

# Thomas Merton and Islam

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Thomas Merton is well known for his pioneering work in the dialogue with Buddhism, but his deep involvement with Islam has gone for the most part unremarked. It has been suggested that the reason for this is the general reluctance of Americans, and Christians in general, to explore the rich religious and cultural heritage of the youngest of the three great monotheistic religions (1). Why should this be, one wonders? Possibly the reason is that we can easily understand how other religions would appear before Jesus Christ, but the most solemn documents of the Catholic Church tell us that Jesus Christ is the fullness of revelation, and therefore we do not expect another major religion to appear after him. And so we are baffled and challenged by Islam, not only by the fact of its appearance at all, but by our profound doctrinal differences. We would much rather avoid confrontation and stay within the confines and safety of the well worn Christian path. Thomas Merton, however, had no such inhibitions. Indeed he wrote, forty years ago, to a Pakistani Sufi, Abdul Aziz, 'It seems to me that mutual comprehension between Christians and Moslems is something of very vital importance today, and unfortunately it is rare and uncertain...' (2) Despite some progress, this is still largely true today. There would seem to be an added difficulty for monastics in the wake of Muhammad's declaration that 'there is no monasticism in Islam'. Yet it has

been said of Merton that his knowledge of Sufism had reached a point beyond which a non-Muslim could not go (3). This raises the question as to whether Sufism might not be the Islamic equivalent of monasticism, thus accounting for Merton's ability to relate to it so easily. Could it be that, for Christians, it has the potential to be a very valuable means of penetrating and understanding the spirit of what seems initially to be the very alien world of Islam? I hope to shed some light on this question as I explore Thomas Merton's involvement with Islam, especially as encountered through his relationship with the renowned French Orientalist, Louis Massignon.

## *Thomas Merton and Louis Massignon*

Merton's monastic life was sometimes a turbulent affair. Most of it was lived in the period leading up to Vatican II and he saw with piercing clarity the need for reform. Moreover there was the additional complication of his yearning for the hermit life for which he needed the permission of his superiors, a permission they were reluctant to give. It is not surprising therefore, that at the time of his correspondence with Louis Massignon he was on the verge of leaving the monastery. Their relationship began almost by chance through the mediation of Herbert Mason, a young American convert to Catholicism who was in correspondence with Merton, and happened also to be a friend of Louis

Massignon. He would write to him enthusiastically about his frequent meetings with Massignon in Paris where they both lived, and Merton was filled with a desire to be in direct contact with this apparently remarkable man. Soon afterwards they were exchanging letters. Massignon sent to Merton his work on the ninth-century Sufi martyr/mystic Al Hallaj by which, according to Mason, he was *bouleversé* (4). Later he told Mason that he considered Massignon to be 'the witness of our time', and became convinced that he was a 'prophet-saint' (5). Writing to Massignon in March 1960, Merton said, 'How can I begin to write you a letter about the amazing book of the prayers and exhortations of Hallaj? I think it is tremendous... there is depth and the fire of knowledge of the one God. There is an inexorable force of sanctity. The sense of the Holy that lays one low... To read Hallaj makes one lament and beat his breast.' And a little later, 'I like al-Hallaj more and more each day'. (6) The two men never actually met in person, and their correspondence spanned a mere two years until the death of Massignon in 1962, but Merton continued to build on all he had learned from the French scholar until his own untimely death in 1968. To put this brief but highly significant correspondence into perspective, we must now outline Massignon's own life and achievements, alas too little known in the English-speaking world even though a recent French publication has described him as a man 'at the heart of our times' (7) and Michael Fitzgerald has called him a 'prophet of dialogue' with Islam (8).

Just as in the Old Testament a prophet's whole life and ministry was often foreshadowed in his call (we only have to think of Jeremiah or Isaiah), so Massignon's whole life and destiny were forged in the furnace of his conversion experience. Born in 1883 in Paris, the son of an agnostic father and a Catholic mother, he was baptised against his father's wishes. His mother reared him in the pious style of nineteenth-century France, but by the time he was a teenager he had abandoned his faith and was living a dissolute life, albeit while developing his considerable intellectual gifts. (He eventually became a professor of the College de France from 1926 until 1954, and his scholarly output was enormous.) As a young man, before his conversion, his work on one occasion took him to North Africa. He did not know Arabic and was betrayed by an interpreter who grossly misrepresented him. He decided to learn the language for himself and applied himself with all the ardour of his twenty-one years (9). He decided to continue his studies in Cairo where he came across some writings of Al-Hallaj, the ninth-century Persian mystic. Feeling drawn to him he decided to make a special study of his life for his doctoral thesis, which obliged him to try and understand Islam from the inside. Soon afterwards, in 1907, there occurred an experience which he attributed to Hallaj's advocacy, together with the prayers of his mother and Charles de Foucauld who had befriended him in North Africa. He was engaged on an archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia which necessitated a boat trip on the River Tigris. It was a Turkish boat and he was the only

