

# THOMAS MERTON & THE QUIZ SHOW SCANDAL: “AMERICA’S LOSS OF INNOCENCE?”

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Robert Redford’s film, *Quiz Show*, was critically well received and was nominated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as the “Best Picture” of 1994. About one third into the narrative, a bright-eyed, eager young student asks Charles Van Doren (played by Ralph Fiennes): “Professor Van Doren, is Thomas Merton an Episcopalian or a Catholic?” Charles replies offhandedly as he walks into his office, “A Catholic.” The film deals with the major and much publicized scandal which broke in 1959 when it was learned that contestants (including Charles Van Doren) on “Twenty-One,” an immensely popular quiz show dealing with general knowledge not specific topics as some others did, had been supplied with answers and that the whole thing was a hoax.

News hounds in all media hastened to assure the public that they had been duped with deliberate and malicious intent, not only by television executives themselves, but by the very contestants they had idealized who betrayed the unsuspecting and adoring public by dishonestly presenting themselves as something they were not — and taking money for it! Charles Van Doren, probably the most popular contestant (the ratings soared high during his fourteen weeks on the show), bore much of the brunt of adverse reaction when he admitted that he had been given answers. The big hype line in the preview for *Quiz Show* emphasizes that “America lost its innocence” somehow in this, the first really big television scandal.

## I

Why is Charles Van Doren asked about Thomas Merton? First of all, as narrative films often do, the sequence calls on the filmgoer to have brought some knowledge — but admittedly not a great deal — into the theater. It helps if the filmgoer does know who Thomas Merton is — otherwise the lines will go right over her or his head (as I suspect they will for the great majority of those who see *Quiz Show*). Those who have heard of Thomas Merton or who have read him probably have some awareness that he was good friends with Charles’s father, Columbia professor Mark Van Doren; that they were, in fact (to use one of my father’s favorite phrases), “tight as ticks on a camel.” From Merton’s student days at Columbia in the 1930s until his death in 1968, he maintained a steady friendship with Van Doren. They traded mutual compliments and praise for each other in their letters. Merton left many of his manuscripts with Van Doren when he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941 and, three years later in 1944, Van Doren was the moving force behind the publication of Merton’s first book, *Thirty Poems*. Van Doren and his wife, Dorothy, visited Merton at Gethsemani in 1954 and 1957, and Van Doren visited with him alone in 1956 and 1961. Merton dedicated *The Strange Islands*, another book of poetry, to Mark and Dorothy in 1957. When the quiz show scandal broke in



MARK VAN DOREN & THOMAS MERTON  
Gethsemani 1957

1959, Van Doren had just completed his “Introduction” for Merton’s *Selected Poems*, a group of poems which he himself had, in fact, “selected.” In 1968, Merton remarked that Van Doren was “one of the major American poets of the century.” When Merton died later that year, Van Doren telegraphed Abbot Flavian Burns: “He was one of the great persons of our time or of any time. I shall mourn for him as long as I live” (*RJ*, p. 55).

Merton is mentioned, in part then, to help the film establish who the Van Dorens were. There is quite a bit of “name dropping” in the first half of the film, all designed to show that the Van Dorens were indeed, as the film constantly reminds us, “one of the country’s most prominent intellectual families;” that they hobnobbed with intellectuals and artists and writers and scholars; that they (and this may be one reason Thomas Merton is brought in) possessed moral fiber in a high degree, representing all that was best about America. They were living fulfillments of “the American dream.”

