

“A Realm of White-Hot Faith:” Thomas Merton on Islam in Spain

Bonnie B. Thurston

Preface

Thomas Merton's first and perhaps most famous book is his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It opens: "On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world."¹ Although one might argue the geo-political boundaries, there is no question that from the moment of his birth, Spain influenced Thomas Merton. He lived his early life on her borders. The Spanish Civil War framed his university career.² Seeing the Picasso exhibition in New York on November 16, 1939 greatly moved him and led to several journal entries.³ Two great citizens of this city, St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross were Merton's life long "spiritual companions." In December, 1939 Merton reflects on Teresa's *The Interior Castle*, and only a few months before he entered Gethsemani he numbered her among "the greatest saints" because she "was at the same time a great contemplative and a great reformer."⁴ In 1951 Merton wrote a (not great) book on John of the Cross, *The Ascent to Truth*,⁵ as well as *Devotions in Honor of Saint John of the Cross* published in 1953.⁶

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 145 ff.

³ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 88 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97, 426.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951).

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Devotions in Honor of Saint John of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Jefferies & Manz, [1953]).

One need not make a case that Spain influenced Merton, or that Islam influenced Spain. From the entrance of Muslims into southern Spain in the spring of 711 A.D., and even after the Reconquista of the 13th to 15th centuries (1492 being an important date for both Spain and the United States!), whether under the Umayyads, the Almoravids or the Almohads, Islamic thought and culture mingled with and enriched Christian Spain because, as one English scholar noted, “the inhabitants of Iberia did not become an Islamic people with their conquest in the early eighth century.”⁷ The native population gradually adopted “the outward manifestation of Arabic culture.”⁸ The Qu’ran teaches “There is no compulsion in matters of religion” (2.256) and “For every nation there is a messenger” (10.47). Especially “people of a book” (a revealed scripture) are “protected people,” *dhimmis*, to Muslims (although some argue that in Al-Andalus the word came to be used only for Jews).⁹ Just as the Islamic conquest did not mark the end of Christian Spain, “the later Christian conquest did not mark the immediate demise of Muslim society.”¹⁰ What resulted from the long association of Christianity and Islam in Spain was one of the richest and most fruitful “hybrid” cultures in all of human history, as material culture, art, architecture, literature, scientific achievements and philosophy in Spain all attest.¹¹ To give a relevant example, one historian asserts the Cistercians were the first to use the Islamic pointed arch in vaulting.¹² For hundreds of years Córdoba was the most civilized city in Europe.¹³ Indeed, as Titus Burckhardt has noted, without the philosophical synthesis achieved

⁷ Brian Catlos, *The Victors and the Vanquished* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ W. Montgomery Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), 19.

¹⁰ Catlos, *Victors and Vanquished*, 2.

¹¹ See, for example, Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).

¹² Titus Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 140.

¹³ See, for example, Robert Hillenbrand, “The Ornament of the World’: Medieval Cordoba as a Cultural Center,” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 112-35.

here, “the intellectual flowering of the Christian Middle Ages would have been inconceivable.”¹⁴ In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton acknowledged the influence of Islam on St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁵

It is not surprising that the rich synthesis of Al-Andalus appealed to Thomas Merton who was, himself, a synthesis and a synthesizer. The product of a New Zealand father and an American mother, he did not become an American citizen until 1951, long after his intellectual and cultural world view was formed in the schools of France and England, in the “romance languages” he mastered. As he matured, he understood synthesis to be his vocation. He wrote, “I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition... found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also... in Asia and in Islam.”¹⁶ He believed a profound freedom characterizes the great monotheistic religions. Islam, he says, gives “a freedom which lifts the believer above the limitations dictated by nature, by race, by society;” the Believer is “set free to travel in a realm of white-hot faith.”¹⁷ Merton saw the result of that freedom and that faith in the synthesis that is Al-Andalus. His most extended meditations on it occur in his poetry.

What I propose to do is, first, to outline the extent of Merton’s acquaintance with Islam and then to introduce two long poems in which he treats some of the brightest stars in the spiritual pantheon of “Moorish Spain”: Ibn Rushd (Averroës), Ibn Arabi, and Ibn Abbad.

Thomas Merton’s Knowledge of Islam

That Merton read widely in Islamic sources is well documented. When exactly his interest arose is less easy to discern. Sidney Griffith notes that Maritain had urged Louis Massignon to

¹⁴ Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, 129.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 184-89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

visit Merton in the early 1950's. The two did not communicate until the summer of 1959. In a sense they were brought together by St. John of the Cross. An American doing research in Paris, Herbert Mason, wrote to Merton about his work on St. John. (Remember Merton wrote *The Ascent to Truth* on St. John in 1951.) In a September 3, 1959 letter to Mason, Merton mentions the Sufi mystic and martyr, al-Hallaj, indicating he was already studying Islam.¹⁸ A correspondence ensued in which Mason praised Massignon to Merton, and soon those two were in correspondence.¹⁹ Griffith correctly notes "the writings of Massignon on Islam and other subjects exerted a considerable influence on Merton's thinking in the 1960s."²⁰ Massignon became for Merton a major source of information about, and contacts within, the Islamic world. One important example of this will have to suffice.

