondly, I propose that such a procedure contains within it a disturbing and false implication that Thomas Merton was somehow sexist or chauvinistic. Anyone familiar with the

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spirit of his writings and his life and his relationships knows that such a claim simply is not true. One's language does not make one a sexist. One's attitude does. Sexism is nothing short of a prejudice, and, as we know, Thomas Merton was one of the twentieth century's most outspoken critics of prejudice in all its shapes and forms.

Thirdly, I suggest that if such a procedure were approved and undertaken, it could very well set a dangerous and burdensome precedent. It is not difficult to imagine all sorts of similar proposals that could very well follow. How might we react if some group or another proposed that Merton's later writings be "de-Zened"? Or if some other group should suggest that his writings be "de-Catholicized" or made, by what would amount to a revision of his language, more strictly pluralistic or "religion inclusive"? Furthermore, I would suggest that it is quite prudent to consider seriously whether or not such proposals are really all that different from the proposals to "de-sex" Merton's language. I hold that they are not.

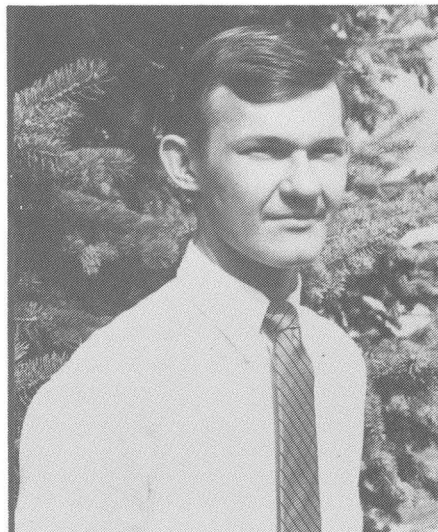
Both proposals start from the premise that some aspect or another of Merton's writing is somehow imperfect. Such a premise is, of course, not faulty in and of itself. We all have the right to our opinions. What is fallacious, I suggest, is to conclude from such a premise that we then have the right to correct these imperfections to suit our own ideas about what is more perfect. And this, it seems quite correct to say, holds true whether we are talking about ideas or style or language, and whether we are considering an individual opinion or a consensus opinion.

In short, I suggest, quite frankly, that any attempt — whatever the way, shape, or form — to revise (on the basis of our idea of what is "better") what is not directly the product of our own creativity is nothing short of censorship. Even though we might try to justify such action with the claim, be it true or false, that what we aim to censor is "bad" or "wrong" or even "outdated," the fact remains that it is censorship nonetheless.

When, out of obedience and a real desire for humility, Thomas Merton passed his writings through the censors of his Order, he thus gave them explicit permission to censor those writings. If he has not given that permission, let us not assume it. Thomas Merton has been censored enough. He should be allowed to rest in peace.

Let us not suppose that we know how to give a "better presentation" of Merton, or that we can make his writings "more attractive." Let us not become Ted Turners of a different kind. The "colorization" of Thomas Merton is something that I, for one, shudder to envision.

My point, and my plea, is simple. Let us take Thomas Merton and leave Thomas Merton, just as we have found him — in black and white, with all that we each see to be his triumphs or his deficiencies. Finally, and above all, let us leave for those who will follow us not only the "original" Merton, but also, and just as importantly, a vivid example of our respect and our admiration — a respect which might praise or might criticize, but which surely fails on all counts when it seeks to vandalize.



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