

Telling the Untold Story

Review of
Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story
 Edited by Rob Baker and Gray Henry.
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Reviewed by **Terry Graham**

“For the servant of God,” wrote Thomas Merton in a poem based on the teachings of an early Sufi master, “Consolation is the place of danger,” while “desolation is his home” and his being “is Nothingness” (290-91). Already in the mid-1960s, when the monk had just entered on his most vigorous undertakings in the study of Sufism, he was able to tap into the essence of its doctrine and practice in an uncanny way. In the section of *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966) devoted to poetic rendition of “Readings from Ibn Abbad,” he managed in a haiku-like way to encapsulate the spirit of Sufism as embodied in the example of an Andalusian-born, Moroccan-trained Sufi saint living six centuries before. Ibn ‘Abbaad was of special interest to Merton because of the probability that “he exercised at least an indirect influence on the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross” (d. 1591), teaching “that it is in the night of desolation that the door to mystical union is secretly opened” (287).

Over the course of the next few years his intellectual and spiritual understanding were to gradually catch up with his spontaneously incisive poetic insight, so that he was eventually able to enter into the actuality of the spiritual way which he had empathetically touched at the initial stage of his acquaintanceship. In the “Readings from Ibn Abbad” he was a man committed to vows of celibacy and seclusion from society, who was at the same time able to make the doctrinal leap of appreciating the “aloneness in a crowd” viewpoint of the Sufi, though still distanced from himself in its being embodied in another person, a person removed from the immediacy of his world and practice.

These were the days when Merton was writing to his Pakistani correspondent Abdul Aziz, himself a scholar of Sufism rather than a practicing Sufi as such, that it was “important, I think, to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the experience of the divine light.” However, later on – as this remarkable compendium, *Merton and Sufism*, demonstrates so effectively – as he evolved from studies of Sufi saints whom he could admire, like the Algerian Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi, to the actual encounter with a living master from that master’s order, while undergoing, in the process, the tormented experience of human – or “figurative,” as the Sufis put it – love, this incredibly endowed seeker and discoverer of God reached the point of being able to partake of the spiritual state which he had described in such vivid poetical terms.

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The compendium's subtitle, *The Untold Story*, reveals what has been virtually overlooked by the biographers: Merton's relationship with Sufism. In a sense they are hardly to be faulted, for he has left no specific work on Sufism comparable to his Taoist work, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965) – a book-length expansion of “readings” of a saintly figure with whom he could identify, *à la* Ibn Abbad (Chuang Tzu being “my own kind of person,” as he puts it in his prefatory note) – or to his dialogue with D. T. Suzuki in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), part of a decade-long study of the Zen masters, begun in the late Fifties, as his earliest serious foray into Eastern spirituality. His intensive encounter with Sufism came too far along in his spiritual career to be properly treated by Michael Mott and Jim Forest, his principal biographers.

Yet it could be maintained that, until he met the Tibetan guru, Chatral Rimpoche, in India, just before his arrival at the conference in Bangkok where he was abruptly taken from this world, Merton's most profound transfaith contact was with the Algerian Darqawi master Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi (d. 1934), whom he knew only in spirit, having been introduced to him through Martin Lings' revealing biography *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, and with Shaykh Ahmad's successor Sidi Abdeslam (Sayyidi 'Abd as-Salaam) Talidi (d. 1980), who came to visit him personally at his hermitage in the Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky.

Testimony to Merton's identification with the Algerian master comes in his words: “With Shaikh Ahmad, I speak the same language and indeed have a great deal more in common than I do with the majority of my contemporaries in this country. In listening to him I seem to be hearing a familiar voice from my ‘own country’ so to speak. I regret that the Muslim world is so distant from where I am, and wish I had more contact with people who think along these lines.” This quotation from Merton's correspondence with Abdul Aziz (18 October 1963) provides a poignant allusion to a yearning stirring deep inside him for something which his current religious condition could not bring to fulfillment.

