

Brothers in Prayer and Worship: The Merton/Aziz Correspondence, An Islamic-Christian Dialogue

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This essay has three roughly equal parts, first a review of Merton's acquaintance with Islam, second an overview of the Merton-Aziz correspondence, and third a brief discussion of an Islamic belief – *Tahwid*, the One-ness of God, and an Islamic practice – *Khalwah*, solitary retreat – in the correspondence.

Merton and Islam

Merton studied Islam from the 1950s until his death. In the early 50s Jacques Maritain urged Louis Massignon to visit Merton, but the two apparently did not communicate until summer 1959. Herbert Mason, an American doing research in Paris, wrote to Merton about John of the Cross, Merton having written *The Ascent to Truth* on St John in 1951. On 3 September 1959, in a letter to Mason, Merton mentions al-Hallaj, the Sufi mystic and martyr. Already Merton knew important Islamic figures.¹ In the ensuing correspondence, Mason praised Massignon to Merton and those two great Roman Catholic thinkers became correspondents.² Sidney Griffith notes 'the writings of

Massignon on Islam and other subjects exerted a considerable influence on Merton's thinking in the 1960s'.³ Massignon became one of Merton's major sources of information about and contacts within the Islamic world.

For example, when Herbert Mason visited Merton at Gethsemani in August 1960 they discussed Massignon's book *La passion d'al-Hallaj*. Martyred for his extraordinary expression of the existential consequence of radical monotheism, al-Hallaj was the subject of Massignon's Sorbonne dissertation and his work 'revolutionized the way scholars looked at Islam' (WF 275). Moreover, Massignon was convinced that his return to Catholicism 'had come about through the intercession of a Muslim mystic'.⁴ Griffith notes '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' very much struck Merton who wrote in his journal on 17 November 1964 'Massignon and Foucauld were both converted to Christianity by the witness of Islam to the one, true, living God'.⁵

Mason reported Merton spoke 'of the far-reaching effect this book [Massignon's on al-Hallaj] had on his life ... in helping turn his attention toward the East'.⁶ From an essay by Massignon on Foucauld and the desert, Merton gleaned the phrase *le point vierge* (which Massignon had gleaned from al-Hallaj). He used it in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* to describe his '4th and Walnut' vision.⁷ 'At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God ... *le point vierge*' (CGB 158). The term occurs in Islamic mystical psychology to describe the heart's 'virgin point', 'the apophatic point of the mystic's deep knowledge of God'.⁸ Merton used the term frequently in *Conjectures*, and it is found in his Asian Journals. Massignon encouraged Pakistani Sufi, Abdul Aziz, to write to Merton. Like Massignon, Aziz introduced Merton to Islamic, particularly Sufi, sources. In his journal entry of 3 May 1961 Merton records Aziz 'sent some books on Islam' including a 'volume on Sufism by one Titus Burckhardt, of whom I had not yet heard. Certainly the finest thing on the subject I have yet touched ...'.⁹ The Aziz letters reveal the extent of Merton's studies of Islam.

Merton wrote reviews of serious books on Islam. Eight were prepared for *Collectanea Cisterciensia*; four appeared in number 27,

1965. Four were to have appeared in number 29, 1967, and are now in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁰ In December 1965, Merton wrote he would be lecturing to the novices on Sufism; he did so off and on for years. These lectures exist on audio tape,¹¹ but are disappointing. Aziz was 'shocked and disappointed about Merton's burlesque/parody of Sufism in a garbled, hotch-potch version'.¹² In a journal entry of 12 November 1967, Merton notes 'Still talking on Sufism'.¹³ In May 1968 he reports giving a talk on Sufism at Our Lady of the Redwoods in California (OSM 119) and many Islamic concepts appear in the conferences he gave in Alaska in September and October 1968.¹⁴

Scholarship was slow to focus on Merton's studies of Islam in part because he did not write a book on the subject. There is a great deal of material, although it is not altogether easy to find. Indexes to the letters and journals naturally reflect the interests and expertise of editors and publishers and are far from complete with reference to Islam. Merton published a great deal on Islam long before it was a 'hot topic'. He found poetic inspiration in Islam. There are seven poems on Islamic subjects in *The Collected Poems*, and *Raids on the Unspeakable* includes 'Readings from Ibn Abbad'.¹⁵ *Conjectures*, which Merton prepared for publication, as well as journals which were edited after his death, make frequent reference to Islam. 'The Meaning of Malcolm X' in *Faith and Violence* (1968) outlines Islamic influences on Malcolm and details Arab involvement in the slave trade.

