

CHRISTIAN MONKS AND MONASTICISM IN ISLAM

I
 IN A PREVIOUS PAPER I outlined the thought of Louis Massignon, a Catholic Islamicist and radical political mystic, on the encounter between Christianity and Islam.¹ Merton and Massignon conducted an intensive exchange on mysticism in the Islamic tradition.² Among the books that Merton was reading on his Asian journey was the Islamicist's classic study in comparative mysticism, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulman*³—a work that concentrates on the technical vocabulary of Islamic mysticism in the Arabic language. In *The Asian Journal* Merton twice quotes from this work of Massignon.⁴ Merton was struck by the Islamic critique of monasticism, expressed in part in the famous phrase attributed to Muhammad, "there is no monasticism in Islam."⁵ Early Muslim mystics had to justify their own behaviour in the light of this dictum, and to explain its original import. They advanced in response the notion that what was wrong with Christian mysticism was, as Merton put it, the substitution of "human institutions for divine providence."⁶ Here is just one example of the insightful challenge to Christian life and thought that one can find abundantly in Islamic texts.⁷ The drama of the modern encounter between Christianity and Islam which is only echoed in the life of Merton, takes on a further twist around the continuing debate about the presence of Christian monks and monasticism in the Islamic tradition. The martyrdom of the seven Cistercian monks of the Atlas monastery in Algeria in May

1996; and the subsequent 'religious' justification for the assassinations given by certain Muslim 'thinkers' brought to the attention of many the distinctive theological understanding that the Islamic tradition has of Christian monks and monasticism.⁸

II

For centuries before the rise of Islam monasticism was a distinctive feature of Christian life, both in the place in which Islam was born, and the Christian communities subsequently integrated into the world of Islam as it spread. Accordingly, from the perspective of its relationship to Islam, one must consider the phenomenon of Christian monasticism under three headings.⁹ In the first place, there is its presence in the Arabic-speaking communities before and up to the time of Muhammad. Then, there are the passages in the Qur'an that mention 'monks' (three times) and 'monasticism' (once).¹⁰ Finally 'monks' and 'monasticism' are discussed in the Islamic texts that both interpret the Qur'an and set the boundaries of Islamic life in later times. Already in the fifth Christian century monks and their monasteries were plentiful on the borders of Arabia. From the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula northwards into Syria/Palestine, eastward along the edge of the Syrian Desert into Mesopotamia and southward into Iraq, monastic communities flourished. Monastic institutions were at the heart of Christian church-life in nearby Egypt and Ethiopia. In a number of places, such as the monastery of St Euthymius in the Judean Desert, the monks actively fostered the growth and

development of Christianity among the neighbouring Arab tribes, who then had the monastery as the centre of their religious life. Similarly, the shrines of St Simeon the Stylite at Dayr Sam'an/Telanissos and of St Sergius at Rusafa/Sergiopolis in Syria regularly attracted large numbers of Arab tribesmen among their frequent visitors. On the borders between the territories of the Byzantine Romans and the Arab tribes of Arabia proper, the Ghassanid tribal federation, allies of the Byzantines, presided over a widely distributed population of monks and monasteries to an extent that a closer examination of texts and archeological data are only lately revealing.

Similarly, on the northwestern frontier between the territories controlled by the Persian Sasanids and the tribesmen of Arabia, in the territories of the Lakhmid allies of the Persians, centered near the city of Hira in lower Mesopotamia, monastic communities flourished. Arabic-speaking monks seem to have made up a large part of these monastic populations, usually with a Syriac theological and liturgical heritage; Arab pastoralists regularly sojourned among the Syriac-speaking Arameans of the area. From these monastic centres on the near periphery of Arabia, in the fifth and sixth centuries monks and monasticism penetrated into Arabia proper. Remains of their establishments have been uncovered along the southern coasts of Arabia as well as in cities in the interior such as Najran.¹¹

A few Syriac texts speak of the activities of monks in Arabia, and a number of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic texts similarly record their presence. Poets, for example, in the classical *qasidas* sometimes mention the lights burning in the cells of monks in the dark of night. More helpfully, the

biographical traditions concerned with Muhammad's early years mention several encounters between monks and the young prophet-to-be, most famously his encounter with the monk Bahira, who reportedly recognized the sign of prophecy on his body.¹² However, they do not suggest a wide and well-established monastic presence in the Hijaz and its environs, in the heart of Arabia. But by Muhammad's day monks and monasticism were certainly known to be an integral feature of Christian life, and monks may well have been prominent among the Christians actually known to Muhammad.

