

# BRIDGE-BUILDING

## Merton Renderings and Renderings of Merton

--by **Robert E. Daggy**

Thomas Merton -- a man who longed for solitude and who spent the last twenty-seven years of his life in a monastery -- has emerged as surely one of the most rendered and depicted monks of all time. He has been written about by scores of people; dramatized by James T. Baker, Anthony T. Padovano, Claire Nicolas White; media-rendered by Paul Wilkes, Roman Bittner, Wade Hall, Monica Furlong; painted by Victor Hammer, Jim Cantrell, Jill Baker, Terrell Dickey, Ernano Basso, Betty Sue Carpenter; photographed by John Howard Griffin, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Edward Rice; drawn by Ugo Tessoriere, Lorrie Bennett, Mary Beth Froehlich, Fritz Eichenberg (and countless others); caricatured by David Levine and Gary Young; sculpted by W. Browne Morton, III, and Joel Weishaus. Some thirty renderings currently hang in the Thomas Merton Studies Center. These and dozens of others have been featured in *The Merton Seasonal* and in other publications. For this season, we feature on our cover one of the more unusual (and certainly one of the loveliest) renderings of Thomas Merton -- one done by icon-painter Robert Lentz.

Thomas Merton once wrote that of all the religious art in the world the two most powerful forms are the cave paintings of prehistory and the icons of Eastern Christianity. He said of an icon of the Prophet Elias: "What a thing to have in the room. It transfigures everything." Robert Lentz uses the ancient techniques of Byzantine iconography to paint icons of contemporary persons whom he considers "modern saints" -- persons such as Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Steven Biko, Oscar Romero, Charles de Foucauld. In an interview conducted by Ken Guentert in 1985 and published in *Family Festivals*, Lentz said of his craft and technique:

My work angers Orthodox people because I paint non-Orthodox saints and it angers Catholics because I paint non-canonized persons. But painting non-canonized persons is very Byzantine. That's what the bishops look for before they canonize someone -- whether people have ever painted icons of that person and if people are praying to the saint...

The icon is a very strong theological and philosophical statement. It is not an illustration by any means... It is a depiction of a person in the presence of God, wrapped up in God's light, transfigured by God. The prototype for an icon is Christ on Mount Tabor. His garments became brilliant and his face shown with the light of God. The icon tries to show that. The light on the face in an icon is not light coming from the outside but is inside the person and coming out through the face. The eyes are wide, enjoying the vision of God. An icon is called a "window into eternity." It is not meant to show the world as we see it now but this world as it really is if we could see it from the vantage point of eternity.

Significantly, Lentz chose to render Merton in his guise as a bridge-builder between East and West, a Western monk in Byzantine form depicted in the traditional garb and pose of an Eastern buddha or bodhisattva. Just as significantly, the firm which distributes reproductions of Robert Lentz's icons is called "Bridge-Building Icons." These reproductions may be ordered by writing: Daniel O'Connor, Director, Bridge-Building Icons, 211 Park Street, Burlington, Vermont 05401.

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The area in which the term "Bridge-Builder" is most frequently used in reference to Thomas Merton is the rapprochement which he sought between East and West. His study of Eastern philosophy and religion -- Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam -- engrossed much of his attention after 1955. He corresponded with several exponents and practitioners of these religious forms, as the first volumes of the Merton Letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, amply attests. He actively encouraged the translation of his works into Japanese, Korean, Tamil and

Sinhalese though the first translations into Chinese were not to appear until after his death. And, of course, he wrote himself about the East. One of his favorite projects was his rendering of texts of the Chinese legendary philosopher Chuang Tzu into English, published in 1965 by New Directions as *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. We feature a comparison of one of Merton's renderings with that of Herbert A. Giles, a scholar who translated more literally from the Chinese into English.

Our feature article marks a return to the pages of *The Merton Seasonal* by Brother John Albert. Some of our readers will remember his provocative article on Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan, "Mind Guards against the White Knight," which appeared in the Autumn 1984 issue. In this new article, Brother John explores the reactions of Oscar Wilde and Thomas Merton to Chuang Tzu. Wilde and Merton may seem at first glance to be an unlikely pairing, but Brother John dispels this notion and shows that they both attempted to put Chuang Tzu into a context that made sense for their times. We must also remind ourselves that Merton's bridge-building was not confined to attempts to span the differences between East and West, but was targeted as well toward areas and situations in the West in which misunderstanding, prejudice, suspicion, fear and ignorance had obtained. Merton himself did not spend much time discussing Oscar Wilde, but he was aware of him and certainly cognizant of the notoriety which his homosexuality had occasioned and which, as Brother John points out, remains the central abiding fact about Wilde in many minds. In 1967, Merton was asked by an unidentified correspondent if he thought any homosexual had saved his soul. Merton replied:

First let me try to answer your question as it was put: the first name that occurs to me off hand of a "proven homosexual" who probably saved his soul, is Oscar Wilde. The poor man suffered greatly and was certainly sincere. I don't know all the details of his later years but the impression I have is that he went through them with a martyr's nobility. I can think of others whom I think did the same though I am not so sure if they were Christians so I won't go into that. In other words, the pitch is this. Homosexuality is not a more "unforgivable" sin than any other and the rules are the same.

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Merton's bridge-building continues as his works are reprinted and more and more items about him are published. Projections for 1987 indicate that even more "renderings" will appear. The Merton Letters project continues with the second volume, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, edited by Robert E. Daggy, and the third volume, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Life and Renewal*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart, in progress. David D. Cooper of the University of California at Santa Barbara has been appointed to edit the fourth volume on Merton's literary concerns. *The Merton Annual*, an announcement of which appears on p. 20 of this issue, is a publication projected over the next five years. Harper and Row will be publishing Fr. M. Basil Pennington's biography of Merton and Larry Levinger's "popular study." Father Pennington has also collected and edited the papers from the 1986 Thomas Merton Conference at Kalamazoo which will be published by Cistercian Publications. *The Kentucky Review* will devote its first issue of 1987 to Thomas Merton with essays contributed for this special issue by David D. Cooper, Lawrence S. Cunningham, Robert E. Daggy, George A. Kilcourse, Victor A. Kramer, William J. Marshall, Christopher Meatyard and Kirsten Warner. Doubleday has scheduled a Merton Day-Book, edited by Naomi Burton Stone, for Autumn release. Merton renderings and renderings of Merton continue.



Illustration from Thomas Merton's  
*The Way of Chuang Tzu*