Merton corresponded widely with Muslims and Islamic scholars. There are letters to Reza Arasteh (an Iranian psychologist), Martin Lings (Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum), Louis Massignon, Herbert Mason and Abdul Aziz. In a letter to Egyptian Aly Abdel Ghani on 31 October 1967, Merton explained: 'I am very familiar with the traditions of Sufism, and have ... read much of the Holy Qur'an. I have read Avicenna ... and very much like others such as Ibn-Arabi, Ibn-Abbad ... Rumi, etc. I wish I knew Arabic, as I could read more in the original' (WF 335). Lack of Arabic did not greatly hinder Merton's encounter with an Algerian Sufi, Sidi Abdesalam, who visited Gethsemani in late October 1966, and voiced his belief that Merton was very near a unitive experience. Merton recorded the event in his journal on 31 October and 1 November 1966, noting, 'Before he came I had a sense that he came as a messenger from God. He too had this sense'.¹⁶

Merton mentions writers representing a broad range of classical Islamic thought. They include Ibn Abbad, al-Hallaj, Jelaluddin Rumi, Imam Riza, al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Arabi, al-Alawi, al-Junayd, al-Hujwiri and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Obviously, Merton's acquaintance with Islam focused on its philosophic traditions and Sufism. He studied the best Islamic scholars of the mid-20th century (A. Reza Arasteh, Arthur Arberry, Titus Burckhardt, Henry Corbin, Martin Lings, Louis Massignon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Paul Nwiya, Cyprien Rice, Fritjof Schuon) and focused on central Islamic concepts and practices: the unity of God (*Tawhid*); the revelation of God's word/the Qur'an (*Tanzil*); the struggle to conform human will to the will of God (*Jihad al-Akbar*); the Sufi path (*Tariq*) with its solitary retreats (*Khalwah*); and the prayer practice of remembrance (*Dhikr*) which is a primary means of facilitating extinction of the ego (*Fana*).

Because his sources were good and his focus was on essentials, Merton's understanding of Islam was deep and affecting. One Islamic scholar with long residence in the Middle East remarked that Merton went as far in Islam as a non-Muslim could go.¹⁷ His thinking about this venerable and beautiful religion was not distorted by current political polemics. In 1960 Merton remarked to Massignon 'I am fasting for peace and for Christian-Moslem [sic] understanding' (WF 281).

Why was Merton so taken with Islamic Sufism? On the surface, he liked their style. He quipped to the novices 'One Sufi did everything to be as shocking to the Ulema [the community] as possible. They have a tendency to break all of the laws from A to Z down as a way of hiding their inner life'.¹⁸ In a 31 October 1963 letter to Ad Reinhardt he wrote 'I am the biggest Sufi in Kentucky'.¹⁹ As do most religions, Islam functions on at least two levels, the outward (*shari'a*) and the inward (*tariqa*). With uncanny likeness to a Buddhist image, Sufism is described as the spokes from the circumference of the circle to its center. A goal of its practice is to attain inner truth (*haqiqa*) in which the Sufi is outwardly conforming, but inwardly free,²⁰ a state Merton coveted for himself and his novices. He clearly approved of what he called Sufi 'beatnik style', but it was the articulation of religious experience that most affected him.

Commenting on al-Arabi and al-Hujwiri in *Conjectures* Merton described the 'nonlogical logic of mysticism and of direct experience, expressed in statements which do not agree and which nevertheless

finally explode into a meaning that can be seized if one has some experience of what is being said' (CGB 210). For Merton, Sufism was 'essence without form' (CGB 211), a quotation from al-Hujwiri which Merton copied into his journal on 12 December 1961 (TTW 186). Sufism encourages direct, existential religious experience liberated from doctrinal formulation (and for this reason has had shifting fortunes in the *Ummah*, the Islamic community). As did Buddhism, Islam gave Merton another way to articulate spiritual experience. Islam and Sufism provided insight into the life of prayer that the One God makes available to all who seek. As Aziz wrote to Merton on 2 August 1963 'God readily responds to earnest prayers from whatever quarters uttered ...'.²¹ Like Aziz, Merton knew the reality expressed by the Qur'anic verse which is central to Islamic theology and to the Sufi path: 'Whereso'er ye turn, there is the Face of God' (S 115).