A monk Fimiyyun is also named in the *sura* in connection with the establishment of Christianity in Najran. And the early Persian companion of Muhammad, Salman, is said to have come to the profession of Islam due to his earlier association with monks, one of whom had premonitions about the coming of Muhammad and Islam. These and other mentions and allusions in Arabic texts to monks and monasticism in the world in which Islam was born testify to their common presence among the Christians known to Muhammad and the Qur'an. According to an old tradition, Muhammad ordered his troops not to hurt hermits in their cells. Another tradition attributed to the Muslim prophet says, "There is no monasticism in Islam; the monasticism of my community is *jihad*".¹³ This appears to be a simple polemical statement regarding the ascetic life in Christianity. On the other hand, it may well reflect an opposition to rigid ascetic tendencies that developed at a very early stage amongst Muslims. Goldziher, one of the founders of modern Islamic studies, goes so far as to suggest that Christian asceticism was the model for Muslim ascetics at the very beginning of

Islam.¹⁴

It seems, however, that when a monastic tradition was in conflict with the basic values of Islam, the attitude towards the former changed, an example being marriage and celibacy. The latter, so important to Christian monasticism, was not accepted by the Muslims.¹⁵ Muhammad, who on several occasions clearly opposed extreme ascetic practices, is said to have rebuked a certain 'Akkaf b. Wad'a al-Hilali, who was resolved upon an unmarried life:

So you have made up your mind to be one of the brethren of Satan! If you want to be a Christian monk, join them openly. If you are one of us, you must follow our *sunna*, and our *sunna* is married life".¹⁶

It would seem that an inclination towards celibacy was viewed, at least to some extent, as an imitation of Christian monasticism.

There is also the question of Christian monastic influence on the Muslim tradition. The phenomenon of Muslim asceticism (*zuhd*) appeared within the Islamic community at a very early stage. Historically and conceptually, it is not homogeneous in nature. Muslim ascetics reflect a variety of trends and attitudes regarding religious, social and political issues. According to some scholars¹⁷ there is a great similarity between certain aspects of Christian monasticism and those in the world of *zuhd*.¹⁸ The ideal of retirement or seclusion for ascetics (or Sufis) was connected, at least in part, to the model of Christian asceticism and was not always welcomed by Islamic religious scholars. Among the biblical figures who appear in Arabic literature as models are John the Baptist and King David.

The custom of wearing wool (*suf*) that was adopted by Muslim ascetics and mystics was most probably borrowed from monastic practices. Mention is made of ascetics wearing *suf*, or of

wearing the rough unfinished side of the garment next to the body; there is also opposition to the use of expensive cloth. The ideal of poverty may well be related to the Christian concept that it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. We have various reports about Christian ascetics who gave all their money or their inheritance to the poor and the needy before entering monastic life. A similar tendency among Muslim ascetics might be connected to the monastic custom although the concept can also be found in the Jewish tradition. Other traditions represent a different trend, calling not for the giving of charity as such but for seeking out the company of the poor and underprivileged. This probably reflects the values of humility and modesty, which also appear in Jewish thinking and certainly among the Christian monastic tradition.

III

In the Qur'an, "monks" (*ruhban*) are mentioned three times (Q 5:82; 9:31, 34) and "monasticism" (*rahbaniyya*) once (Q 57:27). In general, one may say that the Qur'an's attitude towards monks mirrors its ambivalent attitude towards Christianity and Christians at large.¹⁹ On the one hand, the Qur'an says that the reason Muslims will find those claiming to be Christians "closest in affection to the believers" is that "there are among them priests (*qissisin*) and monks, they are not arrogant" (Q 9:31). On the other hand, the Qur'an also says that Jews and Christians respectively "take their rabbis (*ahbar*) and monks as lords (*arbab*) besides God" (Q 9:31). And the text goes on to say, "many of the rabbis and monks devour the wealth of the people unjustly and turn [others] from the way of God" (Q 9:34). While in the many translations

and interpretations of the Qur'an into western languages there are a number of variations in rendering the technical terms in these passages, usually due to lexical or exegetical considerations, the sense of the judgments about the monks remains the same in all of them.

