

THOMAS MERTON'S LOVE AND LIVING

—Review-Essay by **James M. Kronenberg**

Editor's Note: The *Merton Seasonal* carried no review of *Love and Living*, a collection of essays collected after Merton's death and edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart, when it was first published in 1979. This review-essay is printed here to call attention to this collection which has recently been reissued in paperback at \$5.95 by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

The book's title *Love and Living*, was not chosen by Thomas Merton since this book represents a collection of Merton's essays edited by two of his friends, Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart. The book has been divided into three categories of essays, and the first category bears the heading "Love and Living." The editors have given the book its title, using their heading for the first collection of Merton's essays. My best guess about this title is that the editors thought the words love and living not only represented Merton's focus in these writings but also impressed upon readers the nature of the book as a guide to living based upon the principle of love. Merton's primary theme of love being the guiding principle of living is also expressed in the book's two other categories, "Seven Words" and "Christian Humanism."

Merton's motivation to write the kind of essays found under "Love and Living" is clearly stated by him in another book entitled *Faith and Violence* (page 174): "We are living in a society which for all its unquestionable advantages and all its fantastic ingenuity just does not seem able to provide people with lives that are fully human and fully real." This phrase adequately and appropriately describes the tone of Merton's criticism of modern society, especially Western civilization. Merton begins his assault on one of man's most sacred institutions, education, in the book's first essay "Learning to Live." The danger of education, according to Merton, is that the means have been confused with the ends. Even worse, education devotes itself to the mass production of uneducated graduates. Merton states point blank that, "the least of the work of learning is done in classrooms." (page 13) Merton recalls a personal experience, while attending Columbia University, which represented a light shining upon the darkness of his own identity. His friend and mentor, Mark Van Doren, gives Merton insight into the latter's calling to monastic life, not through a classroom lecture, but rather through an informal (and possibly unimportant) conversation between them while crossing Amsterdam Avenue in New York. Merton uses his keen sense of humor to relate a comic incident at a much later date in order to emphasize the continuous process of learning as opposed to an isolated span of time which universities and the like represent. Merton experiences a tea ceremony with Dr. Suzuki and his secretary, Mihoko, on the campus of Columbia as follows (page 14):

"Daisetz Suzuki, with his great bushy eyebrows and the hearing aid that aids nothing. Mihoko, his beautiful secretary, has to repeat everything. She is making tea. Tea ceremony, but a most unconventional one, for there are no rites and no rules. I drink my tea reverently and attentively as I can. She goes into the other room. Suzuki, as if waiting for her to go, hastily picks up his cup and drains it.... A very, very old deaf Zen man with bushy eyebrows had drunk a cup of tea, as though with the complete wakefulness of a child and as though at the same time declaring with utter finality: 'This is not important.'"

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Merton concludes that the “function of a university is to teach man how to drink tea, not because anything is important, but because it is usual to drink tea.” (page 14) This statement reflects Merton’s desire to integrate learning and living in order to make man fully human.

The dignity of personhood is discussed in another essay entitled “Love and Solitude.” Merton attacks technology by stating that “the peril of this massive, numerical, technical concept of man is, then, that it destroys love by substituting the individual for the person,... the precise nature of our society to bring about this division, this alienation... Hence, we live in a world which, though we clutter it with our possessions, our projects, our exploitations, and our machinery, we ourselves are absent.” (page 17) Although he clearly criticizes technology as an alienating force, Merton does speak positively about technology when it is viewed in the context of integration. In an essay entitled “Christian Humanism in the Nuclear Era” (found in the book’s third category, “Christian Humanism”), Merton summarizes the Second Vatican Council’s document “Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”, and in doing so he points out that the Church recognizes the value of science and education. He states that the “progress of the person and the progress of society therefore go together... The transformation of society begins within the person.” He quotes the Council: “There is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable.” (page 154- 155) Technology then must be subservient to human rights in Merton’s view. In another essay entitled “The Universe as Epiphany,” Merton writes a book review of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Divine Milieu*. Merton believes that this French Jesuit scientist is the first Catholic thinker to successfully incorporate the modern scientific world view into an authentically Christian philosophy of life. He quotes Teilhard de Chardin in order to emphasize that God exists in everything, including technology, as follows: “The man with a passionate sense of the divine milieu cannot bear to find things around him obscure, tepid and empty which should be full and vibrant with God.” (page 181) This viewpoint is upheld throughout the book’s collection of essays which consistently points out how God does draw out good from evil. Nevertheless, Merton is not so naive to ignore the evil implications of modern technology, and he does call for reform of the world’s socio-economic order on the basis that life and happiness of human persons is more important than economic production and power.