The Merton-Aziz Letters: An Overview

The Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University apparently has the complete Merton-Aziz correspondence. Merton's letters were edited for publication by William H. Shannon and appear with omissions in *The Hidden Ground of Love* (1985). Shannon omits entirely Merton's letters of 2 November 1965 (an apology for his failures as a correspondent) and 23 March 1966 (a report on Merton's hospital stay and the fact that he took al-Junayd to read, which obviously didn't command his full attention). Editorial omissions from the letters included in *Hidden Ground* are of three types: details of the exchange of books; references to Islamic masters and matters of technical Islamic scholarship (which indicate the extent of Merton's knowledge); and epistolary closings (which, like those of St Paul, express friendship and prayer wishes). Shannon omits four paragraphs on Sufism from Merton's letter of 2 January 1966.²²

The correspondence began on 1 November 1960 (All Saints Day) when Aziz wrote Merton from Karachi, Pakistan. It ended with a letter from Merton, 24 April 1968. By my count there are 16 letters from Aziz to Merton, 18 (if circular letters are included) from Merton to Aziz. Griffiths believes that in Islamic-Christian relations 'these letters are 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'.²³ It began after Massignon visited Karachi in 1959 when Aziz asked him for the name of a Christian contemplative and mystic. Massignon suggested Merton, describing him as *simurgh*, the king of soaring birds in Persian mythology.²⁴ Aziz, who in 1952 read Merton's *The Ascent to Truth* on John of the Cross,²⁵ initiated the exchange in November 1960, requesting Christian books on practical mysticism. In December 1960 Massignon wrote Merton about Aziz, explaining he was the son of a converted Hindu and 'a believer in Abraham's God without restriction'.²⁶ A devout Muslim, Aziz was also a practicing Sufi.

The 'Bio-Data' of Ch. Abdul Aziz from Karachi describes him as 'Advocate and Consultant, Collector of Customs and Central Excise (retd)'. He held scholarships from his primary education through the MA, and earned a BA (Hons), a first class MA and an LL.B at the top of his class from Karachi University. He explained to Merton in his letter of 21 June 1962 that he was offered the chance to do a doctorate in Public Administration in the USA, but turned the opportunity down 'due to my solitary temperament' and 'solicitude for my ailing mother'. In his letter of 18 November 1961 he told Merton he was 46, unmarried, a senior official of government in the Board of Revenue. His resumé states that as a result of the all-India Superior Services competitive examination in 1939 'I joined the Imperial Customs Service as an Assistant Collector of Customs on 19th November 1940 and after serving in various posts retired as Collector of Customs (Appeals) Karachi on 5th June 1974 ...'.²⁷ This means he lived through the turbulent years of the British withdrawal from India and the subsequent division of India and Pakistan. Aziz and Merton were almost exact contemporaries, both familiar with British education and institutions, facts that undoubtedly fostered their communication. Their deepest points of engagement included Islamic and Christian mysticism, about which both were knowledgeable, and Sufism. Aziz had read widely in the classics of Christian spirituality, and the books he requested Merton send were substantive.

The description that came to mind to characterize the correspondence isn't highly intellectual: Aziz and Merton were the 'Odd Couple' of pen pals. Aziz's initial letters exhibit the tone and formality of old school English diplomacy. They are elaborate in address and *politesse*; the civil servant is never far from the surface. Some of Aziz's early letters were apparently dictated and typed, often

badly, so contain extensive hand corrections. Later he types or writes by hand himself. Merton's letters, of which typed (mostly carbon) copies exist, while meeting the tone of Aziz's approach, are immediately more personal and soon less formal. His first letter closes 'As one spiritual man to another (if I may so speak in all humility) I speak to you from my heart ...' (HGL 45). Aziz is more systematic in his response to and introduction of subjects than is Merton. Sometimes he numbers paragraphs or points for discussion in his letters. He hopes for more systematic and fuller responses than he gets from Merton and, as the friendship develops, he chides Merton when responses to queries or replies to letters are not forthcoming. Touchingly, 26 January 1966 he worries about Merton's 'austere' diet, 'whether it sustains you properly', noting that 'When one is above 40 years of age more protein ... minerals ... vitamins, less of starch ... and less of sugar should be taken...'.²⁸

