

# The Merton-Aziz Letters: An Interfaith Journey toward Unity

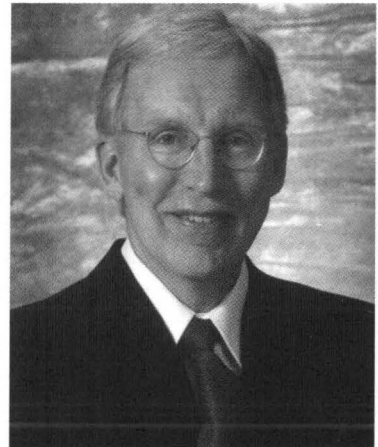
By William Apel

In her insightful introduction to the *Essential Writings* of Thomas Merton, Christine Bochen asserts that Merton had a “vocation to unity.”<sup>1</sup> Evidence of this vocation can be seen in much of Merton’s life and writings – especially in the last decade of his life. This paper’s intent is to explore this “vocation to unity” in light of the fascinating exchange of letters between Merton, the Christian, and Abdul Aziz, the Muslim. The tone and thrust of this correspondence might be given its proper spiritual context by reference to a story regarding Zalman Schachter, an American rabbi with whom Merton also corresponded.<sup>2</sup> In this case, the story is about Rabbi Schachter and another great spiritual master of the twentieth century, Howard Thurman – someone whom Schachter talked about with Merton.

On my most recent sabbatical, I went to Boston University and its archives to research the unpublished papers of Howard Thurman. Like Merton he was the author of numerous books, a spiritual guide, poet and social critic. Through his African-American experience his writings explored such universal themes as the self, community, and the search for God. I had one week to work in the archives. All week I looked for something that would draw my research together. I hadn’t found it, whatever it was.

Then, on the very last day, in a last-minute discovery that would have delighted Merton, an hour before I had to leave to catch a plane for the Merton archives at Bellarmine in Kentucky, I found it.

There before me was an unpublished essay about Thurman and his encounter with a rabbi from Massachusetts named Zalman Schachter.<sup>3</sup> Thurman writes that he was about to begin his spring semester class on spiritual disciplines when this young rabbi appeared in his office doorway at Marsh Chapel. This was in the early 1950s and it would have been out of the ordinary for a rabbi to seek to take a course from an African-American Protestant no matter what his national reputation as a religious teacher. After Thurman acknowledged the young man’s presence, without stepping in from the doorway, the rabbi said, “I have come to see if I can stand you, and if you can stand me!” Once this was determined, the rabbi enrolled in Thurman’s course. He did well in the course. His papers, said Thurman, were well-written but unlike those of other students. They were tight, well-reasoned, and very orthodox. After a successful semester, Thurman had thought he had seen the



William Apel

---

**William Apel** is professor of religion at Linfield College in Oregon, where he has also served as chaplain for two decades. A United Methodist minister, he is the author most recently of *Silent Conversations: Reading the Bible in Good Company* (2000), which includes a chapter on Thomas Merton.

last of his rabbinical student.

Then, it happened again. Standing in the doorway of Thurman's office was the rabbi once again. Again, he did not enter the office but as Thurman came out from behind his desk to greet his student the rabbi fell to his knees and asked Thurman to bless him. This was a part of the spiritual master and student relationship tradition for the orthodox rabbi but was foreign to any experience Thurman had ever had. Thurman reports he remembers offering a prayer although he has no idea of the words he said. Never before had Thurman been asked in such a personal way to be a blessing to another. Indeed, they had become blessings to one another beyond their own religions and cultural milieu. This is exactly what happened in the Merton and Aziz interfaith encounter. They became blessings to one another.

On November 1, 1960 a correspondence began between a Pakistani Muslim civil servant named Abdul Aziz and Thomas Merton which would last until Merton's death in 1968. As Sidney Griffith writes in his excellent essay "As One Spiritual Man to Another," "These letters are rare in that they contain a correspondence between a notable Christian and a practicing Muslim in religious dialogue in modern times. Of course, Merton had long been writing letters to other scholars of Islam, some of them Muslims. But the letters to Abdul Aziz are uniquely personal and religious."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, they were letters of grace in which Merton and Aziz became blessings to each other. They met each other through correspondence at a time when each had a genuine desire to learn from others outside their own religions.

Those who study and learn from Merton should be eternally grateful to Aziz for his probing questions and insights. He caused Merton to think ever more deeply, and personally, about the relation of his spiritual journey as a Trappist to that of the Muslim Aziz and Aziz's lifelong interest in mysticism and the Sufis. Aziz has written of their correspondence: "My correspondence with Thomas Merton was based on 'poverty in spirit,' being humble to learn from each other, without display of any scholarship or erudition. . . . Such correspondence, apart from revealing true feelings, also exudes spiritual fragrance, especially as the holy names of various blessed saints and mystics of Islam and Christianity and their essential teachings have been touched upon therein, apart from the Most Holy Name of Almighty God" (quoted in Griffith 103-104).

What then can be learned from this correspondence based on "poverty in spirit"? Four excerpts from the letters will be used to illustrate some of the lessons of these letters, especially lessons related to Merton's vocation of unity – lessons, I think, which are quite relevant to interfaith encounters at the start of the twenty-first century. First for consideration is a passage from Merton's first letter to Aziz, a quotation which Sidney Griffith also highlights. As one spiritual brother to another, Merton writes to Aziz of a world emptied of God. In a powerful passage, he laments: "The world we live in has become an awful void, a desecrated sanctuary, reflecting outwardly the emptiness and blindness of the hearts of men who have gone crazy with their love for money and power and with pride in their technology. May your work on the Sufi mystics make His Name known and remembered, and open the eyes of men to the light of His truth" (*HGL* 45-46).

