

Sufism: the 'Strange Subject'

Thomas Merton's Views on Sufism by Terry Graham

The Trappist monk, adherent to one of the most austere of the celibate orders of Roman Catholicism, is addressing a group of his younger brethren gathered round him, like a genial football coach or a hearty scoutmaster rallying his eager charges. He tosses off a rhetorical question to catch his audience provocatively off guard, telling them that he'd been asked to talk about mystical theology. "Who wants mystical theology in a monastery?!"¹ he says mischievously. "That's almost as bad as bootlegging or something!" dismissing it, bug-eyed with mock wondering disgust. "The last thing in the world any modern, progressive Catholic wants to hear about is mystics ... I sort of throw it at you with a Moslem disguise or something like that in which it is more acceptable."

At this point, having warmed his audience up, he launches into the topic of the day.

"Now, we'll talk about Sufism. Sufism is a very strange subject, and it should be kept a strange subject." He has his listeners intrigued. "Don't ever let anybody ever get up here, or anywhere else, and give you a course on Sufism," introducing the class with bonhomie to cover his genuine modesty about presenting a subject for which in fact he was, despite his humble disclaimers, perfectly well qualified. "Because anybody who is giving you a course on Sufism is giving you a false bill of goods, and anyway, what do you suppose Sufism is all about?" More palaver, more dismissive references. Now, he has his monastic audience panting to know more. He had bridged the gap, talking not only about the 'taboo' subject of mysticism, but presenting it from the point of view of another religion: Islam.

This folksy, down-to-earth style of speech characterises the series of informal Sunday classes which the teacher has organised to stimulate the monks' faith and practice. In this case the topic is Sufism, to which six talks are devoted, at this point, as part of a series carrying on throughout the years 1967-68. The venue is the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in the blue-grass meadows of Kentucky. The speaker is Father Louis, better known to the world by his given name: Thomas Merton, a name to conjure with amongst the spiritually inclined-intelligentsia of the Western world.

Merton was a man who had given up a promising career in journalism that could have led into politics. A man whose charm and breadth of knowledge could unlock the doors of any social milieu. Yet a man who had chosen to convert

from Protestantism to Catholicism and to isolate himself in ascetic retreat under compulsion to answer the call to his heart.

Born in 1915 in France to a New Zealand father and an American mother, who had met in the artistic world of turn-of-the-century Paris, Merton had been raised in the Anglican (or Episcopalian) tradition. Describing his early character in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he wrote: "Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless a prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born" (quoted in Forest 1991, p.9). Though he was exuberantly extroverted, his rugged independent-mindedness became mellowed by the pacifist convictions of his parents and an intense spirituality surging up within him over the course of his youthful years.

After schooling in a French lycée and an English public school, followed by undergraduate study at both Cambridge and Columbia, a gradual spiritualisation overwhelmed the jaunty, worldly (though with a strong social conscience) young Merton during the Thirties. An important landmark in the process of his inward-turning came during a visit to Rome in 1933 just prior to his entry into Cambridge. There he found himself profoundly moved by the fourth- and fifth-century Byzantine mosaic icons in the city's most ancient churches, sparking his first visionary sense of the Divine presence.

However, his discovery of a religious perspective that could provide a meaningful expression had to come later, after a few high-living university years, during the English period of which he even fathered a child in the course of his adventures. The finding of a congenial path gradually came through the combing of sources as diverse as the French Catholic thinkers Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain and the English mystically-oriented agnostic Aldous Huxley, along with the great sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, while his more immediate model was the subject of his Columbia master's thesis, William Blake, whose - he significantly later wrote -

rebellion, for all its strange heterodoxy, was fundamentally the rebellion of the saints. It was the rebellion of the lover of the living God, the rebellion of one whose desire of God was so intense and irresistible that it condemned, with all its might, all the hypocrisy and petty sensuality and skepticism and materialism which cold and trivial minds set up as impassable barriers (*ibid.*, p.48).

Also, in this period in New York an itinerant Hindu monk, answering a query of Merton's about Eastern religion, directed the searcher back to his own faith by recommending St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. Apart from his readings, there were, indeed, a series of spiritual events which quickened his thirst for deeper involvement in the devotional life, leading to his conversion to Roman Catholicism and his decision to undertake the life of a

solitary. The big move was finally prompted by his discovering the biography of the nineteenth-century English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who had turned from an Anglican background while a student at Oxford and ultimately became a Jesuit priest. Merton himself converted in a New York church in the fall of 1938 and very soon set his sights on the priesthood.

In the spring of 1940, while he was contemplating which order to choose, he made an Easter Pilgrimage to Cuba to the shrine of Our Lady of Cobre, where he had a key vision, later recounting in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that he saw

a light so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralisation of very lesser experience. And yet the thing that struck me most of all was that this light was in a certain sense 'ordinary - it was a light (and this most of all was what took my breath away) that was offered to all, to everybody, and there was nothing fancy or strange about it ... It ignored all sense experience in order to strike directly at the heart of truth. [It] belonged to the order of knowledge, yes, but more still to the order of love (*ibid.*, pp.63-64).

The 'order of love' had chosen him, and when he returned - after consideration of such orders as the Jesuits and the Franciscans - it was the sternest order of travelling the path of love which became his lot: that of the Trappists - the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. Once he had been daunted by its very name; now, on entering the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941, he found himself embracing all its strictures with abounding joy. As with his paragon St. John of the Cross before him, the rigours of harsh conditions and a bed of straw only kindled the fire of Divine love the more brightly within him.

