

THE HUMANISM OF THOMAS MERTON

Review of

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED HUMANITY: THOMAS MERTON'S JOURNEY

Edited by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.

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Reviewed by **Brother Columban (Richard) Weber, O.C.S.O.**

One of the refreshing things about many of the studies now being done on the life and work of Thomas Merton is the degree of personal involvement manifest by the authors. This volume turns out to be a little gem in this regard. Most of the Merton scholarship available to the public is interesting, but once in a while a book appears that is even exciting. Perhaps these essays struck me as important because the "humanism" of Thomas Merton is of particular interest to me. Also, the measure of revelation about some of the authors themselves comes as quite a surprise (John Albert) and even a shock (Thomas P. McDonnell).

Time and space do not permit a long review of these essays, but a few common themes come through in various places. A vital focus, and one that is a personal favorite of mine is the theme of "compassion." This word is used explicitly in many places in these essays, and Victor Kramer quotes what I think is at the heart of Merton's spirituality in his essay on "Literary Patterns in *The Sign of Jonas: Tension between Monk and Man of Letters*": "What is my new desert? The name of it is compassion. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion" (*The Sign of Jonas*, p. 334). The discovery of this Biblical

compassion led Merton more and more to identify with actual human problems and concerns.

A great deal of Merton's early Christian and monastic journey was spent in constructing an



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Photo by Barry Ra

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ethical image of the ideal human life. This image was immortalized in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (cf. Joachim Viens' essay). As life went on Merton was wise enough to know that the holier-than-thou approach just was not going to fly, so he spent much effort debunking the image he had earlier so carefully constructed. Then he was just your ordinary joe-monk, running around outside the enclosure, drinking beer, and falling in love. It is very important not to get stuck on this image either, as it proves to be as artificial and as contrived as the former. Both John Albert and Joachim Viens in their fine studies pursue the themes of image and process in the life and work of Thomas Merton, and successfully unmask some of the illusions.

One of the most touching and moving studies is the one by Robert Daggy, "The Road to Joy: Thomas Merton's Letters to and about Young People." Merton admirers will find this essay refreshing. While pointing to several important themes in Merton's life search, Daggy gives us a glimpse of Merton the man who tries seriously to be open to the young, to be open to change. With "young people," Merton strains pretty hard, trying to be hip and with-it, but never quite succeeding — as no one does — in crossing over the generation gap, but he must get an "A" for effort. It is with children that he shines! No doubt his life in an all male environment and his own lonely childhood made him doubly sensitive to the light and innocence of the child. Many of the episodes related here are touching and tender and give us an insight into yet another aspect of the man. When Daggy makes reference to "Grace's House," one cannot help feeling a pang of longing when the poem is not quoted in its entirety in this volume. Also, the fact that Daggy includes one of the so-called "love poems" in his essay is significant. Truly, Merton found in this love relationship the joy and innocence of childhood.

Several of the finest papers gathered here deal with Merton's search for a full human integration on a more intellectual level, especially in the arena of theological enterprise. Although well-trained in the classical Biblical and patristic (even medieval) methods, Merton longed to engage in the theological debate of his time. He was wise enough to recognize that he could no longer rely on just a Catholic interpretation of theology if he wanted to be in touch with the modern secularized world — a world that was searching for, and expressing itself in, a new theological language — a wider faith community seeking to describe the experience of faith, and looking for a more relevant vocabulary for the enterprise of formal religious scholarship. These fine essays by Basil Pennington, George Kilcourse, Lawrence Cunningham, William Shannon, Roger Corless, and David Cooper are helpful in understanding Merton's attempt to contact contemporary theological thinking and in turn influence it by his own work.

Two of the most charming contributions are those of Thomas McDonnell. "The Trouble with Thomas Merton" recounts his difficulties with his *Merton Reader*. One can only be moved by McDonnell's sincerity and openness in what must have been a painful situation for him. His being overlooked by the Merton biographer, Michael Mott, and his troubles with the Merton Legacy Trust, enlist our sympathies. The essay on "Why Evelyn Waugh Worried about Merton's Prose" is intriguing in its presentation and convincing in its conclusion.

A point that McDonnell makes in his essay about the *Reader* is one that has interested me over the years. McDonnell writes: "I envisioned that he [Merton] might settle down to produce one book which would be a really serious and substantial work of spirituality for the twentieth century." This is a point that must intrigue Merton scholars. Did he, could he, would he, or should he have done such a thing? As the essays in this volume are on the personal side, I would like to venture a theory of my own.

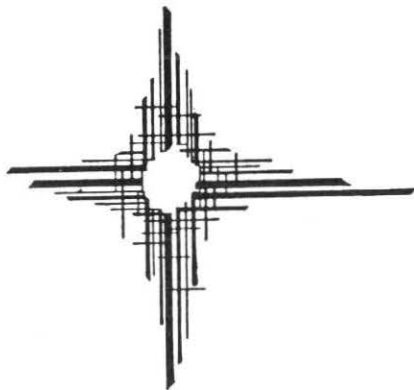
For the past several years I have been dialoguing with the brilliant and seminal work of Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*. The more I read this work itself and pursue its secondary

sources the more I am struck by the extraordinary synthesis that Becker has achieved. It has often occurred to me that Merton would have eventually come to the same sort of synthesis in spirituality that Becker achieved in psychology. Both men are among the most profound and subtle students of the human condition who have ever lived. Both realized that the human dilemma is not merely theological or psychological but ontological in its root. So, although we can safely say that Merton was not to get around to putting such a synthesis between two covers, the seeds for such lay scattered in his works, and the thoughtful essays presented here are proof of this.

Also included in this volume is a study called "Three Decades of Poetry" by Scott Nelson which deals with some of the life-giving diversity and color in Merton's poems. "Merton in These Places," by Paul Wilkes, describes many of the places where Merton lived or visited — presenting a wandering meditative pilgrimage of his life.

The volume concludes with an essay by Basil Pennington on "Centering Prayer" and its meaning and structure. The Centering Prayer Method fits ideally with much of Merton's teaching and practice on the topic of prayer. And prayer is a most human activity. Prayer is life.

One small observation in conclusion. In these days of inclusion and equal time, it would strike the subject of this volume (as it did the reviewer) as mildly amusing that not a single contribution is by a woman! It is an indication indeed, if an indication is needed, of the foibles of our present condition and what it means to be "human."



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