When Herbert Mason visited Merton at Gethsemani in August, 1960 Merton had read Massignon's book *La Passion d'al-Hallaj*. Al-Hallaj, martyred for his extraordinary expression of the existential consequence of radical monotheism, had been the subject of Massignon's Sorbonne dissertation, and his work "revolutionized the way scholars looked at Islam."²¹ Mason reported that Merton spoke "of the far-reaching effect this book had on his life... in helping turn his attention toward the East."²² Sidney Griffith makes a convincing case that from Massignon Merton gleaned the phrase *le point vierge*, used to such effect in the explanation of his "4th and Walnut" experience in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.²³ The term originated in the mystical psychology of Islam to describe the heart's "virgin point," "the

¹⁸ *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 264.

¹⁹ Sidney H. Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," in *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story*, eds., Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 58-59 and 53. See also Herbert Mason, "Merton and Massignon," *The Muslim World* 59 (1969): 317-18.

²⁰ Griffith, "Challenge," 53.

²¹ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 275.

²² Griffith, "Challenge," 62.

²³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 140-42.

apophatic point of the mystic's deep knowledge of God."²⁴ In reading Massignon, Merton picked up the phrase, and the concept it communicated, and used it several times in *Conjectures* and in his Asian journals.²⁵

It was Massignon who encouraged the Pakistani, Abdul Aziz (who had read Merton's *The Ascent to Truth* in 1952),²⁶ to write to Merton, leading the monk to quip "I am being drawn into Louis' Moslem [*sic*] circle after all."²⁷ In Aziz Merton met and dialogued with a living Sufi. The correspondence with Aziz was friendly, detailed and extensive; seventeen letters from Merton exist, fifteen published in *The Hidden Ground of Love* and two unpublished. Sixteen of Aziz's letters exist, but to my knowledge are not yet in print.²⁸ Like Massignon, Aziz introduced Merton to Islamic sources. For example, in his journal on May 3, 1961 Merton records Aziz "sent some books on Islam" including a "volume on Sufism by one Titus Burckhardt, of whom I had not yet heard. Certainly the very finest thing on the subject I have yet touched."²⁹ A letter to Aziz contains Merton's only explicit description of his prayer practice in the hermitage.³⁰ As Sidney Griffith attests, the exchange of letters, which was so important to Merton's knowledge of Islam in Spain, can "be read as a long dialogue on Sufism and Christian mysticism."³¹ "From the perspective of interreligious dialogue on an experiential basis, particularly between a Muslim and a Christian, the Merton/Abdul Aziz correspondence is still unique."³²

In the Aziz letters Merton makes frequent reference to his study of Islam, and particularly Sufism. From them we know he

²⁴ Griffith, "Challenge," 65.

²⁵ For a full discussion of this matter see Griffith, "Challenge," 63-68.

²⁶ *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 43.

²⁷ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 269.

²⁸ Sidney H. Griffith, "'As One Spiritual Man to Another': The Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence," in *Merton and Sufism*, 103 and 123, n. 11.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 115.

³⁰ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 62-64.

³¹ Griffith, "Spiritual Man," 115.

³² *Ibid.*, 122.

wrote reviews of serious books on Islam. Eight reviews were prepared for *Collectanea Cisterciensia*; four appeared in number 27, 1965; four were to have appeared in number 29, 1967, and are now in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky.³³ In December, 1965 Merton wrote, "I will shortly be lecturing on Sufism to the novices and young monks here"³⁴ which, in fact, he did off and on for several years. While these lectures are available on audio tape,³⁵ they are disappointing. Abdul Aziz was "shocked and disappointed about Merton's burlesque/parody of Sufism in a garbled, hotch-potch version."³⁶ Merton's journal entry of November 12, 1967 notes "Still talking on Sufism,"³⁷ and in May, 1968 he reports giving a talk on Sufism at Our Lady of the Redwoods in California.³⁸

Merton scholars were slower to focus on his studies of Islam than of Buddhism in part because he did not write a distinct book on the subject.³⁹ However his published works include much Islamic material. Certainly Merton found poetic inspiration in Islam. There are seven poems on Islamic subjects in *The Collected Poems*, and *Raids on the Unspeakable* contains a set of poems entitled "Readings from Ibn Abbad."⁴⁰ *Conjectures*, which Merton prepared for publication, as well as the journals which were edited after his death, make frequent reference to Islam. "The Meaning of Malcolm X" in *Faith and Violence*⁴¹ outlines Islamic influences on Malcolm and Arab involvement in the slave trade.