It is certainly true that it would have been hard to find a family as “squeaky clean” and WASPish as the Van Dorens, from their very correct Dutch roots in old New Netherlands to their Ivy League image in the twentieth century. Mark and his brother, Carl Van Doren, enjoyed high blown and well deserved reputations as writers and scholars. They were solid without being dull; insightful without being radical; lords of language without resorting to jargon and buzz words. Mark had already, by the late 1950s, moved with barely a ripple through a distinguished career at Columbia. Certainly he had never been connected with scandal. Oh, there were a few raised eyebrows when he, a Columbia professor, was awarded the 1939 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (the Pulitzer Prizes, remember, were awarded by the Trustees of Columbia University), but his reputation was so sound that there was nothing like the feverish protest that had erupted when Columbia professor Hatcher Hughes won the 1924 Drama prize for *Hell Bent For Heaven*. All in all, it would have been hard in 1957 to find a more respectable and respected family than the Van Dorens. And that is precisely what the producers of “Twenty-One” thought!

Merton, as mentioned above, had long before joined in the chorus praising Mark Van Doren and his family. Those who have read *The Seven Storey Mountain* will remember Merton’s glowing and adulatory portrait of Mark. He said in part: “I thought to myself, who is this excellent man Van Doren who being employed to teach literature, teaches just that.” (*SSM*, p. 139). Merton never stopped thinking how excellent a man Van Doren was and he did represent for Merton the best in America. He wrote to Mark on 24 July 1959, shortly before he learned of the quiz show scandal but sounding themes which would resurface in his reaction to it:

Anyway this all adds up to one thing: that America means to me Mark, Dot, the boys [i.e., Charles and John], Lax, and the fellows, and Krutch and Thurber and then back further Thoreau and . . . It is not a very long list. So it seems that only a very small sector of the country really means a lot to me. But I think it is a very important one, and essential enough so that I have no apologies to make to any of those committees, do I? They, the committees, are about the last thing in the world I ask of America and for their sakes I would gladly part company with the whole business: them, and *Time* and Coca Cola (this is heresy, don’t tell Lax, but I have suddenly gone manichean on Coca Cola. Not that I drink any, but I have just come to detest the very idea of the stuff because of some ads that I saw going into Louisville, I mean the uggosome picture of healthy, optimistic, empty headed, crew cutted, sweated, American youth swilling that dam stuff in order to bear witness to our incomparable national IDEAL.) (There, now I’ve said it.) There are some other things too, but I forget them, happily. [*RJ*, p. 35]

Unbeknown to Merton (though he would soon know it), Charles Van Doren, because he fit so perfectly that “uggsome” image which Merton nailed on to Coca Cola, had been swept, largely because of that very image, into the center of a major television scandal. “Image” played an important part in the quiz shows and one producer remarks in the film that they had found themselves “an intellectual Joe DiMaggio” in Charles Van Doren.

Merton, of course, had an image too as a sort of “monastic Joe DiMaggio” and he was not unaware of it (or particularly happy with it). The lines about him in *Quiz Show* not only help to establish the “image” of the Van

Dorens, but they also prepare the filmgoer — at least the filmgoer “in the know” — for Merton’s appearance as a minor character a few scenes later. Yet the “character Merton” has more to do with the screenwriter’s and Redford’s image of a “monk” than with the reality of Merton. The scene has the Van Dorens gathered at the family farm in Connecticut for a picnic celebrating Mark’s birthday. They are shown sitting around a table out on the lawn with their family and their “oh-so-correct” friends. We are further prepared when Paul Scofield as Mark Van Doren says something about “Thomas” (though Mark called him “Tom” in their letters). Were Merton alive (especially given the aversion he came to feel towards film and toward seeing himself portrayed), he would certainly be horrified (though because he was aware of “image” he might not be surprised) at what follows. As the camera pans around the picnic table, we see an obvious monk. It *must* be Merton (we “in the know” say) and, in fact, when the cast list rolls at the end of the film the character is listed as “Thomas Merton, the Monk” — just in case we didn’t quite “get it!” The monk is: (1) bald (that’s OK); (2) old (in 1958 Merton was forty-three, not seventy); (3) short and portly (looking more like Uncle Fester on “The Addams Family” than like Merton); (4) a bit saccharine looking (well, aren’t monks supposed to look a bit “saccharine?”); and (5) wearing brown Franciscan-looking robes (Trappists wear black and white, so some costumer failed to do his or her homework on this one). All right, we can perhaps chalk all that up to dramatic license. Merton is there to establish something about the Van Dorens, obviously *not* to be portrayed accurately as “Thomas Merton, the Monk.”

