

Islam in Alaska: Sufi Material in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*

By Bonnie Thurston

The talks Thomas Merton gave in Alaska are collected in the book *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (1989) edited by Robert Daggy (of blessed memory). They are a compendium of his mature thought.¹ The eight talks were given in September and early October, 1968, primarily to priests and religious at the Sisters of the Monastery of the Precious Blood in Eagle River, north of Anchorage, and at Providence Hospital, Anchorage. The talks entitled "Prayer, Personalism, and the Spirit," and "Prayer and Conscience" are among the most comprehensive and practical teachings on prayer by Merton. The talk entitled "The Life that Unifies" is a discussion of contemplation in the light of Islamic anthropology, Islam's way of looking at the person. Its two framing ideas come directly from the Sufi tradition. After a word about Merton and Sufism and the context of the Alaska journey, this essay will provide some notes on those ideas.

Merton and Sufism

Largely because of the work of Sidney H. Griffith and Erlinda Paguio and the publication of the volume *Merton and Sufism* by Fons Vitae Press in 1999,² Merton's work in the Sufi tradition is now well known. While Sufism is generally thought of as the mystical tradition of Islam, the term properly refers to the wide range of practices in Islam that further the believer's path to God. The definition of Sufism in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* says "its objective is to gain knowledge of and communion with God through contemplation."³ Sufi teaching stresses the nearness of God ("We created man. We know the promptings of his soul, and are closer to him than his jugular vein" [*Quran* 50:16]⁴), an understanding of that nearness, and the practices that foster openness toward it. Sufism's interest is spiritual experience rather than doctrinal formulation, and its adherents have enriched Islam with some of its most beautiful writing, both in prose and poetry.

Merton apparently became acquainted with Sufism through Jacques Maritain, whom he met in New York in 1939. Maritain urged Louis Massignon, the preeminent French scholar of Islam, to contact Merton. That contact occurred in the summer of 1959 through the American, Herbert Mason, then studying in Paris. By that fall, Merton and Massignon were in correspondence, and it was Massignon who introduced the Pakistani Sufi, Abdul Aziz, to Merton.⁵ Their correspondence, published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*,⁶ is a primary source for the study of Merton's thought on Islam.

In the 1960s Merton was reading widely in the Sufi tradition. He read classic works by Henri Corbin, Martin Lings, Louis Massignon,



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Herbert Mason and Titus Burckhardt. Writing to the Egyptian Aly Abdel Ghani on October 31, 1967 Merton says he is “very familiar with the traditions of Sufism. . . . I have read Avicenna . . . and very much like others such as Ibn-Arabi, Ibn-Abbad . . . the Persian Rumi, etc. I wish I knew Arabic, as I could read more in the original.”⁷ In the early 1960s he reviewed Islamic and Sufi books for Cistercian publications, and between 1965 and 1968 he gave an extended series of conferences to the novices at Gethsemani on Sufism. Writing to Abdul Aziz on April 24, 1968 Merton remarks, “For more than a year now I have been giving weekly talks on Sufism to the monks here” (*HGL* 66-67). There are at least seven poems on Islamic subjects, primarily Sufi saints, in *The Collected Poems*⁸ and the letters and journals of the 1960s are full of references to Sufism.

Merton in Alaska

In 1968 Merton traveled more than he had since he entered Gethsemani in December, 1941. “Between May 16 and October 15, when he left for Asia, he visited California twice, New Mexico twice, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Alaska” (*TMA* xi). The ostensible reason for this travel was to locate places where he might live a more secluded life as a hermit. This was clearly in his mind as he traveled in Alaska. The trip was much anticipated and is mentioned in his journals on June 7, August 22 and August 26 before he embarks on the journey. Writing to his abbot, Fr. Flavian Burns, on September 25 from Alaska, Merton devotes nearly the whole of the letter to analysis of the potential of Alaska for “ideal solitude” (*TMA* 44-45). In a letter to Fr. Flavian the next day Merton says, “My feeling at present is that Alaska is certainly the ideal place for solitude and the hermit life” (*TMA* 48). In his notebook on September 27 he notes with characteristic hyperbole “it is clear I like Alaska much better than Kentucky & it seems to me that if I am to be a hermit in the U.S., Alaska is probably the place for it” (*TMA* 26).

