

# MERTON'S REFLECTIONS ON SUFISM

by **Burton B. Thurston**

When Thomas Merton gave a series of lectures on Sufism he began by saying: "Don't let anyone give you a course on Sufism, and I have no right to talk about Sufism . . . it will be wasting a half hour before vespers." However he might have meant this comment, we know that there is in Merton that empathy, stressed some years ago by Wilhelm Dilthey in his "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutic," that, unless you can enter the mind set and thought patterns of the author, your understanding will be faulty and wrong. In following his correspondence, journals and lectures which touched on Sufism, my feeling increased that Merton's knowledge of Sufism had reached a point where a non-Muslim could go no further than he had gone.

The key to understanding Merton's reflections on Sufism is a very simple, straightforward statement which he made in his first lecture to the novices at Gethsemani: "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."<sup>1</sup> For the sake of his audience Merton goes into the fundamentals of Islam and its nature as a prophetic religion, but soon moves into the esoteric and mystical enclave of the Sufis.

He is comfortable with the assumed and historical relations between Sufis and Christian mystics. He is strongly tempted from his own experience of praying over the Cautions and Councils of St. John of the Cross to see the presence of Sufi influence through Ibn Abbad on St. John. He was impressed, but probably not surprised, at Abdul Aziz's interest in John of the Cross.<sup>2</sup>

The Sufi distinction in the two kinds of Holy War or *JIHAD* became a special emphasis in Merton's treatment of the Sufi "Path" (*TARIQ*). The Sufis see the greatest war, or the *JIHAD AL-AKHBAR*, as the holy war against yourself, which is a lifelong battle. This opening to the means of entering the spiritual life on the part of the Sufis was filled with a variety of possibilities which Merton would explore.

When Sufis enter the "Path" and pass through various stages they ultimately face indecision and "bewilderment." This was a live catalyst for Merton in



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1. Thomas Merton, "First Lecture on the Sufis: Introduction / Islam and the Sufi Mystics," *The Mystic Life*; The Merton tapes, series II (Chappaqua, New York: Electronic Paperbacks, 1976): tape 1A.

2. Thomas Merton to Abdul Aziz, 17 November 1960. In *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. 44, 53. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

dealing with novices in the monastery. He looked upon the trials of the spiritual life as an essential stage in the development of that life. He found a congenial parallel in the Sufi stage of “bewilderment” (*DAHASH*). It was not clear in his comment at the end of his third lecture whether he was talking only about Sufis or including all mystics. “We get into total bewilderment, we lose our own hearts. They say we are no longer able to get in contact with the best of our own being.” Among the Sufis this was a specific time of development and was the stage just before the final stage. This idea of bewilderment is especially important to some Sufis. Fariduddin ‘Attar thought of bewilderment as the stage before the final vale on the path of poverty and annihilation. The earlier stages are search, love, gnosis, independence, *TAWHID*, and bewilderment.<sup>3</sup> ‘Attar gives a sophisticated form of bewilderment. When praising God, the Sufi poets did not express more than their utter bewilderment. One of the mystical poets wrote that he broke his pens in complete bewilderment (*MDI*, p. 301).

Thomas Merton uses this Sufi bewilderment to open up the question of inner authority. When conflicting directions face one the question arises: “Who am I and where am I going?” Merton’s comment is very pointed: “Shut out the world and all that jazz!” One should not lose his/her identity in the mess. He then quotes a Sufi: “In all these classes of men I sought for my aim. I could not find it.”<sup>4</sup>

Closely associated with bewilderment in the thought of Thomas Merton was the matter of trials and testing. He related the trials in the monastic community to the Sufi emphasis upon the essentialness of trials. The martyr-mystic Al-Hallaj, whom Merton knew through Louis Massignon, has a loaded sentence regarding trials. “Suffering is He himself . . .” (*MDI*, p. 72). Hallaj explains this by saying the more God loves a person, the more He will test that person. He takes away every trace of earthly consolation so that the lover has only God to rely upon (*MDI*, p. 136). Merton sees several contacts between the Sufi emphasis on trials and the monastic life. He concentrated the theme by saying: “You can’t live for God without trial . . . love and trials are inseparable.”<sup>5</sup> This apparently came as a surprise to some of the newcomers whom he was teaching. He quoted some unidentified third person who said: “I came here for personal fulfillment and what am I getting these trials for?”