Merton and Sufism is an invaluable sourcebook on the penultimate stage of the monk's spiritual development – the “Sufi stage,” as it were, preceding his Tibetan Lamaic contact – focused above all on his encounter with Sidi Abdeslam. The collection of articles, along with transcriptions of Merton's own lectures on Sufism and reprints of his Sufi poetry and his reviews of books on Islam, gives full documentation of Merton's experience, prefiguring the book he might have written. The compendium comprises eleven articles, a photo essay, and three appendices, as well as a preface by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (9-13) and an introduction by William Chittick (15-31). Merton's experience of Sufism is broadly charted through the first nine of these, culminating in the meeting with Sidi Abdeslam, proceeding from the theoretical to the experiential.

Unfortunately, the dating of the articles is given only where the provenance is an earlier publication. As a result, the eleventh article, Merton's own “Final Integration: Toward a ‘Monastic Therapy’” (266-77) placed as a purported epitome of Merton's thinking on the subject, is given no context in terms of chronology or consciousness development. Because of a reliance on the views of Reza Arasteh – whose secularized, “Chardinesque” writing is appropriately omitted from this truly perceptive collection – one presumes that the piece dates from the early Sixties, when Merton was in the early stages of his discovery of Sufism, and maintained a correspondence with Arasteh, whom at a later period he would have had no need to have recourse to. In any case, the wisdom of the compilers in leaving out Arasteh should have extended to this article, as well, because – far from being a summation of Merton's thinking with respect to Sufism – it represents a yet unripened perspective,

limited by a dependence on the inadequate analysis provided by Arasteh, positing such unreflective platitudes as the aim of Sufism being “final psychological integration,” once “the privilege of a few,” now “a need and aspiration of mankind as a whole” (276), as if Sufism were an updating of Freudian psychotherapy with a tincture of mysticism gleaned from the archives of Persian literature. The rest of the material, however, is superb – illuminating in content and well disposed in terms of the compendium’s organization.

In 1949 Merton had criticized in *Seeds of Contemplation* what he considered “the sensual dreams of the Sufis” as being “a poor substitute for the true contemplation that is found only in the Church” (quoted in *Merton and Sufism* 102). It is great credit to his steadfastness of purpose and his spiritual intuition and acumen that through persisting in his investigation of Sufism, he was eventually able to penetrate through the apparent sensuality of Sufi imagery to the starkness of uncompromising inner asceticism and to appreciate the Sufi challenge of an inward monasticism, practiced by contemplatives living an outward life of marriage, child-rearing, professional working and earning, and interaction with society in conventional terms.

The pieces by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Chittick, two of today’s leading scholars of Sufism, set the stage. The Iranian scholar Nasr provides a key statement placing Merton’s experience in context, where he says: “Since the Renaissance, much of what survived of Christian mysticism became in fact mostly individualistic, sentimental and passive. While Merton understood the value of this type of mysticism on its own level, his gaze was set upon the great medieval Christian contemplatives whose vision was not limited in any way by the individualism that was one of the characteristics of the Renaissance” (11). Chittick, writing of his fellow American, points to the anomaly of a Westerner like Merton discovering Sufism as a vitally relevant spiritual direction in an era when “only someone in academic studies would have been likely to run across a name like Rumi” (15). He then proceeds to establish the doctrinal context of the Sufism which Merton would set out to explore.

This dovetails nicely into Burton Thurston’s specific treatment of “Merton’s Reflections on Sufism” (33-39) a discussion of the monk’s views at a much more developed stage. Where Thurston quotes Merton in his first lecture to the novices at Gethsemani, there is an implication that the monk is struggling to work out the spiritual instruction which Sidi Abdeslam has given him by, as it were, “brainstorming” with the young monks, stating: “The Sufis are seeking to know God and have ways of seeking to know God and this should have some success with us. . . . We should be closer to the Sufis” (33).

Thurston’s wife Bonnie focuses the issue more directly in the following chapter (40-50), on Merton’s concern with “the prayer method called *dhikr*” (44). *Dhikr*, as Bonnie Thurston indicates, is important to Merton because in his words it is “the one real practice that is really important for them [the Sufis],” where “what they are aiming at is to try to get the whole [devotee] completely centered on God” (45). The inculcation of the *dhikr* into the Sufi’s heart, according to Merton, occurs when the disciple is ready to learn it “with abandonment, patience, and the love of God” in the presence of the spiritual guide, with whom the devotee “breathes in unison,” until he has the same rhythm. “You breathe out the whole world, and you breathe in God, right into your heart, and you keep on doing it” (45-46).

