

THOMAS MERTON & ALDOUS HUXLEY

The Springboard of *Ends & Means*

by **Judith Anderholm**

It was a November afternoon in 1937 when twenty-two year old Columbia undergraduate student Thomas Merton and his close friend Bob Lax were riding downtown on a bus. Bob began telling Tom about a new book by Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means*, and as the bus passed Scribners' bookstore, Tom wanted to stop immediately and get a copy of the book. Once he began reading, he could not put the book down and actually read it several times. He was excited, inspired and utterly absorbed with the book and even wrote a review-essay about it.¹

The subtitle of *Ends and Means* reads, "An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods employed for their Realization," and the table of contents includes such topics as Goals, Roads, and Contemporary Starting-Point; Social Reform and Violence; The Planned Society; Nature of the Modern State; Centralization and Decentralization; War; Individual Work and Reform; Inequality; Education; Religious Practices; Beliefs; Ethics.² This book provided a logic which much of Merton's thought had been lacking and reorganized his political thinking.³ Merton felt Huxley was largely right about political activism, and wholly right about the need for detachment.

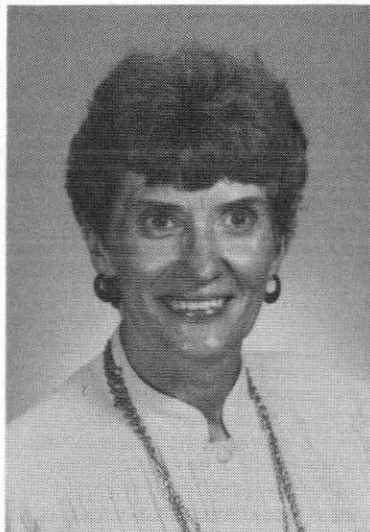
The point of Huxley's title was: we cannot use evil means to attain a good end. His chief argument was that we were using the means which precisely made good ends impossible to attain: war, violence, reprisals. He traced the impossibility of using proper means to the fact that we were immersed in the material and animal urges of an element in our nature which was blind and crude and unspiritual. The answer is to fight our way free from our

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1. See "Huxley and the Ethics of Peace" in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 257-261.

2. Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Ends*.

3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 109, 192. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.



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subjection to this inferior element, and reassert the dominance of our mind and will through the practice of prayer and asceticism.⁴

Ends and Means contains extensive information and insight into the major world religions, including different monastic orders. The book even compared a Cistercian monastery chapel with the meditation hall of a community of Zen Buddhists (*Ends*, pp. 225-251). Huxley gave Merton new meaning for the word “mystic” and, in reality, was a guide on his road to conversion (*Mott*, p. 192). For Merton, one of the most important effects of this book was a newly developed interest in Oriental mysticism.⁵ He borrowed several books on Eastern thought, but for all his effort and enthusiasm he was confirmed in his general view that the Buddhist conception of *nirvana* was pure negation. It was to be years before he came to deeper understanding.

Merton admitted that he may have come away from Huxley with the prejudice that Christianity was a less pure religion and spontaneously turned to the East to read about mysticism (*SSM*, p. 198). But, in June of 1938, Merton met the Hindu monk, Mahanambрата Brahmachari who, when queried about mystical books, actually recommended that Merton should read the many beautiful books written by Christians, such as those by St. Augustine and Thomas a Kempis.

In 1958, twenty years after the first encounter, Merton wrote to Huxley in response to his article, “Drugs That Shape Man’s Mind” which appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*.⁶ They did not read *The Post* in the monastery, but Merton had received a copy from a correspondent. Huxley’s extensive article included an expansive look at the various ways by which humans, often in search of that “mysterious other,” attempt to alter their conscious level of awareness. Huxley noted that the effects of peyote can be duplicated by synthetic mescaline and LSD. Tests showed that their use lowered the barriers between the conscious and subconscious and permitted the patient to look more deeply and with greater understanding into the recesses of his or her own mind. Huxley stated that when administered in the right psychological environment, these chemical mind changers make possible a genuine religious experience. In the past, spontaneous experiences of a mystical nature had been rare, but he claimed that new mind changers of the future would make premystical and mystical experiences commonplace. He stated that this will result from biochemical discoveries that will make it possible for a large number of people to achieve a radical self-transcendence and a deeper understanding of the nature of things. Religion, as an activity mainly concerned with symbols, will be transformed into an activity concerned mainly with experience and intuition — an everyday mysticism underlying and giving significance to everyday rationality, everyday tasks and duties, everyday human relationships.