Each man was a reference service for the other. Both requested and received books and periodicals, in Aziz's case on Christian writers, in Merton's on Islamic. At one point Merton suggests they get books directly from publishers; Aziz disagrees, and they continue to exchange books. Aziz hopes Merton will find a translator into English for Hakim at-Tirmidhi²⁸ and for 'my own spiritual director Malice Barkat Ali of Ardopht (d. 1951)'.²⁹ Merton is neither in a position to do so (clearly Aziz didn't realize how remote the Abbey of Gethsemani is) or very interested. Twice in 1963 and again in 1965 Aziz chides Merton's failure to respond. In 1965 he expresses displeasure at Merton's long silence: 'Needless to mention that such long suspense in our correspondence entails the rupture of mutually useful contacts' (1 November 1965). Obviously the friendship grew to include criticism.

In December 1965 Aziz sent corrections to and suggestions for additions to 'Readings from Ibn Abbad' and outlined in some detail a book on 'how to know God' which he encouraged Merton to write. Merton sent Aziz a mimeo of his 1965 Christmas letter to explain why he couldn't keep up personal correspondence and then wrote the long, technical and very personal letter of 2 January 1966 which admits the book idea is a good one, but he gently declines to undertake it. Merton clearly enjoys the correspondence, but as Griffith notes he '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 ... his own methods of prayer'.³⁰ Several times Merton justifies his

failures as a correspondent. The letters exhibit Merton's knowledge and appreciation of Islam, but also the bundle of contradictions that he was personally.

I am struck by the consistently affectionate openings and prayerful conclusions of the men's letters. They address one another as 'my dear friend' (TM 2 Nov 1965; AA 1 Dec 1965) and 'my very dear friend' (AA 2 Aug 1963, 19 Dec 1963, 26 Jan 1966, TM 2 Jan 1966). The early letters begin with words of thanks and gratitude; the later are more like to plunge right in to an exchange of ideas and information. Both close their letters with assurances of continuing friendship and often the assurance that the writer is praying for the recipient. On 4 April 1963 Aziz says, 'We should pray for each other's spiritual illumination'. October 18 1963 Merton says, '... let us remember one another in prayer' (omitted in Shannon's edition). In a moving hand-written post script to a typed letter to Merton of 2 August 1963 Aziz writes 'Your belief that 'I am sure you will be greatly blessed by God in many ways', has, indeed, come true, for during the last few months, the All-Merciful and Compassionate has vouchsafed [sic] His Grace to me (although He has been Gracious to me – a great sinner, since my birth at all moments) out of His infinite Mercy. I believe your prayers for my humble self (as well as my own prayers) seem to have been answered'. The Merton-Aziz friendship was deeply spiritual.

The closing lines of Merton's letters to Aziz are often prayers employing Islamic turns of phrase and descriptions of God that indicate how very deeply he understood *Tawhid* ('making one'). Merton's first letter of 17 November 1960 closes with their mutual obligation to '... 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 ...' (HGL 45). That short phrase contains the Muslim concept of *Shahadah* (witness or confession); the Sufi understanding of God as the Light-Giver; the knowledge that Islam does not believe in original sin, that the root sin of humanity is forgetting God; and an oblique reference to *dhikr*, the remembrance of God's Names, a fundamental Islamic prayer practice. Merton's dialogue with Aziz quickly bore fruit in part because Islam's fundamental concepts had already taken root in him. On 24 September 1961 Merton closes his letter 'I remember you very often in prayer before Him, the compassionate, the Merciful' (HGL 51). *Rahman* and *Rahim*, compassion and mercy, are the first characteristics of God in Islam,

terms with which most Islamic prayers begin. Merton's self-revelatory letter of 2 January 1966 closes 'I am united with you in prayer during this month of Ramadan and will remember you on the Night of Destiny' (HGL 64). Again, here is reference to one of the Five Pillars of Islam (Ramadan, the 9th month of the lunar calendar, the Islamic fast) and to the Night of Destiny which, in his letter of 13 May 1961, Merton reported he had 'read about ... in Burckhardt' (HGL 49).

*Islam in the Correspondence*³¹

After a few general observations, I shall focus in closing on Merton's understanding of Islam's fundamental belief, *Tawid* ('making one') – Absolute Monotheism, and the Sufi practice of *Khalwa* – solitary retreat. We won't revisit Merton's knowledge of Islam except to say these letters confirm extraordinarily wide contacts and reading. The more familiar one is with Islamic belief and practice, the more one recognizes Islamic references and allusions in Merton's letters. They are, to use a not entirely happy metaphor, 'legion'.

