

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS OF THOMAS MERTON

Review of

THE TRAGEDY OF THOMAS MERTON

by Alice Jordain Von Hildebrand

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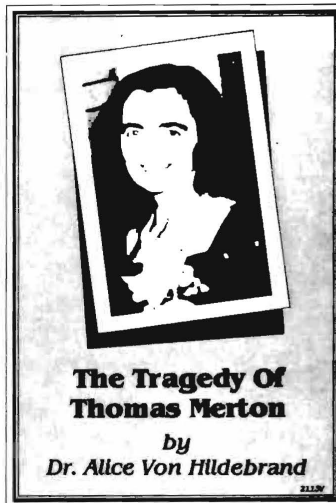
--Reviewed by **Robert E. Daggy**

In the nearly twenty years since Merton's death, as everyone even remotely interested in or aware of him knows, much has been written about him, some of it good, some indifferent, some poor, and, unfortunately, some ludicrous. Most of what has been written has been done by scholars and writers who admire Merton, who feel he has made a significant contribution to the twentieth century, who find continued attention to his life and work valuable. There has, of course, been negative criticism, during his life and since, and that is as it should be -- one reviewer recently concluded that Merton was not much of a literary critic; many regarded his protest against the Vietnamese War with alarm; several have found his involvement with the nurse disconcerting -- yet few seem to have found the total Merton experience unedifying and useless. Not so Dr. Alice Von Hildebrand, widow of ethnician/philosopher Dietrich Von Hildebrand, who, in strong and abusive language, finds literally no redeeming feature in Merton's life. In fact, she considers his life "a tragedy," an example "dangerous" to those who wish to "keep the faith."

Von Hildebrand, a student of her husband's and thirty-four years his junior, helped him co-author several books in the 1950s, including *The Art of Living* and *Graven Images*. In this talk, available on both video and audio tape, she tackles the question of Merton's image and finds it so fragile that it shatters easily under scrutiny.

Her analysis is immediately questionable since the scrutiny is none too close, a fact which she herself frankly admits. She states that she is no "specialist" and that the topic of Merton was "forced on her." She feels that she was on this particular podium, wherever it is and whatever group she may be addressing (it is never identified but does not seem unreceptive to her analysis), not because she knows anything in-depth about Merton, but because she is Dietrich Von Hildebrand's widow and because she is a woman, a necessary component in her opinion for any podium today. Her information about Merton seems to be drawn mainly from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and from the later source of Michael Mott's authorized biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. So we are presented with a strongly negative critique by a person who grants that

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she knows little about the subject. Despite this, she is willing, in fact anxious, to make judgments and she finds Merton "basically a tragic figure in the history of the Catholic church."

She feels his early life was a mess, as indeed it was for the most part. He was "marked for life" (with the chauvinistic implication that *anyone* would be) by early exposure to French language and culture. He had "a fairly good intellectual education" but no moral education. He "inherited money" (?) when his father died, just at the time of his "puberty crisis," and being on his own with far too much money to spend and no adult guidance, he started on the path of "moral decadence" and "wishy-washy liberalism."

At Columbia, he fell prey to the "three temptations" which were to mar his student years and to which he was, regrettably, to return in his later years, namely: 1) communism; 2) psychoanalysis; and 3) Oriental mysticism. In the "liberalistic atmosphere of permissiveness" which was Columbia in the 1930s, Merton, already morally scarred by having fathered an illegitimate child, became a dilettante rather than a deep-thinker, a dabbler, a "self-centered" and "sickly introvert." He knew nothing of communist ideas yet, according to Von Hildebrand, he "joined a Communist party which met on Park Avenue." (!) As for psychoanalysis, "which replaced the Gospel in the United States" in the 30s, he really made no in-depth study of it but fell into the dangerous trap of constantly examining his own responses. Oriental mysticism led him to meditation which did nothing for him beyond helping him to go to sleep. In short, she says, he found all three of the temptations empty and unsatisfying.

With snide arrogance, she dismisses the people whom Merton knew and who advised him in this period. Daniel C. Walsh, whom she repeatedly calls "Danny Walsh," he having taught her at Manhattanville, "an adjunct, not a regular professor," was a "holy, pious, simple man, not an impressive personality [and] not a very good teacher." "Brahamachari or whatever his name was" had been the Hindu guru who led Merton to an interest in Oriental mysticism. Even Catherine de Hueck Doherty is slammed as having "some sort of organization in Harlem." Neither Merton nor the people he knew seem to have been, as they say in Kentucky, "worth shooting."

