

# A Heart that Knows God

## Thomas Merton and Sufism

by  
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In Thomas Merton's taped conference on "The Life That Unifies", he speaks of the different facets of the word 'unity': the unity of persons in a community, the unity within oneself – the unification and simplification of one's personal being and the unification of all of one's heart and strivings in the love of God. To all of these, he added the Sufi theme of final integration, which he learned from the psychologist, Reza Arasteh. Merton defines it as "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"<sup>1</sup> According to him, the real meaning of the contemplative life is the development of persons who really love God and keep that fire of love burning and radiating in this world. These are real people who have become fully unified and fully themselves.<sup>2</sup> In his conference with women religious contemplatives, he expressed this thought in terms of God's relation to the contemplative: "God wants to know the divine goodness in us. This is the deep truth, this desire on the part of God to become self-aware in our awareness. The purpose of contemplation... is that God may see the Trinity reflected in us..."<sup>3</sup>

This paper will illustrate how Merton integrated his study of Sufi tradition with his own Christian background. Noting the importance in both traditions of the formation of the heart to know God through the remembrance of God in prayer, he draws deeply from the Sufi concept of the heart as the faculty that knows God. This paper will relate the relationship of the word *qalb* meaning heart, and the term *sirr*, meaning the inmost part of the heart in which God reveals Himself to the ground of one's being or conscience, as discussed in selected writings of Merton.

Louis Massignon, who inspired Merton in the use of the phrase "le point vierge", had written about how Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) perceived the mysticism of the heart. According to this martyr, when the heart is fully uncovered, what remains is the latent personality, the implicit consciousness called the *sirr*. For Hallaj and Massignon, the innermost secret heart (*as-sirr*) is "the virgin."<sup>4</sup> This most intimate centre of the heart is called a mystery, in which the creature meets his Creator. Al-Hallaj says, "Our hearts, in their secrecy, are a virgin alone, where no dreamer's dream penetrates . . . the heart where the presence of the Lord penetrates, there to be conceived."<sup>5</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel, the eminent Islamic scholar, cites Abdul Husayn an-Nuri (d. 907), who saw in man four different aspects of the heart: the breast; the heart called *galb*, which is the seat of faith; the part which is connected to

knowledge; and the innermost heart, which is the seat of *tawhid* or unification. The element of *sirr* is often added by the Sufis as the innermost part in which God reveals Himself.<sup>6</sup> The term *sirr-as-sirr* refers to the secret between the infinite and the finite, which is known to God alone. The heart or *galb* is both the organ of intuition and the point of identification with Being. Merton notes this concept of the heart in both his Holographic Journal No 18, 1986-1987 and his conference on "The Life That Unifies". He found it very interesting that in Sufism, man is seen as a heart, a spirit, and as a secret, which 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. It is God's secret knowledge of myself in Him . . . . The heart is the faculty by which man knows God and therefore Sufism develops the heart."<sup>7</sup>

The Orientalist, Martin Lings, writes that when the Quran says, "it is not the eyes that are blind, but the hearts", it refers to the heart as the bodily organ which has access to a higher "heart", namely, the *ruh*, or the spirit. The heart in this sense is used as the faculty which perceives the Transcendent.<sup>8</sup>

Merton says that it is very important to develop "a heart that knows God" by praying in the heart. He calls to mind the Islamic practice of *dhikr*, which is the systematic remembrance or invocation of God's holy name, with the aim of achieving constant awareness of Him. "The Sufis," he says, "have ways of learning to pray so that you are really praying in the heart, from the heart, not just saying words, not just thinking good thoughts or making intentions or acts of the will, but from the heart."<sup>9</sup> Merton's familiarity with the "Jesus Prayer", enabled him to draw similarities with it and *dhikr*. He notes in one of his conferences on Sufism that invoking the name of Jesus is the best, simplest, and most universal kind of prayer. He teaches us that it is important to be aware that our aim is God alone, and that when we breathe in, saying "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God", we want Jesus to be enthroned in our heart by enthroning His name in our heart.<sup>10</sup> In another conference, Merton points out how valuable it is to understand the meaning of the Name of God in prayer, for if I find God, everything else is included.<sup>11</sup>

