

(84) of which there may be better resources. Bidlack also reminds us that Merton and Wu were pioneers in advancing the Catholic culture beyond the pre-Conciliar suspicion against other religions as well as preceding the post-modern critique of their efforts.

Donald P. St. John places the Merton-Wu interest in Taoism within a larger “ecumenical” framework, arguing that they were not only pioneers in an increasing pluralistic context, but their achievements are pioneering of and conducive to the shift to an ecological consciousness.

Finally, Wu’s youngest son, John Wu Jr., provides two essays, one that precedes the correspondence, and a touching creative eulogistic-like epilogue about his father. I was not that familiar with Wu, Sr. before I read this book but after reading it I greatly admire him. He offered Merton a rare kind of friendship and loyalty that is enviable. “In certain respects,” says Miller, “they are soul mates” (155).

In some sense the decade of correspondence between them reveals some parallels. Both thinkers are greatly interested in building bridges between East and West and working on communicating Eastern philosophy and religion to the Western world. They both are working on lengthy projects, Merton a project on Chuang Tzu, and Wu, a project on Zen. The correspondence between the two further affords an occasion for personal sharing. Wu’s initiative in sharing the grief over the loss of his wife, his life-long soul-mate, and his subsequent falling in love again years after the fact, in a sense prepares Merton to share his own struggles while in the throes of his own “forbidden” love. The letter he wrote to Wu on the latter account remains a mystery. Having received it, Wu probably destroyed it, and by so doing, revealed the stalwart tact and loyalty of his character.

There are many gems throughout their correspondence too numerous to relate here, including their half-hearted allusions to past lives (200, 206). In short, this is a wonderful volume that I really enjoyed reading and its value will be ongoing for Merton enthusiasts, scholars and theologians on various levels of inquiry.

John Dadosky

GRIFFITH, Sidney H., *Mystics, Muslims, and Merton*, 6 conferences on 2 DVDs / 2CDs (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013) \$39.95 (DVDs); \$25.95 (CDs).

The Merton community is very fortunate to have such a distinguished scholar of Semitic languages, literature and religious traditions as Sidney H. Griffith as a resource for the important topic of Merton’s interest in and dialogue with Islam. A professor of early Syriac and Arabic Christian

literature at the Catholic University of America, with particular expertise in the history of Muslim-Christian relations, he is in a unique position to provide authoritative guidance and insight about the various facets of Merton's deepening involvement with Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, during the last period of his life. In this series of six half-hour lectures, available in both video and audio formats, Griffith draws on his definitive studies of Merton's relationships with the French Catholic scholar of Islam Louis Massignon¹ and the Pakistani student of Sufism Abdul Aziz,² as well as his magisterial presentation on Merton and the Perennialists at the Tenth ITMS General Meeting in 2007, supplemented by discussion of related topics, to provide a comprehensive overview of mystics, Muslims and Merton that is accessible to an general audience.

In his opening lecture, entitled "Sharing the Experience of Divine Light" (a quotation from a letter to Abdul Aziz), Griffith begins the series of presentations by providing a context for his particular focus on Islam through a broader survey of Merton's engagement in interreligious dialogue dating all the way back to his encounter with the Hindu monk Brahmachari during his college days at Columbia in the late 1930s, a relationship that was actually instrumental in leading to Merton's conversion to Catholicism because of the Indian monk's encouragement to read Christian spiritual classics. Griffith goes on to point out the importance of Merton's friendships, largely nurtured through correspondence, with figures representing a variety of religious traditions, such as D. T. Suzuki, Amiya Chakravarty, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as his meetings shortly before his death with the Dalai Lama.

The second lecture, "Thomas Merton Meets Louis Massignon," presents Massignon as Merton's "gateway" to Islam generally as well as to particular historical and contemporary Muslim figures. Griffith provides a capsule summary of Massignon's own religious and academic history, particularly his scholarly work on the early tenth-century Muslim mystic and martyr Al-Hallaj, whose teaching on mystical substitution became very important to Massignon and subsequently to Merton, and was closely related to Massignon's nonviolent activism in opposition to the French-Algerian war. He explains the role of the young American student of Massignon, Herbert Mason, in connecting Merton with Massignon, and provides information on the correspondence between the two men in

1. Sidney H. Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," in Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999) 51-78.

2. Sidney H. Griffith, "'As One Spiritual Man to Another': The Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence" (Baker and Henry 101-29).

the three years before Massignon's death in 1962. The lecture concludes with consideration of the phrase "point vierge," coming from Al-Hallaj through Massignon, that became so resonant for Merton in the "Fourth and Walnut" passage and elsewhere in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and that reappears as "temps vierge" in the *Asian Journal*.

"As One Spiritual Man to Another" is the title of the following lecture on Merton's important epistolary friendship with Abdul Aziz, and is taken from Merton's first letter to the Pakistani Muslim. Initially prompted by Massignon, whom Abdul Aziz met in 1959 and asked for the name of an English-speaking Christian mystic, the exchange of letters from 1960 through 1968 is described by Griffith as the only known instance of an extended correspondence between a Western Christian and an Eastern Muslim Sufi over the course of time, consisting of about fifteen letters each. The mutually beneficial sharing of resources – article and books, of insights on the teachings of their respective religions, and eventually of Merton's personal way of prayer, make this set of letters one of the most fascinating in the entire range of Merton's vast correspondence.

