

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Merton's Beliefs

"Merton's 'True Self: Moral Autonomy and Religious Conversion'" by Walter E. Conn, in *The Journal of Religion* (Oct. 1985), Univ. of Chicago, 1025 East 58th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

In his *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961), Thomas Merton wrote that men who try to live as their own "masters," without deference to a god, "inevitably live as the servant of another man."

Moreover, added the noted American Trappist monk: "It is the acceptance of God that . . . delivers [them] from human tyranny."

The deliverance to which Merton (1915-68) was referring, contends Conn, who teaches religion at Villanova University, is not the sort of conversion one might expect: that of a sinner to Christianity. Rather, says Conn, Merton meant conversion of "the good," the conversion of those persons who believe so strongly in their own inherent moral virtue that they have no need of religion at all and "imagine their task is to make others 'good' like themselves." Such self-righteous folk, in Merton's eyes, are the ones who need religion the most.

Following his emergence from monastic life shortly after the end of World War II, notes Conn, Merton grew committed to the teaching of moral precepts. He ardently supported the view that "killing in war [was] insupportable on gospel grounds." During the 1960s, Merton protested U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, spoke out against racism, and condemned the nuclear arms race. Espousing the view that men must acknowledge an "objective moral good" (the existence of moral laws that distinguish "right" actions from "wrong" ones), Merton taught that to live only with a "good conscience," based only on "good intentions," was to fool oneself; such a life is no more than one of surface piety. To live a truly good life, Merton said in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), each man must accept "the will of God," and use his moral convictions to contribute to the "social and political dimensions of life."

Conn sees more than a hint of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) in Merton, especially in his advocacy of active pacifism. Said Merton once, praising Gandhi's ethics: "To conform is not to act well, but only to 'look good'" — highlighting the difference between insincere pious behavior and "genuinely ethical conduct."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Designer Drugs

"New Variety of Street Drugs Poses Growing Problem" by Rudy M. Baum, in *Chemical and Engineering News* (Sept. 9, 1985), 1155 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

One of the ironies of modern pharmacology is that the same techniques used to make lifesaving drugs can be used equally well to create narcotics. Consider the development of "designer drugs."