

# MERTON ON EDUCATION

Review of

Thomas Del Prete

*THOMAS MERTON AND THE EDUCATION OF THE WHOLE PERSON*

Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1990

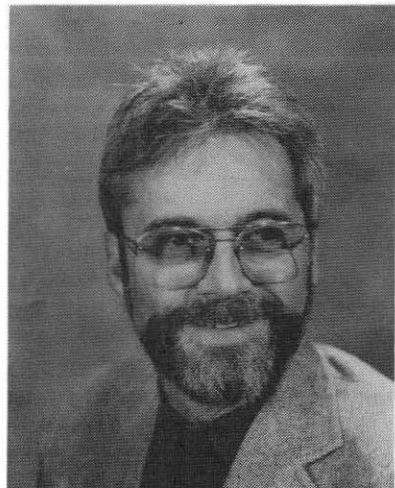
195 pages / \$14.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Daniel Rice**

Thomas Del Prete's *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* is a welcome addition for several reasons. It will, of course, be welcomed by those who have an interest in anything about Merton. These readers, and there are many, will relish the opportunity to consider a systematic review of Merton's thought about almost any subject of general interest. The subject selected by Del Prete, education, has an appeal to an even broader audience. This work will join the current discussion on education which has been sparked most notably by Parker Palmer. Hopefully, many will be introduced to Merton through this book and will be moved to read further from Merton's own works.

Del Prete's work represents a careful and seemingly thorough review of Merton's writing on the subject of education. The task was no simple one as Merton seldom discussed the subject directly. Del Prete drew upon the corpus of Merton's writing which includes some fifty-five books, 250 essays, much poetry, and his voluminous correspondence. Nevertheless, education was something about which Merton had thought a great deal both in general terms and as he served in educational roles within the monastery at Gethsemani. Del Prete describes Merton's sparse comments on education as "scattered kernels of insight" which are in need of "cultivation." The purpose of the book is "to nurture them with careful explication and elaboration."

The two fundamental ideas which best indicate Merton's views on education, according to Del Prete, are "the formation of the whole person" and "self-discovery." Most of the book provides the context for and the elaboration of these two ideas as they were understood by Merton. Both ideas were developed in parallel



DANIEL RICE

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□ **Daniel Rice** is presently serving as Director of the Office of Instructional Development and Assistant Professor of Educational Administration at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota. He has earned the B.A. from Dakota Wesleyan University, the M.Div. from Yale Divinity School, and the M.S. and Ph.D. from the University of North Dakota. He is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

with Merton's own personal development. Del Prete observes that it is impossible to separate Merton's views on education from Merton himself. Merton's insights were shaped primarily by the Christian and especially the Catholic tradition and increasingly, in later years, by his extensive reading in Eastern thought and by correspondence with religious thinkers from the East. While the book is an attempt to present Merton's views on education, as well as describe his journey of self-discovery, the weight of the book is much more on the former than on the latter.

Merton's idea of "the formation of the whole person" required that education include more than imparting facts or teaching skills. Merton was convinced that "scientific rationalism" (Parker Palmer's "objectivism") was not only an inadequate perspective but was responsible for much of the alienation of people from the natural world, from each other, from themselves and their own spirituality. Therefore an educational approach shaped by this perspective would only perpetuate and intensify the problem. Rather than emphasize the importance of "knowledge," from this perspective, Merton advocated the importance of "wisdom" for the "formation of the whole person." Merton described this alternative perspective as the "sapiential" approach. While the "scientific rational" perspective objectifies and externalizes the "sapiential" perspective personalizes and internalizes. Merton wrote, to describe the "sapiential" approach, that the "realm of symbol is the realm of wisdom." Among Merton's favorite "sapiential" writers were T. S. Eliot, Boris Pasternak, William Butler Yeats, William Carlos Williams, Jacques Maritain, and D. T. Suzuki.

