

mark *Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories* as a worthy bearer of presence. In the richness of its simplicity, this volume stands as an icon of the realities narrated on its pages. Wherever grace freights our common world, may we respond with gratitude.

Walter E. Conn

CHRISTIAN CONVERSION:

A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender

New York / Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986

347 pages -- \$12.95

Reviewed by **Dewey Weiss Kramer**

Conversion is a popular topic today and books on the subject easily find a reading public. Walter E. Conn's interest in this subject, however, is more substantial. Though related to the topicality of the subject, it derives from this topic's importance to prominent contemporary theologians who recognize conversion as crucial for a right appreciation of the concrete experiential dimension of a life of faith. Conn, professor of Religious Studies at Villanova University and editor of *Horizons*, Journal of the College Theology Society, agrees with Bernard Lonergan, his former teacher and a major presence in this volume, that "reflection upon conversion can provide an appropriate foundation for a contemporary empirical theology." With this book, Conn wishes to contribute to such a theology, one which shifts the focus away from a preoccupation with individual acts to a more Biblically-oriented concern with the pattern and direction of a person's whole moral life. His method is to clear up the ambiguity which surrounds the term "conversion."

Conn undertakes the task by analyzing the human person's capacity for such conversion. His analysis requires, in turn, that he study the human person her/himself, especially in the value-decision dimension which western culture has traditionally referred to by the metaphor of "conscience." Conscience, as Conn understands it, is the radical drive for self-transcendence, the reality drive for understanding, truth, value, love.

The author develops his interpretation of conscience by drawing on the work of five leading scholars of developmental psychology -- Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and Robert Kegan. From a critical synthesis of their research and feelings, he comes to a theory of the self as a conscious subject developing cognitively, affectively, and morally toward a goal of self-transcendence. After presenting a pattern of personal development, Conn then focuses on conversion, defined as a structural -- as opposed to one of content -- transformation of conscience, a radical re-orientation of the self's goal from the personal toward the dimensions of truth, value, love.

The moral, cognitive, and affective dimensions of this shift in orientation, Conn discovers, coincide with the major moments or stages or developments of human growth as articulated by developmental psychology. Conversions are thus the conscious counterpart of unconscious stage transitions or crisis resolutions.

The book's detailed incorporation of psychological paradigms and terminology presents difficulties for the person unversed in that discipline, but such paradigms make an integral point. It demonstrates that personal and moral maturity and spiritual development are constitutively interdependent. Indeed, the most advanced stages of the primarily secular psychological paradigms raise questions of at least implicitly religious content. For example, as Kohlberg says, only the person who has fully realized and attempted to lead a life of fully human autonomy can truly experience the utter moral impotence constitutive of human existence; and it is precisely this impotence which forces the personal subject to seek meaning beyond the human.

This material comprises chapters one through four of the work. In chapter five Conn examines the moral dimension of "Christian" conversion, i.e. the specific character which the three conversions or shifts in orientation to truth, to value, to love assume when they take place within the symbolic context of the Christian story; and in chapter six he examines conversion's "religious" dimension. Conn's definitions of these two last-named conversions do not correspond to ordinary usage, and one sees here especially clearly his stated objective of "redoing" conversion. He understands "Christian" (moral) conversion as only the beginning of an ever more profound journey into the mystery of God's love -- the journey of "religious" conversion. Lonergan provides him with his understanding of "religious" conversion as "other-worldly falling in love" or "being grasped by ultimate concern" or "total and permanent self-surrender."

These two final chapters use as a kind of laboratory the example of Thomas Merton, drawing on his writings as documentation. The choice of Merton is fortuitous and not surprising, since Merton himself was keenly conscious of constituting a model for others, a fact expressed clearly in his journals. He wished to share the fruits of his questioning and answering with those he would never know personally. In order to get a hold on himself and his journey, Merton found it imperative to discover the right metaphors. The fact, noted by Conn, that Merton the writer helped Merton the monk toward wholeness (conversion) helps account for the facility with which Merton can serve as an illustration of Conn's theses; and his attention to Merton's symbolic pattern of understanding produces an insightful interpretation of the psychological/spiritual significance of the monk-writer's language. Merton's 1938-41 conversion, described in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is interpreted here as a moral conversion, whereas the writings and life after 1941 are used to illustrate the distinctively religious dimension of conversion.