³³ All are published in Appendix B of *Merton and Sufism*, 306-18.

³⁴ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 41.

³⁵ These lectures are available from Credence Communications, Kansas City, MO.

³⁶ Quoted in Griffith, "Spiritual Man," 121.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁹ In my view, the indexes of the letters and journals reflect the interests of the indexers and are not often complete in reference to Islamic subjects.

⁴⁰ See Erlinda Paguio, "Islamic Themes in Merton's Poetry," in *Merton and Sufism*, 89-100 and Bonnie Thurston, "Some Reflections on Merton's Islamic Poems," in *Thomas Merton: The World in My Bloodstream*, ed. Angus Stuart (Abergavenny, Wales: Three Peaks Press, 2004), 40-53.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 182-88.

Merton's letters reflect extensive contact with Muslims and Islamic ideas. There are letters to Reza Arasteh (an Iranian-American psychologist), Martin Lings (Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum), Louis Massignon, Herbert Mason and Abdul Aziz who introduced him to Titus Burckhardt's classic work on Sufism. In a letter to the Egyptian Aly Abdel Ghani on October 31, 1967 Merton summarized his acquaintance with Islam: "I am very familiar with the traditions of Sufism, and have... read much of the Holy Qur'an. I have read Avicenna... and very much like others, such as Ibn-Arabi, Ibn-Abbad... Rumi, etc. I wish I knew Arabic, as I could read more in the original."⁴² Lack of Arabic did not hinder Merton's communication with an Algerian Sufi, Sidi Abdesalam, whose visit to Gethsemani in late October, 1966 profoundly affected him. Merton wrote in his journal, "Before he came I had a sense that he came as a messenger from God. He too had this sense."⁴³

Islamic figures mentioned by Merton represent a broad spectrum of classical Islamic thought and include Ibn Abbad, al-Hallaj, Jelaluddin Rumi, Imam Riza, al Ghazali, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Arabi, al-Alawi, al-Junayd, al-Hujwiri and Ibn Rushd (Averroës). Four of these are Muslims of the *Maghreb*.⁴⁴ Merton's reading is primarily in the mystical and philosophical traditions of Islam which flowered in Spain. He studied the best Islamic scholars of the mid-twentieth century including A. Reza Arasteh, Arthur Arberry, Titus Burckhardt, Henry Corbin, Martin Lings, Louis Massignon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Paul Nwiya, Cyprien Rice, and Frithoj Schuon. Furthermore, Merton's studies focused on central Islamic concepts and practices: the unity of God (*Tawhid*), the revelation of God's word (*Tanzil*), the struggle to conform the human will to the will of God (*Jihad al-Akhbar*), the Sufi path (*Tariq*) with its solitary retreats (*Khalwah*) and the prayer

⁴² Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 335.

⁴³ See Merton's account of the visit in Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 152-54, 156, entries for October 31 and November 1, 1966, and Nicole Abadie, "The Visit of Sidi Abdeslam to Gethsemani," in *Merton and Sufism*, 182-92.

⁴⁴ The *Maghreb* generally refers to the area of North Africa from the Atlas Mountains to the Mediterranean Sea, including Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

practice of remembrance (*Dhikr*) which is a primary means of achieving the passing away of the ego (*Fana*).

Perhaps it is because his sources were so good and his focus was on central concepts that Merton's understanding of Islam was so deep and affecting. His thinking about this great and beautiful religion was not colored by the polemics that characterize our recent unhappy history. Already in 1960 Merton tells Massignon "I am also fasting for peace and for Christian-Moslem [*sic*] understanding,"⁴⁵ a practice we might all imitate. However, it is fair to ask why he was so taken by Islam and by Sufism in particular.

One attraction was undoubtedly stylistic. Merton quipped to his novices that "One Sufi did everything to be as shocking to the Ulema [community] as possible. They have a tendency to break all of the laws from A to Z down as a way of hiding their inner life."⁴⁶ Like most religions, Islam functions on two primary levels, the outward (*shari'a*) and the inward (*tariqa*). Sufism has been described as the spokes from the circumference of the circle to its center. A goal of its practice is to attain *haqiqa* (inner truth) by which the Sufi is outwardly conforming but inwardly free,⁴⁷ an attitude Merton clearly coveted for himself and his novices. Merton approved of what he called the Sufi "beatnik style," but it was the way Sufis described religious experience that was his real concern.

Commenting on al-Arabi and al-Hujwiri in *Conjectures* Merton describes the "nonlogical logic of mysticism and of direct experience, expressed in statements which do not agree and which nevertheless finally explode into a meaning that can be seized if one has some experience of what is being said."⁴⁸ For Merton Sufism was "essence without form,"⁴⁹ a quotation from al-Hujwiri which Merton copied into his journal on December 12, 1961.⁵⁰ As does Zen Buddhism, Sufism seeks direct, essential religious experience liberated from doctrinal formulation. As did Buddhism,

⁴⁵ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 281.

