

## **Mystics and Sufi Masters:**

Thomas Merton and Sufism;  
Merton and the Christian Dialogue with Islam

(Sidney Griffith, Catholic University of America. Posted on this Home Page with author's permission NB: since this is a scanned version, pardon any errors)

### I

#### Christians and the Call to Islam

Muslims and Christians have been in conversation with one another from the very beginnings of Islam as proclaimed in the Qur'an, and as preached by Muhammad in Mecca and Medina in the seventh century of the Christian era. Even a cursory glance through the Qur'an reveals that the holy book of Islam presumes in its readers a familiarity with the Torah and the Gospel, and with the stories of Adam, Noah, Joseph, Abraham, Moses, Mary, and Jesus of Nazareth. The Qur'an also readily reveals its intention to offer a critique of the religious beliefs and practices of Christians, and to offer a program for their correction. The most comprehensive verse addressed directly to Christians in this vein says:

O People of the Book, do not exaggerate in your religion, and do not say about God anything but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, Mary's son, is only God's messenger, and His Word He imparted to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. Believe in God and in His messengers, and do not say, 'Three'. Stop it! It is better for you. God is but a single

God; He is too exalted for anything to become a son to

Him, anything in the heavens or anything on the earth.

God suffices as a guardian. (IV *The Women* 171)

Throughout the centuries since the rise of Islam, Muslim/Christian relations have revolved around this double axis of familiar, biblical appeal and strenuous, religious critique. After the death of Muhammad in 632 A.D., within two decades armies of Muslims had occupied all the territories of the 'Oriental Patriarchates' of the Christians: Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. In the following decades the Muslims moved across North Africa, and across the Straits of Gibraltar into the Iberian Peninsula. Their advance was not halted until the year 732, at the battle of Poitiers in France, one hundred years after the death of Muhammad. This accomplishment set the stage for the long era of confrontation between Muslims and Christians.

From early in the seventh century, when Muslim armies first occupied the territories of the Christians, up to and beyond the day in 1453 when even Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, there were almost constant, military hostilities between Muslim governments in the east and the Christian nations outside the world of Islam. This state of constant, Muslim/Christian warfare came to an end only in the early decades of the twentieth century, with the end of the Turkish, Ottoman Empire. The combination of religious animosity, cultural disdain and military hostility that obtained between Muslim and Christian polities for well over a millennium and a half produced on both sides a large literature of mutual rejection.<sup>1</sup>

By the dawn of the twentieth century, and well into that century, one would not have thought that any efforts at rapprochement between Muslims

<sup>1</sup>See Rollin Armour, Sr., Islam, Christianity, and the West; a Troubled History Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002). For the Muslim side see Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), Islamic interpretations of Christianity (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); Hugh Goddard, Muslim Perceptions of Christianity (London: Grey Seal, 1996).

and Christians were in the offing. Yet just after mid-century at Vatican Council II, one of the shortest, but also one of the most far-reaching conciliar documents, *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated on 28 October 1965, made the following declaration:

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.<sup>2</sup>

Since Vatican II, it is no exaggeration to say that the Roman Catholic Church has been the leader in Muslim/Christian dialogue worldwide. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue set up after Vatican II soon issued guidelines for the dialogue between Christians and Muslims.<sup>3</sup> And there has been no more tireless a promoter of this dialogue than Pope John Paul II, who in numerous documents has taught Catholics to proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ in open a free dialogue with Muslims and members of other religions. On his numerous journeys to Muslim countries John Paul II has himself led the way in this enterprise, and by now there is a sizeable collection of his talks and formal greetings to largely Muslim audiences.<sup>4</sup> Always he echoes the themes of Vatican II, the dignity of the human person,

<sup>2</sup>Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Vatican Collection, vol. I, rev. ed.; Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1975 & 1984), p. 740.

<sup>3</sup>Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims (Interreligious Documents, I, prepared by Maurice Borrmans, trans. R. Marston Speight; New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>See Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Recognize the Spiritual Bonds Which Unite Us; 16 Years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for

Interreligious Dialogue, 1994).

the necessity of the free exercise of religion in society, and the conviction that “the truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.”<sup>5</sup> High Vatican officials have followed the Pope’s lead. Francis Cardinal Arinze, for example, the current president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, is in regular contact with Muslim groups around the world.<sup>6</sup>

Today, after almost forty years of inter-religious dialogue led by the church’s highest authorities, one tends to forget that prior to the council the ground was prepared for the principles enunciated in *Nostra Aetate* by a remarkable group of people whose intercultural religious experience was the very basis of their holiness, and whose ideas and influences were largely responsible for the council’s teaching. I am thinking of such people as Charles de Foucauld (1858-1968),<sup>7</sup> whose experience in North Africa set the tone for a new Catholic approach to Islam which found its most influential expositor in Louis Massignon (1883~1962).<sup>8</sup> I recall the monastic experiments in India undertaken by Jules Monchanin (1895-1957),<sup>9</sup> Henri Le Saux, also known as Swami Abhishiktananda (1910~1973)<sup>10</sup> and Francis MaEieu (Acharya) (1912-2001),<sup>11</sup> I not to mention the monumental studies of Buddhism

<sup>5</sup>Flannery, Vatican Council II Declaration on Religious Freedom, p. 677.

