

# Book Reviews

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## Merton and Sufism:

### The Untold Story

edited by

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Fons Vitae, Louisville, Kentucky.

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In an era when everyone from Madonna to Deepak Chopra is jumping on the Sufi bandwagon, it is refreshing to find a work of literature that encompasses both the academic and the spiritual aspects of Sufism and presents an accurate and well-informed view of Islamic mysticism. Far from appealing to the "new age" crowd who rely upon individualistic interpretation of ancient mysticism and adapt it to suit their own world view, Fons Vitae's *Merton and Sufism* is intelligently and critically written, and beautifully presented and illustrated. It contains an interesting variety of operculum, from essays by distinguished scholars such as Burton B. Thurston and Bonnie Thurston to Merton's book reviews in the *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, analyses of certain Sufi practices and their similarity to Western prayer forms, original Sufi literature, critical analysis of Islamic themes in Merton's poetry, and his lectures on Sufism to his novices. Chittick's introduction, which is accessible to the undergraduate and the

interested person on the street alike, summarizes beautifully the place of Sufism in Islam, and Islam in Sufism. Each essay is written from an informative and largely unbiased perspective, examining the lifelong and consuming passion of Merton to discover that which could give his life meaning, shape his understanding of the world outside of the cloister, explore ways in which to reconcile the monastic life with another Abrahamic faith tradition, one in which he felt more at home than ever before, but which positively discouraged it; and to submerge himself in love of the Divine Beloved.

However, although *Merton and Sufism* should go a long way to dispel the myths that have been created about Sufism by contemporary popular culture, Sufi practices and beliefs remain largely inaccessible to the Western consciousness; and it is difficult to represent Sufism in a way that does not appeal directly to the post-modern ego-self. In their early years, Sufis were integrated within society and were part of the leading Mu'tazili schools, schools of theology, philosophy, law and learning; but after the outbreak of a civil war, the *status quo* severely modified its approach to Sufism, and Sufis reciprocated by denying the legitimacy of political authority. Their writings began to take the form of apologetics, in order to justify their existence to the Sunni and Shi'ite

schools, due to the fact that they largely rejected their philosophical (*falsafa*) and theological (*kalam*) tenets. They rightly protested that every Sufi is a devout, practising Muslim, and it is imperative for every Sufi to "Quranize" his memory in order to be at one with the Divine; but their vehement responses to criticism does point to the fact that they were participating in a lifestyle which was outside of the cultural and theological norm in past and present-day Islam.

Let the reader beware: it is imperative to read *all* Sufi works, and *any* Western interpretation of Sufism, with the utmost caution. As Chittick rightly points out, in seeking to affirm that Sufism is *wholly* Islamic, the uninitiated may be led to believe that *all* Islam is mystical and, thus, to fall into the Orientalist trap that has sabotaged the accurate depiction of the philosophical, legal, theological, mathematical, scientific and metaphysical endeavours of Islamic scholars from al-

Kindi onwards. Much is made of Oriental scholarship in *Merton and Sufism*: would that the contributors had found another, less inflammatory description for this form of scholasticism, which will automatically antagonise many Arabic philosophers and scholars the world over (and thus strangulate dialogue between the two disciplines). In accordance with Edward Said, I regard the use of the word "Oriental" as immensely damaging and denigrating to Islamic history. Orientalism has misrepresented Avicenna and Suhrawardi, two outstanding philosophers, as mystics who made little or no contribution to the history of ideas save that "esotericism" which they purportedly hid within the body of their writings. Orientalism (*pace* Massignon, whose view of the Islamic world, as Sidney Griffith so eloquently points out in Chapter III of this compendium, was an infinitely enlightened scholar who admirably and uniquely combined scholarship with

saintliness) is a way of turning cultures with their own distinctive history into an amorphous mass of Otherness. Orientalism speaks in the same breath about Arabia, India and China as if they were a singular geographical region. Orientalism often gives the impression that those from this vast terrain are good at religion, particularly mystical religion, and little else. Having stereotyped and negativised an entire culture thus, the Orientalist may then set about implementing his political agenda, which usually involves conquering the territories and imposing an alien belief system upon them—the absolute antithesis of Merton's agenda.

I therefore find it ironic that Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the most archetypal Orientalists in academia, should have proved instrumental in instructing Merton about Sufism (and even more ironic that Chittick condemns Orientalist approaches to Islam in the Introduction following Nasr's florid and over-abstruse Preface). Perhaps it is a mark of Thomas Merton's remarkable intelligence that though he was exposed to so much misinformation, he was not only able to speak in the language of the Beloved, but to avoid emulating Nasr's world-view and discovering Islam for himself. In fact, it can be said that Merton's approach was much more enlightened than those who seek to "integrate" Muslims or impose democracy upon them in the current day, a point well-made by Bonnie Thurston in her essay on *Dhikr* (invoking God's presence). Merton's attempt to truly understand Islam and find a way of speaking about it to those firmly rooted in Christianity—a task which he acknowledged was well-nigh impossible—could be said to be unique in an era dominated by coloni-

alistic, jingoistic superpowers. "The horizons of the world," he wrote in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, "are no longer confined to Europe and America. We have to gain new perspectives, and on this our spiritual and even our physical survival may depend."

In the *Final Integration: Towards A Monastic "Therapy"* which comprises the last chapter of this volume, Merton states that a "transcultural integration is eschatological". Although he was referring to the looming shadow of an impending nuclear holocaust, his words strike grimly true in our own uncertain times. Merton's wish for every being to be truly integrated with one another, with the world, and the Divine, is a reflection of a fundamental facet of Sufism: loss of the ego-self and a slow, painful journey into unity with the One. Perhaps Merton's intense need for unity arose from his isolation, both physical and religious: but we can see the man as a metaphor for our contemporary existence, we who live in a world so inundated by meaningless sights and sounds that silence is more compelling, a world in which we commit violence against ourselves by allowing others to act in our name and violence against each other by perceiving them as a minority. Merton's lesson is simple: seek that which is beyond the Self and open the mind. "The path to final integration for the individual, and for the community lies, in any case, beyond the dictates and programmes of any culture ('Christian culture included')."

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