⁴⁶ From a transcription of Merton's Sufi lectures made by Burton B. Thurston, Sr.

⁴⁷ William Stoddart, *Sufism* (New York: Paragon House, 1986), 20 and 41.

⁴⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 191.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 186.

Islam gave Merton another way of articulating spiritual experience. His study of Islam and of Sufism provided further insight into the life of prayer that the One God makes available to all who seek. Merton knew the reality expressed by the Qur'anic verse which is so central to Islamic theology and to the Sufi path: "Wheresoe'er ye turn, there is the Face of God" (2.115).

The place to which I now invite us to turn to see God's Face is to the thought of representative Islamic personalities of Spain and the *Maghreb* as Merton treats them in two longer poems.

"Song for the Death of Averroës"

In 1963 Merton published the very strong (and not all of them were!) collection of poems, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, which contains a series of three prose-poems entitled "Song for the Death of Averroës." It opens with the introductory line "from Ibn Al Arabi, after the Spanish version of Asín Palacios."⁵¹ Miguel Asín Palacios (1871-1944), "the most distinguished student of the mysticism of Islamic Spain,"⁵² translated many Islamic works from Arabic into Spanish and provides further evidence of the excellence of Merton's Islamic source material. Merton's poem represents almost verbatim accounts of the three encounters of Ibn Arabi with Averroës.

Ibn Rushd, whom the poem calls "the wise Averroës, son of Aristotle,"⁵³ was born in the jewel city of Córdoba in 1126 and died in 1198 in Marrakesh; his body was subsequently brought to Córdoba for burial. In *Moorish Culture in Spain*, Titus Burckhardt calls Averroës "the most outstanding of the Arab philosophers," the last and "purest Aristotelian of all the Islamic philosophers."⁵⁴ Watt says that "with Averroës, philosophy reached its highwater mark in Islamic Spain."⁵⁵ In the long tradition of Avicenna (Ibn

⁵¹ *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 325.

⁵² Quotation from Watt, *History of Islamic Spain*, 143. See, for example, *El Islam Cristianizado, Estudio del "Sufismo" a Través de las Obras de Abenarabi de Murcia* (Madrid: Plutarco, 1931).

⁵³ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 325.

⁵⁴ Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, 145.

⁵⁵ Watt, *History of Islamic Spain*, 142.

Sina, d. 1037, whose influence on Meister Eckhart Merton noted⁵⁶) and other Islamic thinkers who forged the synthesis of Islamic theology and Aristotelian philosophy, Averroës' work was revered in his own day as well as subsequently. Watt believes Averroës' most important philosophical work "is contained in the commentaries he wrote on... Aristotle." "One of the great merits of Averroës was... to recover the true Aristotle and to transmit his thought to Europe."⁵⁷ A rationalist who sought to reconcile religion and philosophy (see Averroës' *The Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*), Averroës noted three types of "men": the largest group were those who were receptive to ideas expressed in concrete terms, then those amenable to persuasion, and, finally, the rarest type, those convinced by conclusive evidence.⁵⁸ Notice that Averroës categorizes people by "rationality type."

In contrast, Ibn Arabi is perhaps the best example of "the extraordinary burgeoning of mysticism in twelfth century Andalusia."⁵⁹ Born in 1165 in Murcia, "Ibn Arabi was... one of those whose spiritual development occurs spontaneously, without the intervention of any living earthly guide."⁶⁰ Of the Zahiri school and a disciple of two female Sufi masters, Ibn Arabi's primary spiritual guide was an inner light by which he felt himself specially illumined.⁶¹ Considered a heretic by some Muslims, defended by others, Al Arabi "held that all Being is essentially one, as it all is a manifestation of the divine substance."⁶² He wrote: "knowledge of mystical states can only be had by actual experience, nor can the reason of man define it, nor arrive at any cognizance of it by deduction."⁶³ For him it is the imagination and not reason that connects human beings and Reality. Al Arabi, known also as Ibn

⁵⁶ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 49.

⁵⁷ Watt, *History of Islamic Spain*, 140.

⁵⁸ Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, 142.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁰ Claude Addas, "Andalusi Mysticism and the Rise of Ibn Arabi," in Jayyusi, *Legacy of Muslim Spain*, 910.

⁶¹ H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953), 146.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Quoted in *Ibn Al Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. and ed. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 25.

Aflaton (son of Plato), traveled extensively in the Islamic world and wrote “an almost unbelievably large number of works about the Sufi doctrine and spiritual path. More than 800 writings are attributed to him.”⁶⁴ Unfortunately much of his work is not yet available in European languages. He died in Damascus in 1240.