However, dramatic license be hanged, the scene underscores again an insistent, regular, and apparently necessary (for many people) part of the Merton image which has been steadily building since his death. It may not be surprising, undoubtedly part of what we might call the *Forrest Gump* syndrome, that we want our heroes to have been with important people at important events. In any case, rumors persist that Merton was willynilly running around here and there, visiting friends, going to picnics and parties, drinking and carousing, giving talks, indulging in personal peccadilloes. In the week in which I saw *Quiz Show*, two more instances of these erroneous but persuasive “Merton sightings” crossed my desk. A peace activist wrote that her husband, who went to Bellarmine College, “attended a talk there by Merton” (he did NOT! Merton never gave a talk at Bellarmine College). I probably won’t even bother to tell her it isn’t so because she would believe me no more than the woman in Chicago who insisted, despite my telling her she was wrong, that Bill Shannon had Merton speak to his religious studies class at Nazareth College when she was an undergraduate — or another woman, convinced despite me, who *knows* that she heard Merton give a talk in Providence, Rhode Island. The second instance in that week is a bit more serious because people do tend to believe what they read in newspapers and see on television. Tom Miller, writing on the end of the Left’s affair with Castro and Cuba in the *Washington Post* of 4 September 1994, baldly states: “Thomas Merton went to Cuba a month after the revolutionary government settled in [in 1959].” NO! Merton did *not* go to Cuba in 1959. He did not attend a picnic at the Van Doren farm in Connecticut in 1958 either.

People, however, already prefer to believe the film, not me (what do I know anyway?). As I stood with friends in the lobby after the film and stated that he wouldn’t have been in Connecticut in 1958, one woman (who should know better) responded: “How do you know he wasn’t there? Maybe he sneaked out of the monastery.” Another one (who wouldn’t know better) said: “We don’t know everything he did, do we?” I snapped: “So how did Robert Redford and his screenwriters find it out when I obviously can’t, Monica Furlong couldn’t, Michael Mott didn’t?” She still looked skeptical. Later her husband said to me: “But, Bob, in *Song for Nobody* Ron Seitz says that Merton was always calling people up and wanting to have parties and picnics and drink a six pack and go here and there, so maybe he did go to Connecticut.” I replied, trying to keep my voice as even as possible: “If you want to think that, think it, but I’ll tell you this: Ron Seitz did his friend no good service by leaving you or anyone else with that sort of impression.”

So, does it matter if people think Merton was going here and there, not staying in his monastery? On one level, it may not mean much. Those who do know will recognize it, at least in *Quiz Show*, as dramatic license. Those who don’t won’t much care or even notice. On another level, it does, of course, give meaning to Merton’s own fears about seeing himself portrayed and makes explicable his Trust Agreement prohibition against his works

being dramatized. And I do find myself irresistibly struck, somehow, that a film which self-consciously and a bit smugly tells us that the media shouldn't lie to the public presents such a false image of Merton — and who knows what else?

It is precisely “image” — even “uggsome image” — which forms the basis for Merton's reaction to the quiz show scandal. Let us look now at how Merton did react in his monastery in the knobs of Kentucky, bearing in mind that Merton came to the issue with two predispositions. First, he was prejudiced against television and already distrustful of the images it foisted on the American public. Second, it was inconceivable to him that Mark Van Doren might have misbegotten, that a son of Van Doren's might be morally and spiritually deficient.

