
American history. Amidst the babbling of the doomsayers and in the face of a massive failure of nerve among liberals, George Gilder has emerged as a bold visionary, unafraid of the future and convinced that the American experiment launched two hundred years ago has not yet played itself out. We need more George Gilders, men who grapple

willingly with the intractable problems of our age. Conservatives may yet lose the battle for the mind and heart of America, but should this be our fate, no one will be able to accuse George Gilder of having failed the cause. Truly, he possesses in great measure that faith and courage he so admires in his entrepreneurs. May he never falter. □

to as the debate over the role of religion in politics, it touches more intimately the eternal questions of how the Christian responds to evil in the world. That is the question that shook Merton in his contemplative surroundings and drove him in agony and confusion toward civil disobedience and Marxism.

It is enlightening, therefore, to look deeply at Merton's life, as Furlong's *Biography* allows us to do. She effectively masks her view of the vocation he selected, at least until later in the book. Like many of Merton's worldly friends, she empathized with his total commitment to the Catholic faith, although they wondered, as the years passed, why such a fine writer would choose to forsake the world so completely by entering the strictest religious order he could find. When, later on, he encountered frustration and loneliness in the monastery, some of them seem to have known that it was inevitable.

But it is a mistake to conclude that Merton's political views later in life sprang from some deep psychic configuration, and it would be a mistake, too, to make too much of them. After all, he never left the priesthood, or repudiated the Pope, as is often the case today. Merton was always indifferent to the ideological coloring of political events. He was upset at the outbreak of World War II, but afterward thought little of it. He was preoccupied at the moment with his crystallizing vocation, and throughout his life he remained concerned chiefly with his own spiritual development. And this is why he so easily sympathized with the Christian pacifists, the social activists and, eventually, the Marxist revolutionaries.

In terms of understanding the political nature of events, Merton was, like his close friends, the Berrigans, a rank amateur. He saw nuclear war and pronounced it immoral; he noticed, no earlier than anyone else, that blacks were discriminated against and called discrimination unjust. He heard that Marxists were calling for an end to poverty and

The Melancholy of Idealism

Monica Furlong: *Merton: A Biography*; Harper & Row; New York.

by Edward J. Walsh

It was perhaps inevitable that a biography of Thomas Merton would emerge in 1980, as two profoundly diverse currents of Roman Catholic intellectual life clashed. The first, enunciated by Pope John Paul II and the Vatican hierarchy, stands unequivocally for the defense of Christian spirituality as the essence of the priestly mission. Against the Vatican, and even against the Pope, are arrayed priests and women religious who act as political agents, almost without exception for leftist and Marxist forces.

Thomas Merton, the gifted monk of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, was and is viewed as a charismatic, heroic figure by both traditional and radical Catholics. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he described the near-tangible closeness to the Holy Spirit he felt in his early years in the monastery. Later, he was a pioneer of the priestly left. Merton's numerous letters, many reprinted in Monica Furlong's sympathetic book, provide a revealing glimpse at the evolution of the modern pastoral rebel with which the Church is currently well populated.

The story of Merton's life is, of course, much more than the oft-told tale

of how an obedient priest notices social injustice and becomes a protest-marching apologist for leftist political notions. He was a brilliant man whose sensibilities were more than a match for the secular world, although he partook freely of its attractions before converting to Catholicism in 1938 at the age of 23. It is not widely known among admirers of Merton's contemplative writings that he fathered an illegitimate child during his university years in England. He was sophisticated and cosmopolitan, knowledgeable of art, literature, good food and wine, a skillful writer and satirist. He was also an orphan. Furlong speculates that the early deaths of his parents had much to do with Merton's embrace of the monastic life, with its close-knit personal relations, and, later, with his search for meaning in meditation and social action.