<sup>6</sup>See Francis Cardinal Arinze, Christian-Muslim Relations in the Twenty-First Century (Lecture presented to the Center for Muslim-Christian Relations, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., January 1998); *idem*, Meeting Other Believers; the Risks and Rewards of Interreligious Dialogue (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1998); *idem*, Religions for Peace; a Call for Solidarity to the Religions of the World (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>See Mi Merad, Christian Hermit in an Islamic World; A Muslim’s View of Charles de Foucauld (trans. Zoe Hersov; New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>See Mary Louise Gude, Louis Massignon; the Crucible of Compassion Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>See Françoise Jacquin, Jules Monchanin prêtre (Paris: Cerf, 1996). See also J. G. Weber (ed.), In Oust of the Absolute; the Life and Works of Jules Monchamn (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977).

<sup>10</sup>See André Gozier, Le pere Henri Le Saux; a Ia rencontre de l’hindouisme (Paris: Centurion, 1989). See also James Stuart (ed.), Swami Abhishiktananda; his Life Told through his Letters (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989).

<sup>11</sup>See Marthe Mahieu-De Praetere, Kurisumala; un pionnier du monachisme chrétien en Inde (Cahiers Scourmontois, 3; Scourmont: Abbaye Cistercienne Notre-Dame de Scourmont, 2001).

undertaken by Henri Dumoulin in Japan or by 1~tienne Lamotte in Louvain. It will come as no news to the members of the ITMS to hear that Thomas Merton was well connected with this group of mostly Francophone pathfinders in inter-religious dialogue. It is the purpose of the present communication to highlight one aspect of his relationship to them, namely his interest in Islam, largely under the influence of Louis Massignon.

## II

### Thomas Merton and Louis Massignon

Only late in his career did Thomas Merton come to encounter Islam. And when he did correspond with Muslims and students of Islamic thought, mysticism and the life of the spirit were uppermost in his mind. He read the Sufi poets and became familiar with the work of esotericists like Frithof Schuon and René Guénon. But it was Louis Massignon (1883-1962) who, by his works and by his letters, guided much of Merton's thought about Islam.<sup>12</sup> Among the books that Merton was reading on his Asian journey was Massignon's classic study in comparative mysticism, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*.<sup>13</sup> It is a book that concentrates on the technical vocabulary of Islamic mysticism in the Arabic language. But along the way the author clarifies the terms he studies by comparing them to earlier Christian usages, and sometimes by putting them side by side with the expressions Hindus and Buddhists use to describe similar mystical

<sup>12</sup>See Sidney H. Griffith, "Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," in Robert E. Daggy *et al.* (eds.), *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990), pp. 151-172.

<sup>13</sup>Originally published in 1922, with a second edition in 1954, the book is now available in an English translation: Louis Massignon, Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of

Islamic Mysticism (trans. Benjamin Clark; Noire Dame, md.: University of Noire Dame Press, 1997).

phenomena. By 1968 such an approach to the study of religious forms of expression was, to say the least, very congenial to Merton.

A passage in Massignon's *Essai* that took Merton's attention in 1968 and caused him to reach for pen and notebook is one in which Massignon explained his approach to the study of the early Muslim mystics. He was after "experiential knowledge," he said, by an "introspective method" that seeks to examine "each conscience by transparency". The method was to search "beneath outward behavior of the person for a grace which is wholly divine."<sup>14</sup> This idea struck a responsive chord in Merton, and he made a special note of the passage.

Massignon had achieved his own "experiential knowledge" of Islam by a shattering encounter with "the Stranger," as he called the God of Abraham whom he met at a crisis moment of his life in Iraq in 1908. It was the moment of his conversion from a wayward life back to the practice of the Catholicism into which he had been born and baptized. What was striking about this conversion was the fact that Massignon was convinced that it had come about through the intercession of a Muslim mystic, whose life and works he had been studying. The holy man's name was al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922). Eventually Massignon's study of this holy man was published in 1922 as his doctoral dissertation, under the title *La passion de Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj; martyr mystique de l'Islam*.<sup>15</sup> It became a landmark book that was almost singlehandedly responsible for arousing scholarly interest in the west in Sufism and Islamic mysticism. It would be impossible to overstate

<sup>14</sup>Massignon, *Essai*, p. 138; Merton, *Asian Journal*, p. 263.

<sup>15</sup> The book was republished posthumously, in a completely revised edition, in 1969, and in 1982 an English translation was published: Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj; Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (4 vols., trans. Herbert Mason; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). An abridged edition in English translation is available in Louis Massignon, *Hallaj, Mystic and Martyr* (trans. ed. & abridged by Herbert Mason; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the book's importance and influence. There were repercussions even in Roman Catholic theology, in that Massignon's advocacy of al-Hallaj's cause raised the question of the recognition of genuine mysticism beyond the church's formal boundaries. But the important point for our purposes is to notice that it was al-Hallaj, the Muslim mystic, who had shown Massignon the way back to God. This was the point that would strike Merton: the fact that a compassionate encounter with another, a seeker of the God of Abraham in a religious tradition other than Judaism or Christianity, could open a way for one to reach God in one's own heart. The challenge of Islam then meant a challenge to open oneself to the "Other." This was the challenge of *La passion d'al-Hallaj* for Merton. Herbert Mason, a friend of both Massignon and Merton, has put it this way: "Merton told me himself of the far-reaching effect this book had on his life, coming at a particularly critical moment for him, in helping turn his attention toward the East."<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Merton was known in the French Catholic intellectual circles in which Louis Massignon was a major figure for almost a decade before they started writing to one another. They met by letter in the summer of 1959. Herbert Mason had written to Merton from Paris on 21 May 1959 in connection with his work on St. John of the Cross, and it was not long before they were exchanging letters and poems on a regular basis. Then in a letter dated 2 August 1959 Mason told Merton about his own enchantment with Louis Massignon. There was an exchange of off-prints. By 3 September 1959 Massignon himself was writing to Merton, and with this letter the Merton/Massignon correspondence began. They corresponded with one another on an almost monthly basis throughout 1960. In the archives of the Thomas Merton Studies Center there are fourteen letters from Louis

<sup>16</sup>Herbert Mason, "Merton and Massignon," *Muslim World* 59 (1969), p. 317.