Writing in the magazine *Sufi*, Terry Graham notes that Merton’s discovery of Ibn Arabi, “who bridged the domains of mysticism and philosophy, had a special impact on him, and he took an avid interest in the Spanish Sufis.”⁶⁵ We know from his letter to Abdul Aziz on September 24, 1961 that Merton was reading Henry Corbin’s book on Ibn Arabi which he felt was “going to be very important for me... This is an aspect of mysticism that I have not studied so much.”⁶⁶ On November 7, 1961 Merton copied what he called this “sublime theory of prayer of Ibn al’Arabi” into his journal: “I am known by no one but thee, just as thou existest only by Me. He who knows thee, knows Me – although no one knows Me. And thus thou also art known to no one.”⁶⁷

Merton refers to Al Arabi at least twice in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The first of those references is a key to the poem sequence:

St. Thomas speaks of the anguish, the *angustia* (the pain and frustration caused by confinement within limitations), which he sensed in the *praeclara ingenia* (brilliant minds) of Averroes and Aristotle, in their not being able to see all the way to the end in their aspiration to truth and happiness. This is remarkably borne out by the story of Averroes’ contact with and interest in the young Sufi mystic, Ibn al’Arabi, and his *angustia* at not being able to grasp what Arabi had seen clearly through a divine gift. It is a poignant story and I made a poem of it.⁶⁸

Al Arabi had three experiences of Averroës. The first meeting was arranged by his father; the second was a vision of Averroës

⁶⁴ Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, 158.

⁶⁵ Terry Graham, “The ‘Strange Subject’: Thomas Merton’s Views of Sufism,” *Sufi* 30 (Summer, 1996): 33.

⁶⁶ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 50. See also the letter to the poet Louis Zukofsky on April 15, 1967 in *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 292.

⁶⁷ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 178-79.

⁶⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 188-89.

which Al Arabi saw in a mystical state of prayer, the third when he attended the funeral rites for Averroës in Córdoba. Merton's poem, in which Al Arabi is the first-person speaker, devotes a section to each encounter. In Ibn Arabi's account of the first meeting, Averroës asks him "What solution have you found as a result of mystical illumination and divine inspiration? Does it agree with what is arrived at by speculative thought?"⁶⁹ In Merton's poem, as in Al Arabi's account, the Sufi answers "yes and no," and Averroës pales, recognizing a profound, non-rational knowing.⁷⁰ As Salieri recognized but could not comprehend Mozart's genius, so Averroës experienced Al Arabi.

Section two of the poem describes Averroës as "an eminent philosopher, dedicated entirely to a life of thought, study and rational investigation." Al Arabi "meets" him a second time "by the mercy / of God... at a time when I was in / ecstasy."⁷¹ Al Arabi sees Averroës "in abstraction, thinking deeply" and says, "There is no way by / which he can be brought into the place where we / others are."⁷² That is, Averroës cannot reach spiritual ecstasy by intellection. In the third encounter, Al Arabi sees Averroës' coffin enter Córdoba balanced on one side of a beast of burden by all the books he had written on the other. He composes two verses which "held the secret of the oc- / casion, the seed of truth, shown to the disciple at the / burial of Averroës."⁷³ "On one side the Master rides: on the other side, his books. / Tell me: his desires, were they at last fulfilled?"⁷⁴

The tension in the poem is between two ways of knowing, the rational way of Averroës and the mystical way of Al Arabi. Epistemology, how we know, is a frequent subject in Islamic theology and philosophy (and was, in fact, one of Averroës' themes).⁷⁵ The 13th-century Persian Sufi, Jelaluddin Rumi, wrote of

⁶⁹ Al Arabi, *Ibn Al Arabi*, 2.

⁷⁰ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 326.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 328.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ See for example Jamal Al-Din Al-Alawi, "The Philosophy of Ibn Rushd," in Jayyusi, *Legacy of Muslim Spain*, 804-29.

“two Kinds of Intelligence... one acquired, / as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts / from books and from what the teacher says,” and “one / already completed and preserved inside you.”⁷⁶ These are the “two kinds” of Averroës and Al Arabi. Erlinda Paguio in her lecture “Thomas Merton on the Sufi Way of Love,” delivered at the 4th General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, provides the best summary of the poem: “Averroës arrived at the truth by reasoning alone, whereas Ibn Arabi experienced direct revelation from God. Averroës’ deep thinking was the veil that prevented him from seeing the things the mystics have seen.”⁷⁷

In the crucible of Islamic Spain, Merton found personified two epistemological approaches: Averroës, the son of Aristotle and the rationalist, and Al Arabi, the son of Plato and the mystic. In fact, just as the older Averroës gave place to the younger Al Arabi, as the philosophic tradition declined in Al-Andalus, the mystical traditions of Sufism took the ascendancy. According to Titus Burckhardt “One might almost say that Moorish philosophy... drowned in the ocean of the Sufi contemplation of God.”⁷⁸ It is a baptism of which Merton might approve, having written in the poem “Two Desert Fathers” in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947):

Words were not made to dress such lightning
And thought cracks under the pressure of that thunder
When your most learned, mad
And immaculate indignation

Sunders with its meteors the darkness of our classic intellection.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *This Longing: Poetry, Teaching, Stories and Letters of Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks and John Moyne (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1988), 36.

