

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."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

"Underground chemists," writes Baum, a reporter for *Chemical and Engineering News*, "are playing a deadly cat-and-mouse game with law enforcement authorities." The chemists tinker with the chemical structures of a wide variety of illegal "controlled substances" in order to produce new "technically legal" drugs with the same narcotic effects—but also the same dangers. As fast as the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency can outlaw a specific designer drug, the chemists modify their illicit recipes to produce a similar, legal "analog" compound that squeaks past the regulations.

The stakes in this game are high, Baum observes. A conviction for producing a "Schedule 1" controlled substance (one with no medical uses and a high abuse potential) carries a stiff fine and prison sentence. But these "bucket chemists" can make fortunes off their creations. One common designer drug is 3-methyl-fentanyl, a derivative of fentanyl (marketed under the trade name Sublimaze), which U.S. physicians have used as an anesthetic since the 1970s. By investing \$2,000 in glassware and chemicals, a skilled chemist can synthesize one kilogram of the drug, a quantity worth millions of dollars on the street.

Seeking quick profits, underground manufacturers frequently turn out "sloppy" batches, with fatal consequences for drug users. Roughly 3,000 times more potent than morphine, 3-methyl-fentanyl has caused at least 100 deaths in California to date. Another narcotic, MPPP (an analog of meperidine, or Demerol) is only three times as potent as morphine but easier than fentanyl derivatives to produce. It can become contaminated with a highly toxic chemical known as MPTP, which causes irreversible Parkinson's disease. Many drug abusers who bought the drug as "synthetic heroin" now suffer permanent neurological damage.

So far, drug enforcement officials have had only limited success in their fight against designer drugs. "How," asks Baum, "does one design a law to make illegal a compound that has not yet been synthesized?" Another problem is that conventional blood and urine tests do not reveal most designer drugs, thus hindering the detection of drug users.

Two years ago, Congress began closing legal loopholes open to drug designers by passing the Comprehensive Crime Control Act, Baum reports. It enables the U.S. attorney general to designate certain drugs as controlled substances within 30 days—a process that used to take years. Currently, Congress is reviewing an even more comprehensive "Designer Drug" Enforcement Act, which would give federal officials more authority to crack down on the bucket chemists.

Myopia in Focus

"What Causes Nearsightedness?" by Gina Kolata, in *Science* (Sept. 20, 1985), 1333 H St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

In 1930, approximately 14 percent of the American population was nearsighted, or "myopic," as their eye doctors told them. Today, that proportion has roughly doubled and is increasing at an estimated rate of one percent every three years.

Why are peoples' eyes getting worse? There are two theories: One