Massignon to Merton, written in English, and dating from 3 September 1959 to 26 April 1961. Massignon died on 31 October 1962; Merton continued to read his work right up to his own death in 1968.

By the spring of 1960 Merton was reading Massignon's *Akhbar al-Hallaj* and the *Diwan de al-Hallaj*.<sup>17</sup> He had received a copy of *La passion d'al-Hallaj* somewhat earlier. By August of 1960, when Herbert Mason visited Gethsemani, Merton had already read much of it and, as Mason says: "Hallaj and M[assignon] himself struck him deeply as 'knowing the way.' I think Merton sensed M[assignon] was spiritually revolutionary for future Islamic/ Christian influences."<sup>18</sup> Merton also had a copy of Massignon's *La parole donnée*, the collection of essays Massignon himself chose to represent the spectrum of his thought, although it was published posthumously.<sup>19</sup> The copy is now in the collection of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine. In certain sections of the book Merton marked passages that particularly appealed to him, especially in the essays on Foucauld, al-Hallaj, and Gandhi, although there are marks scattered throughout the book, indicating a relatively thorough reading on Merton's part.

At one point in their relationship, Massignon wrote to Herbert Mason about Merton. He said, "Tom is not mistaken in believing that my thought can be found through the curve of my life substituted by the Hallajian thought."<sup>20</sup> This is language typical of Massignon; his French expressions often do not translate readily into English. It means that Merton had correctly

<sup>17</sup>Louls Massignon, *Akhbar al-Hallaj recueil d'oraisons et d'exhortations du martyr mystique de l'Islam, Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957); *idem*, *Husayn Mansur Hallaj. Diwan* (Paris: Seuil, 1955, 1985).

<sup>18</sup>Herbert Mason to Sidney H. Griffith, 21 October 1988.

<sup>19</sup>Louis Massignon, *Parole donnée* (Vincent-Mansour Monteil, ed.; Paris: Julliard, 1962; republished, Paris: Seuil, 1983). See also Herbert Mason (ed.), *Testimonies and Reflections; Essays of Louis Massignon* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup>Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 152.



discerned the fact that in his work on the life and teaching of the “mystic martyr of Islam,” Massignon had so conformed his own thinking to that of alHallaj that it could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, the two were of one mind. It is an instance of that “introspective method” of Massignon’s, according to which one is in search of “experiential knowledge;” he is looking for the “grace which is wholly divine.”<sup>21</sup> Merton himself adopted a similar method in his study of the texts of the devotees of other religions. In this connection one could mention *The Way of Chuang Tzu* as an obvious case in point.<sup>22</sup>

### III

#### Merton, Interreligion and Islam

Merton was somewhat unique among American Catholics in the sixties by reason of his deep interest in what non- Catholics and even the devotees of non-Christian religions can tell us about God.<sup>23</sup> While it is true that he could write to D.T. Suzuki on 3 May 1965 to say, “There is only one meeting place for all religions, and it is paradise,”<sup>24</sup> he did not mean that human beings of different religions should defer their own meeting with one another until they should meet in paradise. Rather, by his affirmation that paradise is the meeting place for all religions he expressed his conviction that one can, to borrow Massignon’s phrase, search for the “grace which is wholly divine” in certain non-Christian religions. Merton was forceful on this point in a letter he wrote to Czeslaw Miosz under the date of 18 January 1962. He said,

<sup>21</sup>See n. 1 above.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).

<sup>23</sup>A very helpful selection of passages from Merton’s writings on the theme of unity, especially religious unity is available in Thomas Merton, *Essential Writings* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), esp. pp. 140-186.

<sup>24</sup>Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *Encounter; Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki* (Monterey, Ky.:

Larkspur Press, 1988, p. 74

I cannot be a Catholic unless it is made quite clear to the world that I am a Jew and a Moslem, unless I am execrated as a Buddhist and denounced for having undermined all that this comfortable and social Catholicism stands for: this lining up of cassocks, this regimenting of birettas. I throw my biretta in the river. (But I don't have one.)<sup>25</sup>

While Merton's own engagements with other religions were more often with Zen, or other Asian traditions, Islam was never really out of his mind. In a journal entry of 10 July 1964 he wrote,

Literature, contemplative solitude, Latin America, Asia, Zen, Islam, etc., all these things come together in my life. It would be madness for me to attempt to create a monastic life for myself by excluding all these. I would be less a monk.<sup>26</sup>

Merton was very much aware of the fact, as he wrote in his journal on 17 November 1964, that "Massignon and Foucauld were both converted to Christianity by the witness of Islam to the one, true, living God."<sup>27</sup> At the time he was himself busily reading Sufi writers and commentators on their texts; he was filling up his own reading journals with notes on the Sufis and with outlines of their teachings. He was giving talks on Sufism in the monastery. Some of the talks were taped, and they are still available for listening. But they are very elementary, and, frankly, somewhat disappointing.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, they do show the depth of Merton's study.