In a further parallel with the Spanish monk, whose symbolic love poetry and commentaries thereon indicated a consciousness of mystical traditions beyond the Catholic conventions, indeed, very 'Sufi' in spirit, so Merton continued his pre-conversion, researches into the spiritual paths of the East, leading to his writing books on both Taoism and Zen and ultimately bringing him into dialogues about Sufism, with which he was particularly concerned when he embarked on his fateful trip to Asia in September 1968, the fruit of an intention entertained since early 1967, when he had hoped to visit the Orient in order to be with sages like Sidi Abdesalam (Abd as-Salam), an Algerian Sufi shaikh who had come to him at Gethsemani in the fall of 1966, as well as compare the approaches of celibates in the Eastern and Western traditions.

Although he became ever more deeply interested in Sufism and, indeed, had, like St. John before him, the temperament to appreciate the *eros* aspect of Divine love ('*ishq*') as the Sufis understand it (in contrast to the *aqape* aspect, that of *mahabbat* or 'loving kindness', akin to the Buddhist *karuna* or 'compassion', with which the Sufis regard the creatures of the world), he was still

uncompromisingly committed to the celibate life. He would very likely have come out with a book on Sufism if events had not taken a fatal turn.

He wrote in his journal that in the course of his journey to the East, "I hope to find something or someone who will help me advance in my own spiritual quest" (quoted in Forest 1991, p.197). His travels took him to the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and the Tlingits of Alaska, in line with his interest in Native American shamanism, then after conferences in California on to Asia for a series of meetings - including one with the Dalai Lama, about whom he wrote in a letter, "I have seldom met anyone with whom I clicked so well" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.205), while another Tibetan monk called him a "natural Buddha" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.206) - and ecumenical gatherings in Calcutta and Bangkok. He dallied in the Himalayas, wondering if he should pass the rest of his days there. He also stopped in Sri Lanka and visited a Buddhist shrine where he experienced that "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.210).

All this was leading to his final Asian encounter, that with death itself. In the course of the conference of abbots and abbesses of different faiths near Bangkok in December 1968, Merton retired briefly to his hotel room only to be discovered an hour later, electrocuted by a short-circuiting floor fan which had fallen across his body. Sufism had been his main non-Christian preoccupation before his journey, while his encounters on the trip had been principally Hindu and Buddhist, although in a November letter from Delhi he mentions an exposure to the Sufi tradition in that city, where he learned of *qawwali* music, involving the use of "singing to induce contemplation" and was looking forward to hearing some of it in a local restaurant (Merton 1989, p.120).

Merton's interest in Sufism had come later than his inquiry into other Eastern paths, although it was a venue he specifically sought out, where the studies of other mystical approaches - Tibetan Tantra, Hindu Yoga, Zen, Taoism, Native American shamanism - had more or less fallen into his lap. He had been corresponding with the French scholar Louis Massignon, the presenter *par excellence* of the martyred master Hallaj to the West, in pursuit of his interest in non-violent struggle, for the professor, though an expert on Islamic Sufism, was himself a Catholic priest, had joined another priest in leading a protest demonstration in Paris against France's Algerian way in May 1960.

The Massignon correspondence had triggered an interest in Islam and particularly its mystical dimension, Sufism, the study of which Merton pursued through the works of two other important living scholars in the field, the French Henry Corbin and the Iranian Seyyed Hossein Nasr. His discovery of Ibn 'Arabi, who bridged the domains of mysticism and philosophy, had a special impact on him, and he took an avid interest in the Spanish Sufis. It was not lost on him that the Arabic word *suf* referred to the coarse wool worn by a particularly ascetic group of the Prophet's Companions, and that this

was the very material with which the austere Trappists traditionally garbed themselves.

Merton was introduced to Massignon by Herbert Mason, presently professor of the history of religion at Boston University, who discovered the French scholar in 1959 and, like Merton soon after, became fast friends with the older man. While Mason's interest in Massignon was primarily spurious-literary, reflecting a marriage of his interests and fields of study, Merton's came to be based on their common religious calling mingled with a shared concern for the plight of disinherited peoples, the poor and oppressed throughout the world and the mounting of a non-violent struggle towards rectifying their state.

The compelling figure of the Sufi martyr Mansur Hallaj was the standard-bearer for all three. Affected in many ways by Hallaj, his stance and his martyrdom, Mason has written not only poetry and a drama about the Sufi saint, this *wali*, but also translated Massignon's massive *The Passion of Hallaj* into English (published in 1982).

Merton's correspondence with both began in the late fifties, ending with Massignon at the latter's death in 1962, while continuing with Mason throughout the sixties. In an early letter to Mason in June 1959, he demonstrates the mystical intuition which fired his interest in the work of both men and whetted his taste for Sufism in this statement:

The only issue is in a paradox of great humility, a small door through which one goes out, appearing to be nothing: and having become nothing. This is the liberation. (Merton 1994, p.262)

The letters to Massignon show great affection. He addresses him by first name at various points in the text when he feels especially warm about an issue shared with this seasoned veteran and fellow cleric with whom he identified so passionately, as in the following passage:

Louis, one thing strikes me and moves me most of all. It is the idea of the "*point vierge, ou le désespoir accule le cœur de l'excommunié*" ["the virginal point, the center of the soul, where despair corners the heart of the outsider"]. What a very fine analysis, and how true. We in our turn have to reach that same "*point vierge*" in a kind of despair at the hypocrisy of our own world. (Merton 1994, p.278).

From 1965 up to his departure on the final journey Merton corresponded with Reza Arasteh, an Iranian psychologist, residing in America, who had written a book on Rumi, which had impressed the monk, and had been exploring the relationship between Sufism and the psychological thought of both Jung and Fromm, the latter himself a warm correspondent of Merton for over a decade. In an early letter to Arasteh he mentions the hypothesis of the influence of Ibn

'Abbad of Ronda (Spain), whom he mistakenly calls "a Moroccan Sufi" (Merton 1985, p.41), upon St. John of the Cross, suggesting awareness of a parallel between his point of view and that of his Spanish forebear. In another letter he asks Arasteh if he can provide texts "from Persian Sufism, particularly something hitherto untranslated," for a literary magazine he plans to launch (*ibid.*, p.42).