European on board. Taken for a spy, he was afraid he would be killed and tried to flee, but was caught and taken prisoner. He then feared for his life and was tempted to commit suicide. In addition he was taken ill with a high fever, probably malaria. It was at this point that he had a mysterious encounter with One whom he later called 'the Stranger', because it reminded him of the biblical story of Abraham receiving the three 'strangers', who were angels, at Mamre (Gen. ch.18). He sensed a presence; 'God loving him and desiring to be loved for himself alone, and for ever' (10). He wrote later of this experience, 'How I suffered when God converted me! Because I felt that it was my whole life he wanted for himself, and that none of my actions henceforth would escape the notice of his visible Order, the Church.' (11) It would seem that his captors took pity on him for he soon found himself in Baghdad - the place of Hallaj's martyrdom - and was cared for in hospital by a Muslim family; it was an experience of Arab hospitality which moved him profoundly and coloured all his later thought on Muslim/Christian relations. A little later he was reconciled with the Church, returned to France and dedicated his whole life to God.

Charles de Foucauld, who had befriended Massignon, saw him as his successor in the Sahara desert, and it has been said of Massignon that he always thought of himself as if 'entrusted with a mission by de Foucauld to continue his work', that is to say, 'the sanctification of Islam by uninterrupted intercession before God' (12). However, although he was

very much in tune with de Foucauld's spirituality and aspirations, his own path was to be, exteriorly at least, very different. His life was in fact shaped to a far greater extent by Al-Hallaj, the Muslim Sufi who was persecuted and eventually put to death by crucifixion. As he said in a letter to Herbert Mason, commenting on a letter of Merton to himself, 'Tom is not wrong in believing that my thought can be defined to the extent that the "curve of my life" is influenced by the thought of Hallaj' (13). And another said of him that his extraordinary friendship with Hallaj 'filled his heart and shaped his mind so thoroughly that he can be seen as the greatest Muslim among Christians and the greatest Christian among Muslims' (14). Not surprisingly he entertained the idea of a religious vocation, but eventually married in 1914, and had three children. However he became a Third Order Franciscan in 1931 and took private vows the following year. In 1934 he formed in Cairo with a longtime friend, Mary Kahil, a religious movement with regular meetings called *Al-Badaliyyah*, an Arabic word which denotes a kind of mystical substitution whereby one prays and fasts for the salvation of others. The group produced a magazine, *Mardis de Dar-es-Salaam*, copies of which were sent to Thomas Merton. Massignon's group concentrated particularly on the Muslims under whose political control they lived. The idea of *substitution mystique* was known in nineteenth century France, for instance in the thought of Huysmans who was personally known to Massignon, but it was, of course, from Hallaj that Massignon chiefly drew his inspiration, and it was in his writings

that he found the term *badal*, meaning the acceptance and endurance of the sufferings of another, and the transfer of suffering through compassion. One of the members of this movement, perhaps significantly for the future, was Cardinal Montini of Milan, later Pope Paul VI, who became a close friend of Massignon (15). It is highly likely that Montini was influential in obtaining papal permission for Massignon, a married man, to be ordained a priest of the Greek Melkite Rite. This meant a great deal to him, since he saw the offering of the Eucharist as the perfect way to integrate his personal act of mystical substitution for others with Christ's own gratuitous act of vicarious suffering for the whole of humanity.

Al-Hallaj, then, was more to Massignon than an inspirational figure of the past. He attributed his conversion to him, and the fact that it was a Muslim saint leading him back to his native Christianity he considered to be highly significant. He spent the rest of his life, among his other scholarly activities, researching his life and thought, and writing about it for others to benefit (16). Hallaj and Islam were at the core of his conversion experience, and it was the major part his life's work to make both him and Islam better known and understood. He was fond of saying that it was not he who possessed Al-Hallaj but Al-Hallaj who had co-opted him. The Muslim mystic captured his fancy when he was a young man living a dissolute life, and on his death bed he was still exhorting his friends to do whatever they could to make him better known in the world (17). His personal relationship with Hallaj took him to the very heart of the Muslim world, and