In one passage the Qur'an addresses the institution of monasticism itself but there is significant disagreement among commentators and translators, both medieval and modern, Muslim and non-Muslim, about what the text actually says. In one understanding, the text (*sura* 57:27) speaks of the followers of Jesus, of whom God says,

"Then We sent, following in their footsteps, Our messengers; and We sent, following, Jesus son of Mary, and gave upon him the gospel. And We set in the hearts of those who followed him tenderness and mercy. And monasticism they invented - We did not prescribe it for them - only seeking the good pleasure of God; But they observed it not as it should be observed. So, We gave those of them who believed their wage, and many of them are ungodly."²⁰

We will now consider positions propounded by a number of Catholic Islamicists (or scholars of Islam); by Louis Massignon and later, independently, by E. Beck, and by Paul Nwyia, in relation to the exegesis of *sura* 57:27.

In his *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*²¹ Massignon argues that "this verse was unanimously interpreted in a permissive and laudatory sense by commentators of the first three centuries after the *Hijra*", whereas later commentators, influenced by [anti-monastic or anti-ascetic] tendencies, introduced into their commentaries of this verse the spirit of reservation and interdiction, succinctly expressed by the - according to Massignon - late *hadith*: *la rahbaniyya fi-l-islam*²² "There is no monasticism in Islam", and its

"milder version": *inna rahbaniyyata ummati al-jihad* "The monasticism of my community is the holy war".

In his paper "Das christliche Mönchtum im Koran,"²³ E. Beck, attempts to demonstrate - by relying solely on Qur'anic commentary without resort to external material - that Muhammad in his Medinese period, revered Christian monasticism as a noble religious ideal, stemming from devout piety, while at the same time regarding it as incongruent with man's physical and spiritual weakness, and therefore not prescribed by Divine decree. (In Beck's opinion, conflicting with Tor Andrae's,²⁴ not even the ideal of celibacy was in principle excluded from Muhammad's idealistic approval of monasticism). In this way Beck endeavours to reconcile the tone of reproach implied in our verse by the term *ibtada'uha* "they invested (it)" and by *wa-ma ra'auha haqqa ri'ayatiha* "they observed it not as it should be observed", with the positive attitude implicit in the words *illa ibtigha'a ridwan Allah* "only seeking the good pleasure of God", and in other verses expressing similar sentiments towards Christian monks (*sura* 5:82-83).

In keeping with this attitude, both scholars construe this verse as displaying a syntactical predicate; object relationship between *ja'alna fi qulubihim* "We set in their hearts" and *rahbaniyyatan* "monasticism". Thus, Massignon translates:

"...et Nous avons déposé dans les coeurs de ceux qui l'ont suivi [les germes de] la mansuétude (*ra'fa*), l'idéal de la compassion (*rahma*) et l'idéal de la vie monastique (*rahbaniyya*)."²⁵

Similarly, in his transliteration of this passage, E. Beck explicitly interprets *rahbaniyyatan* as syntactically conjoined to *ra'fa* and *rahma*, i.e. as a third direct object to the verb *ja'alana*.

In his *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*,²⁶ the Jesuit scholar of Islamic mysticism Paul Nwiya (who was from northern Iraq) cuts the ground from under Massignon's chronological argumentation by bringing to bear the remarks of the early commentator Muqatil ibn Sulaiman (d.150/767) on the verse under discussion. In his commentary Muqatil suggests a clear syntactical distinction between *ra'fatan wa-rahmatan*, the two direct objects to the predicative phrase *ja'alna fi qulubi alladhina ittaba'uhu* ie. Jesus, and *rahbaniyatan*, which is syntactically connected with *ibtada'uha*. This he does by introducing the formulaic expression *thumma ista'nafa al-kalam* "then He resumed His speech", thus introducing a new sentence.²⁷

This somewhat formalistic insistence upon syntactical distinctions is obviously crucial to the semantics of the question under discussion, since there lies a deep emotive and conceptual gap between the idea – portrayed by the verb *ja'alna*... – of monasticism having been granted to the followers of Jesus by God's grace, and the idea – conveyed by the verb *ibtada'uha* – of monasticism having been created and institutionalized by the followers themselves.²⁸

Our exegetical tradition concerning the Quranic phrase *wa-rahbaniyatan ibtada'uha* thus clearly reflects an early attempt at harmonising two contradictory sets of traditions, of which one condemns and rejects monastic life as practised in Christianity; the other concerns the recognition of Muhammad by hermits, who were the sole guardians of a rejected and forgotten knowledge.

This harmonization is achieved by distinguishing between two types of monasticism: the one benevolent and temporary, destined to guard the true

Scriptures, and then to dissolve and integrate within Islam; the other false and distorted, condemned both for its extreme asceticism and for its apostasy from the true religion of Jesus.