However, the most fruitful correspondence which Merton had on Sufism was with a Pakistani scholar, Abdul Aziz, who first wrote to him in November 1960 when his name had been erroneously interpreted, then rectified. In answer to his request for the recommendation of a contact with "some genuine Christian saint and contemplative mystic" (*ibid.*, p.43). It was the letters and books which Merton received from this fertile source that spawned the series of Sunday lectures on Sufism.

There is an illuminating reference in Merton's response to Abdul Aziz's first letter, which through admission of error reveals a perception of Sufism which had at first been erroneously interpreted, then rectified. Having sent a batch of his books to Abdul Aziz, he comments that he has omitted his *Seeds of Contemplation*, written in 1949, because he is ashamed of his statement in those callow early days that "the sensual dreams of the Sufis" serve as a poor substitute for the true contemplation which is found only in the Church (*ibid.*, p.44n).

What is important is that, having acknowledged the sensual nature of Sufi symbolism, he was eventually able to transcend Western Christian prudery and comfortably integrate this erotic perspective with the way to mystical union. (The fullness of this realisation came through only when he himself had experienced a human sensual love that shook the very foundation of his being, as we shall see below). In this initial letter he attests already at that stage to a familiarity with such Sufi saints as Hallaj and Rumi, as well as revealing insights he has gained through his correspondence with Massignon. In answer to a query by Abdul Aziz about books on St. John of the Cross, Merton mentions the works of the two contemporary priests, Fr. Bruno de Jésus-Marie and Fr. Paul Nwyia, on the saint and his possible Sufi connections.

One of the fruits of the exchange of books between Merton and Abdul Aziz was the monk's receipt of a copy of Titus Burckhardt's classic text on Sufism, which prompted him to comment to his correspondent that Sufism clearly involved "a deep mystical experience of the mystery of God our Creator Who watches over us at every moment with infinite love and mercy" (*ibid.*, p.48). He mentions that the Burckhardt book also directed his attention to the importance of *tawhid* as central to the Sufi perspective, prompting him to note:

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 Persian mystical philosopher Ibn Sina]. 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 ...(*ibid.*)

Another point from Burckhardt which impresses Merton is the matter of "the *dhikr* which resembles the techniques of the Greek monks, and I am familiar with its use, for it brings one close to God" (*ibid.*). He agrees that God "alone is Real, and we have our reality only as a gift from Him at every moment. And at every moment it is our joy to be realised by Him over an abyss of nothingness" (*ibid.*), a comment which reflects the agony of Merton's existential state as much as anything springing from Sufi doctrine, for he goes on to say with a particularly unSufi-like bitterness, "but the world has turned to the abyss and away from Him Who Is. That is why we live in dreadful times" (*ibid.*). The Sufi perspective would be that no time in the world is better or worse than any other; the 'dreadfulness' comes in one's individual inattention to God at any time.

Much of the sympathy which Merton expresses towards Islam is more in the exoteric domain, which he often fails to distinguish from Sufism as such. For example, he praises a book sent by Abdul Aziz as "a splendid ascetic treatise which confirms me in my deep sympathy for Sufism [for it is] set in the right perspective of direct relationship with the All-Holy God. Our conduct is based on His relation of Himself, not on mere ethical systems and ideals. This is the basic principle shared by all the 'people of the book'. We should rejoice together in this light of truth which other religions do not fully understand" (*ibid.*, p.50).

Here he explicitly subscribes to the doctrinal viewpoint of the Abrahamic (Judeo-Christo-Islamic) tradition as a whole, in contradistinction to faiths outside it. In fact, in another letter he specifically states: "It is true that the revelation given to the 'People of the Book', Christian, Jews and Muslims, is more detailed and more perfect than that given through natural means only to the other religions" (*ibid.*, p.58).

On a more universal note, his description of the matter of detachment, spoken from the immediacy of his own struggle, strikes a chord that resonates profoundly in not just Sufism and Christian mysticism, but in the path of transcendence in any faith. In discussing the approach of St. John of the Cross, in whom Abdul Aziz had expressed particular interest, he could be expounding Sufi doctrine in the approach he takes, stating that there are two levels of detachment: first the outward, which he says is easier, then the inward, explaining that

inner detachment centres around the 'self', especially in one's pride, one's desire to react and to defend or to assert 'self' in one's own will. This attachment to the self is a fertile sowing ground for seeds

of blindness, and from this most of our errors proceed. I think it is necessary for us to see that God Himself works to purify us of this inner 'self' that tends to resist Him and to assert itself against Him. Our faith must teach us to see His will and to bend to His will precisely in those points where He attacks the self, even through the actions of other people. Here the unjust and unkind actions of others, even though objectionable in themselves, can help us to strip ourselves of interior attachment (*ibid.*, p.53).

These, we must not forget, are the words of a man who in the prime of youthful vigour elected not only to retreat from the world into the confines of an environment of contemplation but chose the most rigorous path possible in his tradition. Then, as he makes reference in another letter to Abdul Aziz, he finds even the conventional conditions of the Trappists not austere enough, striving for and eventually gaining permission to make his own place of solitude, a hut, his 'hermitage', in the woods beyond the communal world of the monastery itself, yet more rigorous than the rigors of the Cistercians. Hence, whatever he understands of Sufism come straight from the heart of his own painfully sincere endeavours, not merely a matter of academic discussion. Witness his comments on Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi, on reading Martin Lings' *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, sent by Abdul Aziz:

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. In listening to him I seem to be hearing a familiar voice from my 'own country' so to speak (*ibid.*, p.55).