## II

What did he know? He did not normally read newspapers and television was taboo at Gethsemani in the 1950s. In his 1963 “Circular Letter,” he said, probably hyperbolically: “TV (never watched it; don't want to)” [RJ, p. 90]. Yet he did grasp the power of television, that it panders to something deep in the American psyche, that it plays out some part of the American dream. He said in that same “Circular Letter”: “It is no good simply letting our minds become a passive reflection of a television screen.” Read what he recorded in his journal in late August, 1968. Merton spent a rare night in Louisville (OK, yes, he did go fairly often to Louisville). This night he slept at Bonaventure Hall, present site of the Merton Center on the Bellarmine College campus. The building then housed Franciscans on the faculty. Merton wrote:

Finally, a growing American ritual, sitting dead tired with a glass of bourbon in the lounge of the Franciscan friary watching pro-football on TV — at midnight!

The Packers beat the Dallas Cowboys — & it was, I must say, damn good football because it was pre-season & many contracts depended on it.

Football is one of the really valid and deep American rituals. It has a religious seriousness which American religion can never achieve. A cosmic, contemplative dynamism, a gratuity, a movement from play to play, a definitiveness that responds to some deep need, a religious need, a sense of meaning that is at once final & provisional: a substratum of dependable regularity, continuity, & an ever renewed variety, openness to new possibilities, new chances. It happens. It is done. It is possible again. It happens. Another play is decided, played out, “done,” (Replay for the good ones so you can really see how it happened) & that's enough, on to the next one — until the final gun blows them out of a huddle & the last play never happens. They disperse. Cosmic break up. Final score 31-27 now football history. This will last forever. It is *secure* in its having happened. And we saw it happen. We existed.

(Notebook # 36, TMSC)

Ten years earlier, though Merton would have claimed he had never seen TV in that period, he might well have seen something of the same “religious” dimension in the super quiz shows with fantastic money awarded for dazzling displays of knowledge. While we must assume that Merton never saw “Twenty-One,” he did know that Charles appeared on the show. He wrote on 28 February 1957 to his friend Ed Rice: “Is Van Doren's son still winning everything on that TV quiz?” (RJ, p. 284) On 9 April he wrote to Mark himself: “I had another occasion to think of you, when news of Charlie's exploits on TV filtered through. I was given to understand that he had become the king of Persia as a result of being very smart, but that it was the tax people who actually wore the crown. It must have been harrowing, and if, after all, he feels like entering a Trappist monastery, well, the novitiate is wide open” (RJ, pp. 30-31).

Mark replied on 1 May: “Charlie has gone through something, certainly. About 15 million people have fallen in love with him — and I don't use the word lightly, nor did money have anything to do with it. Such letters I have never seen — quantity and quality, with not one peep of envy or malice. So much good will was (is) overwhelming. One thinks quite well of the world in consequence” (*Selected Letters of Mark Van Doren*, p. 217).

Whether one can call it good will or not, it was certainly true that Charles Van Doren became immensely popular on “Twenty-One,” projecting an “image” — clean cut, Ivy League, Anglo, handsome, intelligent, reserved, an American dreamboat. The producers, according to the film, wanted precisely this image, hoping it would grab the public, as indeed it did.

He was a contrast to his predecessor, Herbie Stempel (played by John Truturo), whom he defeated when Stempel was forced to give a wrong answer to a question he knew. Stempel, in the film, is a nerd, a Jew, a television personality wannabe with a strong Bronx accent, whiny and abrasive, an American underdog. For a time, audiences responded to the underdog, but when ratings slipped, the producers decided that Herbie had to be eliminated in favor of a different kind of image (the investigations did show that Jews on “Twenty-One” were invariably defeated by Gentiles and that the Gentiles just as invariably won more money). So, Herbie was sacrificed for a more Anglo image, or as one producer put it, for “The Great White Hope.”