Merton's three initial letters of November 1960 focus on their mutual friend Massignon and on a fairly academic/intellectual exchange about well known Christian and Islamic mystics, particularly John of the Cross and al-Hallaj. Merton inquires about Imam Riza, whose tomb cover he had seen in Cincinnati and about which he rendered into English a poem from the Persian original.³² In the letter of 20 December 1960 which responds to this inquiry Aziz explains in detail the distinctions between Sunni and Shia Islam and its two branches. Aziz asks about the Trappist order to which most of Merton's letter of 30 January 1961 is devoted. On 8 March 1961 Aziz reports that he is praying for Merton in Ramadan, especially on the 'Night of Power' about which Merton had read. That commemoration captured his imagination; he wrote a poem about it ('The Night of Destiny' CP 634) and refers to it three more times in the correspondence: 26 December 1962 Merton hopes Aziz 'will remember me in the holy season of Ramadan and on the Night of Destiny ...' (HGL 54). On 28 December 1966 he writes 'when the Night of Destiny comes I hope to be united with you in fervent prayer' (HGL 64). Then (a bit sheepishly) on 16 January 1968 'I was not too sure when the Holy Night of Destiny occurred. I did, however, unite my prayers with

yours in the days following Christmas as I believe it came about that time' (HGL 65).

The correspondence became not just a discussion of ideas, but a spiritual exchange in which each, to the degree his conscience allowed, entered into the devotional life of the other. When, for example, Aziz invited Merton to chant the Qu'ran, the monk demurred: '... it would not be right for me to chant the Koran daily, as I do not know how this ought to be done properly my task is rather to chant the sacred books of my own tradition ...' (7 November 1965, HGL 61) Aziz responded '... I understood your scruples ... in this respect' (1 December 1965) The integrity of the two traditions were preserved in this genuine dialogue.

This gives a sense of the correspondence. The exchange of letters in April and June 1963 indicates the range of its theological inquiry. Aziz's letter postmarked 4 April 1963 is largely devoted to the 'Islamic view of faith' which he describes as 'simple and practicable being based on truths which could be deduced from the laws of nature'. Faith, he explains, 'is our knowledge of certain truths, with convictions strong enough to convert them into action ...'. The seven 'articles of our faith' Aziz enumerates are (1) God as source of Law (*Tawhid*); (2) angels whom he calls 'functionaries of Law'; (3) The Revealed Books; (4) Prophets; (5) the Hereafter; (6) The Law; (7) The Resurrection. He concludes, Islam 'inculcates individual responsibility for one's action and does not subscribe to the doctrine of atonement or theory of redemption'. The letter ends 'we should pray for each other's spiritual illumination'.

Merton responds on 2 June 1963 with gratitude for 'your brief outline of the Moselm [sic] faith. I can certainly join you with my whole heart in confessing the One God (Tawhid) with all my heart and all my soul, for this is the beginning of all faith and the root of our existence. ... I believe with you also in the angels, in revelation, in the Prophets, the Life to Come, the Law and the Resurrection' (HGL 54). On 13 May 1961 Merton spoke of the 'question of Tawhid' which is 'central' (HGL 49). Much of the letter of 2 June 1963 addresses the 'transcendent UNITY of God' in light of the Christian Trinity. Merton explains that 'person' is not to be equated with 'individual' and affirms 'the supreme transcendent Unity of God, and the fact that there is no other with Him or beside Him' because Christ 'is not a being outside of God who is His helper' (HGL 5).

Not surprisingly, the nature of God was of profound importance to the two. Merton understood the implications of *Tawhid* for Islam. In his letter of 23 March 1966 (Shannon omits) Merton speaks of 'not making mental images of God'. For Merton 'one of the great virtues of Islam' is 'the deep respect for the purity of the divine Oneness which is beyond any possible representation'. Merton understood that *shirk* (literally 'associationism') is Islam's cardinal sin. On 9 December 1964 he writes 'The great sin remains idolatry, and there is an idolatry of *concepts* as well as of graven images. The minds of men are made vile and corrupt by the images which they worship under the pretext of 'science', 'politics', 'technology', etc ...' (HGL 60). Merton's only description of his meditation practice stresses that he is not 'imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry' (2 January 1966 HGL 63-4).