arguably his scholarly work on him has been almost single-handedly responsible for changing the attitude of Western scholars towards Islam. Through Hallaj he encountered Muhammad and the Qur'an, which in turn brought him face to face with Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael, recipients of God's blessing and promise. He wrote in a letter to Thomas Merton on September 9th, 1959, that he had the sense of a deep personal relationship with Abraham, whose name he took when he became a Third Order Franciscan. His insights from a Christian perspective living inside Islam are profound and much needed in our time. As Michael Fitzgerald has said, 'prophets of dialogue' are so because their experience, studies, and teaching have helped us to understand that dialogue is *necessary* in our time, something our faith demands (18). Massignon more than anyone prepared the way for the positive references to Islam in the Vatican II Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. He died in Paris in 1962 on the eve of the great Council, but he had always advocated a broadening of the doctrinal position of the Catholic Church with regard to Islam, and the several audiences he had with Pope Paul VI, his friend from the early days of the *Badaliyya* movement, surely contributed towards this. The Council confirmed Massignon's work in recognising that Muslims adore the same God as we and in recognising the importance of Abraham as a model of faith. Massignon saw Islam as a mysterious response to the prayer of Abraham for Ishmael, 'Your wife Sarah will bear you a son whom you must name Isaac. And I shall maintain my covenant with him, a covenant in

perpetuity, to be his God and the God of his descendants after him. For Ishmael too I grant your request. I hereby bless him and will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous' (Gen.17:18-20). He pleaded for the recognition of the 'conditional authority' of the Qur'an and for the partial recognition of Muhammad as a prophet, despite the fact that he declared the divine essence to be absolutely inaccessible to man, thereby implying the impossibility of mystical union. And doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation were of course impossible for Muhammad to accept, but three centuries later they were opened up within Islam by Hallaj. The 'fulfilment' of the work of Muhammad by Hallaj is at the core of Massignon's thought (19). According to Massignon, 'Muhammad halted at the threshold of the divine fire, not daring "to become" the Burning Bush of Moses; Hallaj took his place out of love' (20). He personally was convinced that Muhammad was a true prophet, albeit a negative one, summoned to challenge Christians and other religious people to the truth of the natural religion of Abraham and warn them away from their moral errors. For Massignon the Qur'an points to Christ. He saw it as 'an Arabic edition of the Bible with conditional authority' because in the end it excludes the full revelation of Jesus Christ in the Gospel and in the Church (21). It poses a challenge of purity of heart for Christians, just as Sufism does for monasticism. Thus Massignon has helped us to see that Islam has a place in God's providence. Christians, including monastics, have undoubtedly fallen short of their calling. Jews can be tempted to think of

themselves as especially privileged and the appearance of both Christianity and Islam must be a challenge to them. And Islam, despite being the latest of the three, cannot take pride in a sense of superiority since neither Judaism nor Christianity will fit the preconceived ideas it has of them, each continuing to have its own independent spiritual reality. Since pride is the greatest hindrance to a personal relationship with God - which is at the heart of all religion, if not its primary purpose - our mutual incomprehension may well be part of God's plan to teach us humility.

Massignon died on the night of October 31st/November 1st 1962. He was a man of many gifts and many faces; an intensely committed Christian, a married man, a highly rated scholar, a friend of the Pope and other prominent Christians of his age such as Teilhard de Chardin and Jacques Maritain, a Third Order Franciscan and a priest. All his gifts and talents had been devoted unreservedly to the dialogue with Islam, which is of exceptional value because of his inside knowledge. Thomas Merton, in a letter to the Pakistani Sufi Abdul Aziz to whom Massignon had introduced him, said of him after his death, 'The departure of Louis Massignon is a great and terrible loss. He was a man of great comprehension and I was happy to have been numbered among his friends, for this meant entering into an almost prophetic world, in which he habitually moved... I am touched at the deep respect and understanding that so many Moslems had for him; indeed they understood him perhaps better than many 'Christians' (22).

In common with Christians in general, however, Massignon could not accept the Quranic view of Jesus Christ. The divine sonship and saving mission of Jesus are fundamental to Christianity, but heresy to Islam. There can be no compromise; it would seem to be the rock on which all attempts at dialogue must ultimately founder. Merton and Massignon probably came as close as anybody to circumnavigating this 'rock', not by avoiding it or denying its existence (dialogue which takes that approach is superficial and basically untrue) but by entering as deeply as possible into the spirit of Islam. Merton found his monastic life resonated on a deep level with Sufism, which is not an unusual, esoteric offshoot of Islam, just as monasticism is not so in respect to Christianity. To show the relationship of Sufism to Islam it will be instructive to look at the life of Al-Hallaj, the Persian mystic who had such a profound influence on Massignon, after which we will look at the resonances Thomas Merton found between Sufism and his own Christian monasticism.