Enter Charles Van Doren. In fourteen appearances, he won \$129,000; appeared on the cover of *Time* (did Merton shudder at that, if he knew it?); became the darling of a large segment of the population; hired a secretary to handle his piles of fan mail; and brought the Van Dorens to a pinnacle of fame that they had never known as mere intellectuals. We know, in the film, that he was supplied with answers and we know that he is bothered by it. After fourteen weeks, he “throws” the game, deliberately giving a wrong answer to a question he knows (and we, the audience, know he knows it). So does the investigator for the Congressional Committee (played by Rob Morrow). It was eventually hearings before this Congressional Committee (in real life and in the film) which exposed the quiz show hoax. Charles Van Doren appeared before the committee and admitted that he had received answers. He was praised by several senators, but one senator from New York remarked that he didn’t feel someone should be congratulated for finally telling the truth. Public reaction was, at first, generally as favorable to Charles as the several senators. In a short time, however, a backlash set in and Charles fell from grace as quickly as he fell into it.

Thomas Merton learned of the scandal in October 1959 while he was in the hospital in Louisville, gaining his information he said from the papers. He dashed off a handwritten letter to Mark. The public, goaded by the media, had already started to turn against Charles and Merton referred to it as “all the nasty fuss about Charlie.”

*Quiz Show* opens as Americans receive the news that the Soviets have put a satellite into space and the radio announcer asserts: “There’s something wrong in America!” Merton would have agreed and had already said just that in this first of his letters to Mark: “I for one do not believe that all is right with America.” He continued:

I think this is a sick and deluded nation (along with all the others, of course.) And this proves it in some sense. Why? Charlie, precisely because he is in most ways just what so many Americans want themselves to be — clear-headed, frank, & ingenuous, has to pay for it by becoming a victim of advertisers, manipulated & sold by them. To me, this is just another indication that few people with any influence care, anymore, about anything except how the best things look & how they sell. And the pity is that *everything* is reduced to that level, including all the things that can neither be seen or sold.

That Charlie should, in all innocence, be the victim of such manipulation is a sad & terrible thing. At least he has his innocence. But that does not spare him from the inane gestures and exhibitions of the inquisitors who are bent on staging their own kind of show: the great, stupid stuff of governmental zeal & integrity!

So I want you to know that I am very angry & very sick & very fed up with what has happened to you all, and that I have considerable difficulty in keeping the anger within ordinate bounds. (RJ, pp. 35-36)

Merton was later, in two weeks in fact, to admit that he fired off this letter in anger without knowing all the facts. By then he knew that Charles was not “innocent” of having received answers though he seems to have

continued to think that Charles was an “innocent” who was swept up in a manipulative maelstrom. Actually, innocence plays little part in Merton’s more reflective and final analysis of the scandal. To Merton demanding an image which we basically know to be false and then expressing indignation when it turns out to be false in ways we don’t want it to be false is *not* a question of innocence. It is a question of deluding ourselves. We delude ourselves further when we express outrage. The image we create (or which is created for us) is as hollow as a plaster statue, but we reject that because it may cause us to see the hollowness within ourselves. In his second letter to Mark, Merton said: “It is the narcissism of the whole blind lot of us that has got Charlie into trouble because he is such an image of frankness, honesty, etc. We had better be very careful how we praise honesty in this day, and when there are such instruments as TV around.” For Merton the phrase “honest television” was an oxymoron.

Charles Van Doren was done in in 1959 by the very image which had made him a hero — in much the same way that Ingrid Bergman’s “good girl” image was shattered in 1949 when she became pregnant out of wedlock and O. J. Simpson’s rough-and-tumble jock image (for which we made him a hero) was repugnant in 1994 when it suddenly included brutality and murder. (Is this why *Forrest Gump* is so appealing to us? Are we so far gone that we can only find and accept goodness in a person who is mentally handicapped, who can act in no other way because he really is hollow in mind if not in spirit?)

Merton wrote to Mark on 31 October 1959, after he said that he had more perspective on the whole affair:

It certainly gives Charlie a “tragic” stature which is much more human than the nice optimistic role of a year ago. And, too, this is not a role. Isn’t that after all a blessing? I mean, even when everything was going so well, Charlie was still, without doubt, seduced into impersonating himself, in order to please and comfort this foolish, and pitifully foolish, nation with a day-dream of itself.