Furthermore, Merton knew Islamic devotion to the Name of God (the *dhikr*³³) and wrote 13 May 1961 'I am stirred to the depths of my heart by the intensity of Moslem [sic] piety toward His Names, and the reverence with which He is invoked ...' (HGL 48). He alludes to the Beautiful Names of God, particularly in the prayerful conclusions of letters to Aziz. Merton refers to God 'All-Holy' (HGL 45), 'Compassionate and Merciful' (HGL 49), 'Rahman and Rahim' (HGL 56), 'One' (HGL 55), 'All-Merciful One' (HGL 59, 65) and adjectivally to many other of the Names. Merton also understood Islam's fundamental submission to God: 'Islam' means 'submission'. He writes to Aziz 'Whatever God wills' [*Inshallah*] (24 September 1961, HGL 50). and 'faith must teach us to see His will and to bend to His will ...' (26 December 1962, HGL 53) and 'I think that all ... 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' (18 October 1963, HGL 57). Of the One God Merton says (along with al-Hallaj) 'He alone is Real ...' (13 May 1961, HGL 49).

This example of the letters' theological content indicates Merton's understanding and appreciation of Islam's fundamental assertion. Then in his letter of 2 June 1963, Merton pens the sentences that turn the dialogue from theology and toward spiritual practice.

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 ...

important ... to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the experience of divine light ... It is here that the area of fruitful dialogue exists between Christianity and Islam (HGL 54).

While not completely abandoning it, Merton shifts the dialogue with Aziz from doctrine to practice, from head to heart. The letters of the next five years discuss Islamic and Christian saints and scholars, but the deeper level of exchange concerns religious practices: priesthood, monasticism, Ramadan, ways of prayer and fasting, and *Khalwa* (solitary retreat).

On 2 August 1963 Aziz indicates he has sent Merton Martin Lings' book, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*, on Ahmad Al'-Alawi. On 18 October 1963 Merton thanks him for 'the remarkable book'. 'I want to say how deeply moved and impressed I was with this book, from beginning to end. ... I am convinced that this is certainly one of the major religious figures of our time. ... there is little in the book that I cannot heartily accept, I look forward to reading it again more slowly and meditatively' (HGL 55). It is an amazing book and anyone who reads it will understand its impact on Merton.

Lings' book on Al'-Alawi introduced into the Aziz-Merton dialogue the subject of *Khalwa* (solitary retreat) which it treats extensively.³⁴ In the letter of 2 August 1963 (eight typed and handwritten pages covering a wide range of subjects), Aziz inquires about the 'daily routine of your solitary retreat (khalwa) for a week in the woods near the monastery ... you had recently resorted to in June. How your meals were looked after? The period of sleep, meditation, prayer, the mode of sleep, whether on a cot, etc? Was not the Solitary retreat possible in the Monastery itself?' (pp. 4-5 of letter) Merton responds in one paragraph in the long letter of 18 October. He explains he went to the 'cottage' at about 4:30 a.m. and stayed until evening, dividing his time among 'recitation of the 'Office' ... meditation, ... meditative reading, study, and a little work'. He slept in the monastery and took two meals there. I suspect the brevity of his response is because he knew how 'thin' his retreat seemed in comparison to *khalwa*.

Aziz's next letter, dated December 19 1963, confirms my suspicion:

I was glad to see that you had intelligently picked up some of the Muslim technical terms esp. I liked your apt use of *khalwa* for your solitary retreat in the woods. ... it may be of interest to know that the Sufi conditions for *khalwa* are more strict; they have 8 conditions as

below: (1) constant state of ceremonial purity ... (2) constant silence (3) constant fasting (ie refraining from meals ... from dawn to dusk) (4) constant invocation of the Holy Name or formula ... (5) constant seclusion i.e. solitary retreat in a cell (6) constant communication with one's spiritual master for interpretation of events and visions, if any occurring during *khalwa*; (7) constant repelling of passing thoughts & (8) constant resignation to the Almighty in all states ... Usually a *khalwa* is for a period of 40 days modeled on Moses' 40 nights' retreat on Mount Sinai & Jesus' retreat for 40 days in the desert, but in the beginning, it may be of lesser duration.

