

MERTON AND THE FEMININE: A REFLECTION

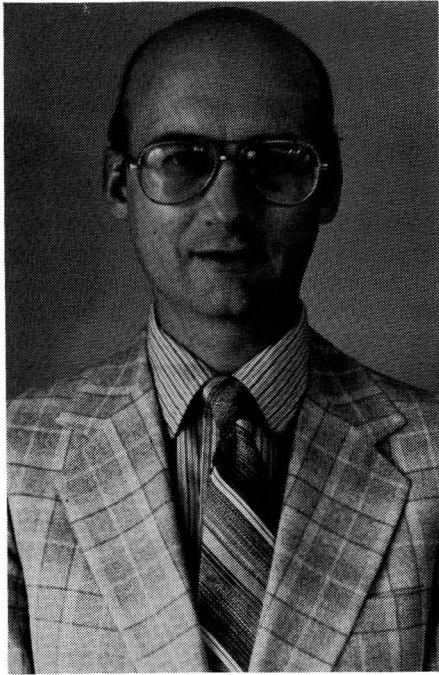
by **James R. Lauridson**

This short essay was written following a stimulating discussion about Thomas Merton's brief love affair in 1966 with the student nurse (identified as "S." in Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*). It had been suggested to me that Merton would have been more relevant to our times if he had married and continued to write and explore spirituality in the married state. My contention is that this episode was the last in a series of encounters with the feminine that allowed Merton to develop a healthy human and monastic understanding of himself and the feminine. It surely was not necessary for him to marry, even though Mott makes it clear that Merton came within a hair of doing just that. The symbol of the committed archetypal monk which was such a part of Merton's identity would have been shaken by such a move. His ideas would have been as valid, but their impact would have been diluted.

The affair with the nurse was the last of a series of relationships that healed the division between the masculine and feminine that had been formalized when Merton entered the Trappist Order. But even prior to that his feminine relationships had been immature and incomplete. The early death of his mother left a void and hurt that appeared throughout his writings. Mott and other biographers hint that Ruth Merton was a cold cerebral mother. Certainly her actions at the time of her own death (sending young Tom a farewell letter and not allowing him to visit) would suggest this. Although details are not available, the affair with the English girl at Cambridge which culminated in his leaving England seems to have been immature and limited to the physical (indeed, it is strange that Merton barely mentions the girl and/ or the child who presumably died in the bombings of World War II in his writings). At Columbia and later at Saint Bonaventure he had many "girl friends," but no significant relationships developed.

On entering Gethsemani, two restricting disciplines were imposed on Merton by the rigid Cistercian rule. First, the secular and religious were sharply separated. Second (and closely linked to the secular-religious division) is the separation of masculine and feminine. Just as the monastery rule and walls excluded the world, so they excluded women (though not the "feminine side" of the monks). At that time in his life Merton eagerly accepted these restrictions. Ironically, he would spend the last ten years of his life healing these separations in reconciling the secular-religious and feminine-masculine. Indeed, the secular and feminine seem to be closely associated during this reconciliation period. His opening to the world is followed by his opening to more contact with women.

□ **James R. Lauridson** is a physician who lives in Montgomery, Alabama, and works at the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences. Originally from Colorado, he holds degrees in electrical engineering (B.S.) and medicine (M.D.) from the University of Colorado. His only other publications have been on medical topics and he writes: "I am a very unlikely person to be writing an article such as this."



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Unification is a major theme of the later years: unification of secular and religious, and unification of the masculine and feminine. In fact, his work relating Christianity and the religious aspirations of the East is one of his widely recognized achievements. Surprisingly, his personal and mystical unification of the masculine and feminine is less recognized by commentators.

Merton's contacts with women evolved on two levels: the intellectual and the emotional. Both were important for his growth. Merton had maintained business and personal contact with Naomi Burton Stone for many years. Likewise his contact with women religious, particularly Mary Luke Tobin in the later years, continued on a regular basis. However, it is in his correspondence with Rosemary Ruether (1966 to 1967) that we can see the development of a secure, honest, open and trusting relationship. As one reads portions of these letters, one sees the monk gradually opening himself to meaningful dialogue with an intellectual, successful, secular woman. He is cautious at first but eventually begins to share his deepest concerns about his vocation and even his concerns about his relationships with women. The correspondence is a milestone.

More interesting and much more difficult to describe is the emotional, romantic and even mystical feminine development. While his contact with Rosemary Ruether established experience with the feminine intellect, other experiences would take Merton to the essence of the feminine. He would need his poetry to express it and he would eventually lose his composure. It seems to have begun with two dreams he had, the first in the late 1950s.

In February 1958, Merton had a dream in which a beautiful, passionate, virginal, dark-haired Jewish girl embraced him. The physical aspects of this dream are undeniable. The girl's name was *Proverb*. This experience had such an impact that one month later he composed a letter to the girl Proverb. In the letter he expressed his gratitude to her for loving in him something he thought he had lost and for showing him someone whom he had thought had ceased to be. He even described this dream to Boris Pasternak with whom he had been corresponding. He associated the girl Proverb with Wisdom as depicted in the Book of Wisdom.

But this was just the beginning. In July 1960, he was hospitalized for medical examinations. While in hospital, he had another moving dream. In the dream, he was awakened early in the morning by a soft-spoken nurse who spoke as if she were the Blessed Virgin. Merton had a strong feeling that this early morning experience was life-restoring, a theme that appears in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and in the great poem *Hagia Sophia* (published in 1962). Elements from these two dreams are clearly present in this work. The poem distinctly expressed Merton's

identification of the feminine attributes of God and it is, in fact, a celebration of those great attributes: tenderness, mercy, fecundity, creativity, playfulness, gratitude, passivity and uniting love. Hagia Sophia plays a special role in God's re-creation and re-awakening of creation at dawn each morning. The qualities of the feminine God are especially present through the Blessed Virgin Mary. In this way Hagia Sophia is responsible for the Incarnation. The full implications of this poem cannot be discussed in this limited space. It is, however, an important point in Merton's evolving sense of the feminine.

The women in the two dreams, the dark-haired Proverb and the gentle nurse, came together in a real, concrete and emotionally shattering way in 1966. While hospitalized again, Merton met a young, dark-haired, sensitive, gentle, intelligent woman named "S." She was assigned to be his nurse. Significantly, they met in the early morning and her first duty was to give him a sponge bath. She had read some of his works and related to him immediately. The rest of the story is humanly appealing with the joy, happiness, and foolishness that head-over-heels love generates. Merton did it all at a time in life when he was a well established and world famous monk and writer. His humanity shines forth as he is re-created by the experience.

He came close to marriage and discussed it openly with a few friends and with "S." Finally, after several months, he chose to stay with his vocation. But he was a changed and more complete person. As Mott says, Merton never again had doubts about *being* loved. He had been touched personally by Hagia Sophia. But he did not forget the nurse. He remembered and observed the first anniversary of their meeting. In two years, he would be dead.

Merton's meeting "S." was foreshadowed in the dreams of 1958 and 1960 and in *Hagia Sophia* in 1962. She provided the finishing touch to the full person Merton was becoming. The importance of "S." to Merton has been recognized. According to Sister Mary Luke Tobin, she was invited to the monastery at Tommie O'Callaghan's behest for the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of his death.

Just as Merton's reconciliation of the secular and religious did not imply that he leave Gethsemani to set up "business," so his reconciliation of the masculine and feminine did not require that he leave the monastery and marry. Instead, he emerged a more perfect monk because he was a more complete person. He was ready for the trip to Asia and the special encounter with God before his death.

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