

really are. But then, who is it who so facilely makes assertions such as these? Humility in the face of the deeply human temptation to fashion idols is clearly endless.

Thomas Del Prete
*THOMAS MERTON & THE EDUCATION
OF THE WHOLE PERSON*

Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1990
195 pages — \$14.95

Reviewed by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

Thomas Del Prete's book on Merton, a version of his 1987 doctoral thesis at the Harvard School of Education, provides both less and more than its title promises. While the ostensible focus on education is actually subsidiary and occasionally somewhat forced, the work is a competent, often quite insightful, discussion of some major aspects of Merton's thought.

The author's efforts to explore the relevance of Merton's writings for education are hampered, as he notes in his introductory chapter, by the fact that there is relatively little material which addresses the topic explicitly. What Del Prete does manage to find, particularly a 1968 response to a college student's inquiry concerning Merton's educational views and the essay "Learning to Live," written for a volume celebrating Columbia University and reprinted in *Love and Living*, provide the "two fundamental ideas" (p. 9) for the study. In his letter, Merton points out that education should go beyond "imparting knowledge" to "the formation of the person" (p. 13; focus of the second chapter as well as the source of the book's title); the essay, discussed primarily in Chapter 3, reflects on the role of the university, and of the education process in general, "to help the student to discover [him or her] self: to recognize [him or her] self, and to identify who it is that chooses" (p. 31).

Del Prete writes that he will not limit his discussion to Thomas Merton on education but will expand his purview to Thomas Merton and education (p. 8), but in fact the themes of holistic personal formation and

self-discovery are so central to Merton's entire vision that much of the book does not differ significantly from other studies of Merton's thought which do not emphasize education. Analysis of the true and false self, of person vs. individual, of the relation of solitude to intersubjectivity, of the superiority of the experiential to the conceptual and abstract, of dialogue as rooted in a primordial, preverbal unity, are all prominent elements here. Though Del Prete's categories of "Seeing, Hearing, and Speaking" (Chapter 4), "Voice and Truth" (Chapter 5), and "Communication, Dialogue, and Communion" (Chapter 6) are generally helpful and pertinent to his topic, direct application to education is frequently left to a concluding sentence or summary paragraph which could have been omitted without damage to the main line of his argument and which often stands as a rather awkward reminder of his thesis (in both senses). For example, the section on "Speaking" concludes: "Education aimed at 'the formation of the whole person' clearly must address the importance of how one forms the words to express what one 'sees' and 'hears'" (p. 76). (The repetition of his verbal *leitmotif*, at one point six times on a single page [26], is a stylistic trait — found also with some other favorite phrases — which likewise suggests the work's origin as a dissertation.)

The final substantive chapter, "Teaching and the Education of the Whole Person" (which is followed by a six-page concluding summary), does deal more directly with educational issues and includes some interesting observations on Merton's own teaching style in his conferences (though his year and a half as professor at St. Bonaventure is surprisingly never mentioned in the entire book). His experience as educator in a broader sense is highlighted by discussion of his role as mentor to various peace movement figures (with particular attention to the 1964 retreat on "The Spiritual Roots of Protest") and by consideration of the unobtrusive guidance toward self-discovery in his correspondence with young people. More problematic are the statement that "Merton's view of education . . . has a clear and compelling and concrete analogy in teaching" (p. 147) (surely teaching is a constitutive dimension of education, not an analogy to it, or to Merton's view of it) and Del Prete's efforts to reinterpret the rather scholastically oriented discussion of Mark Van Doren's approach to teaching in *The Seven Storey Mountain* in the more existential terminology characteristic of Merton's later writings (though he does quote and comment on Merton's marvelous description of Van Doren's questions "educating" from his students insights they didn't know they had, a passage which could perhaps have been used to good effect much earlier in the book).

While its most significant effect may well be to bring an audience composed primarily of educators into contact with Merton's thought, the value of the book transcends its specifically educational framework — generally, “the formation of the whole person,” while certainly applicable to the classroom and other formal pedagogical settings, describes a process of learning which is virtually equivalent to reflective living. If this diffuses the work's focus, it also broadens its scope and appeal. Del Prete knows his Merton very well, and has clearly undertaken the discipline of attentiveness in seeing, hearing and speaking which he considers so central to Merton's “spirituality of education.” While he does not neglect familiar quotations from the best known works (yes, we do get to visit Fourth and Walnut once again), he also culls obscure yet significant passages from less familiar sources: he makes more and better use of various material from *Love and Living* than any other work of which I am aware, and has searched out a few uncollected pieces such as “The Poorer Means: A Meditation on Ways to Unity” (from *Sobornost*, 1966). He also makes good use of taped comments from some of Merton's classes and conferences, including those not available commercially.

