

# HUXLEY'S ENDS AND MEAN REVISITED

by **Chalmers MacCormick**

It is in the light of our beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality that we formulate our conceptions of right and wrong; and it is in the light of our conception of right and wrong that we frame our conduct, not only in the relations of our private life, but also in the sphere of politics and economics. So far from being irrelevant, our metaphysical beliefs are the finally determining factor in all our actions.

Aldous Huxley was born on July 26, 1894. It is fitting that now, in his centennial year, we recall and reflect on his importance for Thomas Merton. The present essay focuses on Huxley's **Ends and Means** (1937), which, by Merton's own appraisal, played a "very great" part in his conversion.<sup>1</sup>

Though resembling a treatise, **Ends and Means** is more aptly seen as a two-part tract. The first part (Chs. I-XI) concerns itself with practical solutions to the major social and political crises that were then current (above all, initially, militarism and the threat of war). Huxley calls it "a kind of practical cookery book of reform," containing "political recipes, educational recipes, recipes for the organization of industry, of local communities, of groups of devoted individuals."

The second part (Chs. XII-XIV) is "a discussion of first principles." The focus there is on religion and ethics. In Huxley's view, those three chapters are "the most significant and, even from the practical point of view, the most important." They are also the chapters that most affected Merton. They presented him with "those two big concepts of a supernatural, spiritual order, and the possibility of real, experimental contact with God," and (most importantly) they launched him on an intensive study of oriental mysticism.

That was in the fall of 1937, soon after the book's appearance. Merton's felt indebtedness to it remained strong when, roughly a decade later, he was readying **The Seven Storey Mountain** for publication. But along with acknowledging his debt, he also voiced reservations, such as that Huxley was (a) "indiscriminate" in his borrowings from the Christian mystics (i.e., he quoted authors of questionable orthodoxy such as Meister Eckhart; (b) too much of a Buddhist; and (c) a nihilist. In retrospect, then, Merton both agreed and disagreed with what he **understood** to be Huxley's views — which might or might not be in accord with the latter's actual ones. Are they? The following seven-fold synopsis should, I believe, help us to decide. Huxley affirmed that:

1. Guided by the great mystics, we must, above all, have a sound metaphysics, i.e., a developed, coherent belief about ultimate reality. For inherent in any metaphysics are practical consequences. As we believe, so do we behave.

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2. Ultimate reality — the hidden unity underlying all plurality — is “so far beyond particular form or personality that nothing can be predicated of it.”

3. The chief ethical corollary of this metaphysical assertion is non-attachment, best exemplified by the “ideal man” (a synonym apparently for mystic). Such a person is non-attached to all things — i.e., non-attached not only to sensations, possessions, power, fame, and social position, but “even to science, art, speculation, [and] philanthropy.”

4. Perfected by systematic training (asceticism, reflection, and especially meditation), non-attachment is manifest in, and as, intelligent and universal, disinterested, emotionless Love. Accordingly, it is, except only in name, not negative. Rather, it is affirmative: it “imposes upon those who would practice it the adoption of an intensely positive attitude toward the world.” (Important words!) The knowledge realized by the ideal man/mystic thus has a double-orientation — towards ultimate reality and towards the world as a whole. Such knowledge is truly mystical.

5. Not all mystical knowledge is equally true, however. For there are various types and species of mysticism, some of which are lower and some higher, depending on their respective notions of ultimate reality, as well as on the practical consequences that inhere in those notions. (Example: where there is a belief in a personal God, religious persecution tends to arise.) Buddhist mysticism is inherently a higher species of mysticism than Christian mysticism is — and that because it is grounded in a more satisfactory metaphysics: the ultimate reality of Buddhism, **Nirvana**, is non-personal, whereas the God of Christianity is personal.

6. But not all Christian mysticism is of a piece. Just as there are various types, levels, etc., of mysticism and mystics generally, so also are there various types and levels of **Christian** mysticism and mystics. It is possible to distinguish and evaluate them; there are criteria for doing so.

7. In sum, some Christian mystics are of a higher order than others. That is to say, to the degree that they affirm a non-personal ultimate reality, eradicate emotion, are non-attached, pacific, and benevolent and (by implication) closely resemble the Buddha, they are “mystics of the first order” Prime examples of this are Meister Eckhart and the author of **The Cloud of Unknowing**. (Conversely, St. Augustine and presumably St. Bernard would, from Huxley’s viewpoint, be examples of lower order mystics.)

Such is the substance of Huxley’s notion of mysticism in 1937.

