

The Meaning of Beauty and the Beauty of Meaning

Review of

Finding True Meaning and Beauty

By Thomas Merton

2 CDs

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Reviewed by **Mary Murray McDonald**

This CD set offers listeners remasterings of two conferences in two parts each from Thomas Merton, “Your Search for Meaning” (Parts I and II) from 1968 and “Beauty Comes from God” (Parts I and II) from 1964. Merton’s thoughts on beauty can’t be repeated often enough – especially in our culture where beauty is often thought to be had by some people, but certainly not by all. It is often considered a function of having the right makeup and clothes. Merton charges into this perception, leveling it by reminding us that beauty is a transcendental property of being: “beauty is being,” and when we encounter ugliness, he says that it is a “lack of being due to a being.” As always, Merton fosters the growth of the individual person such that his or her beauty manifests itself in this full presence.

What do we do to obtain more beauty? He says it is grace that “brings beauty into your life.” “Art restores beauty,” and so we are “constantly using art against decay and falling apart.” These are lectures that most of us could use listening to at least once a year. He continues to discuss at length art that appeals only to the senses – advertisements, for instance – as bad art in that being is not respected in the artwork, but rather they appeal to the senses alone. It is a joy to hear Merton relaxed and explaining things at length to his scholar-monks. He even jokes at one point about Aristotle. Contemplative and artistic imagination unite in the respect for being, he says. He refers to the work of his friend Ad Reinhardt to demonstrate the difference between advertisements and art that respects being.

“Your Search for Meaning,” in particular, shows Merton at his synthetic best. He tells a story of a man who did everything he was supposed to do, and when he gets to heaven, God throws him out because he did not delight in life itself. In this rich lecture set, Merton weaves together psychoanalysis, the psalms, monasticism, Hasidic tales, Persian-American psychologist Reza Arasteh, Victor Frankl, Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and early myths, to show how we get to that delight.

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How does a person manifest the light of the divine in life, enjoy life itself, and deal squarely with the sufferings (and death itself) that we all, he says, evade on many levels? As Merton struggles with this issue, he shows his discomfort with psychoanalysts of his day who, he claimed, wanted people to fit into society rather than be saints, mystics or creative people. Their job of heightening awareness of mental problems was not enough to arrive at a meaningful life. Neither did society provide meaning; Merton takes a fair amount of time to chastise the people who fit well into their social roles without ever trying to make sense of their lives, even though they knew they were miserable in their success.

Merton's advice is that we must make a personal discovery of Christ and that this discovery allows us to encounter suffering and death with meaning once we know that the divine life is in us, a tree of life. He shows how many other ways of approaching meaning stop short, as Wordsworth's writing that we all have divine light and we simply lose it as we grow out of childhood.

Merton notes that in monasticism, the focus is on this "binding oneself to Christ." Also in monasticism, he says, it is impossible to cling to a role since everyone lives together all day and night – no one can simply hold fast to a role when everyone knows him or her individually.

The issue is to gain and then lose the "cultural," "social" and "individual" self in what Arasteh deemed an existential conflict – something Merton said most people knew ended in a kind of death and thereby did not enter. Merton's emphasis here is to make more vivid what he termed "too familiar": the carrying of one's daily Cross that would eventually extinguish the idol of the self and lead to unity with God and others.