He does a particularly fine job of showing how integral Merton's nonviolence is to his entire spirituality, both in the context of his discussion of the nature of the true self as relational (pp. 47-48) and more extensively in the section on dialogue (pp. 135-139), which shows how a respect for the uniqueness of each person and a recognition of the interrelatedness of all life converge in a commitment to love and truth which refuses to violate the integrity of another human being for any reason. He has wise things to say about the relation of the true self to time — being in the presence of God means living fully in the present, which is perceived as having a hidden eschatological dimension: “The true self . . . lives not for, but in the moment” (p. 49), with a simplicity of awareness comparable to Buddhist mindfulness. Perceptive comments are also made on Merton's healthy ambivalence toward institutions, including monastic and ecclesiastical institutions — balanced with his respect for obedience (in the root sense of careful listening). Merton's attitude toward technology, his appreciation for the symbol, his “sapiential” view of reality are among the other topics which give evidence of Del Prete's ability to resonate with his subject's deepest insights and to communicate them to his readers. Clearly there is much of real value here.

Nevertheless the book might have been more original, and perhaps more useful, had it concentrated more rigorously on educational concerns.

What is missing, despite the emphasis on the importance of dialogue, is any attempt to engage Merton in conversation with significant educational theorists. While such criticism may seem to be passing judgment on an author for not writing a different book altogether, Del Prete in his "Preface" mentions that Merton provides a dimension to educational philosophy missing from those theorists he studied in graduate school. Since Merton is never considered in the context of these thinkers and their ideas, we are unable to learn just how his vision challenges or supplements influential educational trends. As an obvious example, it would have been instructive to see how Merton's approach differs from that of John Dewey, not only the dominant figure in American educational thought of this century but still such a towering figure at Columbia in Merton's time, years after his retirement, that Merton sardonically comments in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that the university's motto — "In tuo lumine videbimus lumen" — should have been changed to "In lumine Randall videbimus Dewey." How would Merton's insights on the education process compare to those of Piaget, or Kohlberg, or Fowler, or on another front altogether, to his friend Jacques Maritain's *Education at the Crossroads*? Would Merton's "contemplative" approach be compatible with the iconoclastic radicalism of an Ivan Illich, or the praxis-oriented "pedagogy of the oppressed" of Paolo Freire? Situating Merton in relation to these or other educators might have highlighted why Del Prete finds Merton particularly relevant to education, and have kept the educational focus from becoming somewhat nebulous. Perhaps it is especially unfortunate that the author did not pursue this approach since he shows himself quite skillful in making connections between Merton and other writers, such as Simone Weil, Martin Buber, and Annie Dillard, all of whom basically share Merton's perspective, as does the one educational theorist who is explicitly considered, Parker Palmer, who has himself written perceptively on Merton and who is clearly a central influence on Del Prete's whole approach to his topic.

The other aspect of his topic which could profitably have been explored in greater detail is that of subject matter. Del Prete rightly stresses that from Merton's perspective, education "will be concerned ultimately with intrinsic experience rather than extrinsic information" (p. 178); knowledge will be "not so much *received* . . . as *conceived*" (p. 149), and will lead to deepened self-understanding in the context of understanding the multifaceted reality which is studied. Learning will be relational and experiential. This is certainly the proper emphasis (though the author's occasional use of the term "subjective" as a synonym or correlative for

"experiential" could be misleading, given its other connotations of "relative" or even "self-interested" (as noted on p. 100). Del Prete does not imply that content is not important: "an experiential level of wholeness . . . hardly excludes, but ultimately subsumes reason and analysis. This implies a quality of 'knowledge' beyond facts, concepts, and intuition, a 'knowing' with one's whole self" (p. 176). Still, the relatively little attention given to Merton's views on what is worth learning (names of some "sapiential writers" are the closest we get to a "reading list") is not reflective of the extraordinary range and depth of Merton's own interests and their relevance to human and spiritual formation. He writes in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, for example: "I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and in Islam. Man's sanity and balance and peace depend, I think, on his keeping alive a continuous sense of what has been valid in his past." Merton's own "spirited Christian humanism" (p. 7), his mining of both secular and religious traditions, his interaction with non-Western wisdom, show that his concern for educational process is matched by a concern for content. The first letter "To a Professor of Humanities" in *Seeds of Destruction*, with its reflection on "the urgent need for Christian Humanism" and its suggestions of sources for wisdom, such as the early Alexandrians, provides a fascinating insight into Merton's concrete views on the educational enterprise which could have supplemented and specified some of the theoretical comments noted by Del Prete, and helped to provide a more complete and more representative picture of Merton's educational thought.

To conclude that this is not the definitive treatment of Merton and education does not, however, detract from the positive contribution that this book does make to Merton studies. Del Prete has demonstrated that his is a voice worth listening to attentively. I hope we may look forward to learning from his further insights into other aspects, specifically educational or otherwise, of "the formation of the whole person" according to Thomas Merton.