## II

Not surprisingly, given Huxley’s many successes and high reputation as a writer, **Ends and Means** was widely reviewed. The reviews were, on the whole, mixed, the reviewers somewhat ambivalent. Some were overwhelmingly negative. Alfred Kazin’s review is a case in point.<sup>2</sup> He scorned Huxley’s recent leap “from facile bitterness to facile mysticism” and his “Humorless, querulous insistence that we all read a Buddhist maxim a day and be kind to each other.” Kazin’s may have been one of the reviews that Merton had in mind when he wrote the counter-review that appeared in March 1938 under the title “Huxley and the Ethics of Peace.”<sup>3</sup> There he defended Huxley against those critics who believed, and lamented, that **Ends and Means** represented a radical change, both intellectual and moral, in Huxley’s world-view. As Merton wrote, “it is important to show that the Huxley in **Ends and Means** is not so new after all, because the accusation implies no small inconsistency on his part. He is supposed to have abandoned safe, scientific ground and retreated toward magic.” Merton sought to correct this misinterpretation and therefore argued that such change as had occurred could “only be expressed in terms of development, of expansion. To talk of it as if it were the minor, personal revolution of a lecher suddenly running to the cloister (which is what critics have done) is to confess unfamiliarity with most of Huxley’s books.” Against those critics Merton stressed the continuities in Huxley’s thought,

especially in regard to what Huxley said about the supreme virtue, Intelligence: “There can be no possible doubt that Intelligence was always the highest of virtues in Huxley’s eyes. And his treatment of Intelligence as a virtue, in **Ends and Means**, follows the same pattern as his treatment of it in other books.” Conjoined with it, however, is a new element — something that may be shockingly so for some readers: namely, Love. “What shocks us more than anything is the fact that Huxley puts Love by the side of Intelligence as the head of all virtues.” Defending Huxley on this point, Merton wrote that it is “axiomatic” that these two virtues, Love and Intelligence, “must dominate any system of ethics framed to exclude war.”

### III

Several years later, when reflecting back in **The Seven Storey Mountain**, Merton remained, on the whole, favorably disposed towards **Ends and Means** — especially its speculative side. But as noted, he also had reservations. What are we to make of them? In my own efforts to discover answers, I’ve found it most helpful to pose two other questions, the first being: did Merton present Huxley’s views accurately and fairly?

My answer is that generally speaking he did — especially those views of Huxley’s that coincided with his own. Consider, for instance, this statement by Merton: “Not only was there such a thing as a supernatural order, but as a matter of concrete experience, it was accessible, very close at hand, and extremely near, an immediate and most necessary source of moral vitality, and one which could be reached most simply, most readily by prayer, faith, detachment, love.” Even if the phrase “supernatural order” should strike us as most un-Huxleyan, don’t we have encapsulated here both the heart of Huxley’s concept of mysticism in the later thirties and testimony to Merton’s personal approval of it?

Still, there is the matter of Merton’s reservations, which I find flawed. Of the three specifically noted above, the charge that Huxley was a nihilist is — because it concerns fundamentals — particularly serious and in need of correction.

In **Ends and Means** was Huxley truly a nihilist? No, he was not. To be sure, he didn’t like the world as he found it and wanted it reformed. But as we’ve seen (synopsis #4), he didn’t repudiate the world; rather, he affirmed it. Merton was under a mistaken impression, therefore, when he surmised that Huxley “had followed the old Protestant groove back into the heresies that make the material creation evil of itself; [hence] his sympathy for Buddhism and for the nihilistic character which he preferred to give to his mysticism and even to his ethics.”

What accounts for Merton’s error?

There are, as I see it, two relatively obvious explanations. One is that, as someone who was expressly partial to Buddhism, Huxley was (in Merton’s eyes) **bound** to be a nihilist — or at least nihilist-tending; for Buddhism is, Merton held while his autobiography was in process, fundamentally nihilistic. Consider what he wrote then about Buddhist **Nirvana**: he called it: the ultimate negation of all experience and all reality whatever.”

A second explanation is that by the mid-forties Merton was no longer seeing **Ends and Means** with the same directness, freshness, and clarity that were operative in the late thirties. A number of things had happened to alter his perspective: his conversion to Catholicism and his move to the monastery, as well as the passage of time and the inevitable fading and warping of memory that is our common lot as humans.<sup>4</sup> But one other factor in particular needs to be stressed: from 1939 on, he was seeing **End and Means** through the lens of another of Huxley’s writings, the novel **After Many a Summer Dies the Swan**, which he panned in the November 1940 issue of **The Catholic World** in a review entitled “Huxley’s Pantheon.”<sup>5</sup> There, concerning nihilism, he wrote: “[Huxley] now believes that the world is completely illusory. Matter does not exist, and it is evil.”

Merton reached this judgment (mistaken, as it happens) by focusing on one of the main characters, "the dullest character in the whole history of the English novel," a certain Mr. Propter. And it is true that Propter speaks and behaves in a non-attached Buddha-like way and appears thereby to personify the ideals and practical aims that Huxley had advanced in 1937. Here, for instance, is a piece of Propterian sententiousness that is both typical of virtually all Propter's utterances and more than a faint echo of **Ends and Means**.