The fourth lecture, "Sufis at Gethsemani," first explores Merton's deep interest in the figure of the Sufi master Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi, first encountered in Martin Lings' biography *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century* (1961), sent to him by Abdul Aziz, then recounts the deeply moving visit to Gethsemani in 1966 of Sidi Abdeslam, an Algerian disciple of al-Alawi and a Sufi master in his own right, which Merton told his friend Jean Leclercq was like meeting a Desert Father or figure out of the Bible. Griffith notes that Abdeslam told Merton he was very close to mystical union, and later wrote to him asking if he had set aside the distraction of words to enter into union with God beyond words. He also touches in this lecture on Merton's poetic reworking of the writings of the fourteenth-century Sufi master Ibn 'Abbād and other poetry stimulated by his readings of Islamic materials.

In "Merton and the Perennialists," the fifth presentation, Griffith discusses Merton's various contacts with a contemporary school of religious thought known as "perennialists" or "traditionalists" that emphasized both the transcendent unity of all religions and the importance of being a practitioner of a particular religious tradition. Through his reading and his personal contacts with such members of this group as Marco Pallis, Merton became acquainted with the thought of Frithjof Schuon, one of the principal figures in this school, whom he learned was himself a disciple of Ahmad al-Alawi. He was encouraged by Pallis to develop a personal spiritual bond with Schuon, an idea which initially attracted Merton as a further connection with Shaikh Ahmad, but which he eventually decided

would be too artificial in its reliance on correspondence.

The title of the last lecture, "Final Integration," refers both to the presentation's focus on Merton's reading of and response to the work of the Persian-American psychoanalyst Reza Arasteh and to Griffith's own concluding summary of the main points of his entire series of talks. Merton was particularly impressed by Arasteh's Sufi-influenced view of psychological integration as transcending rational adjustment to social norms in an inner transformation of consciousness, a psychological and spiritual "rebirth" of an integrated personality that is not limited to any particular social or cultural environment. His appreciative response is expressed not only in his correspondence with the author but above all in his review-essay "Final Integration,"³ one of his most important articles, in which he transposes Arasteh's insights into a specifically Christian and monastic milieu. Griffith then concludes by reiterating his emphasis throughout the series that Merton's engagement with Islam was not primarily intellectual or academic but deeply personal, focused on the mystical and experiential dimensions of the Sufi tradition, and typically developing from personal contacts that exemplified authentic interreligious dialogue, an approach that Merton himself recommended in his address to the Temple of Understanding Conference in Calcutta shortly before his death, the point at which Griffith brings his presentations to a close.

These lectures provide a rich and thorough exposure to the breadth and depth of Merton's contacts with Sufism in the last decade of his life. Only his series of conferences on Sufism to his monastic community in 1967 and 1968, mentioned in passing in the final presentation, is not given detailed attention. The video version also includes a short interview with Griffith, in which he comments informally and spontaneously on the impact of the study of Islam on Merton's spiritual life, on why it is important for contemporary Catholics to learn about Islam, on Pope Francis' interest in interreligious dialogue, and on the continuing appeal of Merton's life and writings almost fifty years after his death. The DVDs also feature frequent graphics with key quotations and facts accompanying the speaker's words, as well as numerous photographs of Merton (though these have little direct connection to the subject of the talks) and of most of the other key figures mentioned in the course of the series. Otherwise the content of audio and video is identical; both versions also include a CD-ROM with a study guide and additional information including a bibliography. There are occasional minor slips of the tongue in the course of the presentations, as when *The Seven Storey Mountain*

3. Thomas Merton, "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy,'" in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 205-17.

is dated a year too early and the opening of the Second Vatican Council a year too late, the Dalai Lama is included among Merton's correspondents, and Fourth and Walnut is renamed Fourth and Martin Luther King (instead of Muhammad Ali) (unfortunately all but the last of these are picked up in the video graphics as well, which also turn the Benedictine Jean Leclercq into a Dominican – an inadvertent reference to Merton's death as happening in 1964 has now been corrected). One slight modification of the substance of the material is in order: Merton's "Readings from Ibn Abbad"⁴ is not based on poetry by the fourteenth-century Sufi master but on excerpts from various letters, treatises and sermons of Ibn 'Abbād that Merton found in the Jesuit scholar Paul Nwyia's French study *Ibn 'Abbād de Ronda*⁵ and translated and reworked in verse. But these few inaccuracies are of no great significance and do not detract from the overall impressiveness and effectiveness of Sidney Griffith's engaging and enlightening introduction of his audience to an important but generally little-known aspect of Merton's engagement with other religious traditions. At a time when the need for trustworthy information about Islam and the importance of recognizing the spiritual wisdom of Muslim teachings are of particular urgency, Professor Griffith and Now You Know have performed a signal service in making Merton's contributions to this process of developing interreligious awareness and mutual respect between Muslims and Christians readily available to a wide audience in media other than the printed word.

Patrick F. O'Connell

MCCOLMAN, Carl, *Answering the Contemplative Call: First Steps on the Mystical Path* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2013), pp. xxi + 170. ISBN 978-1571746771 (paper) \$16.95.

In this short book, Carl McColman offers counsel and guidance for those who have heard a call to contemplation, which he believes is made to every person, and who wish to respond. As such, it is not a text about Thomas Merton, though McColman makes frequent reference to Merton, but it addresses a topic with which avid readers of Merton most likely are interested.

Guiding the author's work is the common metaphor of spiritual life as a journey that may be summarized as: "From longing, to awakening,

4. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 141-51.

5. Paul Nwyia, SJ, *Ibn 'Abbād de Ronda (1332-1390)* (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1961).