

THE MERTON CHALLENGE

Review of

THOMAS MERTON: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SPIRITUAL THEOLOGIAN

by Donald Grayston

New York & Toronto, Edwin Mellen Press, 1985

—Reviewed by **Paul Wilkes**

Upon concluding one of the many books about Thomas Merton, I inevitably pause and, calling to mind Merton's face, wonder what he would make of the latest effort to penetrate his thinking or explain his spirituality. Would he smile or frown, castigate or congratulate? Would he be ready with a pat on the shoulder or a swift kick in the pants. He was a man infused with enormous charity but also with a quick and incisive intellect.

He was certainly aware that he was a phenomenon and recognized he would be the subject of study after his death. But I wonder if he could have imagined how many men and women would be so taken with his life and thought that, in the less than two decades since his death, shelves would be filled with theses and books about him.

It is one of the problems these days in Merton studies. The writer must come up with something new or particularly insightful about Merton. It is not an easy task.

Donald Grayston first addressed Merton for his doctoral dissertation and then expanded upon that work to produce *THOMAS MERTON: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*. He attempts to document Merton's growth as a contemplative and theologian through a textual analysis of his writings; specifically *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

This is indeed a worthwhile pursuit. In the study of writing and rewriting, the researcher can find how a body of thought develops, when concepts are cast aside, when others are changed slightly but significantly, when new insights coalesce previously ambiguous statements.

Paul Wilkes is the editor of *MERTON: BY THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST* (Harper & Row) and the director, writer and co-producer of *MERTON: A FILM BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS MERTON*, the PBS documentary which premiered in 1984.

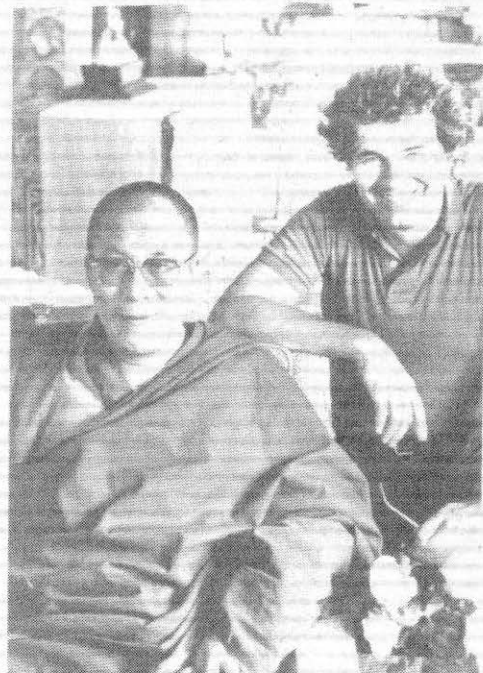
But, as it is a tedious method to use in research, it is equally difficult to make into a form that is at once enlightening and, if not easy to read, at least not quite so difficult as this volume turns out to be. The object is to find the best and most illuminating examples, not to use every example that was found. The object is to breathe something fresh into what can be a musty pile of academic documents.

The references throughout Professor Grayston's book are many, but I'm afraid the insights are not so abundant. And, I believe, Prof. Grayston often makes more of his sleuthing than any writer would make of his own revisions. Often, we don't know the right word to use or way to summarize. Later, on looking at a text, there are few of us who would not rewrite. Not so much because of great progress on the journey of life, but just because of having lived a bit longer, seen how our concepts needed sandpapering or a toss in the basket.

Merton was a quick, instinctive writer. It shows even in his letters, dashed off in a few minutes, many of which stand as polished essays. But he was mercurial. He was changing constantly and he was unpredictable. To point out that Merton used "God" in one version, "love" in another shows a close reading of various texts and that Merton was growing into a more universal man, but in the context of this book such fine distinctions tend not to help us see the man any better.

The body of work done by and about Merton is so great, who could not say in the mid-1960s that he became more universal, ecumenical, understanding as he grew older?

Merton presents all those interested in his life with a great challenge. He should be studied and written about, starting with grade school essays exploring this giant of a man. But let us all be careful not to conclude that our research or our passion about the man need be disseminated between hard covers.



PAUL WILKES
With His Holiness The Dalai Lama
Paul Wilkes Photo