The Alaska journey was the prelude to the Asian journey which is generally treated as a journey into Buddhism. In fact, the Asian journey also reflected Merton’s interest in Islam. Although its relationship with other Indian religions was never irenic, Islam is one of the major religions of India. The Mogul Empire, itself, lasted from 1526 to 1857. Merton’s *Asian Journal* is full of references to Islam. Scholarly interest has tended to focus on the Asian, and to ignore the Alaskan, journey of Merton. This is a pity because, in particular, the conferences Merton gave in Alaska represent his “mature thought” and are some of his most synthetic teachings on the life of prayer. This brings us to the Alaskan conference that contains the Sufi material, “The Life that Unifies.”

“The Life that Unifies”

“The Life that Unifies,” as printed in *Merton in Alaska* is, according to Naomi Burton, an adaptation of a taped conference (*TMA* 193). The talk was one given on a day of recollection mentioned by Merton in his journal on September 29, 1968: “Late afternoon. Rain. Cold. I got home from preaching the Day of Recollection to (most of) the Sisters of the Dioceses at Providence Hospital. It was good and I was less tired than I expected.”⁹ In my view, the talk is very good, indeed. It is framed by two Sufi concepts: (1) unification that leads to final integration; and (2) the prayer of the heart that leads to the “act of yes.”

(1) Unification Leading to Final Integration: Merton begins by defining “contemplation” as “simple openness to God at every moment, and deep peace” (*TMA* 143). Merton makes the distinction between a contemplative and a “mystic,” a term he thinks “causes a great deal of consternation” (*TMA* 144). Merton suggests that for most contemplatives and monastics an important question is: “How would I define the real aim of my life?” He suspects most would say “love” or “union with God” (*TMA*

145). And that leads him to introduce the first of the Sufi concepts that frame the talk, unification.

He introduces the concept of unification by saying “I know a psychoanalyst who is a Persian Muslim” and then says a few words about the Sufis (*TMA* 146). He returns to his “Persian friend” whose work suggests that psychoanalysis should be “leading people to the highest perfection” which he calls “final integration – a final unification in which the person becomes fully and completely himself as he is intended to be, which is to say, a full and complete lover. . . . When this author speaks of final integration he says that real maturity is for a person to become a mystic. This is what man is made for” (*TMA* 146). Merton then proceeds to speak of what “final integration” might entail using the language of Abraham Maslow (“peak experiences”¹⁰) and an example of “an old Father at Gethsemani” (*TMA* 148).

The Persian Muslim psychoanalyst to whom Merton alludes is A. Reza Arasteh, who was born in Iran in 1927 and educated at the University of Teheran and Louisiana State University. He worked with Erich Fromm and C. G. Jung and wrote extensively on human development from the point of view of the interior or spiritual life. Merton read his two books *Rumi the Persian: Rebirth in Creativity and Love*,¹¹ an analysis of perhaps the greatest of the Sufi poets, and *Final Integration in the Adult Personality*,¹² which Merton reviewed and which appears in the essay “Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy” in *Contemplation in a World of Action*.¹³ From 1965 Merton corresponded with Arasteh (see *HGL* 40-43).

In a book written after Merton’s death, *Growth to Selfhood: The Sufi Contribution to Islam* (1980), Arasteh summarizes his ideas about human development in light of Sufi literature on inner development.¹⁴ The Sufis, he notes, “analyzed the underlying realities of religion, philosophy and science and unveiled the mysteries of man’s psyche as a means of attaining perfection and certainty. . . . Sufism develops in the individual a process of continual rebirth until he attains real selfhood” (Arasteh, *Growth* ix). Anyone familiar with Merton’s discussion of the true and false self (for example in chapters 4-9 of *New Seeds of Contemplation*¹⁵), will see immediately why Merton was so taken with Arasteh’s work. It made the same sort of distinction between “phenomenal self” (false self) and “cosmic self” (true self or “person”) that Merton had articulated.

Arasteh points out that the Sufis taught that religion was a “useful step toward man’s growth to selfhood” (Arasteh, *Growth* 8). He clearly articulated the variety of aspects of the “phenomenal” or “conventional self” as that which we must be “reborn from” (my phrase). The means by which this is accomplished is prayer, “the instrument of detaching one’s self from social reality and relating one’s self to human destiny” (Arasteh, *Growth* 21). Arasteh believes that prayer is the path to human growth and development and understood Merton as an ally in this thinking. He wrote,

the late Thomas Merton, who corresponded with me for several years, believed that self-renewal is one of the basic characteristics of Christianity. . . . Merton maintained that self-renewal is the product of an inner evolution which “in its ultimate and most radical significance implies complete self-transcendence and transcendence of the norms and attitudes of any given culture, any merely human society. . . . [the Christian] is bound by the higher law of *love*, which is his freedom itself, directed not merely to the fulfillment of his own will but rather to the transcendent and mysterious purposes of the spirit: i.e. the good of man” (Arasteh, *Growth* 39).

