

THOMAS MERTON AS A PARADIGM OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

Review of

CHRISTIAN CONVERSION:

A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender

by Walter E. Conn

New York: Paulist Press, 1986

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--Reviewed by **Brother Patrick Hart**

Walter E. Conn, Professor of Religious Studies at Villanova University and currently Editor of *Horizons*, a journal of the College Theological Society, has written an engaging book on the subject of Christian conversion. He explains in his Preface that this is an interdisciplinary study which "combines a philosophy of self-transcendence with a critical interpretation of developmental psychology;" he thereby establishes a criterion for an in-depth evaluation of Christian conversion. Rather than simply assess various manifestations of conversion, Dr. Conn provides the critical basis for such a discussion. This requires considerable concentration on the part of any reader, but it is well worth the effort involved.

Certainly this kind of book has been needed for a long time, as Bernard Cooke of Holy Cross College points out. Walter Conn has given us a truly scholarly study of Christian conversion that draws synthetically from present day psychology, philosophy and theology, using these insights to enable him to analyze actual Christian religious experience. What we have here, then, is one of the best treatments to date of foundational moral theology.

The author has divided his book into six large sections. The first chapter, which he entitles "Conscience and Conversion" forms a triad: at first, the fundamental connection between an adequate understanding of conscience and a normative interpretation of conversion is elucidated. Secondly, the various dimensions of conversion are situated within a pattern of personal development. And thirdly, he shows how a "critical understanding of conversion can be philosophically grounded in a theory of self-transcendence and empirically controlled by a psychology of development."

Chapters two and three: "Personal Development through the Life Cycle" and "Developmental Theory and Conscience" are built on the previous works of Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and Robert Kegan. He successfully brings the basic elements of their various theories together in a single integral mode of personal development as self-transcendence, with the strengths of each theory criticizing and compensating for the weaknesses in the others. This is where Dr. Conn articulates his own personal perspective.

Chapter three's interpretation of conscience as developmental leads directly into chapter four's consideration of developmental transitions as conversions. Moral, cognitive and affective conversions are delineated as key dimensions of a fundamental shift from an instinctively spontaneous to a personally reflective patterning of the drive for self-transcendence. Once the main lines of the stages of development and the dimensions of conversion are sketched out, Dr.

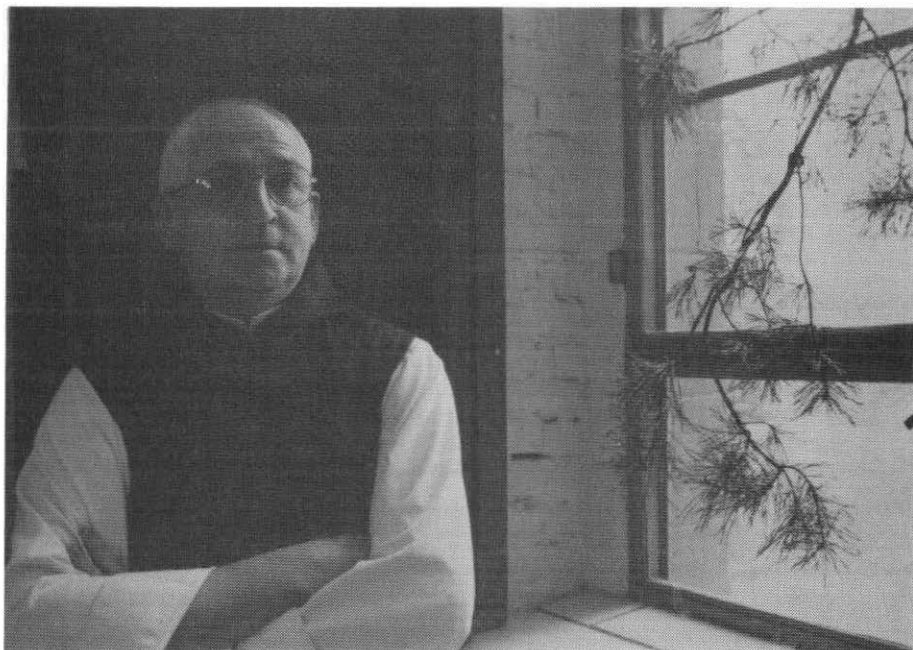
□ **Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.**, of the Abbey of Gethsemani, needs no introduction to Merton readers. He has written extensively on Merton and edited several Merton texts. His most recent publications are *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986) and *Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories* (Bardstown: Necessity Press, 1986).

Conn turns to the life of Thomas Merton for a concrete model, an example rich in the complexities and depth of Christian conversion.

In chapter five, the author considers Merton's early conversion. At first he discusses Merton's conversion experience as a Christian version of moral conversion. In chapter six, after introducing the notion of a distinctly religious conversion, he examines Merton's mature Christian experience in its light. Thus, Christian conversion is viewed not as one more conversion to be added to the moral, affective, cognitive and religious quartet, "but as the specific shape these conversions take when focused on Jesus in the symbolic context of the Christian story." In monastic terms, the vow of *conversatio morum* (or conversion of life), is seen as ongoing conversion for the monk or nun throughout the whole of one's monastic life, although this is not developed by Dr. Conn.

I am happy to recommend this book to all, both religious and lay alike, who are concerned about the question of Christian conversion today. Dr. Conn's use of Thomas Merton as a model is especially well-grounded, and shows the seriousness with which he explored his topic. If I have a reservation, it is in regard to the author's concept of conversion as one of uninterrupted progress. In real life conversions, the self all too often falls back, but then regains its equilibrium again and moves ahead with God's grace. "The just man falls seven times and rises again," as we read in Proverbs. I think Merton's life -- as it is true of nearly everyone -- would bear this out in practice.

The copious footnotes to this volume, replete with many references to related works, and the helpful Index at the end, provide an extra bonus for those who would like to pursue further study along the lines developed here. This, too, I would encourage for anyone adequately prepared for such a venture.



BROTHER PATRICK HART

Photo by Brother Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.