So America grabbed Charlie and set him up in the middle of its dream, so that he could be the dream image for a while. And the people who were making money out of it could see that it had evident possibilities. And after all, America continually and stupidly pays people like that millions of dollars all the time precisely in order to suffer this kind of deception. America *wants* to be kidded and the only crime is letting the people know, realize, the falsity. We are such babies that we want our unrealities to be real and the only thing we resent is the reminder that they are not.

(*RJ*, pp. 36-37)

We don’t want the “image” shattered for us. Yet Merton was aware that we can blithely accept falsity, we can even know with certainty that it is false, as long as it doesn’t touch the image in ways that make us uncomfortable with ourselves, make us not like ourselves. When that happens, someone has to atone for it — usually the person who has projected the dream image itself. That is why Merton correctly guessed, I think, that Charles Van Doren became the scapegoat, not only for all the contestants, but, as Merton put it, “for a national sin.”

Merton asked: “Just suppose he had taken an enormous sum of money to have his picture printed in a magazine over a statement that he thought that product was utterly superb — whatever it was. Nobody would have accused him of lying. It is perfectly respectable to tell that kind of lie.” Merton was right again. Who really cares, for example, whether or not June Allyson wears “Depends?” Or whether Robert Urich feeds his dog “Purina Dog Chow” or whether he even has a dog? Or whether Dionne Warwick or Sylvester Stallone’s mother use the psychics they urge us to spend money and call? We watch these people pushing these things at us and we *know* they are paid big bucks for pushing them — and we don’t care whether they are telling the truth or not. Paul Scofield as Mark Van Doren pooh-poohs Charles’s confession at first, flippantly saying: “Cheating on a quiz show is like plagiarizing a comic book.” Yet, on some level we do care — and Americans, mostly because of the “image” projected on “Twenty-One,” cared about the quiz shows. At some point, as Merton reminds us, we want it to be genuine — no matter how fatuous and feckless that expectation may be. It is hard to know what that cut-off point may be, but it is almost certainly connected in some way with the “image.” People cared when preachy TV

evangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart admitted having extra-marital affairs. They cared when Pee Wee Herman, whose public image as a kiddie star was childlike itself, was arrested for indecent exposure in Sarasota, Florida. *Time's* comment that Pee Wee "made a bad career move" underscores that it is the image that matters to us. To Merton we are "*all equally guilty*" in creating and perpetuating the image.

That is the substance of Merton's remarks when he finally wrote to Charles himself on 7 November 1959. The letter was to have been included in *The Road to Joy*, but was cut at the last moment from that second volume of Merton's letters. Merton said:

It was very good of you to send me a copy of your statement [read by Charles before the Congressional Committee] . . . now I have the complete picture, and I can really begin to understand how hard it has been for you. You have not only my sympathy but my admiration. In fact I think you have all done magnificently in this very trying business, notwithstanding the remark of that apparently rather pharisaical senator who said, it seemed to me with disgusting self-righteousness, that "every mature man ought to be expected to tell the truth." How often do senators tell the truth?

I have been very shocked by the whole thing, and what has shocked me about it has not been your part in it, especially, but the whole thing as a kind of symbol and symptom. Your own part, which after all God alone can judge or evaluate, is after all simple in so far as you were beguiled into going against your conscience and were afterwards sorry in a very simple and honest way, after much suffering . . . what disgusts me is the fact that when you have done wrong and admitted it a whole nation of people who very often do wrong without admitting it have allowed themselves to judge you . . . You have received the unenviable role of being the scapegoat for a self-deluded country. They have heaped their delusions on your back, and hope to be rid of them by shouting at you . . . This is a actually a great moral and psychological problem in the country I think. It is actually what we are doing as a nation in the world today: we are being deceptive, and more than that we are being aggressive, selfish, unjust, pharisaically pious etc., and counting on our sincerity and subjective "good will," our feeling that we are nice guys, to get us by. It scares me to death, it is terrible. And of course it is in me, as well as in everybody. We are all *you*, at the moment, and there is no consolation in the fact except for those of us who may be able to see the fact. The sad part is that most people refuse to see that you are all of them. In rejecting you, those who have rejected you have rejected what they ought to love and cherish in themselves . . .