Traditionally, Muslim scholars have considered monasticism to be an instance of the Christians' putting religious burdens on people beyond what God has mandated and then not being able to support them. By way of contrast, the prophetic tradition (*hadith*) according to which, "There is no monasticism in Islam", gradually gained currency among Muslims. While many scholars have questioned the authenticity of this tradition, it is nevertheless widely reported and accepted. Similarly, another controversial prophetic tradition says, "The monasticism of this community is Jihad". These traditions seem to have come into prominence in the context of debates among Muslim scholars in the early centuries about the legitimacy of Sufism.

Muslim scholars have also been careful to point out that the disapproval of monasticism should not be mistaken for a disapproval of the hermit's way of life, or the practice of a religious retreat, including sexual abstinence undertaken for a time for legitimate religious reasons.

Rather, what is rejected in monasticism, according to many scholars, is the commitment to lifelong celibacy that the Christian institution entails. Celibacy is seen by some commentators to be the innovation introduced by Christians into what Muslim could consider to be an otherwise acceptable, even divinely instituted, monasticism.

Despite the religious narrative within Islamic traditions, Christian monks and monasticism continued to attract the attention of many Muslim scholars and mystics into their world of prayer, liturgical culture and scholarship.²⁹ After the rise of Islam and the consolidation of the territories of the Christian, ecclesiastical provinces of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem under Muslim rule, Christian monks writing in Syriac, Greek and Arabic were the first to call attention to the doctrinal and moral challenges of Islam to Christians.³⁰

Monks were also the first Christians to adopt Arabic as an ecclesiastical language, to write theology in Arabic and to translate the Christian bible and other classical Christian texts into Arabic. In the agreements drawn up to govern the relationships between Muslims and Christians in early Islamic times, monks were often exempted from the payment of the Poll tax (*jizya*), and often the authority of the prophet himself was claimed for this dispensation.

Monasteries were often considered to be privileged places by Muslims and Christians alike, where help could be sought and interreligious conversations could take place. Some of them claimed to have patents offering them special protection. On the other hand monks and monasteries were sometimes targets of anti-Christian attacks. In Arabic secular literature from the early period a genre of poetic writing often called *diyariyyat*, or "monastic poems", developed that celebrated monasteries as places of revelry.³¹

¹ Anthony O'Mahony, 'Christianity and Islam in the Thought of Louis Massignon', *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 10, no.2 (2003), pp. 4-12.

² Sidney H. Griffith: 'Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon and the Challenge of Islam', *The Merton Annual*, Vol 3 (1990) pp.151-172.

³ Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964).

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. by Naomi Burton Stone, James Laughlin & Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 263-264.

⁵ *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, pp.145-153

⁶ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* p.263

⁷ For an extensive corpus of materials on Merton and Islam see: *Thomas Merton and Sufism: the untold story*, Edited by R. Baker & G. Henry, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999

⁸ See especially the commentary by Louis Wehbe, ocsa & Dom. Armand Veilleux, ocsa, 'Une opinion islamique extreme. À propos des sept Frères de Tibhirine', *Collectanea Cisterciensia: revue de spiritualité monastique*, Vol.62 (2000), pp.72-80 on *Ibn Taymiyya, Le Statut des Moines. Traduction française, en référence à l'affaire de Tibhirine*, par Nasreddin Lebatelier [Jean Yayha Michoht], El-Safina Éditions. B P 536, Layali. Beyrouth Liban. 1417-1997, pp.36.

⁹ Sidney H. Griffiths, 'Monasticism and Monks', *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* < Vol. 3 (J-O), Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Leiden, E.J.Brill, 2003, pp.405-408; Paul Nwiyi SJ, 'Moines chrétiens et monachisme en Islam', *Studia Missionalia* (Rome), Vol. 28, (1979), pp.337-355; and Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Compassion, Mercy, and monasticism' in her book *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.260-284.

¹⁰ E. Beck, 'Das christliche Mönchtum', *Studia Orientalia* (Helsinki), Vol. 13 (1946), pp. 3-29; Laurent Lechevalier, ocsa, 'Le monachisme et l'Islam', *Collectanea Cisterciensia: revue de spiritualité monastique*, Vol. 29 (1967), pp. 206-219.

¹¹ J. Spencer Trimingham *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic Times* London, Macmillan, 1979.

¹² Sidney H. Griffiths, 'Muhammad and the Monk Bahira: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic text from early Abbasid Times', *Oriens Christianus*, Vol. 79 (1995), pp. 146-174.