Significantly, in commenting on books by Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon, as forwarded or at least recommended by Abdul Aziz, he criticises these two formidable commentators on Islam, mysticism and comparative religion as at times interpolating their own gnostic ideas into their analyses, while fully acknowledging "their efforts to bring East and West together" (*ibid.*, p.56). He will brook no 'intellectualising' of a spiritual reality which has to be experienced as a result of sincere striving.

By June 1964 Merton telling Abdul Aziz that he is to "provide notes on Islamic mysticism from time to time for the magazine of our Order. This is a new step, and a promising one" (*ibid.*, p.59). In another letter he reaffirms the harmony of perspective he feels between Christianity and Islam, asking when Ramadan is to be that year (1965) and saying,

I would like to join spirituality with the Moslem world in this act of love, faith and obedience toward Him Whose greatness and mercy

surround us at all times, and Whose wisdom guides and protects us even though, in the godlessness of the world of men, we are constantly on the edge of disaster. We must humble ourselves truly and seek to see our state, and strive to pray with greater purity and simplicity of heart (*ibid.*, p.60).

A final note on Merton's correspondence with Abdul Aziz, which carried on up to his departure for Asia, may be appropriately devoted to his method of meditation, as he explained it in a letter:

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centred entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centred on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as "being before God as if you saw Him." Yet it does not mean imagining or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realising Him as all. My prayer tends very much toward what you call *fana* ['annihilation']. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognise totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up and out of the centre of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present 'myself' this I recognise as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness seems to itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not 'thinking about' anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible (*ibid.*, pp.63-64).

This significance of this passage is, first, that it is written as a confidence, involving the expression of something which he would normally find too private, even too inexpressible, to expose to anyone; and second, that Merton has been inspired to find terms to express the inexpressible through the vocabulary of the Sufis which has come through the works which Abdul Aziz has led him to. He does not have a '*dhikr*' [a sacred formula like the Yogic mantra], which he acknowledges to be the key to Sufi, as well as, to a certain extent, Eastern Christian Hesychastic, contemplation, but he is struggling to embrace the process of Divine communication in a conceptual way, beyond the rituals, the litanies and the offices of the Church and the monastic rule offered to the devotee in his own tradition.

In a letter of October 1966 Merton described himself to a friend whose quietism (utter abandonment of human activity in submitting to God's will) he gently and humorously criticised, as sharing his position to a certain extent, but tempered with other points of view, as well, adding, "I am a Jansenist² also and a Sufi. I am the biggest Sufi in Kentucky though I admit there is not much competition" (*ibid.*, p.281). His references to the quietist and Jansenist positions was clearly in jest, as these were positions which he agreed that the Church had rightly condemned, but his addition of the Sufi comment, slipped into the conventional Catholic fold of heresies, was puckishly provocative, as a mask to very serious preoccupations with which he was wrestling.

Given the productive correspondence with Abdul Aziz and the abundant reading material that sprung from it, there were two encounters which fired what one might call the 'Sufi nature' of Thomas Merton, one of them on the classically spiritual plane, the other on the *eros* plane. The first was the visit of the Algerian Sufi shaikh, Sidi Abdesalam; the second, the passionate love affair with the student nurse Margie Smith.

Ironically, Merton's encounter with the Algerian Sufi, following a path which normally encourages marriage and living *in* the world, while not being *of* it, served, in fact, "to reinforce his resolve and confidence in his vocation" (paraphrase of journal entry in Mott 1984, p.462), that of a celibate devotee. This was due principally to the spiritual presence of his visitor, with whom "he sensed that he [could] communicate beyond the translated words" of his interpreter (*ibid.*). Chronologically the arrival of Sidi Abdesalam came right on the heels of his break-up with the great human love of his life, taking place in October 1966, a month after he had made his permanent vow of celibacy, having lasted from April to September of that year, though with two brief, final meetings in late October, concurrent with the time of the shaikh's visit. However, because the Sufi's appearance was vital in the higher realisation process, in fact, setting the human love in context, where Merton's heart had been opened in a special way, it makes sense to recount it first.

Merton's biographer, Michael Mott, describes the impact of Sidi Abdesalam:

It was a week in which Merton attacked himself more savagely than usual, seeing in himself great powers of self-deception and wondering whether he had not proved so vulnerable earlier that year [over his relationship with Margie] precisely because he was seeking a chance to run from his vocation. Now a man he recognised as a true mystic, a man who represented the most authentic tradition in Islamic spirituality, left him with the message that he was very close to a mystical union and that the slightest thing could bring that union about (*ibid.*, p.462).

In carrying on the teaching of his visit, the shaikh wrote Merton a letter the following February, asking if he "had set aside the distractions of words, his own words and those of others, in order to realise the mystical union" he had foreseen (paraphrase in *ibid.*, p.468). At this time, in the winter of 1967, Merton was in the throes of debating within himself whether or not to travel. As Mott puts it:

"What is best is what is not said," Merton translated from Sidi Abdesalam's letter. He was in search of the "not-said". Solitude had borne many fruits when Merton had trusted it [in his solitary hermitage]. There were too many distractions still - words and visitors. And yet Sidi Abdesalam had himself been a visitor. Merton had seen travel as a temptation, a pull to the old restlessness ... Now he began to wonder whether the "not said" would come to him at Gethsemani if he waited, or whether it was to be found only somewhere else (*ibid.*, p.468).