Writing to Abdul Aziz, he compared this process to the “Jesus prayer” of the Orthodox Hesychasts of Mt. Athos. He is right in that this is the closest practice in Christendom to the Sufi *dhikr*; especially

in noting the similarity of the Hesychasts' and the Sufis' discipline of sitting in a posture with the head focused on the heart. What is missing in the accounts of the *dhikr* practice quoted from Merton is the Sufis' aim of annihilation, of losing self, being completely overwhelmed by God – not as “Jesus” or even as “Allah,” but as the unnamed Essence, close to the Buddhist *sunyata* – where only That remains. There is, indeed, every indication that in the period between the encounter with Sidi Abdeslam and that with Chatral Rimpoche he was arriving at the threshold of this realization, so that by the time he arrived in Bangkok, he was ready for his demise from this world, being dead in spirit, in terms of the Sufi dictum, “Die before you die,” where death in body would be virtually an after-thought.

The third essay, Sidney Griffith's “Merton, Massignon and the Challenge of Islam” (51-78), deals with the awakenings of an understanding of Sufism through Merton's brief two-year exposure to and correspondence with the French Islamicist scholar Louis Massignon. As a married priest in the Melkite rite (which permits this status), Massignon provided an alternative to monasticism for Merton, as well as a way of faith which involved political activism, a tempting line of approach for the American, who was swayed by similar tendencies to right wrongs and fight for the oppressed. However, despite many appeals from activist friends, Merton stuck to his monastic discipline – as he was so resolutely to do later when love tempted him to abandon his vows for a perfectly piously approached marriage.

In May 1968, a year and a half after his encounter with Sidi Abdeslam, he is quoted by Griffith as having told a group of women contemplatives on retreat at Gethsemani, “I am deeply impregnated with Sufism” (69). In fact, he associated himself much more consciously with Sufism as such than Massignon had. Though the latter had been the prime mover in Merton's early interest, the French priest was far more concerned through his Badaliyya movement with Moslem-Christian links through the common denominator of the Arabic language and an identification with the Sufi martyr Hallaj (d. 922), more as a “Jesus figure” than as a practitioner of the Sufi path.

Even Massignon's concept of *le point vierge* (“the virgin point”) as the innermost depth of the heart, though Sufi enough in conception, was steeped in French intellectuality and Catholic doctrinalism compared to Merton's clear-sighted penetration of the ineffable, the inexpressible, the Eternal. Massignon had never even met, let alone submitted to, a Sufi master, whereas Merton was – if not initiated to Sidi Abdeslam – forever fixed on Divine Unity (*tawhiid*) thenceforth. Ironically, the man who had chosen to remain a Trappist celibate was closer to Sufism than the one who had chosen the more Islamically conventional path of marriage and interaction with society!

Note the contrast which Griffith gives between Massignon's description of his own concept and Merton's expression of it. Where the former states: “The ‘heart’ designates the incessant oscillation of the human will which beats like the pulse under the impulse of various passions, an impulse which must be stabilized by the Essential Desire, one single God. Introspection must guide us to tear through the concentric ‘veils’ which ensheath the heart, and hide from us the virginal point (*le point vierge*), the secret (*sirr*), wherein God manifests Himself” (66), the latter is prompted by a visionary experience in the crowded shopping center of Louisville, to realize that “I loved all those people” and to declare: “Then it was as if I saw the beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality. . . . Again, that expression, *le point vierge* – I cannot translate it – comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched . . . by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to

God. . . . This little point . . . is the pure glory of God in us” (67).

Chapter 4 (79-88) is a translation of a treatise on the heart by Hallaj’s contemporary Hakim Tirmidhi (d. c. 932) from Khorasan, the other end of the Persian world from the martyr’s Baghdad. Found in Merton’s papers, it is provided as an indication of the monk’s own research into the Sufi science of the heart.