Every stage in the Sufi “path” is encompassed with trials. The major one, as stressed by Hujwiri who tends to systematization, is the struggle with the “soul” (*NAFS*). It is the constant battle with the base instincts. Sura 79 (*AN-NAZI’AT* — The Yearners) is a special admonition to those who would face this struggle. In v. 40 they are admonished “to fear to stand before the Lord and restrain (*NAHA*) *NAFS* from lust.” The main duty of the pious is to overcome this trial by acting contrary to the appetites of the soul. Merton picked this up as being also a Christian response when he said in his third lecture to the novices: “The reality comes through struggling with this thing and overcoming it, by God’s grace.” To the Sufi it was the soul or *NAFS* which would incite to evil (Sura 12.53), but according to Rumi this can be completely cured by love. Rumi, who apparently was a special source for Thomas Merton in regard to the spirit of Sufism, had a majestic view of love.

From Love, bitter things become sweet,  
From Love, copper becomes golden,

3. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 123. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MDI*.

4. Thomas Merton, “The Straight Way,” in *The Mystic Life* series.

5. Thomas Merton, “Creative Love and Compassion of God,” in *The Mystic Life* series. Hereafter referred to in the text as Third Lecture.

From Love, the dregs become pure,  
 From Love, pain becomes medicine,  
 From Love, the dead are made alive,  
 From Love, Kings are made slaves. (MDI, p. 124)

Merton looked upon the trials as a mark of the friends of God. "If you are a friend of God you are going to get special treatment. You are going to get a hard time but you will also have a good time . . . There is not any consolation that has not been prepared for by real rugged suffering."

While there are general similarities in stages of development among various mystics such as repentance, renunciation, fasting, poverty, and contemplation, there was the final stage of the "path" which attracted Merton's special attention. The final stage in all Sufi progress is *FANA'* which is variously translated as "annihilation," "extinction," or "passing away." Merton refers to the technical term but then expresses the culmination or goal of the providential trial. Merton's view of the final stage is that "Man is overwhelmed, he is reduced to nothing, a tested heart, a proved heart is a destroyed heart" (Third Lecture). He sees in this idea a form of exaggeration, such as the Sufi emphasis on love, when it leads to the idea that as a friend of God He will destroy you. Even in mystical metaphor the expression of being killed or destroyed raised serious questions.

In order to reach *FANA'*, which took on various forms with the Sufis, the destruction or passing of the self was required. Al-Hallaj was executed for heresy when he said *ANA AL-HAQQ* (I am the truth) which was taken to mean that he was God, as *AL-HAQQ* was one of the *ASMA AL-HUSNA* (Beautiful names of God). Rabia lost herself in union with the Divine. Al-Muhasibi entered into the life of perfect fellowship with God. Dhu an-Nun, by gnosis, entered the mystic experience of union (*TAWHID*). Abu Yazid al-Bistami ended personal separate existence and returned into the One.<sup>6</sup>

Following his explanation of the Sufi "path" in his lectures, Merton then concentrated his attention on Sufi worship. This would possibly be a normal or natural counterpart of his expressed views on contemplative prayer. One quotation from his writings had a governing effect on his view of Sufism. He wrote: "Contemplative prayer is the recognition that we are the Sons of God, an experience of Who He is, and of His love for us, flowing from the operation of that love in us . . . He makes us realize at least obscurely that it is He who is praying in us with a love too deep and too secret for us to comprehend."<sup>7</sup>

This same theme is repeated in his correspondence with Abdul Aziz. On 30 January 1961 he wrote of the value he placed on the prayers for him which were uttered by Aziz and wrote that prayer "represents for us the moment of the nearest presence of God in our lives" (*HGL*, p. 46). More than two years later he wrote again to Aziz on the subject of prayer and contemplation (*HGL*, p. 15). He had already begun to work on the similarities between the Sufis and the Oriental Christian mystics. About sixteen months after he wrote to Abdul Aziz asking information, he was giving lectures on the Sufis to the novices at Gethsemani (*HGL*, p. 41). As time went on and his reading of the Islamic mystics increased, he felt closer to some of them such as Shiekh Ahmad al-'Alawi and al-Junayd. He shared with Aziz in writing his own personal method of worship and prayer, but said that he hesitated to chant the *Qur'an* because he did not know how to do it correctly (*HGL*, pp. 61-63). He was fascinated by the prayer methods peculiar to the Sufis.