Furlong's psychoanalysis of Merton is less important, and less interesting, than her scrupulous tracing of the events of his life and her editing of his letters. These are the virtues of her book, which provides a full portrait of the man and, most important, of the battle for meaning in his life that led him to Gethsemani and then away from it. For Thomas Merton is today larger than the sum of his own words and actions. His spiritual writings are studied by contemplatives the world over, and his colleagues in radical causes are now demigods of the international left. He left a legacy of spiritual conflict that racks Christianity today; commonly referred

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misery in Latin America and decided they were doing God's work. He saw evil, in short, and pronounced it wrong. But never, once he began dispensing moral judgments on political questions, did he consider that nuclear war would never be possible if the Soviet Union did not threaten it, or that Marxists might prove to be crueler than any set of Latin oligarchs when it came to establishing and enforcing political dominance. Merton was a true believer, and it never occurred to him that his beliefs might be somewhat askew in a world in which the spiritual life was under virulent attack by unbelievers. Like many other Christian activists, he had spent years training himself in moral reflection; if moral reflection is the primary calling of the clergyman, that is of course the only kind of training that makes sense. But few Christian clergy today, especially among the Catholic priesthood and the mainline Protestant ministry, are uneducated in the realm of world affairs, hence they ought to be able to recognize the hard political meaning of, for example, Marxist speeches. Strangely enough, it is the less-learned preachers of America's fundamentalist sects who seem to be more aware of the distinction between political and moral judgments.

What is occurring in the established Christian churches today is that multitudes of clergy, hoping to keep in step with multitudes of laymen who are by no means regular churchgoers, are abandoning any semblance of rationality in judging political events. Recently, more than one hundred American churchmen and -women endorsed an *ad hoc* organization called the U.S. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, which urged an end to U.S. military assistance to El Salvador, but made no mention of the flow of weapons from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to the Marxist guerrillas in that country. Among the endorsers of the Committee, these names scattered among those of the good clergy, were Jane Fonda, Bella Abzug, Marcus Raskin, Isabel Letelier

and many more whose political slant can only be described as fawningly pro-Soviet. Yet the Christians who signed on with the Committee are far more knowledgeable and experienced in world affairs than Thomas Merton ever was.

The tragedy, and the irony, of current clerical social activism is that it has moved so far beyond the moralistic questioning of Thomas Merton, who, during the 60's, was one of the first Catholic priests to adopt uncritically leftist positions. Today the Reverend Ernesto Cardenal, one of Merton's closest friends in his last years, is minister of culture in the Sandinista regime that rules Nicaragua, an obsequious Soviet-Cuban satellite, "a puppet of a puppet," in the words of one democratic-minded Nicaraguan. A Maryknoll priest, the Reverend Miguel d'Escuto, is Nicaragua's foreign minister. In Central America—which Merton hoped to visit but was not allowed to by his superior—the Jesuit and Maryknoll orders have been largely radicalized. "Liberation theology," a grotesque attempt to caricature Christ as an urban guerrilla, is the reigning liturgical style, as it is among leftist clergy the world over.

Looking back at Thomas Merton's whole life, one guesses he would have been sympathetic but confused at this aspect of his legacy. While he provided the literary armament for radical activists and worse in the protest years, he remained a thoroughgoing idealist. That

his ideals would be seized upon and corrupted by grim revolutionaries within and without the Church was a possibility that simply would not have registered with Merton. To disbelieve or distrust those whom he heard repeating his own sentiments was not in his bones.

The beauty of Monica Furlong's approach to Merton's life is the sincere reverence she shows for the man as an idealist. She documents thoroughly the evolution of his disillusionment with the world, his acceptance of the Church, his hurried application to the monastery and his eventual detachment from it. We learn from her that he was ill-at-ease with the world: during his youth because of what he considered his own failings, but later, as he found his own limited peace, because he perceived the yawning gap between his intense conviction of the innate goodness of the human spirit and the tragedy and violence of the world in which it exists.

Furlong makes clear, however, that Merton's political meanderings did not distract him from his investigation of the contemplative aspect of man—which is to say, the investigation of his own soul. He was, from the first, learned in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, especially St. Benedict and his Rule, who mapped out the purpose of the monastic life. But he looked farther—into Zen, Hinduism and Buddhism—and eventually was permitted to make

In the Mail

The Language of American Popular Entertainment by Don B. Wilmeth; Greenwood Press; Westport, Connecticut. A very informative glossary and guide to the vernacular of entertainment slang and terminology, with origin and etymology provided where possible. Highly recommended for reference shelves.

International Security Review, Vol. VI, No. I edited by Stephen P. Gibert; Center for International Security Studies of the American Security Council Foundation; Boston, Virginia. A quarterly publication devoted to commentary on foreign policy and national security.