A valid reason to travel, Merton wrote in his journal, would be "to visit very special places and to see exceptional people. For instance to visit Sidi Abdesalam or to go to the Zen places in Japan" (quoted in *ibid.*). When Merton did make his voyage, as Sidi Abdelsalam had predicted he would, he did not get to the region where the Algerian shaikh lived, but he was very conscious of pursuing a course which the Sufi had launched him on. In the course of what was to be his final journey in the fall of 1968, he found himself in the Himalayas, pondering whether to go back to Gethsemani or to remain. "Everyone he had met, including the Dalai Lama, had talked of finding the right master as the most essential step on the way," recounts Mott (*ibid.*, p.552). In a Tibetan guru there he came upon someone who, "like Sidi Abdesalam, ... had recognised in some unspoken way that he was "*on the edge* of great realisation" (*ibid.*).

In fact, a statement from a letter written by the abbots attending the Bangkok conference to the Abbot of Gethsemani suggests that he succeeded in attaining that realisation: "In death Father Louis' face was set in a great and deep peace, and it was obvious that he had found Him Whom he had searched for so diligently" (quoted in Forest 1991, p.214 caption).

The final push to realisation seems to have begun with Sidi Abdesalam, but the effect of the Sufi would certainly not have been so profoundly felt if it had not come on the heels of a heart-opening relationship which had been foreseen in dreams but needed to be actualised. Forest recounts how in January of the previous year (1965) Merton was sitting in his hermitage, giving an agonising reappraisal of the "lack of love that had been typical of his relations with women throughout adolescence and adulthood" (*ibid.*, p.162), recording in an article "an urgent need for love" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.163).

For the Sufis the experience of painful, even unrequited, human love, known as 'figurative love' (*'ishq-i majazi*), is regarded as particularly important for the heart-opening necessary to receive Divine, or True, Love (*'ishq-e haqiqi*), that which is necessary to transport the devotee to Divine union. If Merton had been deficient in his realisation of human love, the moment came to rectify this situation a year after his reflection on his deficiency in this area. In March 1966 he was in hospital in Louisville for a back operation. Early in April while he was recuperating a student nurse was put in charge of him.

She had black hair, a pale complexion and striking features, and she mightily resembled a vision which he had had of an archetypal beloved, most prominently conceived of as a Jewish girl, who announced herself as 'Proverb', a reference to the biblical Book of Proverbs, on which Merton placed great store. This accorded well with Merton's 'Sufi' temperament, with spirituality grounded in a sense of human love to be transubstantiated. Such was Dante's love of Beatrice, in the milieu of the Sufi-inspired *Fidegli d'Amore* ('Those Pledged to Love') of the late Italian Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Such was Hafez' Shirazi Turkish girl and scores of other references to human representations of the Divine Beloved in Sufi poems.

For two or three months in 1958 Merton addressed rhetorical letters to his beloved 'Proverb' in his journal, then reference to the visitations stopped for the time being. Merton recorded the archetypal beloved as appearing at least two other times: in the form of a woman Latin professor from Harvard in March 1964 and in that of a Chinese princess in November of the same year. Merton wrote that he felt "overwhelmingly the freshness, the youth, the wonder, the truth of her, her complete reality, more real than any other, yet unobtainable" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.161).

Whether as a Jewish girl or a Latinist or a Chinese princess, Merton's love manifestation represented oriental and ancient wisdom and gnosis. By early 1966 the time was ripe for his beloved to be manifested in living form, so that his heart could be torn open for the freshets of spiritualised *eros* love, or *'ishq*, to pour in, sensitising him for the input of the only spiritual master which he was to have on American soil, the one who was to prepare him for the journey to the East.

The nurse's name was Margie Smith. She was both highly capable and reasonably well read, as well as spiritually inclined; and she had read Merton's book, *The Sign of Jonah*, so she was well aware of who her patient was. When, after attending him for a few days, she left Louisville for a weekend at home, Merton was overcome with loneliness, lying awake half the night tortured "by the gradual realisation that we were in love and I did not know how I could live without her" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.173).

There is little point in recounting the details of their meetings, which in their chasteness must have resembled the encounters between the great Sufi paragon lovers, like Laila and Majnun or Farhad and Shirin, where the passion was more important than the realisation in material terms, leaving the heart bruised and burned and tenderised for the Divine onslaught, carrying one on to empyrean planes of spiritual transport. The point is that "Thomas Merton," says Mott, "had discovered his authentic wholeness in authentic love" (Mott 1984, p.443).

In Forest's words:

Margie was for Merton the one person with whom he could be himself without a facade. For the first time in his remembered life, Merton felt he was wholly known not only by God but by another person. "This is God's own love He makes in us," he wrote in a poem that night. In his journal he wondered about the possibility of 'chaste marriage' (Forest 1991, p.175).

After one particularly blissful day together, Merton wrote these verses:

*We rock and swim
In love's wordless pain.
Halfway between
Heaven and hell
Zion and the green river
We rock together
In that lovely desperate grip ...
(quoted in *ibid.*, p.179)*

Once he had eventually resolved to continue on the celibate path, he wrote her a letter stating his monastic intention unequivocally with the concomitant need to break off the relationship, then in envisioning her reading it in despair, he felt howls of pain "rending their way up out of the very ground of my being" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.180). As Forest concludes his account of the affair:

In the end, Merton renewed his commitment to remain a monk and to persevere as a hermit, the most difficult choice of his life. His love for Margie hadn't ended. In his soul, and probably hers, there had been a kind of wedding. [But the way had been prepared for a higher realisation.] "There is something deep, deep down inside us, darling, that tells us to let go completely," He had written in a letter to Margie that summer ... "Not just the letting go when the dress drops to the floor and bodies press together with nothing between, but the far more thrilling surrender when our very being surrenders itself to the nakedness of love and to a union where there is no veil of illusion between us" (quoted in *ibid.*, p.181).