The second concept, "self-discovery," had a particular meaning for Merton. According to Del Prete, it meant the "discovery of ourselves as whole persons on the deepest existential and spiritual level." This, thought Merton, was the true purpose of all learning. Those familiar with Merton's writing, especially the journals and the more autobiographical works, will grasp at once the essence of the concept and the great difficulty of achieving it in one's own life. In the chapter on self-discovery, Del Prete offers a number of questions and topics which illustrate what an education directed by self-discovery might involve. It is also one of the few efforts in the book at making an application of Merton's views. Del Prete notes in the "Preface" that he does not intend to produce a "how to" book. In subsequent chapters the author discusses "Seeing, Hearing, and Speaking" (chapter four), "Voice and Truth" (chapter five), and "Communication, Dialogue, and Communion" (chapter six).

The chapter titled "Teaching and the Education of the Whole Person" (chapter seven) was, in some respects, the most rewarding. After delineating the essential aspects of Merton's position on education, this chapter provides the reader with a more personal view of Merton's favorite teachers and how they influenced him and provides an all-too-brief view of Merton himself as a model learner and teacher. If there is a criticism of the book, it is that this section was not more extensive. Especially disappointing was the limited attention to Merton's own teaching. Merton's former students could have provided rich illustrations of Merton as a teacher. Del Prete makes only a few references to the many tapes of conferences and classes led by Merton. These provide a rich resource for understanding Merton as a teacher. For example, the tapes provide evidence of the extensive use of humor by Merton, a point which receives only a footnote from Del Prete. It is also clear that humor was not a mere technique used by Merton but was an essential element of who he was as "a whole person." The tapes of Merton's classes with the novices are filled with examples of the give and take in his teaching, his openness to questions and comments by students, his directness, his modesty, and his amazing skill to describe the most complex issues in simple and vivid language. While Del Prete identifies these qualities in Merton, it is ironic, given the emphasis on the personalistic, that they were not illustrated with examples from Merton's actual teaching. The discussion of the sapiential approach, for example, could have been

been powerfully illustrated by a description from a tape recording of Merton's discussion with the novices of Faulkner's "The Bear." In fairness to Del Prete, the question of how much emphasis to give to essential concepts and how much to Merton the teacher, is a matter of judgment. And yet, more about Merton as teacher would have been consistent with the subject, would have been congruent with Merton's approach to education and would have strengthened the overall impact of the book.

A methodological problem for the author must have been how to treat the various quotations from Merton given the fact that his views on several issues changed over the years. In other words, one ought to be hesitant to give all of his statements equal weight because his earlier views may not have been what he continued to believe many years later. Del Prete does not reveal how he resolved this problem.

The only other concern about the book is that the same quotations by Merton seem to be repeated too frequently. Perhaps this was a function of the few direct comments from Merton about education. At the same time, repetition is an effective pedagogical tool.

All in all, the book will certainly provide a much needed contribution to understanding an important aspect of Merton's thought. In addition, it should fuel the current debate about education and will provide support for what is clearly a minority viewpoint. Merton's voice is one which needs to be heard on this crucial subject and the timing seems just right. We owe Del Prete our thanks.

## MERTON IN CAPSULE FORM

A Capsule Review of

*THOMAS MERTON: A Selection from his Writings*

Edited by Aileen Taylor with an Introduction by Monica Furlong  
Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers (Modern Spirituality Series), 1990  
94 pages / \$4.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Barbara Sonnenberg**

Originally published in England in 1988, this attractive paperback in The Modern Spirituality Series highlights capsule thoughts from thirteen works of the mature Thomas Merton. Renowned biographer Monica Furlong introduces the selections with a cogent portrayal of the exterior and interior events which influenced Merton's life and thought. Understanding what Furlong terms the "Paradox and contradiction . . . built into Merton's family background," the reader can more readily identify his quest for peace, stability, and concern for all living things.

All the selections chosen by Aileen Taylor are from mimeographs prepared at Gethsemani and are upbeat, optimistic, "new" Merton. Wisely, no comments are made on the texts. A bibliography is provided at the end. Readers familiar with these writings will find their old favorites and perhaps add some new gems, but the work is best suited to those unfamiliar with Thomas Merton's later works. Format and price make this an excellent gift item.

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□ **Barbara Sonnenberg** lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, and is a librarian at the Cincinnati Public Library's main branch. She is a frequent reviewer of books ("mostly fiction," she says) and has reviewed for *The Merton Seasonal*.