Christianity in a Neo-Pagan Society edited by Paul L. Williams, Ph.D.; Northeast Books, Div. of Cultural Society of Northeastern Pennsylvania; Scranton, Pennsylvania. The proceedings of the Third Convention of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars treating such issues as theological questions, moral and secular values.

his journey to the East, where he died, his death surrounded by mystery and ambiguity, but also, to his admirers, by peace. Thomas Merton was a humble, loving man who was in some ways misunderstood, and who misunderstood some things himself. His bequest of misbegotten causes has been promulgated

and mutated until it is unrecognizable as the wistful thinking of a meditative man in the forest. But political movements grow old and die. The real legacy of Thomas Merton, as Monica Furlong suggests, is triumphantly of the monastery at Gethsemani where he is buried. □

tion, he argued that Calvinism's moral values continued to shape men's characters as a social ethic even after the religious doctrines had lost their spell. Thrift, sobriety and the systematic pursuit of profit, even if no longer taken as a sign of divine election, remained the hallmarks of the early American capitalist. And, as Epstein notes, they became universalized ethical imperatives which German Jews and Irish Catholics could embrace with the same zeal as Scottish Presbyterians.

Despite the long-time identification of American prosperity with the prevalence of the Protestant work ethic, men of letters in the mid-19th century were already denouncing material ambition as a national obsession. Epstein traces the genealogy of this powerful dissent from Henry Adams's intellectual elitism and social snobbery down to the new-left attacks on the "American system." To his credit, he makes appropriate distinctions between 19th-century traditionalist critiques of the Gilded Age and modern rejections of the work ethic. Although critical of his own

Let Us Return to First Principles

Joseph Epstein: *Ambition*; E. P. Dutton; New York.

by Paul Gottfried

Joseph Epstein, editor of *American Scholar*, is a cultural critic who writes with flair and offers learned judgments about the state of American society. Like the more explicitly conservative George Will, Epstein is fond of citing 18th- and 19th-century authorities on 20th-century problems. His essays, also like Will's, abound with references to Tocqueville, Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Dr. Johnson and Burke; they and others are cited to good effect on the dangers of cultural leveling, emotional excess and educational mediocrity. A relentless advocate of high linguistic and learning standards, Epstein seems to be, in one of his own favorite phrases, "on the side of the angels."

His latest book testifies to his continuing concern with a changing American character. The major theme is ambition—or, more accurately, the highly ambivalent attitude that modern Americans have toward worldly success. One part of his book consists of portraits of famous Americans who amassed great fortunes by steadily exerting themselves to get ahead. Henry Ford, Samuel du Pont, Meyer Guggenheim and that self-promotion genius, Ben Franklin, are treated as devotees of the traditional

American work ethic. They, like many others, sought unabashedly to gain money and influence, convinced as they were that the pursuit of both was entirely meritorious. Epstein mentions in passing the Weber thesis on the correlation between the psychology of the capitalist entrepreneur and Calvinist moral theology. According to Max Weber, a capitalist economy in either Europe or America would never have been achieved in the absence of those moral attitudes toward work and profit which Calvinist theology imparted. Calvinism taught service to God through the pur-

"The silliest and most dangerous part of Epstein's book [is] the pretense that the commercial foundations of our society have been undermined by currents of radical chic . . ."

—*The Nation*

"Take a can of Corn Niblets, blend into a pot of slightly warm Cheez Whiz, and voila, you'll have the culinary equivalent of Joseph Epstein's *Ambition* . . ."

—*Village Voice*

suit of one's worldly vocation. Since Calvinists viewed salvation as a gift conferred independently of human merit, they looked for signs of divine grace in their social and material relationships. Calvin and his immediate disciples were highly critical of commercial dealings, but they helped to create an ethos of "worldly asceticism" that found its fullest expression in the incipient capitalist economy of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Significantly, Weber turned to secularized Calvinists like Benjamin Franklin to furnish examples of a triumphant Protestant ethic. With some justifica-

society, Henry Adams, for example, considered his productive scholarly life a failure for being devoid of his ancestor's political accomplishments. By contrast, our contemporary attacks on ambition curse America's past as well as its present. Adams criticized the work ethic of his day for being too closely associated with material pleasure and ostentation, but, like Max Weber, he respected the moral restraint and ascetic values of his own ancestral Protestant culture.

But whatever the differences between Adams's and Irving Babbitt's ap-

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