Though entitled “Islamic Themes in Merton’s Poetry,” Erlinda Paguio’s Chapter 5 (89-100) is really devoted principally to how the Sufi imagery of the redoubtable Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) has swelled his poetry, as well as a brief mention of the inspiration derived by the discovery of an exquisite silk cover for the tomb of Imam Riza (Ridha), who, though a classical Shi‘ite figure, is also regarded as a saint by Sunnite Sufis.

This leads thematically to Chapter 6, again by Griffith and concerned with the Merton-Abdul Aziz correspondence (100-29). This is followed by the “out-of-place” Chapter 7, transcriptions from Merton’s lectures (130-62); had these been shifted to later in the volume, the discussion of contacts with Aziz would have formed the natural transition to Chapter 8 (163-81), Gray Henry’s analysis of Merton’s response to Lings’ work on Shaykh al-‘Alawi, preparing the way for his meeting a living shaykh from the master’s Darqawi Sufi order, vividly described in Chapter 9, the most important piece in the compendium, the axis on which the rest of the articles turn (182-92). It is written by Nicole Abadie, a French convert to Islam with the adopted name of Khadidja Benaissa, marrying a disciple of Shaykh al-‘Alawi’s son and successor Hajj ‘Adda ibn Tunis (ben Tounès), who entrusted his highest shaykh and confidant Sidi Abdeslam with the spiritual training of his son and successor-to-be, Muhammad al-Mahdi b. Tunis.

After years of intimate association with Sidi Abdeslam, Khadidja Benaissa writes with awe of him as a profound and powerful master, whose by-word was “Watch your heart.” She also points out that for the Darqawi shaykh the high point of a busy tour of the U.S., with visits to a number of spiritual centers of different faiths, was his two-day stay with Merton in the fall of 1966. We do not know what was exchanged between them, but we do have some snippets of their correspondence on love. In the one surviving letter from Merton, the monk states: “For love to be true, it seems to me I must love the will of The One who loves in me and creates me at all times. But I love more my own will and my passions and we come to what you call ‘the battlefield of the *nafs*.’ It is that I am ignorant and stupid. So the Light of God cannot shine as it should in my *nafs* because I am too opaque, too resistant” (191). In one of the Sufi shaykh’s extant missives, he chides his “disciple,” giving God’s counsel to Moses: “Abandon your ego (*nafs*); you will then find Me” (190). Whatever had gone on between them, Merton’s expressions thereafter focus his perspective more and more clearly on Divine Unity, where he speaks of God alone – over and over again.

After Rob Baker’s lengthy discussion of Merton’s contacts, through Marco Pallis, with the traditionalist circle around Frithjof Schuon (193-265) and Merton’s “Final Integration,” the book concludes with three appendices, respectively devoted to Merton’s Sufi poems (287-305), his Sufi book reviews (306-18), and a piece by Schuon (319-34) on “The Universality of Monasticism and Its Relevance to the Modern World” (though of dubious relevance to Merton’s own experience of Sufism!). While it is very well annotated, a brief prefatory note for each article would have been well advised, giving the date and circumstances and/or context in which the text appeared. This would have helped the reader to follow the development of Merton’s meditation-powered quest in the domain of Sufism.

Furthermore, the photo essay (278-85), four pairs of photographs of Cistercians and Sufis, cer-

tainly deserves more than the short shrift it gets, deprived of any kind of text at all. Not only does it lack essential captions, identifying the subjects and the reason for their juxtaposition, but there is a failure to repeat even the title, forcing the reader back to the table of contents to gain orientation. A lovely ecumenical idea that – Sufis and Cistercians – but what is the point being made? Are the photos – apart from one featuring Merton himself – by him or by friends of his? Are the Sufi photos in a collection of his, found amongst his papers, connected with any of his writings or notes? A nice idea, but sadly undeveloped.

Overall, however, this is a remarkable book, providing a lucid, well-documented and passionate portrayal of Merton's exposure to Sufism, from the theoretical to the practical, charting his course of development in becoming ever more absorbed in Sufi teachings. It is a treat for anyone concerned with the unity of all religions, with inter-faith dialogue, and with the transcendent source of all spiritual experience.