

SERVICE TO MERTONOPHILES

Review of

THOMAS MERTON: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SPIRITUAL THEOLOGIAN

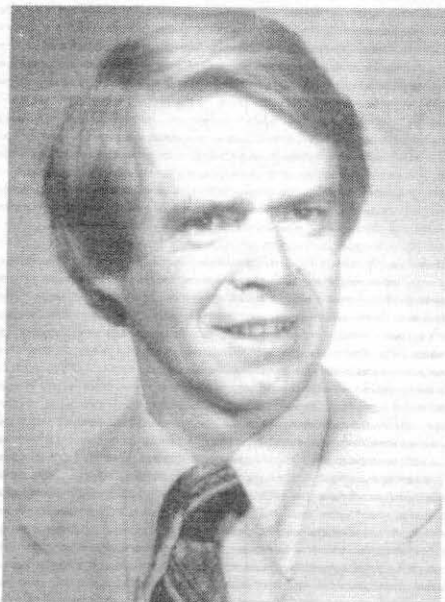
by Donald Grayston

New York & Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985

—Reviewed by **E. Glenn Hinson**

No matter from which direction one approaches Merton, he will appear both lucid and enigmatic at one and the same time. He was, as he liked to characterize himself, a Jonah churning around in the belly of a paradox. We can only add to the problem, however, if we do not recognize his development or evolution from an immature, though precocious, convert to the Catholic Church and contemplative to one whom millions look to as the premier spiritual guide of the twentieth century.

In this splendid scholarly study Donald Grayston has rendered yeoman's service to Mertonophiles by demonstrating the development of Merton's thought from the original manuscript of *Seeds of Contemplation* dated July 1, 1948 through the publication of *New Seeds of Contemplation* published January 30, 1962. In tracing the evolution in an exacting way he has done what biblical scholars call redaction criticism of five major sources: the typescript of *Seeds*, *Seeds* itself, *Seeds* in revised forms, the typescript of *New Seeds*, and *New Seeds* itself. His well established conclusion is that Merton



E. Glenn Hinson is David T. Porter Professor of Church History at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of several books, including *Glossolalia* (1967); *The Integrity of the Church* (1978); *The Early Church Fathers* (1980); and *A History of Baptists in Arkansas* (1979). A friend and correspondent of Thomas Merton's, his writing on Merton includes "The Catholicizing of Contemplation: Thomas Merton's Place in the Church's Prayer Life," *Cistercian Studies* (1975); "Expansive Catholicism: Ecumenical Perceptions of Thomas Merton," *The Message of Thomas Merton* (1981); and "Merton's Many Faces," *Religion in Life* (1973). He was a participant in the 1978 Merton Symposium at Vancouver.

E. GLENN HINSON

advanced from “essentially a world-denying and triumphalist monk, a contemplative-out-of-the-world” to “a world- affirming and broadly ecumenical person, a contemplative-at-the heart-of-the-world, having in the interim recovered Paradise, and having gone forth from that recovery to the sophianic task of the building of the Kingdom of God.” The crucial transition, Grayston believes, occurred during a period of physical and emotional malaise between 1949 and 1951.

This hypothesis agrees with my own studies and perceptions of Merton based on his other writings. The only question I would put to the author is whether Merton would not be more appropriately labeled “a spiritual guide” than “a spiritual theologian.” Merton was not, after all, really trained in theology in the sense that latter term may suggest, and he suffered obvious limitations in formal theology. Where he excelled was in spiritual direction wherein experience often carries one well beyond the range of formal theology. He exhibited a boldness seldom seen among theologians as he attempted to respond to the critical and urgent issues of our time not only with his head but also with his heart. But perhaps that is what theology should be when it is true to itself.