

Merton and Sufism: The Well-told Story

Review of

Mystics, Muslims, and Merton

By Sidney H. Griffith

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Reviewed by **Erlinda G. Paguio**

Sidney H. Griffith's *Mystics, Muslims, and Merton*, six conferences available on 2 DVDs or 3 CDs, is a well-researched and masterful presentation of Thomas Merton's strong interest in other religious traditions and his deep study and experience of Islam and Sufism. Griffith shows clearly that Merton's study of Islam and his contacts with scholars and Sufi practitioners during the last years of his life was personal, intimate, life-transforming, and that his experience strengthened his appreciation for his own Christian tradition. Professor of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literature at the Catholic University of America, Griffith is the 2009 recipient of a Rumi Peace Award for his efforts in interfaith dialogue. His book, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Muslims and Christians in the World of Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2008), was awarded the Albert C. Outler Prize for the best book on ecumenical Church history by the American Society of Church History.

Lecture 1, "Sharing the Experience of Divine Light," cites Merton's friendship with Mahanambrata Bramachari, a Hindu monk, as an early experience in interreligious appreciation. It surveys the growth of Merton's interest in other religions in the late 1950s and early 1960s and explains how Merton's extensive correspondence with contemporary religious thinkers developed into a deep spiritual friendship with the Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki, the Indian scholar Amiya Chakravarty, the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, the Pakistani Muslim Abdul Aziz and the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel. Griffith notes that Merton's principal mode of conversation with them was through letters and that his interreligious dialogue occurred during Vatican Council II. Griffith also reminds us that Merton's interest in other religious traditions had a precedent among men like Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, Francis Mahieu, OCSO, Bede Griffiths, Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld, all of whom had entered into dialogue with Eastern religions. Merton believed that although it is important to understand the beliefs of other religions, it is much more important to share their experience of the divine light that God gives as Creator of the Universe.

Lecture 2, "Thomas Merton Meets Louis Massignon," is a succinct summary of how Massignon became, in Griffith's term, "Merton's gateway to Islam." Massignon, a deeply religious man and a

Erlinda G. Paguio, former treasurer and president of the International Thomas Merton Society, recently retired from the University of Louisville, where she was Director of Development Research in the Office of University Advancement. She has spoken and written widely on various aspects of Merton's interest in mysticism and involvement in interreligious dialogue.

world-class scholar of Islamic mysticism, was introduced to Merton by Herbert Mason, a young disciple of Massignon. Merton and Massignon exchanged letters, books and articles from 1959 to 1962. Griffith excellently explains that the encounter between Merton and Massignon through letters was not just a search for facts; it was a true meeting in which they were able to share their deep life in God. Merton was much inspired by Massignon's writings and his personal devotion to the tenth-century Islamic mystic and martyr Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d.922), who Massignon believed was instrumental in his re-conversion to Catholicism. The martyrdom of Al-Hallaj deeply moved Merton and reminded him of Christ. The poetry and spiritual intuitions of al-Hallaj that he learned from Massignon profoundly appealed to him. He was attracted to the practice of mystical substitution – the offering of one's own suffering on behalf of one's people as a way of bringing them closer to God. The practical and active expression of Massignon's spirituality – prayer and fasting for Muslims, his organizing a Friends of Gandhi movement, and his non-violent demonstrations against the French war in Algeria – led Merton to pray and fast in solidarity with Massignon and his friends.

One of the jewels of Griffith's research on Merton and Islamic mysticism is his study of the source of Merton's adopting in his own life and writings the theme of *le point vierge* or the virgin point that Massignon learned from al-Hallaj. To explain the origin of *le point vierge*, Griffith quotes al-Hallaj: "Our hearts, in their secrecy, are a virgin alone, where no dreamer's dream penetrates . . . the heart where the presence of the Lord alone penetrates, there to be conceived." In Sufi terms, the virgin point is the innermost center, the secret of the heart, where God makes Himself known. Merton was so touched and captivated by the deep reality of the virgin point that he wrote about it in his experience of seeing the secret beauty in the crowd of people in Louisville and hearing the first chirping of the birds at dawn in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Griffith observed that the phrase lingered with Merton during his Asian journey as he described the contemplative life as "'temps vierge' – a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes – and its own presence to itself. One's own time."