6. See Chapter 10 in Margaret Smith, *The Way of the Mystics: the Early Christian Mystics and the Rise of the Sufis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976).

7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1953), p. 291.

When Merton first took up the study of their prayer method, called *DHIKR*, is not clear. While he mentioned it in his Asian journal, that reference is later than his treatment of it in his lectures concerning the Sufis which he gave at Gethsemani at the end of 1965.<sup>8</sup> In his fourth lecture about the Holy War against the self, he said: “Now we get to some of their real practices. The one real practice that is really important for them is *DHIKR*.” It was here that Merton saw the similarity between the Sufi method of prayer and the Eastern monks’ hesychastic prayer related to breathing. The Sufis developed *DHIKR* (remembrance or recollection) connected with some sort of breath control. One of the Sufis expressed the idea that the breaths are counted, and every time one breathes out in recollecting (*DHIKR*) the Lord, the breath is connected with Him. As Merton explained it to the novices, the breathing was related to the recitation of the *SHAHADAH* or witness that there is no god except God. In one of his humorous notations he suggested that they not invoke aloud the name of *ALLAH* or he would get fired for having all the novices pray to *ALLAH*. He said it was perfectly all right to pray the first part of the *SHAHADAH* that “there is no god except God.”

Merton explained to the novices that the method of learning *DHIKR* was for the disciple to sit before his Sufi master and then they start breathing rhythmically together. The disciple follows the master and starts saying the *SHAHADAH* as he exhales: “*LA ALA ILA ALLAH*.” This becomes a total renunciation of everything except God. In this process the disciple concentrates on what is happening. He thinks: “I want nothing, I love nothing, I seek nothing but God.” The exhaling breath turns everything out, and then he breathes in love, desire and total concentration on God. The aim is for the whole person to be completely centered on God. Merton commented: “This is actually a beautiful way to pray.” He suggests that a Christian could go through the same experience using the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner.” To him the breathing and aim were both a help in prayer.

Because of Merton’s expressed interest in al-Junayd (d. Baghdad 910), I will close these comments with one of his prayers:

Turn Thy goodness and mercy toward all faithful men and women who have departed this life in Thy true faith. Be Thou a protector, guardian and defender to them and to us. Forgive the living the evil which they have done and receive their penance. Have mercy upon the transgressors, help the oppressed, heal the sick. Allow us and them to turn to Thee in sincere repentance, such as is pleasing in Thy sight. Be Thou, O God, a protector, guardian, defender and helper to those who fight in Thy holy war. Give them a mighty victory over their enemies . . . Prosper the rulers and their subjects. To those whom Thou hast set in authority over the faithful give support and lasting joy. Prosper their lives and the lives of those over whom they rule. Show them grace, goodness and mercy and bestow lasting joy upon us and them. Prevent the shedding of blood, let discord and insurrection come to an end and protect us from severe trials. In Thy mercy Thou has promised us this, Thou who art all knowing and all powerful. Grant that we may never see the faithful of Islam draw their swords against one another or any dissension reign among the believers. Instead unite them in obedience to Thee and in all those things which bring them closer to Thee, O God, we pray that Thou wouldst lead us to glory and not to humiliation, that Thou wouldst raise us up and not debase us, that Thou wouldst be for us and not against us. Unify for us the course of things, those matters of the earth which are to be a means for us to fulfill our obedience to Thee, and a help in reaching agreement with Thy will; and those things of the next world which are the highest goal of our desire. In Thy providence send us that which is dearest and most pleasing to Thee, O Thou who hearest the voice of all people and knowest that which is hidden, Thou Lord of the heavens.

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8. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart, & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 294.