Merton adds that in Sufism, it is the spirit which loves God: "The spirit is almost the same word as the Biblical word 'spirit' – the breath of life. So man knows God with his heart, but loves God with his life. It is your living self that is an act of constant love for God and this inmost secret of man is that by which he contemplates God, it is the secret of man in God himself."<sup>12</sup>

Merton expressed a desire to study the texts that were related to this Sufi concept of man because he considered it to be one of the deepest and best concepts he had come across in a long time. Although he was never able to fulfill this wish because of his accidental death in Thailand in 1968, we can look at some of the Sufi sources and analyze how he was able to integrate those concepts in his later writings.

The Sufis trace the origin of this faculty for knowing God from God Himself, who is believed to have spoken it to Gabriel and who in turn had spoken it to Muhammad: "It is a secret of my secret. I set it in the heart of My servant, and none of my creatures understand it."<sup>13</sup> Another *hadith* has God saying: "The heavens

and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of my believing servant does contain me. Abu Said ibn Abi'l-Khayr (b.967 A.H.) speaks of a divine principle he calls *sirr Allah*, which means the conscience or consciousness of God, which God communicates to the "heart". Whenever a person declares that God is One, his faith in the divine Unity depends on that divine principle, which is a completely divine act of mercy, belonging to God alone.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars on Islamic mysticism, like Reynold Nicholson and Margaret Smith, relate this divine consciousness to Meister Eckhart's "spark" of the soul.<sup>15</sup> Merton, himself, states in his Holographic Journals, No.18 and No.46, that the *sirr* is Eckhart's "spark" of the soul, the place where one experiences the deepest union with God, the inmost sanctuary where evil is not felt at all. In his correspondence with the Pakistani Sufi, Abdul Aziz, he indicated that the question of *tawhid* or Unity is central. Among the Christian mystics, the Rhenish and Flemish mystics of the 14th century, including Meister Eckhart were the closest to Islam. Their mysticism culminated in the "Godhead" beyond "God", an ascent to perfect and Ultimate Unity beyond the triad in the Unity of the Persons. Merton's attempt to make Christian doctrine comprehensible to Abdul Aziz did not go into complicated theological discussions. Like Aziz, Merton believed that the beginning of all faith and the root of man's existence is faith in One God *Tawhid* and that the work of salvation is entirely God's work.<sup>16</sup>

In his conference on "Prayer and Conscience", he speaks of the deepest meaning of conscience within the context of prayer, Meister Eckhart's "spark" of the soul, and the true self. He relates conscience to the Biblical concept of the heart, which is related to one's identity. It is in the activity of conscience that a person creates his own identity and makes life what it is. In prayer, a person's deepest conscience and consciousness, a mystical conscience and mystical consciousness, are awakened to the reality of man and God working together.<sup>17</sup> In the opening page of his Contemplative Prayer, he quotes Jeremiah 24:7: "I will give them a heart to understand that I am Yahweh, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, when they return to me with all their heart."<sup>18</sup>

In *No Man Is an Island*, Merton writes that a life of prayer enlightens and strengthens our conscience so that "it not only knows and perceives the outward, written precepts of the moral and divine laws, but above all lives God's law in concrete reality by perfect and continual union with His holy will."<sup>19</sup> It is in the depths of our conscience that God speaks to man, and man's refusal to open up inside and peer into those depths is also a refusal of the invisible God who dwells within.<sup>20</sup> For Merton, the Christian conscience is the self that belongs to Christ. When one lives and prays in union with Christ, he acquires a deep consciousness that God and man and all things are involved in one love.<sup>21</sup>

In his Holographic Journal, No.18, Merton notes that in Sufism, all humanity is committed or engaged in a primordial "yes" to God. In the inner secret of the heart is also found each individual's covenant or *mitaq* with God. This personal "yes" is the foundation of conscience. It is an act of God in man, in which

man surrenders himself totally to God to appropriate this divine act. Merton says that this is our true self. Our choice is to say "no" and be outside God and fall into nothingness or to say "yes" and fully become a person lost in God. The Sufis trace this primordial "yes" to God's addressing humanity in Adam when he asks: "Am I not your God?" and they responded: "Yes, we witness it."<sup>22</sup>

