

# BARRY ULANOV: “I REMEMBER TOM WITH GREAT FONDNESS”

by **Mitch Finley**

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In **The Seven Storey Mountain**, Thomas Merton wrote that in 1937 Robert Lax told him about a book he had been reading. The book was **Ends and Means**, by Aldous Huxley. “He told me about it in a way that made me want to read it too,” Merton said. “So I went to Scribner’s bookstore and bought it, and read it, and wrote an article about it, and gave the article to Barry Ulanov who was editor of [Columbia] **Review** by that time. He accepted the article with a big Greek smile and printed it. The smile was on account of the conversion it represented, I mean the conversion in me, as well as in Huxley . . . .”

Browsing through **The Seven Storey Mountain**, Barry Ulanov’s name caught my attention, because I was familiar with several of his books written with his wife, Ann Ulanov. (I would mention, in particular, **Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer and Religion and the Unconscious**.) Since Merton mentioned Ulanov in **The Seven Storey Mountain**, would he be quoted in any of the Merton biographies? As it turned out, the answer was no.

Today, Barry Ulanov is McIntosh Professor of English emeritus at Barnard College, Columbia University. He is also a lecturer in psychology and religion at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and co-editor, with Ann Ulanov, of **The Journal of Religion and Health**. “I knew Merton early on,” Ulanov said in a telephone interview. “I remember Tom with great fondness. He, I guess, was a couple of years ahead of me . . . I knew him well, because [when I started at Columbia] I immediately got involved in the magazines — the literary review called **Columbia Review**, and the humor magazine, **Columbia Jester**,” where Merton was also quite active. “It’s an absolute fact,” Ulanov said, “that when we wanted a particularly sexy, a ‘dirty’ cartoon, Tom was the guy to go to. They weren’t crude, you understand, I mean that in a strictly undergraduate sense, and an undergraduate in those days, by comparison with today, was comparatively innocent.” Merton was “always cheerful and funny, and available.”

Barry Ulanov, now seventy-six, has no trouble remembering the incident Merton wrote about in his autobiography. “I remember being both startled and entertained at the unmistakable switch in convictions. Later, it was amazing to me that he put this incident in his book. Although I remembered the incident I would not have thought that he would have spelled it out quite that way. But then and now I would say it was accurate.

Ulanov believes that Merton was a product of a particular climate at the Columbia University of that era. “This is a very important thing about the Columbia of that time — it was not a place in which people all held a particular point of view. It did have strong political textures, the Columbia of that time. It was certainly not all, but largely

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leftist, or left-of-center, in any case. But at the same time there was a very great deal of very serious thought and talk about religion — religion not simply in the sense of attending a church or having a particular set of precepts, convictions, dogmas that one held dear and made every effort to adhere to. But religion as a way of life, as an attitude of mind, and as a sort of disposition of psyche and soul . . . It was something we really **thought** about.”

Communism captured the imaginations of many students, Ulanov recalled. So it is not surprising that Merton wrote in **The Seven Storey Mountain** that he dallied with communism. “People who were moved by that, and caught by that — as we all were for a time, even if only for a matter of weeks — were moved by the writing . . . that Jacques Maritain was doing. I remember that one of my favorite teachers was reading Maritain when I was, in my freshman and sophomore years.”

Ulanov insists that at the time “Tom’s concerns mirrored a campus concern. Conversion, yes, but also a mixture of attitudes that was to be found all around the place among people of seriousness and solid equipment, such as he possessed. Tom simply did it with grace and style.” In general, Ulanov remembers that Merton “was always available for discussions.” He remembers a below street-level “tap room” at Columbia called the Lion’s Den, which still exists. “It had a kind of oak or elm furniture that made it look like a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century tap room. That was a world Tom knew, both here and abroad, and he was to be found there on any number of occasions. There were strong discussions with exactly the people he talks about in his book. His book is an accurate record of the time, there’s no question about it.”

When Barry Ulanov heard that Merton had joined the Trappists, he says that he recalls being “perhaps less startled than I should have been, because I remembered that article. I printed it, after all . . . We were all very moved by this kind of conviction and concern. Concern didn’t always harden into conviction . . . That Tom went to that degree [of joining the Trappists], that startled me a little. I had heard that he had been living in the Village, I think it was . . . I remember thinking at the time, when the conversion pushed him as far as the Trappists, that it was certainly an extraordinary length to go. But when I say I wasn’t so startled all I mean is that seemed likely. Whether it be Tom or somebody else, it seemed likely that that would arise, that would come. People in our group — and I use ‘our’ loosely — we would do that sort of thing, we would think that sort of thing, we took it seriously. It pleased me enormously that for so many people what might have seemed to be just silly, school-boy conversation, ‘bull session’ antics and so forth, came from deeper sources and had such large consequences. It wasn’t just a kind of ‘bull session’ attitude, it was much more fundamental.” Ulanov believes that the quality of the faculty and the small class sizes of the time had something to do with this. “People like [Mark] Van Doren, whom Merton knew well, were available. We didn’t have teaching assistants. We knew these people.”

Barry Ulanov had no contact with Merton after he left for Gethsemani, but he did stay “up” on Merton because his literary agent at Doubleday was Naomi Burton [Stone], who was Merton’s agent as well. “We talked a great deal about Tom. I learned things from her.”

The fact that Merton touched so many people, Ulanov said, “the fact that his writing, his example, his conviction, that all those things meant so much to so many people, reflects not only the quality of the man but also the quality of that particular place and time . . . Many of them, who were not themselves of a great religious turn of mind or soul, took so seriously these attitudes, issues, speculations that they did not believe in that they moved us to go on with them. What you have in Tom’s extraordinary achievement is not only his achievement but the achievement of this whole community he came from. It is, in a sense, a community of soul, a community which reflects a spiritual life which didn’t even know that it was a spiritual life.”