⁷⁷ Erlinda Paguio, “Thomas Merton on the Sufi Way of Love,” 4th General Meeting ITMS., St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY, June, 1995, p. 14 of ms. copy kindly shared with me by Ms. Paguio.

⁷⁸ Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, 146.

⁷⁹ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 166.

“Readings from Ibn Abbad”

In 1965 Merton gathered together some material he had written for English and Spanish periodicals between 1960 and 1965, and published them as *Raids on the Unspeakable*. This collection of essays, prose poems and calligraphies is one of Merton's most interesting as its general subject is the arts and religious experience. The book contains another prose poem on an important Andalusian, “Readings from Ibn Abbad,” which is more poetic in form than “Song for the Death of Averroës.” Griffith reports that in 1965 Abdul Aziz sent Merton a book on the life and works of Ibn Abbad of Ronda which contained the French versions of the Sufi's Arabic poems.⁸⁰ Writing to Aziz on November 7, 1965 Merton says, “I am sure that... I spoke of Ibn Abbad, by whom I was very much impressed, and later I even did some adapted versions of his thought, in semi-poetic fashion, based of course on the French version. These will be published next year in a book.”⁸¹

Merton's French sources for Ibn Abbad could not have been better. Fr. Paul Nwyia, S.J. (1925-1980) was an Iraqi native who worked for 25 years on comprehensive studies of Abbad.⁸² Focusing his remarks on spiritual direction in the Sufi tradition, Merton reviewed one of Fr. Nwyia's books for *Collectanea Cisterciensia*. In his article on Abbad in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* Fr. Nwyia calls him the most important mystic writer of the 14th century.⁸³ Asín Palacios, mentioned previously, suggested Abbad's thought influenced one of John of the Cross' central concerns, the Dark Night of the Soul.⁸⁴ Merton knew of this possibility, although in a letter to the Iranian psychologist and scholar of Rumi, Reza Arasteh, Merton said “this hypothesis of influence is very shaky.”⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Griffith, “Spiritual Man,” 119.

⁸¹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 61.

⁸² See *Ibn Abbad de Ronda* (Beirut: Impr. Catholique, 1961) and *Lettres de Direction Spirituelle... par Ibn Abbad de Ronda* (Lettres Orientales de Beyrouth, 7; Beirut: Impr Catholique, 1958).

⁸³ Paul Nwyia, S.J., “Ibn Abbad,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed., B. Lewis et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 1971), III 670-71.

⁸⁴ Miguel Asín Palacios, “Un Precursor Hispanomusulmán de San Juan de al Cruz,” *Al-Andalus* 1 (1933): 7-79.

⁸⁵ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 41. See also his review of Nwyia's book reprinted in *Merton and Sufism*, 314 and Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 141.

Watt has noted that “men born in al-Andalus made important contributions to the growth of the... mystical order of the Shadhiliyya.”⁸⁶ (Parenthetically, these are the mystics “credited with having invented the use of coffee as a way of staying awake during their litanies and vigils. Many mystics... still rejoice in coffee as a useful means of attaining spiritual wakefulness.”⁸⁷) In a differently focused lecture one might draw many biographical and spiritual parallels between Ibn Abbad and Thomas Merton. Ibn Abbad (1332-1390), born in Ronda, was the “most important of these Andalusians who spent their maturity in North Africa,” in his case primarily in Rabat and Fez.⁸⁸ According to a distinguished European scholar of mystical Islam, Annemarie Schimmel, after a period of studying *Sharia* (Qur’anic law), Abbad undertook *khalwa* (a period of solitude and meditation), finally becoming a preacher and *imam* in the famous Qarawiyyin *madrasa* in Fez. He was a silent man who lived a celibate life. He wrote two collections of letters of spiritual direction to explain the fundamentals of mystical spirituality to individuals struggling with specific problems.⁸⁹ Abbad “modestly admits that he never enjoyed real *dhauq*, mystical experience, or rapture,” [pace Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 141] but he was possessed of an “unquestioning faith” and “unshakable certitude.” “He always saw himself as ‘*abd*, a slave who constantly feels his nothingness before God’s majesty.”⁹⁰ “In this... he feels his absolute dependence upon God... and thus is prepared for the highest possible attitude a servant can reach, that of uninterrupted *shukr*, ‘giving thanks,’ ‘rendering grace.’” “Ibn Abbad teaches man to thank God first with his tongue, then with his heart, until his whole being is transformed into gratitude and every moment of life consists of gratitude toward the Lord.”⁹¹ As Erlinda Paguio so elegantly put it, “to be grateful for being able to give

⁸⁶ Watt, *History of Islamic Spain*, 144.