The saddest thing of all is the complete ignorance everyone seems to be in, of the fact that one can be a perfectly good and nice person, and do wrong, and still continue to be a perfectly good and nice person. It is the assumption that anyone who does wrong once, even once, thereby proves that he never was or never could be, good. If people really believe that, and I think they do, then we are in a terrible state indeed. And first of all I hope that all this trouble has not somehow poisoned your own view of yourself. I am sure it has not, you have too much sense . . .

This crazy belief in people who are absolutely good and people who are absolutely bad (the stock in trade of totalitarian society) is inseparable from lack of belief in God, and to me the frightful outcry, scandal, pious horror, and generally unrealistic attitude people have taken toward the case, is simply characteristic of a country that knows nothing of God. But of course, has there ever been a country, as such, that knew Him? Is not that an affair of individuals, or of groups that are not organized along the lines of merely human society?

If we were really a Christian people (as we are now in some measure pretending to be) we would have been able easily to accept and understand your mistake and to set things right without all these firings and recriminations and dollars flying out the windows in tens of thousands.

Not to prolong this (you must have a permanent headache, which this will by no means help) I end by giving you all my sympathy, and understanding such as it is, and love, while congratulating you on being instrumental in the death (?) of an important illusion. No, they will not recognize it as dead. You will, though, and that is something to be very thankful for. You have been drawn into the empty center of our unreality, and you have been able to experience it for what it is. From now on you can pity and understand so many of the politicians, business men, churchmen (including Trappists), intellectuals and what not, who spend their day from midnight to midnight telling themselves and others that they are really very smart on a quiz program and are rapidly becoming rich. In other words that life holds no secrets for them, they understand all, they love all, are loved by all, and will take all.

It is better to be awake . . . .

(Thomas Merton Studies Center)

Merton wrote one more letter to Mark Van Doren about the scandal and then said it was enough of the whole business. His last statement was his harshest and most challenging. He said: “*Omnis homo mendax*, which loosely translated says “Every man tells lies.” He added: “It is about time this was admitted.” But we can’t admit it. Merton was to say three years later in 1962, again to Mark Van Doren: “All we will see is the image, the image, the absurd image . . . we want the image, the consuming image, the dead one into which we pour soft drinks. The smiles of the image. All the girls are laughing because the image has a soft drink” (*RJ*, p. 45).

For Merton, America didn’t lose its innocence in the quiz show scandal. Americans hadn’t been innocent since George Washington padded his expense accounts at Valley Forge — if they had only known it. When Charles Van Doren told the truth, it had nothing to do with innocence, lost or found. It had to do with the “image.” He was castigated for a time and then Americans moved on, as Merton knew they would, to other personifications of the “image”, the uggsome image.

Television has become even more a fact of life, a necessary part of life than it was in 1959. We continued and continue (all too unfortunately) to feel existence in quiz shows, in sitcoms, in football games, even in the gruesome voyeurism of O. J. Simpson’s trial. We accept, without batting an eye, news programs where wide-eyed, toothy-mouthed, plastic-haired commentators banter and giggle and disport their way through news, weather and sports. Talk shows which delve into the darkest and most twisted areas of human nature and experience proliferate at a rapid rate (and do we ever stop to ask if these incredible stories are true?). Thirty-five years after Thomas Merton warned us about the “image,” Robert Redford and his screenwriters have reached much the same conclusions that he did in 1959. One line in *Quiz Show*, possibly the most important line, is said by Rob Morrow the investigator when it is clear that the investigation of the quiz shows will lead nowhere. He says: “I thought we had television, but television has us.” Thomas Merton would say “Right on, brother!”