In the conclusion of his conference on "The Life That Unifies", Merton writes that this secret affirmation God placed in man's heart is contained in the word "yes" and the act of "yes" to Him. He says: "This is God's secret. He knows my "yes" even when I am not saying it. My destiny in life is to uncover this "yes" so that my life is totally and completely a "yes" to God, a complete assent to God." The contemplative life is the real response, the inner "yes" for each person<sup>23</sup>

In his essay "Learning to Live", he considers the goal of university and monastic education as the activation of this "spark". "It means discovering the ground of one's personality, and realizing the light and wisdom of God within oneself, and recognizing God in everything. It is a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation."<sup>24</sup> He says that the deepest meaning of our personality is in our hearts where the spark resides. All we need to do is to turn towards it and let it become a flame.

In an informal talk he gave in Calcutta in October 1968, Merton discussed the relationship of his marginal life as a monk to God as the Ultimate Reality. Persons like him have been called by God to pierce through the irrelevance of their life in the world, and to discover relevance in God. He spoke of communion as the deepest level of communication because it is beyond words and beyond concepts. It is the discovery of an older unity in which all are already one. He remarked that persons must recover their original unity, because what they have to be is what they are.<sup>25</sup>

The extent to which Merton's thought may be related to the Sufi doctrine of union may be gleaned from some sayings of the Sufis themselves. For them, union means acquiring an interior vision in which they see and listen to God alone. Al-Nuri says: "Union is the revelation of the heart and the contemplation of the conscience."<sup>26</sup> Another Sufi taught that one attains union when the conscience arrives at the state of oblivion in which only God is adored. Junayd says: "Unification is this, that one should be a figure in the hands of God, a figure over which His decrees pass according as He in His omnipotence determines, and that one should be sunk in the sea of His Unity, self-annihilated and dead alike to the call of mankind to him and his answer to them, absorbed by the reality of the divine Unity in true proximity, and lost to sense and action because God fulfills in him what He hath willed for him, namely that his last state become his first state, and that he should be as he was before he existed."<sup>27</sup>

The expressions "the heart that knows God" and "a heart alive with love" appealed to Merton very much because they express a person's realization of God's innermost knowledge of him, and his own knowledge and love for God. This realization leads to total inner transformation and to unity.

The word *galb* which means heart, is also synonymous with the term *taqallub*, which denotes transformation. The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have said that the hearts of Adam's children are like a single heart between the two fingers of the All-Merciful God. He turns it wherever He desires. Indeed, God is called in many *hadiths* as the "Turner of Hearts" because the Prophet had prayed: "O God, O Turner of Hearts, turn our hearts toward obeying Thee."<sup>25</sup>

Merton's description of his prayer life to Abdul Aziz is given in terms of the Prophet's teaching on how one should pray: "being before God as if you saw Him," adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond comprehension, and realizing Him as all. "My prayer," he said, "tends very much like what you call *fana*. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the centre of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself", this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle . . . my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation . . . [is] a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible."<sup>29</sup>

The martyr, al-Hallaj, whom Merton described as a great saint and mystic, is said to have begun a poem in these words: "I saw my Lord with the eye of the Heart. I said: Who art Thou? He answered: Thou." <sup>30</sup> al-Hallaj adds: "Thy place in my heart is my whole heart, and there is none other than Thou who has any place there."<sup>31</sup>

## Notes and References

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4. Sidney H. Griffith, "Thomas Merton and Louis Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam" in *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990), pp.165-166.
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16. *Thomas Merton in Alaska* p.131. See also *Merton's Holographic Journals. 18 & 45* in the Thomas Merton Studies Centre, and his letter to Abdul Aziz, May 13, 1961 in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. edited by William Shannon (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 49-50, and another letter to Aziz dated June 2, 1963, pp.54-58.
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