To this quotation from a letter Merton wrote him, Arasteh adds, “Any Sufi would go along with this statement of Merton’s” (Arasteh, *Growth* 39).

According to Arasteh, the three stages of inner development are personification, deification and unification. Personification is becoming one's cultural self through identification with a spiritual teacher. One Sufi disciple put it this way, "O Master! Whether I look with my physical organs or with my spiritual sight, always it is you that I see!" (Arasteh, *Growth* 94). Deification involves one's identification with God. This was most beautifully (and dangerously) articulated by al-Hallaj:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I:
 We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
 If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
 And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both (Arasteh, *Growth* 97).

The highest stage of development, unification, is "the recognition of deification in everything" (Arasteh, *Growth* 98). This is the logical end of Islam's radical monotheism and a basic Sufi concept: there is nothing but God, a point discussed in Martin Lings' book, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawi*, which Abdul Aziz sent Merton and which Merton read with great enthusiasm.¹⁶ In unification, then, one discovers that he or she "exists within the realm of the beloved" (Arasteh, *Growth* 98). This is exactly the first point that Merton is making in his Alaskan talk: final integration is, quoting Merton, "final unification of the person in love . . . that takes him beyond the limits of himself. . . . This final integration and unification of man in love is what we are really looking for" (*TMA* 147). "[T]he real meaning of our life is to develop people who really love God and who radiate love" (*TMA* 149).

So the introductory idea of the talk "The Life that Unifies" takes as its opening gambit a point of Sufi psychology: that people are made to develop God-ward; the unification of the human person is not so much manifested in psychic health (although that is a good end), as in love for God and other that takes one beyond the narrow confines of the "self." Merton's talk gives several examples of what this might look like and then, at the end of the talk, he returns to Sufism when he speaks of the heart.

(2) The Prayer of the Heart that Leads to the Act of "Yes": Sufism, he notes "looks at man as a heart and a spirit and as a secret, and the secret is the deepest part. The secret of man is God's secret; therefore, it is in God. My secret is God's innermost knowledge of me, which He alone possesses. . . . Sufism develops the heart. . . . The Sufis have ways of learning to pray so that you are really praying in the heart, from the heart" (*TMA* 153). Certainly the heart is not an unknown concept in Christianity. In biblical cosmology, "heart" is a metaphor for the whole person, his or her deepest and most authentic self. It is not so much the seat of the emotions, although it is that, as it is of the will and intellect, "knowing" in a very full sense.¹⁷ Indeed, Merton says this "very ancient Biblical concept . . . is carried over from Jewish thought into monasticism" (*TMA* 153).

Merton certainly encountered the concept of the heart in a number of Sufi sources; it is fundamental to Sufi anthropology. Among his miscellaneous papers, for example, is the essay "A Treatise on the Heart" by Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi which ran in four issues of *The Muslim World* in 1961. The "heart" appears frequently in Martin Lings' book on Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawi which describes the heart as the "throne of the intellect" "which is to the soul what the corporeal heart is to the body" (Lings 40). Baidawi, author of widely read Quranic commentaries, notes that "other-worldly realities are perceived first by the Heart" (Lings 40). For the Sufi the heart "is the point where the human self ends and the Transcendent Self begins" (Lings 40). Lings' book is largely devoted to the Shaikh's teaching on prayer of the heart, "the centre from which one's deepest worship springs"

(Lings 111). “[T]he deeper the centre, the nearer it will be to the Heart, which is the faculty of synthesis” (Lings 111). The invocation of the name of God – the prayer form of the *dhikr*, defined in Merton’s *Asian Journal* as “the discipline of repeatedly mentioning the name of God” (AJ 372), “is a cry from the Heart, or from near to the heart” (Lings 111). The salient point here is that Merton is speaking about “The Life that Unifies,” of unification as the highest development of the inner person. This happens precisely *in* the heart, “the faculty of synthesis,” of “together-bringing.”

Merton closes the talk by describing the “inmost secret” of the human person, “the secret of man in God himself. This is a very, very deep concept of man, and someday I hope to study these texts further and write more about it because it is one of the deepest and best concepts that I have come across in a long time” (TMA 153-54). Following this, Merton says:

the Sufis have this beautiful development of what this secret really is: it is the word “yes” or the act of “yes.” It is the secret affirmation which God places in my heart, a “yes” to Him. And that is God’s secret. He knows my “yes” even when I am not saying it. My destiny in life – my final integration – is to uncover this “yes” so that my life is totally and completely a “yes” to God, a complete assent to God (TMA 154).