The veil of illusion that had been rent between two sincere and spiritually-minded lovers prepared the way for the falling away of the very veil of illusion that stood between the devotee and the Divine, an event that had to occur in Asia in a process which flowed between the encounter with a Tibetan guru in the Indian Himalayas, resonating with Merton's time with Sidi Abdesalam, and the mysterious death by burning in Bangkok, leaving only a third-degree searing on his right side extending down near the groin, reminiscent of the wound which Jesus has received from the centurion's spear while in agony on the cross.

Given that human love is seen as, if not a prerequisite, at least a recommended precondition, for the true flowering of Divine love from Sufi the point of view, it seems something more than happenstantial that the period of Merton's affair, concluding with his decision to put his spiritual vocation ahead of it without denying the value of it, dovetailed nicely into the arrival of a Sufi shaikh, the sole master who visited the monk in his hermitage. In fact, the event was mentioned in one of Merton's letters to Margie (with whom he communicated by post or by telephone up to within a few months of his death), where he wrote that Sidi Abdesalam had recognised him "as a true mystic with whom an exchange of ideas was possible" (paraphrase in Mott 1984, p.452), going on to point out:

It means I have a living place in a living and secret tradition. It can have tremendous effects. I can see that already. Here again, the Shaikh attaches considerable importance to my life in solitude (quoted in *ibid.*).

As he clearly felt he had to temper his expression of enthusiasm for his rapport with the Sufi, he hastened to add to Margie that he had been accepted as a solitary by a whole slew of figures, who were all classed as "scholars" and "authorities" in one spiritual field or another, except for one group whom he considered "Islamic mystics", suggesting that, at least at this stage, he was touched by a certain special sense of authenticity in the experience he had had with Sidi Abdesalam (*ibid.*, p.452).

With respect to the association with Margie preparing the way for receptivity to the spiritual input of the Sufi shaikh, another monk revealingly comments that Merton's experience of love for her was

an astonishing opening into a facet of God's love that he had never fully realised before. To be infatuated, even for a little while, is a true expression of a gift of God's love that had not been there before (Costello 1995, p.11).

The encounter with the shaikh was still resonating sufficiently in him a few months later for him to recommend to an LSD-besotted young psychologist, on reading her article urging the drug as an accessible way to a consciousness-

opening experience, that she investigate the Sufi approach, proposing that she read Ibn 'Arabi or, at least, Corbin's presentation of him. This was after giving some profound words on a non-drug-induced contemplation, saying, "I think you really need an element of silence, of loneliness, of non-communication in order to make the whole thing more valid and keep it so" (Merton 1989, p.352).

This was 15 April 1967. Two days before, he had written to a Smith College professor, speaking of the:

reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma ... or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned anymore than breathing), we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations (Merton 1985, p.115).

Already three years before (and well into his correspondence and readings with Abdul Aziz), he was speaking in stark, almost Islamic terms in reply to a Hindu student writing from Communist Poland but interested in Catholicism. He was countering the views of both atheists and idolatrously misguided religious people by calling God "the Absolute, the source and origin of all Being, beyond all beings and transcending them all and hence not to be sought as one among them" (*ibid.*, p.452).

In the spring of 1965, Merton replied to the British Sufi scholar Martin Lings, who had sent his latest book for Merton to review, that he felt unqualified to critique a work on Sufism, while praising *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* and saying how the 'school of thought' represented by it and books like René Guénon's (a French convert Sufism) *Crisis*, which he was reading at the time, were "of great help to me in rectifying my own perspectives in this time when among Catholics one is faced with a choice between an absurdly rigid and baroque conservatism and a rather irresponsible and fantastic progressivism à la Teilhard [the Catholic thinker accused of eclectic compromise with materialist theories]" (*ibid.*, p.454).

This is the context in which Merton was giving his lectures over the years 1967-68, basically from the time of his encounter with the Sufi shaikh to that of his departure on his journey.

In attempting to give the "strange" Sufism greater immediacy to his fellow monks, Merton, the teacher, explores the idea of a connection between Sufism and the Christianity of his monastic listeners, suggesting a link with Syriac Christianity, which must have come up in his voluminous reading, through which he had, no doubt, come across the fact that the Prophet Muhammad had received his first religious instruction from a Nestorian monk in the course of his

commercial journeys into Syria long before his revelation. He then turns to the great late medieval mystics of the Netherlands and the Rhineland, notably Ruysbroeck and Meister Eckhart, who he says "are like the Sufis," continuing on to state approvingly: "That's why they are good," and, furthermore, "That's also why they get into trouble."

This strikes a vibrant chord with the profounder Christian because of the trials which Eckhart underwent with respect to the Church establishment. Merton maintains that "Eckhart talks and acts like a Sufi, and if you want to get a Christian counterpart of the Sufis, read Eckhart." The same holds for Ruysbroeck, who, as what Merton calls a "secret friend of God", "lives a completely secret holy life", "is a friend of sinners" and "judges no one."

Then Merton finds himself wrestling with the idea of what the Sufis are fundamentally up to and, in seeking Christian parallels, is confronted with movements which have been branded 'heretical' by the Church, such as the Messalians, whose antinomianism leads them to by-pass the sacraments and all the structure of ritual and canon law, where "if you just sort of lock yourself up in your little shell and pray, you've got it made and you don't have to do anything else," with the end-result that "you could see God," or at least the "divine light", as the Orthodox Hesychasts maintain. However, when the speaker tries to bring this back to the Sufis, he is stumped, asking, "Now the Sufis, do they say this, or don't they?", to which rhetorical question, he replies, "No, not exactly."

He does assert that the Sufis share one thing with the Hesychasts, in that both groups "have this idea of calling upon the name of God synchronised with breathing, opining that they have influenced one another, with the principal object of both being "a life of constant prayer, a life of hidden sanctity, a life of total abandonment to God, and so forth." Furthermore, they both make "esoteric interpretation of the scriptures," respectively the Koran and the Bible.