Merton responds 28 June 1964 that because of work with the novices and a brief hospital stay, he has not had more than a day or two a month for retreat. He acknowledges the excellence of the program Aziz describes and hopes he might someday receive permission for a 40 day retreat, although 'this is never practiced in our Order where everything is concentrated on the common life, and permission ... would be granted only with extreme difficulty' (HGL 58). He notes that he must return to the monastery to sleep, compares at some length the Muslim and Christian customs of fasting, and explains that silence is not difficult. 'If I could get permission to stay in the hermitage, the problem of solitude would be easily solved' (HGL 59). Merton knew *dhikr* from reading Burckhardt (13 May 1961, HGL 49). Both it and the goal of *fana* (which Merton mentions in describing his prayer in 2 January 1966 – HGL 64) are central to *khalwa*.

The four letters from August 1963 through June 1964 are particularly substantive. Indeed, I think the letters of 1963-64 are the 'meat' of the exchange. Then there is a lapse in the correspondence. From June 1964 to November 1965 only one letter exists. This was a period of change and turbulence for Merton. Aziz wrote on 1 November 1965 chiding Merton for the 'long suspense in our correspondence'. The letters in December 1965 and January 1966 are again substantive. On 1 December 1965 Aziz writes five single-spaced typed pages and raises the crucial question 'May I know your methods of meditation? ... your detailed programme day and night of your present solitude...'. Merton's extraordinary answer of 2 January 1966 outlines 'my daily life in the hermitage' (HGL 62-63) and 'my method of meditation' (HGL 63-4). It is to my knowledge the only written record we have of Merton's private prayer practice.³⁵ Only seven letters followed, four in 1966, one in 1967 and two in 1968, none with the depth heretofore achieved.

Conclusion

There is no question that Merton drank deeply from the sources of Islamic wisdom. This fact makes his use of the word 'Moslem' instead of 'Muslim', and the flip tone and superficial treatment of material in his recorded Sufi lectures almost incomprehensible. The degree of his self-revelation, both conscious and unconscious, and his desire to please in the Aziz letters shows us again Merton's humanity, the bundle of contradictions that is the human person. The more important point is made by Sidney Griffith: '... it was through his sincere interest in other religions that his life in Christ deepened'.³⁶ In his encounters with Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, Merton was not abandoning his Christian or monastic commitments but was personally clarifying both in ways that made significant contributions to inter-religious understanding.

Griffiths has noted that 'few writers in the modern non-Muslim world have ... sought from within their own traditions for a religious response to Muhammad's call to all people to submit to God'.³⁷ Had the human family produced more Charles de Foucauld's, Louis Massignon's, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith's and Bishop Kenneth Cragg's perhaps we would not be in our current unholy impasse. As William Apel so articulately points out in his chapter on the Merton-Aziz letters 'Settling for the God in front of God creates an idolatry of religion putting *my* God against *your* God – a source of division that divides us all'.³⁸ This particular *shirk* has had particularly tragic consequences within the family of monotheistic believers. Christine Bochen's happy turn of phrase reminds us that Merton had a 'vocation to unity'.³⁹ It is a vocation of particular potency at this moment in history, one we might ask the One God to multiply among us.

The opening lines of al-Alawi's poem 'The Present Reality' that appears in Ling's book which Aziz sent to Merton provide a fitting conclusion for this brief examination of an important Islamic-Christian friendship:

The Summoner unto God's Nearness hath called to them:
Lo, I am with you, for wheresoever ye turn
There shineth My Light. One in My Essence,
In all things I am seen. Hath ever aught been seen
But Me? ...

...

...Come then unto Union
With the Eternal. Is there aught beside Him to oppose Him?
Nay, He alone was, is and shall be.⁴⁰