The more you respect a personality, the better its chance of discovering that all personality is a prison. Potential good is anything that helps you to get out of prison. Actualized good lies outside the prison, in timelessness, in the state of pure, disinterested consciousness.

For none of what he says, however, does Propter deserve to be labeled a nihilist. While he does oppose eternity to time, he does not oppose spirit (or mind) to matter, or condemn the latter. Still, Merton thought so and therefore, in the end, consigned Propter — and with him Huxley — to social isolation.

Neither Propter nor Huxley really believes he can do anything for anybody else, and if they have any vocation at all, it is to the hermitage . . . . There Huxley would be able to sit and think, in between visits from cultured and amusing friends, and it would be good for him. He should do that.

#### IV

A second key question is: to what extent did the mysticism of **Ends and Means** anticipate the mysticism of Merton's later years?

My answer is that though differences persisted, Merton's later position more nearly approximated Huxley's than his earlier had — thanks to the virtual canceling out in the meantime of his stated reservations. Consider, for instance, how Merton felt in the sixties about Meister Eckhart. In 1966, at a time of acute personal travail, Eckhart became Merton's "life-raft."<sup>6</sup> Far from dismissing or demeaning Eckhart because of his dubious orthodoxy, Merton came to commend him as one who represented a current that was "profound, wide and **largely orthodox**."<sup>7</sup> Though mindful of Eckhart's limitations, he could scarcely contain his enthusiasm for this "great man." He was entranced by him: "I like the brevity, the incisiveness of his sermons, his way of piercing straight to the heart of the inner life, the awakened spark, the creative and redeeming Word. God born in us."<sup>8</sup>

Consider, too, Merton's later understanding of **Nirvana**, which he had previously criticized for being world-negating. He eventually came to see that view as a distortion.

Enlightenment is not a matter of trifling with the facticity of ordinary life and spiriting it all away. As the Buddhists say, **Nirvana** is found in the midst of the world around us, and truth is not **somewhere** else . . . . **Nirvana** and **Samsara** are the same. This, I submit, implies not flight from the world, denigration of the world, repudiation of the world, but a real understanding of the world."<sup>9</sup>

To which Huxley, had he still been alive, might have said: "Amen."

#### V

What, in the end, is one to make of all this? In the absence of a more sustained correspondence between these two luminaries, one must settle for modest conclusions — be tentative when one might prefer to be definitive. "Non finis quaerendi." Which is to say, every seemingly sure answer opens up new questions. I can imagine a number of plausible scenarios for one or more conversations between Huxley and Merton. I don't for the moment at least, propose to describe any of them. The encounters would be amicable — of that

I'm sure. They would be productive — of that I'm also sure. My optimism is warranted, I believe, by the little correspondence concerning them both that is available to us. Two letters in particular boded well for a netting of minds. The first, a letter from Huxley to his friend Christopher Isherwood, who was then (1942) working with the Quakers in Pennsylvania, bears witness that long before Merton himself had become a celebrity, Huxley saw and appreciated his special qualities. He wrote to Isherwood:

If you are ever in New York, it might be worth your while to get in touch with a man, with whom I have exchanged one or two letters of late — a Catholic called Thomas Merton, whose address is St. Bonaventura, New York. (I presume it is some sort of school or college.) He wrote very interestingly from a Catholic viewpoint about **Gray Eminence**, and described what sounds like a remarkable venture in saintliness functioning in Harlem among the poorest negroes . . . .<sup>10</sup>

The second letter, this one from Merton and addressed to John Heidbrink, a civil rights and peace activist, evidences Merton's conviction that, differences between him and Huxley notwithstanding, they had much in common.

Really Huxley is a great man . . . . If you write to him, do please give him my regards and remind him of the great esteem and affection I have for him. I have a feeling he thinks that having become a hardened Roman and a monk into the bargain, I have drifted far from any common ground with him, but this is not so.<sup>11</sup>

To which I say: "Amen."

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, **The Seven Storey Mountain** [SSM] (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), pp. 184-187; Thomas Merton, **The Secular Journal** [SJ] (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959) < p. 268.
2. **The New Republic** (8 December 1937), pp. 152-153.
3. Thomas Merton, **The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton** [LE]; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 457-461.
4. In **SSM**, p. 186, Merton admits to an uncertain memory regarding Huxley's supposed repudiation of matter.
5. **LE**, pp. 490-494. He subsequently regretted having written it. See **SJ**, p. 266 (entry dated 25 November 1941).
6. Michael Mott, **The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 456; John Howard Griffin, **Follow the Ecstasy** (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 80.
7. Thomas Merton, **Zen and the Birds of Appetite** (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 63; emphasis added.
8. Thomas Merton, **Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander** (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 42.
9. **Zen**, pp. 87-88.
10. **The Letters of Aldous Huxley**; ed. Grover Smith (New York, 1969), p. 476.
11. Thomas Merton, **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), p. 407 (letter dated 15 February 1962).

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