⁸⁷ Annmarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 254.

⁸⁸ Watt, *History of Islamic Spain*, 144.

⁸⁹ From *Ibn ‘Abd of Ronda: Letters on the S f Path*, trans. and ed. John Renard, S.J. (New York: Paulist, 1986), 52.

⁹⁰ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 253.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 253-54.

thanks is to reach the final stage of gratitude.”⁹² In human progress on the path to God, the central concern for Abbad is “to grow in gratitude and in certitude.”⁹³

The ten sections of Merton’s “Readings from Ibn Abbad” have a prose introduction that includes biographical material on Abbad, a note on his possible connection to St. John of the Cross, and reference to Fr. Nwyia’s work. “The purpose of these notes,” Merton writes, “is to share something of an encounter with a rich and fervent religious personality of Islam, in whom the zeal of the Sufis is revealed... there is a mordant, realistic and human quality in the life and doctrine of this contemplative.”⁹⁴ The ten “poems” are culled from contemporary descriptions of Ibn Abbad, and his own sermons and letters. The opening two poems set the context for what follows. The first is a description of Ibn Abbad by a friend who refers to him as “the celebrated preacher,” except for the use of incense (which he loved), an ascetic, one who “above all things... prizes peace / And tranquillity of soul.”⁹⁵ The second poem speaks of Abbad’s burial and his patronage of the Guild of Shoemakers.

Sections 3 to 10 of the poem are gleaned from the writings of Abbad; three deal with the practical realities of being a “servant of God”; two chide persons who put their hands to the Sufi plow and then turned back; three are advice to novices. Sections 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9 most clearly reflect Abbad’s gifts as a spiritual director and are written in a spare, crisp, and incisive style that mirrors Sufi sayings and what, in other contexts, I have called Merton’s “Zen poetry.”⁹⁶ Section 4, “Desolation,” serves as an example both of Merton’s literary style and of the similarities between Abbad’s thought and that of St. John of the Cross.

For the servant of God
Consolation is the place of danger
Where he may be deluded

⁹² Paguio, ms 12.

⁹³ Annemarie Schimmel, Preface to *Ibn Abbad of Ronda: Letters on the Sufi Path*, xiii.

⁹⁴ Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 141.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 142-43.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Bonnie B. Thurston, “Zen in the Eye of Thomas Merton’s Poetry,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 14 (1984): 103-17.

(Accepting only what he sees,
Experiences, or knows)
But desolation is his home:
For in desolation he is seized by God
And entirely taken over into God,
In darkness, in emptiness,
In loss, in death of self.
Then the self is only ashes. Not even ashes!⁹⁷

In section 8, “To a Novice,” Abbad enjoins the novice to thank “Allah / For a mouthful of ashes.”⁹⁸

Merton resonated not only with aspects of the life and character of Abbad, but with his understanding of himself as a spiritual guide, one who, according to John Renard, tried to adapt Islamic traditions to the needs of everyday seekers.⁹⁹ This was Merton’s vocation as Master of Scholastics and Master of Novices at Gethsemani and in his massive epistolary work and his writing for the wider audience of us “everyday seekers.” Whether or not it is accurate that “a mystic such as Ibn Abbad stands out simply because of the spiritual aridity of the age,”¹⁰⁰ he certainly struck Merton as one who “exercised a powerful spiritual influence,”¹⁰¹ one worth making more widely known. Abdul Aziz described Merton’s poem as “excellent renderings” and showed it to Dr. Peter Fernandez “who also greatly admired the smooth flow of your versions.”¹⁰²

Conclusions

All three “Moors” about whom Merton wrote poems were men of profound faith and deep prayer. All were teachers of the

⁹⁷ Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 146.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149. I have always wondered whether the poem “A Messenger from the Horizon” which appears in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963) might have been written with Islamic materials in mind. It has interesting parallels with Section 8 of “Readings from Ibn Abbad.”

⁹⁹ John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 195.

¹⁰⁰ J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 84.

¹⁰¹ Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 141.

¹⁰² Quoted in Griffith, “Spiritual Man,” 119.

young. All were writers. Having had profound experiences of God, in some sense all were seeking to reconcile faith and reason. All were at some point in tension with the “orthodox structures” of their religious communities. In short, all of them had affinities with Merton whose own most profound religious experience as a Christian and a monk were of the liberating and universal implications of the “white-hot faith” of Resurrection. His studies convinced him that, at its best, Islam, too, liberated people and conveyed “a freedom which lifts the believer above the limitations dictated by nature, by race, by society... free to travel in a realm of white-hot faith.”¹⁰³ The world, culture and spiritual attainment of Islam became increasingly important to Merton as he grew into his role as a *shaikh*, a spiritual master. The origin of this interest is found in Merton’s European roots. He was, by his own admission, born in the shadow of a great flowering of Islamic, European and, indeed, human culture: that of Al-Andalus.