### *Hallaj, Sufism and Monasticism*

Abu 'Abdallah al-Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj, whose name means 'the wool-carder', was born in 858 in Tur, in modern-day Iran, but his father took him at an early age to Iraq where he attended a Sufi school. When he was twenty years old he went to Basra, met a famous Sufi, Amr al-Makki, and after a conversion experience, officially became a Sufi himself. He married, had three sons and one daughter. (It is thanks to one of his sons that his teaching was put into writing.) He moved in 878 to Baghdad and became the disciple of another celebrated Sufi

called Junayd. In 895 he made a pilgrimage to Mecca where he stayed for a year. He then became an itinerant preacher, earning the title - a pun on his name - 'Hallaj-al-asrar', 'the carder of consciences'; an indication of the content of his preaching. He attracted many disciples, but also, perhaps not surprisingly, enemies. He attracted the wrath of theologians, but also of his fellow Sufis, because he would make known to the people at large 'the secret of the way'. In 903 he made a second pilgrimage to Mecca with 400 disciples, after which he undertook a long preaching tour of India and Turkestan, taking his message well beyond the frontiers of the Muslim community. After this he made his third and final visit to Mecca, where he prayed that God would exalt his name through the suffering of his servant. In 909 he returned to Baghdad where he set up a replica of the Ka'aba (the great black stone of Mecca) in his house. By night he would pray there, and during the day he preached in the market place, in the streets, mosques and graveyards, reputedly working miracles of healing. In 913 he was arrested and put in prison, the victim of what was at the time a repressive regime, but also charged with heresy and charlatanism. Eight years later, in 922, he was condemned to death, tortured, crucified and beheaded. He uttered several sentences before his execution, in one of which he is reported to have asked God to be merciful and forgive his enemies. Many years before he had declared, 'I am going to die according to the religion of the Cross' (23).

Hallaj was not of any particular philosophical bent, but appearing at the



beginning of the Sufi movement he prepared the way for later Sufi systems of thought. As an itinerant preacher he emphasised moral regeneration and the life of union in love with God. Orthodox Muslims and even other Sufis, including his teacher Junayd, repudiated him, because he took the doctrine of unity with God to extremes. He said for instance that 'I am the Real' or 'the creative Truth', which understandably was considered blasphemous. The trouble is that in Islam no less than in Christianity, human language is inadequate to express what the mystic has experienced. He also said, in slightly more orthodox language, 'I have become he whom I love, and he has become myself. We are two spirits in one body. When you see me you see him.' There is still a distinction between the divine and the human, but an attempt to get beyond duality. He also said, 'When I saw the Lord with the eye of the heart and asked "Where are you?", he replied, "Yourself" (24). In praying for his executioners, but also in his life of poverty and purity, his biographers claimed he followed the example of Jesus, whom Sufis regarded as the 'seal of the saints' (25).

This brief overview of the life of Hallaj gives us a glimpse into the lived reality of Sufism in one man, albeit an exceptional one. It can be seen that it is compatible with Christianity as a whole as well as certain aspects of monasticism, such as the quest for purity of heart, union with God, and uninterrupted prayer. But can the Sufi movement as a whole bear comparison with the monastic movement in Christianity? Certainly their beginnings

were similar, in that they were in part a reaction to the growing success and worldliness of their respective religions. When Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire, the challenge of the early centuries when they were a despised minority, frequently persecuted under repressive emperors, was no longer present. Inevitably a certain laxity set in, and many fled to the desert for a more intense and demanding religious life. Similarly, Sufism was a reaction to the worldliness resulting from the success of the Arab armies, and was likewise a search for a more pure and inward religion (26). And just as monasticism can be thought of as a little odd and on the fringes of mainstream Christian life, so the same might be said about Sufism in regard to Islam. But just as monasticism is an expression of the *essence* of Christianity, more or less present in everybody, so Sufism, despite the fact that it borrowed from early Christian monastic and Indian yoga practices, was a natural development within Islam, and also of its essence. This in any case was the opinion of Louis Massignon on conclusion of his researches into the subject (27). Some writers have denied the existence of mysticism in early Islam because of the 'great gulf' theory between God and man, but this is questionable even in the Qur'an (28). Christianity is nothing if not the religion of the *nearness* of God, primarily in the incarnation of the Son of God, but also because of his continued presence with us through the Church and her sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In Islam it is Sufism which has the potential to draw together the

two extremes of God's transcendence and majesty, the prime emphasis of Islam, and his presence among us, the focus of Christianity.

When Thomas Merton first discovered Sufism it was an almost unknown phenomenon in the West. Nowadays the name is familiar to most people, if not the reality. Scholars in the field of Islamic studies do not agree what the term means, or how the Sufi way of life originated, but in his own discovery of it there can be no doubt that Merton felt he was entering a spiritual universe parallel to his own.