<sup>25</sup> See this letter published in Thomas Merton, The Courage for Truth; Letters to Writers (Christine M. Bochen, ed.; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Merton, A Vow of Conversation, p. 62. Fuller version quoted from Daggy, Encounter, pp. 89-90.

<sup>27</sup> Merton, A Vow of Conversation, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Merton mentions these talks in two letters to Abdul Aziz, 16 Jan. '68 & 24 April '68. In both of them he says "For more than a year now I have been giving weekly talks on Sufism to the monks here." See Thomas Merton, The Hidden Ground of Love; Letters (William H. Shannon, ed.; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 66 & 67. He says that he based his lectures on books which Abdul Aziz sent him.



His study was not merely in books. Merton made an effort to engage Islam in his personal religious practice as well, another lesson he may have learned from Louis Massignon. In his journal for 18 January 1965, for example, John Howard Griffin found a passage in which Merton wrote about his own observance of the Islamic ‘Night of Destiny,’ the 27th of Ramadan. He explained that for Muslims it is a night when heaven is open to earth, and all the prayers of the faithful are answered. It is a night of joy and peace, such as Christmas is for Christians. So on that night Merton too, like the Muslims, stayed up late to pray in solidarity with them. He prayed “for them,” he says, “and for my own needs, for peace.”<sup>29</sup>

In the fall of 1966 Merton met a genuine Sufi in the person of an Algerian named Sidi Abdeslam, who spoke no English. He was a Sufi master who was the heir to the tradition of Shaikh Ahmad al-’Alawi. Merton had become devoted to the latter, twentieth century spiritual master through a book by Martin Lings, which had a profound effect on him.<sup>30</sup> Abdeslam came to Gethsemani together with some friends from Temple University who could serve as interpreters. As Michael Mott puts it, “Merton sensed that he and Sidi Abdeslam were able to communicate beyond the translated words.”<sup>31</sup> And the thought which Abdeslam communicated to Merton disturbed him. The fall of 1966 was already a troubled time for him. And the visiting Sufi, whom Merton recognized as a genuine mystic, “left him with the message that he was very close to a mystical union and that the slightest thing could bring that union about.”<sup>32</sup> This at a time when Merton himself was

<sup>29</sup>John Howard Griffin, Follow the Ecstasy; the Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>30</sup>Merton wrote a review of Martin Lings, A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century, Shaikh Ahmad al-’Alawi; his Spiritual Heritage and Legacy (London, 1961). See Merton’s letter to Lings in Merton, Hidden Ground of Love pp. 453-454.

<sup>31</sup>Michael Mott, The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 462.

<sup>32</sup>Mott Seven Mountains p. 462.

questioning his vocation. Then on the 14th of February 1967 Sidi Abdeslam wrote Merton a letter in which he asked him if he “had yet set aside the distractions of words, his own words and those of others, in order to realize the mystical union.”<sup>33</sup> And Abdeslam left Merton with the cryptic phrase to ponder: “What is best is what is not said.”<sup>34</sup>

By 20 March 1967 Merton was thinking of travel and Sidi Abdeslam figured in his musings. He wrote in his journal under this date:

The most I would want in any case would be the freedom to travel once in a while to very special places and to see exceptional people. For instance to visit Sidi Abdeslam, or to go to the Zen places in Japan.<sup>35</sup>

So it is clear that Merton’s interest in Islam, and especially in Sufism, occupied him at much the same time as he was deeply interested in Zen and Buddhism.<sup>36</sup> And, as always, it was the “introspective method” in the service of “Experiential knowledge,” to use Massignon’s terms, that preoccupied him. Typically, he then used the “experiential knowledge” in his own sermons and conferences. For example, in a retreat conference at Gethsemani he said,

I’m deeply impregnated with Sufism. In Islam, one of the worst things that any human being can do is to say that there is an other besides the One, to act implicitly as if God needed a helper, as if God couldn’t do what needs to be done.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Mott, Seven Mountains, p. 468.

<sup>34</sup>Mott, Seven Mountains, p. 468.

<sup>35</sup>Mott, Seven Mountains, p. 468.

<sup>36</sup>For the most comprehensive collection of studies on Merton, Sufism and Islam see Rob

Baker & Gray Henry (eds.), Merton & Sufism: the Untold Story; a Complete Compendium (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).

<sup>37</sup>Thomas Merton, The Springs of Contemplation; a Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), p. 266.

One of the ways in which Merton became “deeply impregnated with Sufism” was the method he employed in the composition of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, a project he was working on in the spring and summer of 1965, the same time when he was reading about Islam. He translated and adapted poetic texts from the tradition he was studying and made them his own. From Sufism he chose texts by the Sufi master Ibn ‘Abbad de Ronda (1333~1390);<sup>38</sup> he “adapted versions of his thought,” as he said, “in semi-poetic fashion.” Eventually, a selection of these texts appeared in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, where Ibn ‘Abbad's thoughts spoke through Merton's meditative translations.<sup>39</sup>

#### Iv

#### Merton in Dialogue: Correspondence with Abdul Aziz

Merton's dialogue with Islam was not just by way of a careful reading of books suggested to him by Massignon and some others, supplemented by the occasional meeting with a Muslim like Sidi Abdeslam. Since 1960 he had been engaged in a remarkable correspondence with a Muslim student of Sufism in Karachi, Pakistan a man named Ch. Abdul Aziz. Already in 1952 Abdul Aziz had read Merton's *The Ascent to Truth*. He was a university trained public servant who had an interest in mysticism of all kinds, and he was of course a practicing Sufi. He knew Massignon and his work on alHallaj. When in 1959 Louis Massignon came to Karachi, Abdul Aziz asked him for the name and address of a Christian mystic with whom he could