There are at least two “white-hot” contemporary issues for which its synthesis, and Merton’s own, can serve as positive examples in this difficult moment. First, we are once again in a “dark age” of warfare between intellect and experience in religious life. It is a fact of intellectual history that Muslim philosophy “had a major impact on the West. By transmitting Greek philosophy to medieval Europe, it influenced the curriculum of its universities and the work of such scholars as Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Roger Bacon.”¹⁰⁴ As a result, within the Islamic tradition itself, “theological schools struggled over the relationship of reason to revelation.”¹⁰⁵ Reacting to the debates between theologians and philosophers, Sufis sought immediate experience of God.

Are we not in this same epistemological dilemma? Isn’t it true that the tension between rationality and revelation as modes of religious knowledge, between hierarchical legalism and personal

¹⁰³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 74.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

spiritual experience continue to characterize our religious environment? The dialogue between these poles of human experience in Al-Andalus provides a model of how fruitful the conversation can be, demonstrates how these potential swords can be beaten into actual plowshares. And the way Thomas Merton created a synthesis of his own, deep religious experience and his wide-ranging intellectual interests, of which Islam is but one example, also shows us a way forward.

Second, we are in a “dark age” in which “other” is often assumed to be “evil,” and cultures not our own are automatically treated with suspicion rather than with interest or compassion. In *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton’s Theology of the Self*, Professor Anne E. Carr speaks of Merton’s interest in the psychological work of Reza Arasteh, Erich Fromm and Victor Frankl, “as well as the mystical theories of Sufism to explore ‘the final and complete maturing of the human psyche on a transcultural level.’”¹⁰⁶ She suggests that Merton’s deep engagement with other religious traditions was a movement toward “transcultural maturity” and “transcultural integration.”¹⁰⁷ Merton’s own “transcultural integration,” Carr suggests, “goes beyond the Christian and monastic culture of his own spiritual formation to include, within his own dialectical perspective, something of the spiritual experience of many cultures.” She continues:

The experience of any religious group or person which cherishes the solitary personal search for rebirth and transformation attracts Merton’s transcultural mind and spirit. And yet he never left the particularity of his own Christian, Catholic, and monastic religious heritage. In that particularity Merton sought to uncover something universal.¹⁰⁸

Without leaving Christianity, indeed by means of its “particularity,” Merton sought the universal. This is what Merton says of himself: “I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I

¹⁰⁶ Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton’s Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 103.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 103 and 107.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and... in Asia and in Islam.”¹⁰⁹ Or again from a July 10, 1964 journal entry: “Literature, contemplative solitude, Latin America, Asia, Zen, Islam, etc., all these things come together in my life. It would be madness for me to attempt to create a monastic life for myself by excluding all these. I would be less a monk.”¹¹⁰ One is reminded of these verses of Ibn Arabi:

My heart can adopt all manner of forms,
It can be a meadow for gazelles, a monastery for monks,
A temple for idols, a Kaaba for pilgrims,
The tablets of the Torah, and the book of the Koran.
My religion is the religion of love, and wheresoever
Its steeds may wander, there will my religion and faith be found.¹¹¹

At the very end of his life, Merton wrote, “I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience.”¹¹² Only transcultural maturity of this sort on the individual level will lead to transcultural integration on the communal level and the sort of human progress which Teilhard de Chardin so carefully articulated.

Perhaps it is overstating my case, but I think one reason Merton gravitated toward Avicenna, Averroës, Ibn Arabi, Ibn Abbad and other Islamic thinkers and Sufi Masters of Spain was precisely that they were, however imperfectly, achieving something of this “transcultural integration.” Paradoxically perhaps, the long period of Islam in Spain can serve as an example to us of how one’s

¹⁰⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 176.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 62.

¹¹¹ Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, 159, and quoted in a slightly different translation in Stoddart, *Sufism*, 51-52.

¹¹² *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds., Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 313.

own religious convictions can be clarified by means of embracing the religion and culture of another, or at least living in relative peace with it. Merton wrote to Aziz on December 26, 1962, "It seems to me that mutual comprehension between Christians and Moslems [*sic*] is something of very vital importance today, and unfortunately it is rare and uncertain, or else subjected to the vagaries of politics."¹¹³

Forty years later, we still "live in troubled and sad times"¹¹⁴ for Islamic-Christian relations. It is but one proof of our personal immaturity and our cultural fragmentation. But Al-Andalus and Thomas Merton can serve as signposts toward another way. "Transcultural maturity" and "transcultural integration": Is this not the goal of conferences like this and the vocation of people like us?

¹¹³ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 53.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.