It was around Islam's third century (our ninth) that certain people called themselves 'Sufis' for the first time. The same people were also sometimes called 'knowers', 'ascetics', or 'renouncers'. The last two names especially were also used of early Christian monks. The reality of Sufism is too subtle and elusive to lend itself to neat delineation and classification, but William C. Chittick, Professor of Comparative Religious Studies at State University of New York, has given a helpful analysis of how it fits into Islam as a whole (29). Islam, he says, has three basic dimensions; practice, knowledge and interiority, which can be thought of as its body, mind and heart. The first level concerns externals such as right and wrong practice, rituals, etc. It finds its chief expression in the 'shariah', a great compendium of systematic law based on the Qur'an. The second level is concerned with understanding, its fundamental focus being on how to understand the objects of faith such as God, angels, Scripture, the prophets, etc. The third and deepest

level is what happens in the heart. Here Islam teaches people to transform themselves so that they may come into harmony with all being. Neither activity (the first level) nor understanding (the second level), are sufficient of themselves. For those sensitive to the interior life, the various terms that are employed in discussing the focus of this third dimension are immediately recognizable as the *raison d'être* of religion itself. It is Sufism which corresponds to this third level, which could be roughly understood to refer to the inner life of practicing Muslims, an essential part of their religious experience; 'the secret quest for God in the inner castle' (30). This is true even though the name itself has become suspect among modern-day Muslims.

Thomas Merton's knowledge of Islam was basic, but he had no difficulty in cutting through the obfuscations of scholars to get to its heart. After the death of Massignon he continued deepening his knowledge through reading and personal contacts. Remarkable among the latter was his friendship with the Pakistani Sufi Abdul Aziz, to whom Massignon had introduced him. They continued to correspond and exchange books of mutual interest right up to the time of Merton's death in 1968 (31). Interestingly there was one book that Merton declined to share, and that was one of his very first works after entering the monastery, namely *Seeds of Contemplation*, in which he spoke of 'the sensual dreams of the Sufis as a poor substitute for the true contemplation that is found only in the Church' (32). The following brief excerpts of conferences Merton gave to

the novices at Gethsemani in the last two years of his life are a measure of how far he had traveled in his own monastic life, enriched and broadened by his private reading (*lectio divina*) and the relationships he had developed - especially his friendship with Louis Massignon. The style is inimitably his own, delightfully informal, at times humorous; casual but profound. It would be surprising if the novices did not find them highly enjoyable as well as enlightening. They show that he understood the deep and significant relationships between Christianity and Islam, and especially between Sufism and his own contemplative life. 'So the basic idea of Islam' he tells them, 'is this union of God and man, God manifesting himself in the world created by him, and man in the world as the one who has the job of knowing that God is manifesting his love in him and in the world, and of responding to that knowledge. And man is granted the gifts of intelligence and freedom and speech in order to respond to Allah's love...' (33). It is to be remembered that these are taped lectures devoid of his usual literary polish. 'You are here to seek God', he continues, 'and any ordinary monk can deepen his knowledge of God by living the monastic life. This is assumed in these talks, so get rid of your despair which you have been nourishing now for some time. Get rid of it and stir up your hope... God isn't all that hidden. He didn't bring us here out of a kind of trick. He didn't lure us here to get us in this box in order to... torture us for the rest of our lives. He brought us here for real, and He wills that we know Him' (34). In another talk he says, "The Muslims place an enormous amount of

importance to the Names of God. See, they've got the idea that these Names are in God clamoring to the invisible, unknown, absolute abyss of God for manifestation. And God breathes on them and they are manifest in creatures. All creatures are not manifestations of the Hidden Essence of God, they are manifestations of Names of God. And the Name of God which is top of the pyramid [other than Allah] and which includes every other Name is Merciful. The Mercy of God in everything. And of course one of the chief Christian Sufis of the last hundred years is Saint Therese. The Little Way of St. Therese is Sufism. It's a form of Christian Sufism, and it is based on this particular attitude toward God, this idea of God' (35). And on the same topic, 'So, a saying of the Prophet [relating to God's words]: "I was a Hidden Treasure", he says, "and I loved to be known, I desired to be known." The word for "loved to be known"/"desired to be known" here is the same kind of word that our Lord uses in the Gospel, "with desire I have desired to eat this Pasch with you," this sort of thing, this intense desire of God to make Himself known as He is to His creatures, as Merciful to His creatures. And the duration of Mercy is an intensely personal relationship. "Accordingly I created the creatures, and thereby made Myself known to them, and they did come to know Me. I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known. Accordingly I created the creatures and made Myself known to them and they did come to know Me." That's Islam in a nutshell. God wishing to make himself known to His creatures and He makes creatures that they may know Him.... Everything that happens is love and is mercy. Not

that it always appears to be that way, very often it appears to be just the opposite. But everything that happens is love. And of course the ones in Islam who emphasise this the most are the Sufis, because the great thing in Sufism is Love' (36). And again on the monastic life, 'You come to a monastery because you are looking for something, and you stay here because you are looking for it, and the whole thing about it is that you believe that there is a point to this search and when you get away from this search... you begin to hear the voice, "This isn't the job you're supposed to be doing. Get back on the track of what you are looking for. Do the thing you are supposed to be doing."...Once a person has received from God the charge to seek what he has to seek, then he puts everything else aside and seeks it. On the basis of a truth like this you get a Sufi and you get a monk' (37). One could go on, but the above examples are enough to demonstrate how easily Merton passed between Sufism and monasticism.