Then Merton decided, impulsively and with little thought (which, according to Von Hildebrand, was the way he did everything), that he would become a Roman Catholic and announced it to his friends during a bout of drinking beer. He sought no spiritual guidance or religious formation, but made the "tragic assumption and tragic mistake that he knew all about Roman Catholicism." Yet, as her story unfolds, he wanted, not so much to be a Catholic, as to be somebody and this becomes, in the story, a fourth "ridiculous temptation." He wanted to see his name in print, to be a success, to be famous -- and "to be famous is to lose one's soul." Despairing of success, he tried to enter the Franciscans and, after being refused by them, decided "to try his luck" at Gethsemani with the Trappists.

He fared no better there, remaining neurotic and indecisive. He did eventually become famous when *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published, a fantastic best-seller she admits but one that was just "a plagiary of St. Augustine." The dangerous fame which he gained led him to further neuroses (like wanting to be a hermit) and eventually, to her and her husband's "horror," back to the three temptations he had abandoned at Columbia. She questions why he was allowed, as a monk, to write in the first place and then why he was allowed to continue to write, uncertain in her own mind whether he was permitted to write because he was seen to have a vocation or because the Abbey of Gethsemani needed funds.

In any case, he returned to the three temptations. He embraced, not communism per se (though his last talk was about Marxism), but "extreme leftism," a position "manifested in his ridiculous attitude at the time of the Vietnamese War" and in his association with such undesirables as the Berrigan brothers and Joan Baez. He returned to psychoanalysis though he knew

nothing about it, and she implies that he damaged generations of novices by subjecting them to his amateur brand of meddling psychoanalysis. In the 1950s, a psychiatrist, Dr. Gregory Zilboorg (she calls him “Eelboorg”), found his behavior “pathological.” And he returned to Oriental mysticism which she feels led him nowhere except away from Roman Catholicism (to which his commitment was lukewarm anyway), to association with more questionable types like the Dalai Lama, and to his death in Bangkok, far from the monastery where he belonged and where he should have stayed.

It is difficult to know how to review such a harangue -- difficult to know whether it is worth reviewing or worth notice. It is obvious that Von Hildebrand loathes Merton and his writings, that she finds his life, not an example or symbol for our times, but a model which must be avoided at all costs by “right-thinking people.”¹ She finds him ultimately “not an outstanding religious authority but a man in bad need of psychological and spiritual help.”

What makes Von Hildebrand’s conclusions invalid is, first of all, that she bases them on a cursory knowledge and examination of the Merton experience. What makes her talk fail to me is *not* that she criticizes Merton negatively -- if he cannot stand up to negative criticism and close analysis then he is probably not the person, indeed the prophet, which so many think him to be --but that she seems to have no grasp that the human experience, in general, is one of complexity, contradiction, change, vulnerability, and inconsistency. Beyond the twisting of facts which help her “grind her own axe,” there is little in *The Tragedy of Thomas Merton* to suggest that she has recognized this one essential and inescapable fact of Merton’s experience. He was a human being, a complex, contradictory, changing, vulnerable and inconsistent human prone to mistakes and foibles and, yes, eccentricities, but a human who sought his own true self, his God, and eventually the good of all humankind. We may not always like the answers he found for himself or the process by which he found them -- so what? He demonstrated how one man tried in the twentieth century to maintain his humanity and to let the humanness of God show through in him.

There is more humanity, indeed Christian humanity, in Merton’s life and writings than there is in Von Hildebrand’s implacable and tight-lipped analysis of him. She undoubtedly feels that there was not enough of the *Godly* in him, Godliness as she conceives it, naturally. Yet, for such a staunch and unrelenting “religious” woman, she seems to have forgotten that *Proverbs* tells us that “*The just man falls seven times and rises again.*”² I would say that Merton was lucky to have encountered only three “great temptations” in his life and managed to reconcile them with the Christianity which he practiced. I was greatly tempted to turn *The Tragedy of Thomas Merton* off before it finished because I could not reconcile this tirade with what I know of Merton and his witness.

¹ This phrase is borrowed from Merton who said in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “May God prevent us from becoming ‘right-thinking men’ -- that is to say men who agree perfectly with their own policies.”

² Brother Patrick Hart reminds us of this proverb in “Thomas Merton as a Paradigm of Christian Conversion,” *Merton Seasonal* 12 (Winter 1987): no. 1, p. 19.