Conn's subject matter -- morality, authentic selfhood as realized in the personal/psychological and spiritual dimensions; authentic existence defined in terms of going beyond the limited, egocentric self to a loving embrace of others; the work's extensive use of and reference to other disciplines such as philosophy, literary criticism, theory of creativity; and finally the impetus it can provide to apply the patterns he works out to other artist-Christians (Simone Weil, Reinhold Schneider, Flannery O'Connor, for instance) -- all would justify the volume's being reviewed in an Annual such as this one devoted to interconnections among religion, culture, and social concerns. Its inclusion here is, of course, specifically mandated by Conn's use of Merton as his major demonstration of theory applied to a concrete life.

His presentation of Merton casts more light on the book's painstakingly detailed study of patterns of personal and spiritual growth than do his theoretical formulations on the figure of Merton. This is hardly surprising. Starting with the monk himself, the phenomenon of Thomas Merton has been copiously and frequently analyzed. Conn's emphases inevitably repeat well-known facts and facets -- the journey motif, the tension between monk and artist, the dichotomy of the false and true self, the role of metaphor as way to self-understanding. This is not to deprecate Conn's study of Merton, however. Such insights bear repeating and Conn's probing of his works in chronological order for their developmental clues is helpful. His focus on the false self/ true self theme is especially valuable.

At one point Conn notes in referring to the theories of William James, E. D. Starbuck and V. B. Gillespie that their theories seem almost to have been formulated with Merton in mind. One might make a similar quip about this study, especially in the context of Merton's false and true self problematic. It was in the true self/ false self distinction, incipient in *The Seven Storey Mountain* but first expressed clearly in *Seeds of Contemplation*, that Merton found, in Conn's terminology, the apt metaphor for articulating the transformational pattern of his discovery of God through discovering himself. And this Mertonian metaphor, as will become obvious to the careful reader of Conn's volume, is reflected in the book's own thesis of the self's progress from immaturity, through successive stages, toward authentic selfhood.

This metaphor also constitutes the major focus of the final chapter as illustration of the dimension of the radically religious conversion. Conn traces the development of Merton's concern from *Seeds of Contemplation* to *New Seeds of Contemplation*. He then examines "The Inner Experience" (serialized in *Cistercian Studies* and now available in reprints), drawing again on the formulations of Lonergan's analysis of religious conversion as the personal subject's radical drive for self-transcendence, seeing the true self most fully realized in its surrendering its claim to autonomy in God's love.

Other late Merton works reveal additional dimensions of true religious conversion: the turning toward the universal as reflected in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and his stance on nuclear armament, the final stages of self-transcendence and universal integration in his work with Zen and the experiences and writings during the Asian journey.

Is this a work which will lead readers to ponder their own position in the continuum of conversion, or will it be treated as a source for studying others? If the latter, it is meant for the theologian; if the former, it is for those serious about their own developmental journey. But a caveat is in order -- it is hard going. The psychological and theological apparatus could easily overwhelm those not well-versed in those disciplines. Still, Conn dedicates it to the memory of his father who "showed him the heart of Christian conversion." It might therefore be assumed that Conn is throwing out a challenge to readers to progress in their own faith development.

The author helps as much as is possible. The volume is admirably structured. Chapters begin and end with clear statements of purpose and summaries, sub-sections do the same. There are copious notes which actually amount to an annotated bibliography of the several inter-

connected topics touched upon in the main body of the work. A careful reading of both text and notes offers insightful summations of the thought of major scholars in various areas such as theology and literature, with bibliographical references able to direct the interested reader toward new lines of inquiry. And finally, Conn's appropriation of secular developmental psychology to examine what has traditionally been considered a theological problem offers support for Merton's own discovery (using William Blake's terminology) that a merely natural explanation is ultimately an insufficient basis for authentic selfhood.

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF MARK VAN DOREN

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Foreword by Dorothy Van Doren

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Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

I

Mark Van Doren was a writer, poet, teacher, scholar and friend to numerous persons; and he was so over a long period of time. His energy, reflected throughout these letters, was enormous and he was the kind of person who could do many different kinds of things quite well. He lived from 1894 to 1972, and from the earliest moments in his career -- for which we have records -- he was involved in an active life of the mind and pursuit of a dual career as teacher and writer which was, as well, combined with a family life to which he was devoted. His relationships to many writers could be charted at great length, and thus there would be many ways in which an overview of this volume could be organized. Van Doren's active work with other writers such as Allen Tate or John Gould Fletcher would be one way. Van Doren's management of his own various writing projects would be another important pattern to observe. Finally, his relationships with his students such as John Berryman, Robert Lax, and Thomas Merton would