What is it about monasticism, we may ask, that enables it to enter into the spirit of another religion in a way Christianity as a whole seemingly cannot? The answer may be its universalism, by which we mean that there is a *monastic archetype*, or what we might call a contemplative dimension, however undeveloped, in every human being. When it comes to fruition, one of the ways in which it expresses itself is the institutional monasticism which varies in expression from age to age and from culture to culture. It could be identified with Karl Rahner's 'supernatural existential'. This

phrase was coined by him in the theological debate about nature and grace to encapsulate his view that grace is not something 'added on', but our human nature is 'graced' simply by virtue of being human. The universal nature of monasticism is brought out by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), a Swiss specialist in comparative religion, in an essay which greatly appealed to Merton called 'The Universality of Monasticism and its Relevance for the Modern World' (38). In it he makes the point strongly that monasticism is not something strange and esoteric, but fundamental to human nature. The monk's mission, he says, is 'to remind men what man is'. He is not a being apart but 'a prototype, or a model, or a spiritual specification, a landmark'. For 'man is fully man only in rising above himself'. And he turns our normal perception on its head by the statement, 'It is not monasticism that is situated outside the world, it is the world that is situated outside monasticism' (39). Thus monasticism has a universal and inter-religious character on the grounds that the 'supernatural' is in the nature of man, whether or not it finds expression in a particular form.

Christian monasticism possesses this universal character but also something specifically Christian, namely, its all-absorbing Christocentrism which implies the exclusion of all 'worldly' pursuits: marriage, career, having children, etc. But what about Islam? We have seen that Sufism could be described as the monasticism of Islam, but Schuon goes further. He declares that the *raison d'être* of Islam is precisely the possibility of a 'monastic society', because it aims to carry the

contemplative life into the very framework of society as a whole (40). And indeed the regular calls to prayer, the fasting, the special robes and the orderly prostrations have a real monastic 'feel' about them. It succeeds in realizing the conditions of structure and behaviour that permit of a contemplative isolation in the very midst of the activities of the world. What corresponds to the monastery for the Muslim is above all 'attachment to a brotherhood, submission to a spiritual father, vigils and fasts', and the isolating element with respect to the world is observance of the *sunna*. So 'no monasticism in Islam', says Schuon, really means that the contemplative must not withdraw from the world, but on the contrary that the world must not be withdrawn from contemplatives (41).

### Monastic Bridges

Thomas Merton discovered that his contemplative life could be a 'bridge' to the heart of other religions. His particular genius was with Zen Buddhism, but we now have ample evidence that his monastic life also aided the dialogue with Islam. Here we shall look briefly at three points of contact that he discovered: the story of Hagar and Ismael, the Sufi practice of *dhikr* ('remembrance'), and *le point vierge* (the virgin point).

In a letter to Louis Massignon after receiving one of the issues of the *Mardis de Dar-es-Salam*, he said, 'I was above all deeply moved by your own short meditations on the desert and the God of Agar and Ismael' (42). It is not difficult to imagine what ideal monastic *lectio divina* such meditations would

make. A Belgian monk of Clervaux, Louis Leloir, writing almost twenty years after Merton's death, has called this story found in the book of Genesis, which is also foundational to Islam, a 'source-event', and 'the first draft of a spirituality of the desert' (43). The Mesopotamian image of the desert was of a fearsome place, inhospitable and the abode of outlaws, but it becomes in this episode the place of divine encounter, the place where Hagar, cast out by Abraham because of the jealousy of Sarah, meets the angel of God (that is, God himself). It is the place of her humiliation which opens her to God, as the desert of the monastery is for the monk. It is the place of poverty and dependence on divine providence. Hagar, with the son whom she had been commanded to name Ishmael 'because Adonai has heard thy humiliation' (Gen.16:11) was blessed in her banishment and promised descendants too numerous to be counted. The desert of the monastery, where there is no begetting of children, should be a place of spiritual fertility for the world.

Another theme of great interest to Merton was that of remembrance of God. There is a Sufi prayer method called *dhikr* (in Arabic, 'remembrance', 'recollection' or 'invocation'), which is 'the very heart of Islamic practice' (44). Merton spent a considerable amount of time studying *dhikr*, as is evidenced in his letters to Abdul Aziz and his talks to the novices at Gethsemani. He saw it as a parallel to the Jesus Prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner', so characteristic of Orthodox spirituality and especially associated with Mount Athos. It is an

attempt to put into practice the biblical injunction to 'pray unceasingly' (1 Thess.5:17) and has been called the 'prayer of the heart' because as it is repeatedly recited with the lips it eventually penetrates the heart, transforms it, and continues of its own accord; a continuous plea for the mercy of God. Merton's conjunction of *dhikr* and hesychasm is a perfect example of the way he penetrated to the heart of another religious tradition (45).