<sup>38</sup>See John Renard (ed. & trans.), *Ibn ‘Abbad of Ronda; Letters on the Sufi Path* (The Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

<sup>39</sup>Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 141-151. Merton's translations were made on the basis not of the original Arabic, but from the French versions of Paul Nwiya, S.J., a friend and colleague of Louis Massignon. See Paul Nwiya, *Lettres de direction spirituelle; les Rasail as-Sughra de Ibn ‘Abbad de Ronda* (Beirut, 1958).

correspond, and Massignon gave him Merton's name and address. Abdul Aziz wrote his first letter to Merton on 1 November 1960. Merton replied on 17 November 1960, and so began a remarkable correspondence which lasted until the year of Merton's death. On 31 December 1960 Massignon wrote to Merton to say: "Ch. Abdul Aziz (he is the son of a converted Hindoo) wrote me [of his] joy to come in touch with you. He is a believer in Abraham's God without restriction." Merton's side of the correspondence, including fourteen letters all told, is published in The Hidden Ground of Love, the first volume of his published letters.<sup>40</sup> These letters will repay our closer attention because they show us Merton in actual dialogue with a Muslim.

It is important to emphasize the fact that these letters are somewhat unique, in that one cannot readily think of other instances of a published correspondence between a notable Christian and a non-Christian partner in religious dialogue. And even here we have only one side of the correspondence available in published form.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, it provides a unique opportunity to catch sight of Merton in actual dialogue with Islam, a world religion whose call, is, if anything, louder in the 2002 than it was thirty-five years ago. Of course, he had long been writing letters to other scholars of Islam, some of them Muslims. But the letters to Abdul Aziz are uniquely personal and religious, not primarily scholarly. Indeed one has the impression that Abdul Aziz pushed Merton, sometimes quite persistently, to express himself on themes which he would not otherwise willingly address. The result is that in what he says to Abdul Aziz, Merton was almost forced to

<sup>40</sup>Thomas Merton, The Hidden Ground of Love; Letters (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 43-67.

<sup>41</sup>Abdul Aziz' letters to Merton are available in Bellarmine University's Thomas Merton Center. William Shannon quotes from a letter of 4 April 1963 in Merton, Hidden Ground of Love, p. 54, n.~. On this correspondence see Sidney H. Griffith, "As One Spiritual Man to Another": The Merton -Abdul Aziz Correspondence," in Rob Baker & Gray Henry (eds.), Merton & Sufism; the Untold Story, a Complete Compendium (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), pp. 101-129.

state his position on matters of inter-religious dialogue in ways that other Catholic writers and scholars have adopted in print only in the course of the last decade or so.

In general, what strikes the reader of Merton's letters to Abdul Aziz is their personal, even intimate character. It is clear that Merton felt that he was in correspondence with another man of God, with whom he did not need to hide his own devotion behind polite phrases. In his second letter he says, 'There is no question in my mind that the mercy and bounty of God are very clear in the inspiration which has brought about our correspondence, and His angels certainly have their part to play in this.' (p. 46)<sup>42</sup> He customarily ended his letters with an invocation, not unlike the following instance in a letter of 18 October 1963:

I believe that our friendship is a blessing from God that will bring much light to us both, and help Him to be made known through us. All glory and praise be to Him Who shows Himself in all things infinitely merciful and a lover of all that He has created. (pp. 57-58)

It also seems clear that in general with Abdul Aziz Merton felt himself to be peppered with more than the usual number of questions, not only about matters of Catholic belief, but about his personal life, and even about his own methods of prayer. There is, for example, the famous letter of 2 January 1966, which is often quoted by Merton scholars, in which the otherwise private Father Louis gives an account of his method of meditation.<sup>43</sup> And there are some passages in some letters in which Merton seems to be a bit exasperated

<sup>42</sup>The page nos. in parentheses in this section refer to pages in Merton, The Hidden Ground of Love.

<sup>43</sup>See Merton, The Hidden Ground of Love, pp. 62-64.

by Abdul Aziz' unrelenting pressing for explanations. For example, on 7 November 1965 he wrote:

I certainly agree with you that we lose much by not keeping in touch with each other. On the other hand, I admit that it is my fault for not answering your letter of last December in detail. It is not possible for me to do so now because when I moved 'out of the monastery to the hermitage I discarded all letters and files. Actually, here I am in a much worse position to write. Our monastic rule frowns on much letter writing and being in the hermitage I must give more time to prayer and study than before, naturally. Also I do receive quite a few letters that have to be answered immediately, usually from people in urgent spiritual trouble. Please understand my situation and I in my turn will do my best to reply at least briefly and in substance to whatever you ask that is within my power to answer without research. (p. 61)

One detects a certain vexation, and even some special pleading, in the tone of this passage, but Merton nevertheless continues to write to Abdul Aziz at much greater length than he does to many other people, and he often reveals more of himself in the process.

As in all of his letters, so in those to Abdul Aziz, Merton is ever on the lookout for new books and articles. The letters are full of references to books received or sent, to books requested or just referred to. Indeed, it seems that Merton often relied on books provided by Abdul Aziz for his lectures to the

Trappist community about Sufism. But the most interesting parts of this correspondence for the present purpose are those in which Merton reflects on the nature of the dialogue with Islam. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in America in the 1960's Merton was perhaps the only Catholic seriously so engaged.