Merton’s concern, on reading Huxley’s article, was to clarify the difference between mysticism as a state of the soul arrived at through prayer and meditation and mysticism as an experiment in sensory experience arrived at through chemistry. In a letter to Huxley, Merton noted that he was in no position to dispute the known effects of drugs, but he did have questions he would like to raise:

1. Are we not endangering the whole conception of mystical experience in saying that it is something that can be produced by a drug?
2. Ought we not to distinguish an experience which is essentially *aesthetic and natural* from an experience which is *mystical and supernatural*?

4. *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), p. 90.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 187. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

6. Aldous Huxley, “Drugs That Shape Man’s Mind,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (18 October 1958).

3. The moment such an experience is conceived as *dependent on* and *inevitably following from* the casual use of a material instrument, it loses the quality of spontaneity, freedom, and transcendence which make it truly mystical.

Merton ultimately stated that real mystical experience would be more or less incompatible with the *consistent* use of drugs.⁷ Huxley responded in a letter which explained various experiments and he defended the researchers and clinicians. He stated that about seventy per cent of those who take drugs have a positive experience. The others have a negative experience which may be infernal. It is important to note that many of the states experienced by the desert fathers were negative. Huxley pointed to his personal experiences which were both aesthetic and of “another nature.” They helped him to understand obscure utterances found in the writings of mystics, both Christian and Oriental.⁸ The exchange between Huxley and Merton was brief and friendly, but it left Merton with deep misgivings. He had concerns about the danger of *magic*: both magic and drug use were based on manipulation and were thus the opposite of true mysticism. Confusion in this distinction between ends and means would lead to tragic consequences. Merton also had concerns that wide spread drug use would cause the public to identify nonviolent peace movements with the “crazies,” a theme developed by the media (Mott, p. 378).

The difference between Merton and Huxley became indeed obvious. Merton was not impressed by the reasoning of those who sought mystical experience through chemistry. He clearly believed in the technique of prayer which alone could lead to real spiritual experience and to the grace through which the person arrives at contemplative liberty.⁹ Merton later wrote that what humans *really* seek and need — love, authentic identity, a life with meaning — cannot be gained by merely *willing* and by taking the wrong steps to procure them. No amount of ingenuity can “buy” these things — no psychological or sociological manipulation can encompass them, no inspirational religious self help, no ascetic technique, no drug can do the trick.¹⁰ The things we really need come to us only as gifts and in order to receive them, as gifts, we have to be open. In order to be open we have to renounce ourselves — in a sense we have to *die* to our image of ourselves, our autonomy, our fixation on our selfwilled identity. There is only one remedy — the surrender that seeks faith in God as a gift that is not our due, and that is willing to suffer great indigence and peril while waiting to receive it. Still later Merton wrote that drugs had appeared as a *deus ex machina* (“a god of machinery; anything artificially introduced to solve a problem”) to enable the self aware consciousness to extend its awareness of itself while seemingly getting out of itself. In other words, drugs have provided the self conscious self with a substitute for metaphysical and mystical transcendence.¹¹

I believe the book *Ends and Means* by Aldous Huxley was a springboard for Thomas Merton. As it is written, it will easily titillate an inquisitive and curious mind with a hunger and thirst to learn more. Huxley actually helped Merton organize and crystallize his thought and direction. While Merton undoubtedly possessed a brilliant mind, it would be some time before he reached higher maturity levels. Huxley introduced him to many concepts and ideals which started that process and which become evident in their later exchange about drugs.

7. See Thomas Merton, Letter to Aldous Huxley, November 27, 1958, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. 436-439.

8. *The Letters of Aldous Huxley*; ed. Grover Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 862-864.

9. Cornelia & Irving Sussman, *Thomas Merton* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 161.

10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 224.

11. Thomas Merton, *Zen & the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 28.