

Islam from Inside and Out: A Quartet of Diverse Voices

Review of

*Listening to Islam with Thomas Merton, Sayyid Qutb,
Kenneth Cragg and Ziauddin Sardar: Praise, Reason and Reflection*

By John Watson

Brightland, Portland, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2005

viii + 109 pages / \$24.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Sidney H. Griffith**

This interesting little book, originally a set of lectures, presents the thoughts of four notable thinkers and writers of the modern era about Islam, two Christians and two Muslims. Following a short preface and a statement of acknowledgments, in four concise essays John Watson first offers a brief sketch of the life and work of each of the writers in the sequence in which they are named in the title of the book. In each instance, there follows a presentation of the writer's views of Islam, liberally supplied with quotations from their works; bibliographies for further study are included at the end of each essay. At the end of the volume one finds the annotations to the essays, citing the sources of the quotations and referring to other authorities whose views were elicited in each essay. In addition, following the endnotes, there is a brief discussion of the Qur'ān in English translation, with descriptions of four of the currently most readily available translations. There is a list of Qur'ānic references in the book and an index of persons and subjects.

Thomas Merton needs no introduction to the readers of this review. Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) was an Egyptian Muslim, whose works have been extraordinarily influential among today's Islamists, most notably his multi-volume *In the Shade of the Qur'ān* and the autobiographical *Milestones*. Kenneth Cragg (b.1913), Anglican bishop and prodigious writer of books on Islamic themes for Christians, has been one of the few Western scholars consistently to take Islam religiously seriously. Ziauddin Sardar (b.1951) is a prolific, present-day Muslim commentator on current affairs, with an abiding interest in the future of Islam. He is an ardent supporter of inter-religious dialogue as a road to world peace.

Watson's very brief introduction to Merton mentions the highlights of his life; it concludes with the notice that while Merton's work on Buddhism and Taoism is well known, the extent of his interest in Islam and specifically in Sufism has only gradually become common knowledge. The essay on Merton's "listening to Islam" is focused on Sufism and Merton's reading of Sufi texts, along with books and articles on Sufism. It highlights his correspondence with a number of contemporary

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Muslims, most notably the Pakistani Muslim student of Sufism, 'Abd al-'Azīz, with whom Merton was in regular if intermittent correspondence during the last ten years of his life.

In just about a dozen pages, John Watson discusses Merton's "listening to Islam" very much in terms of his own reading about Sufism; he presents a virtual dialogue between Merton and the authors of the works he has consulted. A notable feature of the essay is Watson's mention of the Orthodox Christian musician, Sir John Tavener, whose views he finds very compatible with Merton's. The essay makes the reader want to know more about Merton and Islam, and to that end Watson includes the appropriate sources in the list he appends to the essay. As the written text of an Advent lecture presented to an ordinary church audience, Watson's essay impresses this reader as a success.

There is one somewhat jarring feature in the book as a whole; Watson loses no opportunity throughout to express his own animus against Tony Blair and George W. Bush, particularly in connection with the war in Iraq. While one welcomes the expression of the author's opinion, the tenor of his remarks in this vein strike this reader as somewhat intemperate in the context of his effort to listen to Islam in the lives and works of four of the more significant spokespersons on the subject, whose views are meant to be the main focus of attention. And while it is ungracious to ask for more than the author intended to give, this reviewer could not help thinking that it is a pity that Watson did not spread his net a bit wider, to include some discussion of other major figures in Christian-Muslim relations, such as the Christian, Louis Massignon (1883-1962) and the Muslim, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b.1933). Perhaps he will be invited to give another course of Advent lectures on the same theme to the Methodist and Anglican churches in Highcliffe, and we can hope for another slim volume on "listening to Islam" with other likely writers and seekers in the future.