In the “Love and Living” category of essays, Merton focuses on materialism as an evil symptom of technology. In “Cargo Cults of the South Pacific,” Merton describes the pathetic and sometimes tragic efforts of primitive natives to adjust to the power and wealth of white colonialism. Merton contends that a true understanding of the Cargo mentality will tell us much about ourselves. After the coming of the white man to their islands, the natives experienced an identity crisis since the white man had cargo ships which brought them fabulous goods. The natives did not benefit from the white man’s cargo, they felt inferior to the white man, and over time they desired to achieve equality (i.e., gain cargo) by evolving rituals of symbolic activity. One movement in New Guinea around the middle of this century got the idea that a vase of fresh flowers was instrumental to obtaining cargo since the white man’s dwellings contained them. Merton properly points out that our reaction as civilized Westerners to this curious aberration is to dismiss this as the work of a primitive mentality and proof of the white man’s superiority. Nevertheless, Merton aptly asks the crucial question (page 83): “Is there really much difference though, between Kago (pidgin for cargo) and the coming of the good life promised in our fabulous modern consumer advertising?” Merton answers this question by referring to modern man’s need to repudiate everything that is old and seeking new material things, which is the basic premise guiding advertising. Merton believes this approach is no different than the ritual requirements (sometimes dancing, sometimes fasting, sometimes carrying a gun) met with perfect exactitude by



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Cargo Cult movements.” The goal always is the destruction of something old as an act of faith in the future.” (page 85) The result for all Cargo Cults is their collapse since the faithful who have thoroughly committed themselves realize that it is useless (i.e., the cargo is not going to come). Here, Merton comments upon the illusion of happiness created by man’s belief in the power of material things. In a separate essay, “Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?” Merton identifies narcissism as the primary trait resulting from the Cargo Cult type of mentality. Influenced by this trait, “You are no longer able to really love the other person, for you become obsessed with the effectiveness of your own package, your own product, your own market value.” (pages 30-31) When man considers himself and others not as persons but as products, then the concept of love is viewed as a package, whereby lovemaking is equated with salesmanship. Accordingly, love is regarded as a deal which presupposes that we all have instinctive needs which can be fulfilled only by means of commercial exchanges. Merton states that the “trouble with this commercialized idea of love is that it diverts your attention more and more from the essentials to the accessories of love.” (page 31) Furthermore, “the truth is... that this whole concept of life and love is self-defeating. To consider love merely as a matter of need and fulfillment... is to miss the whole point of love, and of life itself.” (page 33)

In the book’s second category of essays entitled “Seven Words,” Merton writes down his thoughts about the meaning of seven different words ranging from ethics, theology, war, and death to world, divine and purity. Only the essay “Death” remotely resembles the issues raised in Merton’s essays contained in the other two sections of the book. Here, Merton addresses the issue of death representing the end of life, and points out that the secular viewpoint of death is one which considers life as something which must inevitably be ambushed by death. Merton colorfully summarizes the consequences of this viewpoint on page 98:

“If we become obsessed with the idea of death hiding and waiting for us in ambush, we are not making death more real but life less real. Our life is divided against itself. It becomes a tug of war between love and the fear of itself. Death then operates in the midst of life, not the end of life, but rather, as the fear of life. Death is life afraid to love and trust itself because it is obsessed with its own contingency and its own ending.” Merton believes that this attitude towards death is wrong and is one infected with sin. Knowing that death cannot be turned back by deceit, man still seeks to outwit death by sinning against his fellow man through violence and war. By destroying others, the victors strive to assert their own interminability. This narcissistic viewpoint of death is expressed “not only in avarice, in the accumulation of power, but also in legalism..., technologism..., as well as the direct cult of violence for its own sake.” (pages 100-101) Merton leads us away from this death-loving character by showing us that death as an end can be seen in a totally different light - one of love and grace. Since growth is one of the essential functions of life, then it is possible to learn how to discover a deeper level of reality and life. “The mature man realizes that his life affirms itself most, not in acquiring things for himself, but in giving his time, his efforts, his strength, his intelligence, and his love to others.” (page 102) The final act of death itself will not be a termination but rather a “culminating gift, the last free perfect act of love which is at once surrender and acceptance.” (page 103)