¹³ Ofer Livne-Kafri, 'Early Muslim Ascetics and the World of Christian Monasticism', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 20, 1996, p.107

¹⁴ I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 123. See also R. Köbert,

'Zur Ansicht des frühen Islam über des Mönchtum (rahbaniya)', *Orientalia*, Vol. 42, 1973, pp. 520-524.

15. Fr. Maurice Borrmans of the Pontifical Institute for the study of Arabic and Islam (Rome), has observed that Muslim estimations of what it regards as Christian "excess" continue to be an obstacle in the contemporary encounter between Muslims and Christians, *Orientations pour un dialogue entre chrétienne et musulmans*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1981, pp. 121-123.

16. Quoted in Ofer Livne-Kafri, 'Early Muslim Ascetics and the World of Christian Monasticism', p.111

17. T. Andrae 'Zuhd und Mönchtum', *Le Monde Oriental*, Vol. 25, 1931, pp. 296-327.

18. Ofer Livne-Kafri, 'Early Muslim Ascetics and the World of Christian Monasticism', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 20, 1996, pp. 105-129.

19. See my reflections: Anthony O'Mahony, 'Reflections on the Encounter between Christianity and Islam', *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 9, 2002, pp. 4-16; 'Islam face-à-face Christianity', *The Way Supplement*, no. 104, 2002, pp. 75-85; 'Christianity, Interreligious Dialogue and Muslim-Christian Relations' *World Christianity: Politics, Theology, Dialogues*. Edited by A.O'Mahony & Micahel Kirwan SJ, London, Melisende, 2004, pp.63-92.

20. All English translations of Qur'anic verses are quoted from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London 1955.

21. L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, (Third Edition) Paris: Vrin 1968, pp. 145-153. Now translated into English by Benjamin Clark as: *Essays on the origins of the technical language of Islamic mysticism*. University of Notre Dame Press 2001.

22. *Ibid*, p.148.

23. See *Studia Orientalia*, (Helsinki), v.13 (1946), pp. 3-29; note especially pp. 17ff.

24. See *ibid*, p.25 n.3.

25. See Massignon, *op cit*, p.148.

26. P. Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, Beirut, Dar al-Machriq 1970, pp. 52-56.

27. See Nwiya, *op cit*, p.53.

28. I owe much of my discussion to the exegesis of the text to the fine study by Sara Sviri, 'Wa-Rahbaniyatan ibt Ada'uha: An analysis of Traditions Concerning the Origin and

Evaluation of Christian Monasticism', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 13, 1990, pp. 195-208.

There is an early tradition in Islam relating to Muhammad's opposition to monasticism. In his commentary on Sura 57:27 Muqatila relates a tradition concerning ten of Muhammad's most intimate companions, among them 'Ali, 'Umar, Ibn Mas'ud, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, Salam al-Farisi, Hudhaifa ibn al-Yaman and others, who assembled at the house of 'Uthman ibn Maz'un, and together resolved to deny themselves food, garments and women. They also undertook to emasculate themselves, put on the monastic garb of hair, erect solitary cells (*sauma'a*), and to take up the monastic life (*fa-yataarahhabu fiha*). This austere resolve was miraculously revealed to the Prophet by Jibril, and he hastily went to 'Uthman's house. Not finding him there, he left the following message with his wife: "Tell your husband when he comes, that he who does not adhere to my *sunna* and does not follow my fashion does not belong to me ... Our *sanna* is (wearing) clothes, (eating) food and (having) women..." Upon hearing the Prophet's admonition 'Uthman exclaimed: "It is wondrous that the Prophet should know what we have said; let us relinquish that which the Prophet dislikes..."

29. However, this early anecdote can hardly serve as conclusive evidence for or against Muhammad's own attitude towards monasticism; it may, however, invalidate Massignon's thesis to the effect that it was only after the 3rd century that anti-monastic influences found their way into the interpretation of this verse.

30. S.H. Griffiths, 'Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Emir', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, Vol. 3, no. 2000, pp. 1-22.

31. See the studies by S.H. Griffiths, 'Anastasios of Sinai, the Hodegos and the Muslims', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 32 (1987), pp. 341-358; 'The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic', *The Muslim World*, Vol. 78 (1988), pp. 1-28; *Arabic Christianity in the monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine*, London, Variorum, 1992.

32. G. Troupeau, 'Les couvents chrétiens dans la littérature arabe musulmane', *La nouvelle revue de Caire*, No.1 (1975), pp. 265-279;