In Lecture 3, Griffith recounts Massignon advising Abdul Aziz, who was interested in Sufism and mysticism, to contact Merton. Griffith says that this is the only instance he is aware of in which a notable Western Christian and an Eastern Sufi corresponded with each other in a very deep spiritual way. The title, "As One Spiritual Man to Another," is drawn from Merton's first letter to Abdul Aziz on November 17, 1960, in which Merton writes, "I speak to you from my heart of our obligation to study the truth in deep prayer and meditation, and bear witness to the light that comes from the all-Holy God into this world of darkness where He is not known and remembered." Merton and Abdul Aziz became engaged in discussing spiritual thought and practice, doctrines and personal prayer. They also exchanged books and articles. Merton also expressed solidarity with Abdul Aziz by fasting and praying with him during the month of Ramadan and the Night of Power.

In Lecture 4, "Sufis at Gethsemani," Griffith describes Merton's encounter with two Sufis through reading materials that Abdul Aziz sent Merton. After reading Martin Lings' book, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), Merton wrote an appreciative letter to Lings and a review of the book for a Cistercian publication. He told Abdul Aziz that he and Sheikh Ahmad had much in common. In 1965, Merton was so impressed by the poetry of the Andalusian Sufi, Ibn 'Abbad al-Ronda, that he rendered his own English translation from a French study of Ibn 'Abbad (see *Raids on the Unspeakable* [New York: New Directions, 1966] 141-51). In 1966, Sidi Abdeslam, a Sufi master from the spiritual lineage of Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi, visited

Gethsemani. Through an interpreter, he and Merton were able to communicate with each other. Merton considered Sidi Abdeslam as a remarkable person, and meeting him was like meeting a Desert Father or someone out of the Bible.

In Lecture 5, “Merton and the Perennialists,” Griffith reviews Merton’s interaction with a school of interreligious thought called “perennialism” or “traditionalism,” a group which strongly affirms the transcendent unity of religions. Griffith highlights Merton’s encounter with Sufi enthusiasts in the West through Marco Pallis, Titus Burkhardt and Martin Lings to illustrate how monastic renewal could profit from contact with different religious traditions. Other perennialists or traditionalists whom Griffith mentioned were Rene Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. In corresponding with Marco Pallis from 1963 to 1966, Merton learned that Schuon was a disciple and a Sufi practitioner in the line of Shaikh Ahmad. Pallis suggested that Merton could develop a closer, personal relationship with Schuon, but Merton stressed his preference for informality in such relationships and noted that authentic spiritual guidance was not a matter of letters. He indicated the importance for him of being in contact with the spirit and teaching of Shaikh Ahmad through Schuon. It became evident later that Merton did not have the right impulsion to write Schuon and get into a personal relationship with him.

In Lecture 6, “Final Integration,” Griffith discusses Merton’s deep attraction to Reza Arasteh’s idea of final integration in the adult personality. Arasteh, an Iranian-born Muslim psychologist, believed that in conceiving the idea of final integration in the adult personality, the Eastern cultures’ “art of rebirth” as practiced in different religious traditions should be added to the European attention to rationality and external measures of security, to develop a transcultural outlook.

Mystics, Muslims, and Merton is a valuable resource for Merton scholars and followers who are interested in delving into Merton’s engagement with Islam and its mystical dimension. The dates, quotations and pictures of Merton and scholars mentioned in the lectures that were included in the videos were informative. (The caption on Merton’s date of death was unfortunately erroneous, cited as December 10, 1964 instead of December 10, 1968.) The Study Guide on the final disc was particularly helpful while listening to the lectures. Persons involved in interfaith dialogue have much to learn from these engaging presentations.