The third bridge is created by that evocative phrase of Merton's, *le point vierge*. He wrote in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 'Again, that expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it).... At the centre 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, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.... I have no programme for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.' He says in the same context, 'There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around

shining like the sun'. He describes his own great joy in simply being a human being because of this *point vierge* and wished that everyone could see themselves as they really are. He knows because of a mystical experience he had one day among a crowd of people in Louisville. It was as if he suddenly saw 'the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes...' (46). Merton first came across the phrase *point vierge* in an article by Massignon called *Foucauld au Desert: devant le Dieu de Abraham, Agar et Ismael*, published in an issue of *Les Mardis de Dar-es-Salam* (47). He made this evocative expression inimitably his own, as for instance in another passage of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 'The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the "*point vierge*" of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. They begin to speak to him, not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the "*point vierge*". Their condition asks if it is time for them to "be". He answers "yes". Then, they one by one wake up, and become birds (48). And in a letter to Abdul Aziz (Jan. 30th, 1961) he spoke of the dawn as 'the time when the world is silent and the new light is most pure, symbolizing the dawning of divine light in the stillness of our hearts'. It was the time when he usually said Mass in a remote part of the monastery (49).

Merton encountered the expression *le*



*point vierge* through Louis Massignon, but to appreciate its relevance as a 'bridge' it is important to realize that Massignon first came across it in his study of Al-Hallaj, and in turn made it his own. Hallaj saw the spiritual path as a gradual purification of the heart through the destroying of the 'veils' surrounding it until we reach God. The final veil is the *shirr*, that is, the latent personality, implicit consciousness, the deep subconscious, the secret cell walled up and hidden to every creature, the 'inviolable virgin'. The 'virgin point' in Massignon's parlance is the last, irreducible, secret centre of the heart. He used the phrase in his own way as Merton did. For instance, the faith of Abraham was the true *point vierge*, that is, the very axis, of Islamic teaching (50). Hallaj's teaching is grounded firmly in the Qur'an which says that the heart is the organ prepared by God for contemplation. It is also the place where our conscience is formed and where we experience the sacred. However, according to Massignon, Hallaj went beyond the Qur'an when he spoke of the latent personality... the inviolable virgin, and of a 'secret, holy place, in each one of us, always entire and intact, whether we be rich or poor, erudite or illiterate, whether or not we deserve it. Our fears and sufferings make no difference to its presence, nor does our habit of going in the opposite direction, or even our evil desires. The *point vierge* is a call to recognize the Transcendent within us and overcome our illusions of power and authority' (51).

When Thomas Merton first discovered Sufism he was in a state of crisis, intent on leaving the monastery at all costs. We do not know what made him change his

mind, but we do know that he was on the brink of an exciting discovery. Through his correspondence with Massignon he was brought face to face with the unfamiliar world of Islam, and he found that he was at home, not in spite of his monastic way of life, but because of it. And he found what might be called the *point vierge* of his own monastic life in the hermitage which was given to him in the grounds of Gethsemani. From there he wrote to his friend, Dom Jean Leclercq, 'For the first time in twenty-five years I feel I am leading a really *monastic* life. All that I had hoped to find in solitude is really here... It is good to have this silence and peace to be able to get down to the *unum necessarium* (52). In his own secret cell in the woods of Kentucky, and in the *point vierge* of his heart, his life expanded to include all mankind, for he said about the same time, 'Literature, contemplative solitude, Latin America, Asia, Zen, Islam, etc.... all these come together in my life. To me it would be madness to live my monastic life while excluding all these. I would be less a monk' (53).

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#### Notes

1. See the article by Bonnie Thurston, Thomas Merton's Interest in Islam, in *The American Benedictine Review*, Vol. 45, No.2 (1994), p.131.
2. Ibid, letter of Dec.26th, 1962
3. Burton B. Thurston, Merton's Reflections on Sufism, in *The Merton Seasonal* 15, 1990, p.4. Quoted in *ibid*, p.132
4. See Ch.13, Massignon and Merton, in Louis Massignon au Coeur de Notre Temps