Recently, I used this particular passage in several different talks with Christian ecumenical groups in an effort to speak about the "God behind God" to whom Christian mystics and Sufi saints have often pointed. In a world void of this deeper understanding of the Eternal, we do, in fact, abide in "a desecrated sanctuary." As I made this point, one audience member suggested that much of our conflict today is caused by allegiances to the "God in front of God." Settling for the "God in front of

God” creates an idolatry of religion, pitting my God against your God! – a source for division which divides us all. In contradiction to this great divide, Merton and Aziz honored the Holy One who stands behind all institutional formulations of doctrines and dogmas. They knew of a God who exists beyond organized religion. They both had experienced the Reality beyond the rhetoric. This is what Aziz meant when he said that Merton had shared a religious perspective “based on ‘poverty in spirit’” rather than “scholarship or erudition.” Scholarship and erudition were not absent from Merton and Aziz, but in their spiritual quests they sought something deeper: the hidden ground of love (to use Merton’s phrase).

A second passage from the Merton-Aziz letters further illustrates the unitive nature of their encounter. In this passage, Merton attempts to respond to Aziz’s inquiry about why the teaching of the “Doctrine of Trinity” was so essential for Christians. After confessing that he was “perhaps not equal to the task of making clear” what he believed about the Trinity (*HGL* 55), Merton nonetheless pressed forward with remarkable clarity. He wrote Aziz:

Just as you (and I too) speak with reverence of Allah Rahman and Rahim [the Merciful, the Compassionate], so I think you can see that speaking of Father, Son and Holy Ghost does not imply three numerically separate beings. The chief thing that is to be stressed before all else is the transcendent UNITY of God. Now as this unity is beyond all number, it is a unity in which “one” and “three” are not numerically different. Just as Allah remains “one” while being compassionate and merciful, and His compassion and mercy represent Him in different *relations* to the world, so the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are perfectly One, yet represent different relations (*HGL* 56).

In this statement, it is clear that above all else Merton sought to express the unity of God which united him and his spiritual friend Abdul Aziz. Merton does not elude difficult doctrinal issues, but he persists in looking for common ground. Ultimately, there is no such thing as Christianity or Islam for the mystic. There are only Christians and Muslims. People come to know and experience God – not religions. It is in the lives of individuals that the Holy One abides. This is often forgotten when religion replaces life, when belief systems replace God, and the whole affair becomes idolatrous.

A third passage from the correspondence of Merton and Aziz presents a necessary word of caution for interfaith encounters. Aziz had proposed to Merton that he try chanting the passages from the Qur’an on a daily basis. Evidently, he wondered if this were something Merton might want to incorporate into his spiritual disciplines. Merton, on his part, felt he could not do this; he was drawn to the wisdom and beauty of many Qur’anic verses, but because he had not been properly trained in their devotional usages he was reluctant to incorporate them into his prayer life. He wrote to Aziz: “[I]t would not be right for me to chant the Koran daily, as I do not know how this ought to be done properly, and I would not want to simply go in for improvisation in so serious a matter. It seems to me that here again, my task is rather to chant the sacred books of my own tradition, the Psalms, the Prophets, etc., since I know the proper way of doing this. But on the other hand I read the Koran with deep attention and reverence” (*HGL* 61). Aziz fully accepted this response and its logic.

However, he was curious about how a Christian, schooled in the ways of mysticism, did pray. Merton’s response to Aziz’s inquiry is perhaps the best-known segment of the segment of the Merton-Aziz correspondence.

It is with this fourth quotation that I conclude. Merton wrote directly about his prayer life: “I

have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. . . . One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet [Mohammad] as ‘being before God as if you saw Him.’ Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry” (HGL 63-64). On the final analysis, the use of precise images of God in prayer would be “a kind of idolatry” for Merton. It would sidetrack his journey on the way to unity. This is not to say that various ways of imagining God are unimportant, but it is to say that images eventually drop away until there is only God. Words, even the word “God,” give out at this juncture on the road to unity. Here one enters the Void. There is no voice, no image, no vision, only God. It is this “God behind God” that Merton and Aziz shared together.

Those who desire to carry forward this aspect of Merton’s legacy will find the task quite difficult. Far too often, the vocation to unity is blocked by advocates of a “God before God.” In our religions, there continues to be the great Division which divides. However, the Merton-Aziz letters grant a glimpse of a new emerging geography of grace. They point to a unity which unites. This greater path still remains for those willing to walk its challenging terrain. An interfaith journey toward unity is still possible. We know this is so because of witnesses like Thomas Merton and Abdul Aziz. They had become blessings to one another. What greater gift of grace can there be?

1 See Christine M. Bochen, ed., *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 43-49.

2 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) 533-41; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.

3 The unpublished work by Thurman does not identify the rabbi. However, when this paper was presented at the ITMS Eighth General Meeting in June 2003, my fellow presenter, Professor Edward Kaplan of Brandeis University, said he was certain that it was Zalman Schachter. I contacted Reb Zalman and sure enough he confirmed that he was the rabbi in the story. He had never seen what Thurman had written, but he fondly remembered the encounter.

4 Sidney H. Griffith, “As One Spiritual Man to Another: The Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence,” in Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999) 103; subsequent references will be cited as “Griffith” parenthetically in the text.