It is interesting to note that Merton has to begin the correspondence with an apology. He tells Abdul Aziz that he will not send him a copy of *Seeds of Contemplation* because of "shame". He says, 'The book was written when I was much younger and contains many foolish statements, but one of the most foolish reflects an altogether stupid ignorance of Sufism.'"(p. 44) Merton does not say what the foolish statement is, but William Shannon notes at the bottom of the page in his edition of the letter that in *Seeds* Merton had spoken of "the sensual dreams of the Sufis' as a poor substitute for the true contemplation that is found only in the Church.'"(p. 44, n. \*) He wrote that in 1949. In 1960 he is prepared to say to Abdul Aziz:

As one spiritual man to another (if I may so speak in all humility), I speak to you from my heart of our obligation to study the truth in deep prayer and meditation, and bear witness to the light that comes from the All-Holy God into this world of darkness where He is not known and not remembered.... May your work on the Sufi mystics make His Name known and remembered, and open the eyes of men to the light of His truth. (pp. 45-46)

Throughout the correspondence Merton makes remarks which afford the reader a ready insight into what he thought about dialogue with nonChristian religions. For example, in a letter of 28 June 1964 he anticipated a



principle which would be stated in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated on 28 October 1965. Merton wrote:

How can one be in contact with the great thinkers and men of prayer of the various religions without recognizing that these men have known God and have loved Him because they recognized themselves loved by Him? (p. 58)

Merton said this in the context of his reply to Abdul Aziz' question about the church's position on the salvation of non-Christians. He went on to explain the matter, again in language that anticipated what theologians would commonly say thirty years later. He wrote:

Obviously the destiny of each individual person is a matter of his personal response to the truth and to the manifestation of God's will to him, and not merely a matter of belonging to this or that organization. Hence it follows that any man who follows his faith and his conscience, and responds truthfully and sincerely to what he believes to be the manifestation of the will of God, cannot help being saved by God. (p. 58)

But Merton cannot be accused of relativism or of indifferentism on this score. He went on to say:

It is true that there are different ways to Him and some are more perfect and more complete than others. It is true that the revelation given to the 'People of the Book,' Christians, Jews and Muslims, is more detailed and more perfect than that

given through natural means only to the other religions. (p. 58)

Not only did Merton see that contemplatives of other religions than his own truly met God, but he told Abdul Aziz that he sometimes felt closer to them than to his own contemporaries. He said the following about Ahmad al'Alawi (d. 1934), whom he met through the book by Martin Lings mentioned above:

The first thing that must be said about this 'encounter' with present-day Muslim mysticism is that it is quite obvious that with someone like Shaikh Ahmad, I speak the same language and indeed have a great deal more in common than I do with the majority of my contemporaries in this country. (p. 54)

Inevitably in inter-religious dialogue the question of doctrine and differing beliefs comes up. Merton shared some thoughts on this subject with Abdul Aziz as well. He wrote:

Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas. In the realm of realities we may have a great deal in common, whereas in words there are apt to be infinite complexities and subtleties which are beyond resolution. It is, however, important, I think, to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the experience of divine light, and first of all of the light that God gives us even as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. It is here that the area of fruitful dialogue exists between Christianity and Islam. (p. 54)

Merton goes on to say that he loves the passages of the Qur'an which speak of the manifestations of the Creator in the creation. It reminds us that he communed with the Muslims through his own deeply contemplative reading of the Qur'an. At one point it appears that Abdul Aziz was encouraging him to chant passages from the Qur'an every day. In a letter of 7 November 1965 Merton replies to this suggestion by saying that he did not know how to do the chant properly and that he was opposed to improvisation in so serious a matter. He goes on to say, "It seems to me that here again, my task is rather to chant the sacred books of my own tradition, the Psalms, the Prophets, etc., since I know the proper way of doing this. But on the other hand I read the Koran with deep attention and reverence." (p. 61) One sees in these words Merton's conviction about an important point in inter-religious dialogue, namely that while one may cultivate a deep appreciation of the ways of other religions, success in the dialogue requires that one be faithful to the tenets and usages of one's own faith. Otherwise, there is no real dialogue.

While he held them to be of secondary importance in dialogue, Merton nevertheless did talk to Abdul Aziz about doctrines, and especially about those about which there was most disagreement between Christians and Muslims. A major case in point is the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity. Merton addressed it in a long letter of 18 October 1963. While he could hardly be expected adequately to discuss the matter within the confines of a single letter, he nevertheless did introduce the context in which the discussion would have to take place for a Muslim rightly to get the point of the Christian concern. Uncannily, Merton, seemingly unawares, hit upon exactly the terms in which Arabophone Christians and Muslims in dialogue in the early years

of Islam discussed the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>44</sup> He raised it in connection with the Islamic theological concern with the ‘beautiful names of God,’ what Christians would call the divine attributes. There is a long and philosophically quite sophisticated discussion within Islam about the ontological status of the truths affirmed of God in His scriptural attributes. It is in this context that the Christian can the most intelligibly explain the terms of the doctrine of the Trinity to Muslims. Merton discerned this fact on the basis of his own reading and deep meditation on the Qur’an. But even here he was wary of too much explanation. He dosed the discussion with the following rather long paragraph:

I perfectly agree that any man who in his heart sincerely believes in God and acts according to his conscience, will certainly be saved and will come to the vision of God. I have no doubt in my mind whatever that a sincere Muslim will be saved and brought to heaven, even though-for some reason he may not subjectively be able to accept all that the Church teaches about Christ. There may be many extrinsic reasons which make it impossible for him to understand what the Church means. This also applies to Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and in fact to all sincere men. I think that all men who believe in One God Who is the Father of all and Who wills all to be saved, will certainly be saved if they do His will. This is certainly the teaching of the Catholic Church, and this is being brought out

<sup>44</sup>On this topic see Seppo Rissanen, Theological Encounter of Oriental Christians with Islam during Early Abbasid Rule (Abo: Abo Akademi University Press, 1993), and the articles collected in Sidney H. Griffith, The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic (Variorum Reprints; Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002).

clearly now, in connection with the Council. But it was also brought out a hundred years ago at the time of the First Vatican Council. (p. 57)

The doctrine of the Trinity is of course the one Christian teaching which goes most directly counter to the basic confession of Islam that God is one. Merton realized this and even here he was anxious to point out to Abdul Aziz that there was some common ground between Christians and Muslims. In a letter of 13 May 1961 he said:

The question of Tawhid [the confession that God is one] is of course central and I think that the closest to Islam among the Christian mystics on this point are the Rhenish and Flemish mystics of the fourteenth century, including Meister Eckhart, who was greatly influenced by Avicenna. The culmination of their mysticism is in the “Godhead” beyond “God” (a distinction which caused trouble to many theologians in the Middle Ages and is not accepted without qualifications) but at any rate it is an ascent to perfect and ultimate unity beyond the triad in unity of the Persons. This is a subtle and difficult theology and I don’t venture into it without necessity.

(p. 49)

As if to get beyond such issues as these Merton here and in other places in the letters goes on to say to Abdul Aziz, “We live in dreadful times, and we must be brothers in prayer and worship no matter what may be the doctrinal differences that separate our minds.” (p. 49) And in another letter he puts the matter bluntly:

It is my belief that all those in the world who have

kept some vestige of sanity and spirituality should unite in firm resistance to the movements of power politicians and the monster nations, resist the whole movement of war and aggression, resist the diplomatic overtures of power and develop a strong and coherent “third world” that can stand on its own feet and affirm the spiritual and human values which are cynically denied by the great powers. (pp. 50-51)

Such thoughts inevitably led Merton to consider his own vocation. In a letter of 4 April 1962 he wrote to Abdul Aziz as follows:

I believe my vocation is essentially that of a pilgrim and an exile in life, that I have no proper place in this world but that for that reason I am in some sense to be the friend and brother of people everywhere, especially those who are exiles and pilgrims like myself... My life is in many ways simple, but it is also a mystery which I do not attempt to really understand, as though I were led by the hand in a night where I see nothing, but can fully depend on the Love and Protection of Him who guides me. (p. 52)

Like Louis Massignon, whose lead he followed in so many things having to do with Islam, Merton pointed out to Abdul Aziz the connection between Christians and Muslims implied in the devotion to Our Lady of Fatima. The city in Portugal was named after the prophet Muhammad’s daughter, and at one time many Muslims must have lived there. Accordingly, for Merton, this fact bespoke a mystical connection between

Muslims and Christians which was one more warrant for their effort to understand one another.

There are many other details in the correspondence which one could cite to show the extent and the depth of the dialogue between Merton and Abdul Aziz. Time does not allow any more extensive quotations here. One hopes that soon the full edition of the correspondence will be published.

## V

### Merton and the Sufis

It is clear that Merton's interest in Islam did not remain on a bookish level, and it was not superficial. One knows of course that it was not his only, or even his most profound encounter with other religions. It is striking that in the sixties a significant part of Merton's intellectual and spiritual life was taken up with his dialogue with other religions. But it did not involve a turning away from his own religion or from his own spiritual quest. Rather, for Merton, as for Massignon before him, and for so many people, it was through his sincere interest in other religions that his life in Christ deepened. In meeting the other he met himself. There is something uniquely monastic in this dialogue of religious inter-experience. Throughout it all Merton was becoming not less a monk but more a holy man on the model of the desert heroes of Christian antiquity whom he so much admired. Typically they encountered the other and returned to the society they left to communicate what they had learned. Merton's published journals, letters, and conferences accomplish the same purpose.

Few writers in the modern Christian world have in fact sought a religious

response to Muhammad's call to all people to submit to God.

Mohandas Gandhi and Louis Massignon are two of Merton's 'friends' who were preoccupied with it. In the English speaking world none were more eloquent in the twentieth century than scholars like Wilfrid Cantwell Smith and Bishop Kenneth Cragg,<sup>45</sup> neither of whose works Merton seems to have known. But increasingly the intellectual and religious challenge of Islam is making its way into church and academy. And Christians do not know how to reply. What Merton said to Abdul Aziz just about forty years ago is still pertinent. In a letter of 26 December 1962 he wrote:

It seems to me that mutual comprehension between Christians and Moslems is something of very vital importance today, and unfortunately it is rare and uncertain, or else subjected to the vagaries of politics. (p. 53)

One has only to mention the names of Israel/Palestine, Iraq/Kuwait, Bosnia, Afghanistan to underline the timeliness of this remark and to utter Amen. One sees here the pertinence-of-Christian/Muslim dialogue. And in Merton one sees a good example of how it may be conducted. He truly felt the spirituality of the other. In 1963 he wrote to a friend, "I am the biggest Sufi in Kentucky,"<sup>46</sup> and in 1968 he declared in a retreat conference, "I am deeply impregnated with Sufism,"<sup>47</sup> and it is for this reason that I think, had he lived