The effect of this esotericism is an apparent antinomianism, of which the exponent *par excellence* is Hallaj, who "got himself crucified deliberately by saying, 'I am God'," shocking the legalists because they failed to perceive that esoterically "everything is one in God," and Hallaj "deliberately kept his angle secret."

He didn't explain this. So he walks into a whole group of legalist fellas ... "Hello, fellas, I'm God. And they say, "Oh, you are, are you! Well, come over here, and we're going to fix you." They fixed him good. He died a terribly painful death ...

While acknowledging Louis Massignon as his source, Merton is skeptical about the French scholar's contention that Hallaj was imitating Christ. In fact, Merton shows far greater perspicuity in this matter than his source, maintaining that the

Sufi martyr did what he did "in order to incur blame," where "he got himself killed ... for seeming to blaspheme God when he was affirming God." For Merton, Hallaj's intention and act illustrate "a very important religious truth," one which is "one of the central intuitions of Sufism."

This insight at this juncture provides Merton with the opportunity to make a point to his monks about their own situation, namely, that this vital 'religious truth' is

one of the things that we are struggling with, ourselves, in a rather naive way. The Sufis nevertheless, see deeply into the fact: the kind of dualism that arises in a strictly dogmatised religion. Where you continue to declare this is true and this is false, ... very soon you build up a very uncomfortable body of statements that are reputed to be false but which contain truths that can't be ignored and that have to come out in some other way ... There comes a point when the things that you reject are going to come back home to roost.

He states that "this is a thing that the Sufis realised. You cannot go on indefinitely affirming and denying, ... for sooner or later you are going to have to account for the things that you've denied ... Because eventually the balance gets overbalanced and, all of a sudden, everything flops over and you suddenly find that the people who hold all the affirmations are supremely impious people. What happens is that there comes a time in this process where the most orthodox, the most fervent and the most holy people are real sons of guns." At this point his exasperation with the sanctimonious and doctrinaire types becomes so strong that a wrath of the sort that fired Jesus to drive the money-changers out of the temple stirs him to begin spelling out that "naughty word": 'bastard', to brand the hidebound, denying dogmatists who plague every faith.

To bring the point home to his listeners, he touches on the archetypal case from the Gospels: that of the Pharisees. "The supreme example of this process is where you have the officially holy people who've got everything taped so perfectly that when God appears, they kill him." If he had used the term, 'perfect human' (*insan-i kamil*), he would have been virtually expounding Sufi doctrine. Indeed, the Christians could be both God and human at one and the same time, where the Sufi concept of ego-less human through whom God works fills the bill very nicely. If only all those councils in the early days of Christianity had had this handy formula at their disposal, it would have saved countless lives and wasteful internecine strife, not to speak of endless palaver!

What he does proceed to do is to come to grips with another doctrine vital not only to the Sufis but to Islam in general: that of the simultaneous transcendence (*tanzih*, 'being above and beyond') and immanence (*tashbih*, literally, 'being comparable or relatable to', though the latinate English word means 'indwelling') of God with respect to the realm of existence. While similar issues

have been raised in the context of Christian theology, Merton chooses to employ the Islamic concepts and terms, with which he is not merely familiar but over which he has clearly pondered considerably.

This discussion leads Merton on to the topic of the 'mystical knowledge of God', the subject of his next talk, but which he introduces now, giving a foretaste of what is to come, he begins with the paradox of God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence, saying that the former represents the "absolute otherness of God", which is "not able to be expressed in any way, not able to be understood, not able to be manifested," while the latter indicates that God "is able to be understood", that, indeed, "He is manifested in concrete things, and He's in everything." The speaker tells us that the Sufis "run these two things together, and actually the point is that there is no knowledge of God without these."

In addition, Merton has something particularly cogent to say about *tashbih*, that it "is not a question of reasoning' it is a question of symbol." What he goes on to say represents as concise and graspable a statement of the doctrine for the layman as could be found in any Sufi text:

It is a question of creative imagination, and so, whereas *tanzih* says God cannot be imagined, *tashbih* says God can be imagined. A God who cannot be imagined does manifest Himself in visible symbols, and the visible symbols are real manifestations of God, and to grasp them one must have imagination and one must see them, and they must be concrete ... So that the most absurd thing for the Sufis would be simply a ruthless policy of, say, demythologisation, just simply demythologise for the sake of demythologising ... [You] have to have both of these things, so that the perfection of one includes the perfection of the other.

For Merton this represents "a very good point about religious knowledge. A purely logical knowledge doesn't do it. A purely affective knowledge doesn't do it. A purely abstract knowledge doesn't do it ... There is a special kind of knowledge which is *religious knowledge* by which we are able to know God, which is not like other knowledge, and which combines both these things with appear to be opposite."

Early in his second talk Merton gives his listeners a helpful illustration of the paradox of *tanzih* and *tashbih* at work. Taking the example of a green window pane with light shining through it, he explains that one's experience of the light as green is a case of *tashbih*, although one knows that the light in itself is not green, this being a case of *tanzih*.

Tashbih is where "God as He appears to us in created being. His being appears to us in a being which is not His but it appears to us ... He makes Himself known in His creatures. Not merely by argument from cause to effect." The Sufis, he

says, "are very definite about the fact that every creature manifests God's love ... doesn't manifest God's essence but manifests His love, is a manifestation of love. Everything manifests love. Everything comes from love and is a manifestation of love."

Merton also tells of an example given by St. John of the Cross, that of the sun coming into a room, where one can detect the ray of light only by the motes of dust swirling around in it which give it a substance detectable by our eyes. "And so," he concludes, "all creatures are the locus, the place of the manifestation of God. God shows Himself in His creatures, but you have to see Him there."