Merton offers his readers hope by pointing the way to a life which dies unto itself (i.e., ego) and adopts love as a guide to living. Merton’s idea of love is based upon a spiritual discipline, yet his essays that deal with love as a creative force would not qualify him as the Ann Landers for the religious world. A column in a religious newspaper is inappropriate for Merton’s discussions of love because Ann Landers provides solutions to the love-related problems of her readers. Merton voices his difference in his approach to love when he states on page 17: “Love is not a problem, not an answer to a question. Love knows no question. It is the ground of all.” Before exploring Merton’s development of love as a creative force, it appears that his last statement gives us a clue about his style of writing. Based upon the copyrights printed at the beginning of *Love and Living*, Merton wrote the essays collected by the editors during the later stages of his life. Since he had received considerable exposure to Zen and other Eastern religions by this time, his writing style reflects his assimilation of Eastern thinking. He seems to write less and say more. His sentences are considerably shorter than those found in *Seven Storey Mountain*. Even the paragraphs seem abbreviated, which may be explained partially due to the nature of essays versus novels. Nevertheless, Merton discloses his own thoughts on his style in an essay entitled “Symbolism: Communication or Communion?” (page 54): “The author will permit himself to set down, in a more

spontaneous and less organized form, a few bare intuitions;... reflection, synthesis, and contemplation are more important than investigation, analysis, and science." His style is smooth and fluid throughout all of the essays in *Love and Living*, which leads one to believe that Merton had achieved the inner peace he was seeking through contemplation. Merton stated his belief that dialogue between Christian Westerners and Zen Easterners was important in order to aid all men to discover the reality of inner peace (see page 202, his essay entitled "Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity."). Merton emphasizes the inadequacy of language, though, when one explains his own personal experience of inner peace as follows (page 15): "No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees."

According to Merton, solitude is a basic ingredient to love since the truth of God's love is revealed to man in silence. In his essay "Love and Solitude," Merton points out that "the paradox of solitude is that it is the true ground of universal love." (page 16) For Merton, solitude does not imply that everyone must withdraw from life in order to experience one's own being. Merton believes that solitude can be learned even in the midst of a crowd, and he states that "solitude is not apart from, above, better than ordinary life." (page 23) Rather, true solitude simply means being ourselves without thinking about it, and in doing so we glorify God's gift of life to us.

"He who is alone, and is conscious of what solitude means, finds himself simply in the ground of life. He is 'in Love.' He is in love with all, with everyone, with everything ... He lives, then, as a seed planted in the ground." (page 22)

Merton explains that this seed must dissolve (i.e., die) into the ground in order to become fruitful, and that the true solitary does not seek himself but loses himself. He expresses an interesting tension between doubt and faith based upon God representing Infinite Love. Doubt is used to dissolve one's ego-identity, and faith gives one life in Christ. Merton points out the appearance of complexity resulting from numerous doctrines laid down by the Church. He believes that these doctrines represent an obstacle to man's faith only if man grasps them separately from Love. Merton uses two metaphors, a wheel and a window frame, to explain how to integrate Love (God) and doctrine as follows (page 19-20): "Revealed doctrines about Him ... must converge upon Love as the spokes of a wheel converge upon a central hub. They are window frames through which the One Light enters our House ... We must seek to communicate with Him, not only by words, but above all by silence."

One of the best features of *Love and Living* is that Merton takes an opportunity to critique himself in his essay, "Learning to Live." Based upon his experiences at Columbia University, he reveals that he was voted best writer by the yearbook senior poll, although no one really cared that much. Merton explains that he was happy at Columbia because they let him be himself and find the value of unsucess. He relates a story about a request from an author compiling personal success stories to obtain a statement from Merton on his own personal success. Merton writes with humor (page 11):

"I replied indignantly that I was not able to consider myself a success in any terms that had a meaning to me. I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. If it so happened that I had written a best seller, this was a pure accident, due to inattention and naivete, and I would take very good care never to do the same again. If I had any message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success. I heard no more from him and I am not aware that my reply was published with other testimonials."

Later in the same essay, Merton develops what appears to be the closest thing to a moral found anywhere in the book. He writes a moral about success based upon the incident related above. In reality, he is offering a short sermon on life (page 12):

"What I am saying is this: the score is not what matters. Life does not have to be regarded as some game in which scores are kept and somebody wins. If you are too intent on winning, you will never enjoy playing. If you are too obsessed with success, you will forget to live. If you have learned only how to be a success, your life has probably been wasted."