<sup>45</sup>See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion; a Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions (New York: Harpers, 1962); *idem*, On Understanding Islam; Selected Studies (Religion and Reason, 19; The Hague: Mouton, 1981); *idem*, Towards a World Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981). See also Kenneth Cragg, The Call of the Minaret (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956; 2nd ed.; Mayrknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); *idem*, Muhammad and the Christian; a Question of Response (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984); *idem*, Jesus and the Muslim; an Exploration (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985). See also Christopher Lamb, The Call to Retrieval; Kenneth Cragg's Christian Vocation to Islam (London: Grey Seal, 1997).

<sup>46</sup>Merton to Ad Reinhardt, October 31, 1963, in Thomas Merton, The Road to Toy; the Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 281.

<sup>47</sup>Thomas Merton, The Springs of "Contemplation; a Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), p. 266.

beyond 1968, he well may have written a book that could readily have been called, “Mystics and Sufi Masters,” on the model of his justly famous *Mystics and Zen Masters*.<sup>48</sup>

As a matter of fact, in a letter of 2 December 1965, Abdul Aziz suggested to Merton that he “plan a book on ‘How to Know God’ on a psychological, moral and spiritual basis.” He went on to say:

The book should deal with the fundamental principles which are essential to be followed by a seeker after truth to attain his moral and spiritual perfection with a view to attaining contemplation of God and communion with Him and the mystic vision of God with the eye of the heart in this very life. ...In writing the book much material is already available i.e., the writings of the great Saints and Mystics of Islam and Christianity but this should be coupled with the modern principles of psychoanalysis as applied to ethics.

Regretably, Merton never wrote such a book. Perhaps he came closest to doing so in the last two years of his life, in the conferences he gave on Sufism to the monks of Gethsemani. Here he drew freely from both the Christian spiritual classics, and from his readings in Sufi authors, on whose works he took extensive notes and from which he copied many passages *in extenso* in his reading notebooks.<sup>49</sup> The tapes of Merton’s so-called Sufi conferences remain for the most part unpublished, and under-studied.<sup>50</sup> But in 1986 Abdul Aziz, through the kindness of a correspondent had the

<sup>48</sup>See Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967).

<sup>49</sup>Merton’s reading notebooks are on deposit in the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY. Notebook 18 is especially pertinent to his Sufi lectures.

<sup>50</sup>See Bernadette Dieker, “Merton’s Sufi Lectures to Cistercian Novices, 1966-68,” in Baker &

Henry, Merton & Sufism, pp. 130-162.

opportunity to hear them. He was startled by their informal style and he wrote to Msgr. William H. Shannon on 10 May 1986 to say:

I have been simply shocked and disappointed about Merton's burlesque/parody of Sufism in a garbled, hotch-potch version. If I were to make critical comments it would take a number of pages.

But it was from just such raw material as one finds on Merton's Sufi tapes that he was in the habit of producing his often penetrating essays. After listening to him for a while, and being frustrated by the seeming stream-of-consciousness style of his speaking, one finally realizes that Merton had indeed gotten the point of much Sufi teaching. Had he lived to do it, he may well have produced from this matrix the book Abdul Aziz requested.

## VI

### A Post 9/11 Postscript: What Would Merton Have Said?

I think he would have prayed. And perhaps he would have remembered a poem he wrote in 1961, with thoughts of the Algerian civil war on his mind, a conflict~ in which many died by violence in the name of religion. Little did he know then that the violence would outlast the twentieth century, and in 1996 even claim the lives of seven of his own Trappist brethren at the monastery of Our Lady of the Atlas, Tibhirine, Algeria.<sup>51</sup> On September 11, 2001 it claimed the lives of his countrymen. Here is what Merton wrote:

<sup>51</sup> See Bernardo Olivera, How Far to Follow; the Martyrs of the Atlas (Petersham, MA: St. Bedes Publications, 1997); John W. Kiser, The Monks of Tibhirine; Faith, Love and Terror (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

The Moslem's Angel of Death (Algeria 1961)

Like a jeweled peacock he stirs all over

With fireflies. He takes his pleasure in Lights.

He is a great honeycomb of shining bees

Knowing every dust with sugar in it.

He has a million fueled eyes.

With all his eyes he explores life.

The firefly city stirs all over with knowledge.

His high buildings see too many

Persons: he has found out

Their times and when their windows

Will go out.

He turns the city lights in his fingers like money.

No other angel knows this one's place, No other sees his phoenix wings, or  
understands That he is the lord of Death.

(Death was once allowed To yell at the sky:

“I am death!

I take friend from friend!

I am death!

I leave your room empty!”)

0 night, 0 High Towers! No man can ever Escape you, 0 night!

He is miser. His fingers find the money.

He puts the golden lights in his pocket.

There is one red coal left burning

Beneath the ashes of the great vision.

There is one blood-red eye left open

When the city is burnt out.

Azrael! Azrael!

<sup>52</sup>Thomas Merton, Selected Poems of Thomas Merton (Enlarged ed.; New York: New Directions, 1967), pp. 104-105. For commentary on this poem see Erlinda G. Paguio, "Islamic Themes in Merton's Poetry," in Baker & Henry, Merton & Sufism, pp. 93-94.