The speaker points to the manner in which Moslem theosophy relates the absoluteness to the humanly-relatableness of God, that is, through the Divine Names, which "are in God, clamouring to the invisible, unknown, absolute abyss of God for manifestation, and God breathes on them and they are manifested in creatures," who, thus, manifest the Names, not the Essence. Merton then declares that for Moslems it is the Name, the Merciful, which is the most important, whereby "one seeks to ascend to the knowledge of God as merciful in everything," pointing out that this was the position represented in the 'Little Way' of the nineteenth-century French mystic, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, among others in the Christian tradition.

Merton cites the Sacred Tradition referred to by the Sufis: "I was a hidden treasure; I desired to be known; so, I created the creation," where the 'hidden treasure' is *tanzih* and the 'created the creation' the process of *tashbih*, that is, God's making of Himself known. The speaker draws a parallel between this sacred Tradition (representing God's direct words from a Muslim point of view, though uttered through the lips Muhammad) to the words of Jesus (as God's direct words from a Christian point of view, though, of course, the Sufis with their doctrine of the 'perfect human' would accept both statements as Divine) in the Gospel: "With desire have I desired to eat this passover with you ..." (Luke 22:15)

Furthermore, as Merton explains, a Sufi teacher like Ibn 'Arabi declares "that if it were not for this love, the world would never have appeared in its concrete existence. In this sense the movement of the world toward existence was a movement of love which brought it into existence ... The great thing in Sufism is love."

In his third talk, 'The Creative Love and Compassion of God', Merton develops his treatment of God's creativity, which he says the Sufis "are able to experience ... in themselves, this sort of a creative ferment that is going on, to realise themselves, as it were, tingling with this light which is being shot through them at every moment by the power of God.

He devotes the last two talks in this series of six on 'The Desire of God', emphasising what he calls the Sufis' "practical approach", by which he means the master-disciple relationship. From the point of view of any Eastern religious path, this seems an odd perception, indicating how far the West has fallen away from the fundamental approach to gnosis of God. It also indicates how profoundly he must have been affected by his moments with Sidi Abdesalam, with whom he had enjoyed so much wordless communication - a unique experience for him, even in a monastery which discouraged verbal exchange!

With the excitement of discovery, he exclaims that "the relation of the disciple and the guide is absolutely decisive in Sufism! It's the real heart of it!" Later in this talk, he describes what he calls the "Sufi formula", for the "direct and immediate" realisation undergone by the contemplative, saying:

One sees the act with his bodily eye, and as he looks, as he looks, beholds the agent with his spiritual eye. Another is rapt by love of the agent from all thing else, so that all he sees is the agent.

Here, he stresses, one must be completely unconscious of self, shorn of even the veil that is "awareness of the fact that you are a mystic."

In the final talk, the second part of the discussion of 'The Desire for God', Merton states that the "Sufis are centred entirely around this love, this desire, this thirst, for God, which is a passion, you see. It is a supreme passion, and the Sufis emphasise the aspect of passion ... not entirely passion in a purely erotic sense, but it is a passion of love arising out of a supreme intuition."

When it comes to question time, he replies to someone's query with words he says he is quoting from the Sufis: "Those who once knew God in Him as their supreme love, when He manifests Himself to them in this life, they suddenly become beside themselves and intoxicated with ecstatic love, for they know the scent of the wine. They have drunk it before."

It is difficult to say how much of an impact Sidi Abdesalam had on Merton. Did he even initiate him secretly as a disciple? Something which would have had to have been kept a profound secret. Secrecy is, of course, no stranger to Sufism, or to mysticism in general. Witness the difficulties the likes of St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart went through! And certainly initiation in what is apparently a different tradition from that to which one is outwardly committed would be seriously misunderstood by everyone and seriously disturbing for one's colleagues, although, if such a thing had occurred, Merton would have seen it as no more than an intensification of the path which he had already chosen to follow. The one for which he had originally given up a full life, and most recently, a fulfilling love.

Whatever the case may be - and there is certainly no hint that such a thing took place, Thomas Merton was on a lifelong quest, in which there were a number of milestones: including his first entry into the celibate life, his decision to spend his days in an isolated hermitage outside the monastic enclosure, his various visions (notably the archetypal feminine ones leading to his human love experience), the love of Margie, his encounter before his journey, and his spiritual encounters on the Asian journey (notably with the Tibetan guru). Passages from his *New Seeds of Contemplation* in the early Sixties give stunning evidence of his profound understanding of the reality of the mystical life, as where he states that

the way to God lies through deep darkness in which all knowledge and all created wisdom and all pleasure and prudence and all human hope and human joy are defeated and annulled by the overwhelming purity of the light and the presence of God (Merton 1962, pp.208-09).

Notes

1. No page references are given, simply an indication in the text of which lecture is being quoted from. The original is an unpublished transcript of six informal talks and published on audio-cassette in the USA by Electronic Paperbacks and Credence Cassettes. The quotations are given in order, so that reference to the original may be easily facilitated.
2. Jansenism was a modified form of Calvinism, expressed in the seventeenth century within the Catholic Church, which condemned it. Its position was that spiritual attainment could take place only through God's grace, which was determined without reference to one's personal efforts. Clearly a position uncongenial to Merton's temperament, in contrast to the very active Sufi position with which he was eminently sympathetic, hence, his enthusiastic assertion of being the "biggest Sufi in Kentucky"!

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- 1) 'Introduction to Islam and the Sufi Mystic'
- 2) 'The Mystical Knowledge of God'
- 3) 'The Creative Love and Compassion of God'
- 4) 'The Straight Way'
- 5) 'Sufism: the Desire of God' (Part I)
- 6) 'Sufism: the Desire of God' (Part II)

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