Much earlier, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton had said, “God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself” (NSC 37). Merton had long understood that the most authentic core of personhood is God within. He wrote in *New Seeds*:

There exists some point at which I can meet God in a real and experimental contact with His infinite actuality. This is the “place” of God, His sanctuary – it is the point where my contingent being depends upon His love. Within myself is a metaphorical apex of existence at which I am held in being by my Creator (NSC 37).

As does Sufi literature, Merton speaks of being “true to the concept that God utters in me” (NSC 37). The same basic idea also appears in *Thoughts in Solitude* where Merton writes

[God’s] presence is present in my own presence. If I am, then He is. And in knowing that I am, if I penetrate to the depths of my own existence and my own present reality, the indefinable “am” that is myself in its deepest roots, then through this deep center I pass into the infinite “I Am” which is the very Name of the Almighty. My knowledge of myself in silence . . . opens out into the silence and “subjectivity” of God’s own self.¹⁸

This passage moves into a prayer in which Merton says “You have called me forth out of yourself because You love me in yourself, and I am a transient expression of Your inexhaustible and eternal reality” (TS 71). Merton found this same idea, that God speaks the Divine Self in the heart of each person, and the person’s most authentic self is found in saying “yes” to that utterance, refined and articulated in the Sufi tradition of Islam. As Merton said in *Thoughts in Solitude*, “My life is a listening, [God’s] is a speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond” (TS 74).

Writing to Abdul Aziz on June 28, 1964, Merton remarked, “the ultimate destiny of each individual person is a matter of his personal response to the truth and to the manifestation of God’s will to him” (HGL 58). This will is to be found in the deepest center of the human person, what the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition calls the heart. In the “unified life,” one has set aside all that divides one from the heart and lives from this center which is really the Divine Spark within. Final integration is precisely “simple openness to God at every moment” (TMA 143), the recognition of and affirmation of God within. The contemplative life, Merton concludes, “is the inner ‘yes’ itself. . . . Deep in our hearts

is the most profound meaning of our personality, which is that we say ‘yes’ to God, and the spark is always there. All we need to do is to turn towards it and let it become a flame” (*TMA* 154).

Merton never had the opportunity to write more about this “very, very deep concept” of the human person that was articulated in Sufism: that the goal of human development is to say “yes” to God in the heart, the “yes” which God has already uttered there. What strikes me is that in one of the last religious conferences he gave before he left for Asia, one which articulates some of his most synthetic thinking on prayer and personhood, he relied so heavily on Sufi concepts. Ever the prophet, Merton had turned to the Islamic world from which his own adopted country had turned its face. In my view, this fact makes his untimely death less than three months after he gave this talk even more tragic. Perhaps had God granted Merton to remain with us, we should have been able to appreciate more fully the beauties of Islamic spirituality, been spared the sin of demonizing it and destroying countries and cultures in which it flourishes.

1. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989); subsequent references will be cited as “TMA” parenthetically in the text.
2. Rob Baker and Gray Henry eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999); subsequent references will be cited as “Baker & Henry” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 405; subsequent references will be cited as “AJ” parenthetically in the text.
4. Quranic quotations in this essay are from *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (New York: Penguin, 1999).
5. For a full discussion of Merton and Massignon see Sidney H. Griffith, “Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam” in Baker and Henry, 51-78; the article first appeared in *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) 151-72.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 43-67; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 335.
8. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977): “Tomb Cover of Imam Riza” (985-86); “The Moslems’ Angel of Death” (307-308); “Song for the Death of Averroës” (325-29); “Readings from Ibn Abbad” (745-52); “East with ibn Battuta” (538-44); “Lubnan” (614); and “The Night of Destiny” (634-35).
9. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 195.
10. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964).
11. A. Reza Arasteh, *Rumi the Persian: Rebirth in Creativity and Love* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965).
12. A. Reza Arasteh, *Final Integration in the Adult Personality: A Measure for Health, Social Change, and Leadership* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).
13. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 205-17; reprinted in Baker & Henry 266-77.
14. A. Reza Arasteh, *Growth to Selfhood: The Sufi Contribution to Islam* (London/New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1980/90); subsequent references will be cited as “Arasteh, Growth” parenthetically in the text.
15. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 21-69; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
16. Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); subsequent references will be cited as “Lings” parenthetically in the text.
17. Particularly helpful introductions to the “hear” in Christian tradition are found in Marcus Borg’s book *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 113-15, and in Bro. David Steindl-Rast’s *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 26-38.
18. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 70; subsequent references will be cited as “TS” parenthetically in the text.