Footnotes

- ¹ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, William H. Shannon ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 264. Hereafter in the text WF.
- ² Sidney H. Griffith, 'Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam', in *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story*, Rob Baker and Gray Henry eds. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 1999) 58–9 and 53. Hereafter 'Challenge'. See also Herbert Mason, 'Merton and Massignon', *The Muslim World* 59 (1969) 317–18.
- ³ Griffith, 'Challenge' 53.
- ⁴ Sidney H. Griffith, 'Mystics and Sufi Masters: Thomas Merton and the Dialogue between Christians and Muslims', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15/3 (July 2004) 300. Hereafter 'Sufi Masters'. For more on Massignon and Merton see Michael L. Fitzgerald, 'The Prophets of Dialogue: Massignon, Monchanin and Merton', *The Merton Journal* 11/1 (Easter 2004) 34–40; Agnes Wilkins, O.S.B., 'Thomas Merton and Islam', chapter 6 in Anthony O'Mahony and Peter Bowe, O.S.B. (eds), *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Studies in Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2006).
- ⁵ Griffith 'Sufi Masters' 300 and 302. The text of Merton's journal entry is found in Vol. 5 (1963–5) of his journals, *Dancing in the Water of Life* R.E. Daggy, ed., (San Francisco: Harper, 1997) 166, and in Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964–1965*, N.B. Stone, ed., (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988) 100.
The 'Foucauld' in question is the explorer, monk and hermit Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), missionary to North Africa and founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus. An accessible introduction to his life and work is Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Charles de Foucauld* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).
- ⁶ Reported in Griffith 'Challenge' 62.
- ⁷ Wilkins, 'Thomas Merton and Islam', 114, and Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1968) 156–8. Hereafter in the text CGB.
- ⁸ Griffith 'Challenge' 65.
- ⁹ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World* (Journals 1960–3) Victor A. Kramer, ed., (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 115. Hereafter in the text TTW.
- ¹⁰ All are published in *Merton and Sufism*.
- ¹¹ They are available in the USA from Credence Cassettes and see Bernadette

- Dieker, 'Merton's Sufi Lectures to Cistercian Novices, 1966-8', in *Merton and Sufism*, 130-62.
- 12 Sidney H. Griffith, 'As One Spiritual Man to Another': The Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence', in *Merton and Sufism* 103 and note 11, page 123.
- 13 Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain* (Journals 1967-8) Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., ed., (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 10. Hereafter in the text as OSM.
- 14 Robert Daggy (ed.), *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters* (New York: New Directions, 1989), and see Bonnie Thurston, 'Islam in Alaska: Sufi Material in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*', *The Merton Seasonal*, 29/4 (2004).
- 15 See Erlinda Paguio, 'Islamic themes in Merton's Poetry', in *Merton and Sufism* 89-100, and Bonnie Thurston, 'Some Reflections on Merton's Islamic Poems' in *Thomas Merton: The World in My Bloodstream* Angus Stuart, ed., (Abergavenny, Wales: Three Peaks Press, 2004) 39-53.
- 16 Merton's account of the visit occurs in *Learning to Love* (Journals 1966-7) Christine M. Bochen, ed., (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1997) 152-6. And see Nicole Abadie, 'The Visit of Sidi Abdesalam to Gethsemani' in *Merton and Sufism* 182-92.
- 17 Burton B. Thurston, 'Merton's Reflections on Sufism', in *Merton and Sufism* 133.
- 18 From a transcription of Merton's Sufi lectures made by the Rev. Dr. Burton B. Thurston, Sr.
- 19 Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* Robert E. Daggy, ed., (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 281.
- 20 William Stoddart, *Sufism* (New York: Paragon House, 1986) 20 and 41.
- 21 From letter in Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, USA. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Aziz letters are from this source.
- 22 Professor Sidney Griffith of the Catholic University of America has devoted sustained scholarly attention to the letters. It is much to be hoped that he will edit an edition of the full exchange.
- 23 Griffith, 'Sufi Masters' 303-4.
- 24 So Aziz reported to William Shannon. HGL 43.
- 25 Griffith, 'Sufi Masters' 303.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Aziz's 'Bio-Data' form exists at the Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine University, KY, USA.
- 28 He mentions the matter in three letters, 21 June 1962, 4 April 1963 and 2 August 1963.
- 29 Aziz letter of 4 April 1966.
- 30 Griffith, 'Sufi Masters' 304.
- 31 The correspondence is summarized in William Apel's, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2006) chapter 2 'Blessings; The Merton-Aziz Letters'.
- 32 *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977)

- 985 (Hereafter in the text CP).
- 33 See Bonnie Thurston, 'Thomas Merton and Islam: The Example of *Dhikr*', *American Benedictine Review* 45/2 (1994) reprinted in *Merton and Islam*.
- 34 Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-'Alawi* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press, 1961/73) 84ff and 103-5.
- 35 For an exposition of Merton's letter see Bonnie Thurston, 'Rising Up Out of the Center': Thomas Merton on Prayer', *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 109-22.
- 36 Griffith, 'Sufi Masters' 308-9.
- 37 Ibid 309.
- 38 Apel 15.
- 39 Christine Bochen (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000) 48.
- 40 Al-'Alawi quoted in Lings 219.