- (henceforth LMCNT), Sous la direction Jacques Keryell, Éditions Karhala, Paris 1999, p.248
5. Ibid. p.249 and p.255
6. Witness to Freedom: The letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis, selected and edited by William H. Shannon, Harcourt, Brace & Co. p.276 (March 18, 1960) and p.277 (May 12, 1960)
7. Op.cit, LMCNT.
8. Michael Fitzgerald in a collection of essays, *En Hommage au Pere Jacques Jomier OP*, Etudes réunies et coordonnées par Marie-Therese Urvoy, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2002
9. Details of Massignon's life are taken from Fitzgerald, op.cit., Anthony O'Mahony, Christianity and Islam in the Thought of Louis Massignon, in *The Merton Journal*, Vol.10, no.2, Advent 2003, and Sydney H. Griffiths, Merton, Massignon and the Challenge of Islam, in Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story, A Complete Compendium, Fons Vitae, Louisville, Kentucky, 1999, (Henceforth M&S), pp.52-63.
10. Fitzgerald, op.cit., p.21
11. J. Petit (Ed.), Claudel-Massignon (1908-1914), in *Les Grandes Correspondances*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1973, p.91, quoted by Dorothy C. Buck in *Le Theme du Point Vierge dans les Ecrits de Louis Massignon*, in LMCNT p.279
12. Fitzgerald, op.cit., p.21, quoting I.E.Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981, p.77
13. Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p.152. Quoted by Sydney H. Griffiths in LMCNT, p.265
14. Ibrahim Madkout. See O'Mahony, op.cit. p.7.
15. See Introduction to Massignon's letters to Thomas Merton in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, p.275.
16. His dissertation for the Sorbonne, *The Passion of Al-Hallaj*, was published in 1922.

- It is available in English, translated by Herbert Mason (Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press).
17. See Sydney H. Griffiths, op.cit. in M&S, p.69
  18. Fitzgerald, op.cit., p.20
  19. See O'Mahony, op.cit., p.8
  20. From Massignon (Ed. J.F.Six), p.156. Quoted by Sydney H. Griffiths, op.cit. in M&S, p.70
  21. Sydney H. Griffiths, *ibid*. p.71-72
  22. Ibid. p.63
  23. Chawcat Moucary, *Faith to Faith: Christianity and Islam in Dialogue*, InterVarsity Press, Leicester 2001, p.298, quoting L. Massignon, Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr.
  24. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, Sheldon Press, London, 1976, p.135. The quotations are from Le Diwan d'al-Hallaj, (1955).
  25. Parrinder, op.cit. p.135
  26. This is the opinion of Geoffrey Parrinder, op.cit. p.130. Ninian Smart expresses the same view in *World Philosophies*, Routledge, London, 1999, p.161.
  27. See Parrinder, op.cit., p.129. We are referred to Massignon's work, *Essai sur les Origines du Lexique Technique de la Mystique Musalmane* (1954).
  28. Ibid. p.131
  29. William C. Chittick, *Sufism: Name and Reality*, in M&S, pp.15-31
  30. Ibid. p.31
  31. Excerpts from this correspondence with commentary are provided by Sydney H. Griffiths, *As One Spiritual Man to Another*, in M&S, pp.101-129.
  32. Ibid, p.102. Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* was published in New York by New Directions in 1949.
  33. Merton's *Sufi Lectures to Cistercian Novices*, 1966-68, Bernadette Dieker, p.130
  34. Ibid. p.136
  35. Ibid. p.138
  36. Ibid. p.141
  37. Ibid. p.147
  38. In M&S, pp.319-334
  39. Ibid. p.333 and p.321
  40. Ibid. p.322

41. Ibid. p.322
42. Letter of July 20th, in Witness to Freedom: the Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis, p.278
43. Hagar the Egyptian's Flight to the Desert, in Monastic Studies, No.16, Christmas 1985, published by the Benedictine Priory of Montreal, p.93
44. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'God' in Islamic Spirituality, Ed. S.H.Nasr, New York, Crossroads, 1987, p.318. Quoted by Bonnie Thurston, Thomas Merton's Interest in Islam: the Example of Dhikr, in M&S, p.318
45. See ibid. p.47
46. Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Sheldon Press, London 1965, pp.153-155
47. An issue of 1958-59, pp.57-71. Reproduced in Opera Minora, Vol.III, pp.772-784
48. Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, p.128
49. See Sydney H. Griffiths, As One Spiritual Man to Another, in M&S, p.105.
50. See Sydney H. Griffiths, Merton, Massignon and the Challenge of Islam, in M&S, pp.64-66
51. Louis Massignon, 1983, Vol.II and Vol.III of The Passion of Al-Hallaj, translated by Herbert Mason, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press. See Dorothy Buck, Le Theme du Point Vierge dans Les Ecrits de Louis Massignon, in LMCNT, p.281.
52. Letter dated Sept.18th, 1965, in Jean Leclercq and Thomas Merton: a Monastic Exchange of Letters, by Patrick Hart, in Monastic Studies, pub. Benedictine Priory of Montreal, Christmas 1985, pp.74-5.
53. Journal, 10 July, 1964. See Sydney H. Griffiths, Un Entretien sur les Choses Humaines et Divines, in LMCNT, p.270.