

## Sufi Musings and Meanderings

Review of  
*Thomas Merton on Sufism* [CDs]  
 Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra  
 Rockville, MD: NowYouKnowMedia 2012  
 (www.NowYouKnowMedia.com)  
 7 CD set / \$169.95

Reviewed by **Bonnie Thurston**

At least since the 1970s, pirated copies of Thomas Merton's late 1960s talks on Sufism to Gethsemani's novices have been in circulation. The previously-sold commercial copies were unedited and of poor audio quality, so the re-issue of the talks with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University was cause for, if not rejoicing, at least optimism. While the technical production and sound of the new release are excellent, I found the Islamic content disappointing. The seven CDs contain fourteen talks: an introduction to the material by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, Ph.D. and thirteen talks by Merton. The first several provide some information about Sufism, but the latter are at best general material on spirituality and at worst meandering reflections on whatever Merton was thinking about or reading at the time.

Fr. Ciorra's introduction begins slowly, but picks up steam and provides adequate orientation to Merton's material. Unfortunately, Arabic proper names and terms are mispronounced both in the introduction and by Merton, making what information there is less clear than it could be. It was telling that Fr. Ciorra quoted popular author Karen Armstrong rather than scholars of Islam. However, he quite correctly and perceptively notes that the key to Merton's talks is "seeking to know God." Honestly, "knowing God" and not "Sufism" is the subject of the collection which, understood as such, is instructive.

Merton's first two talks, "Knowledge of God" and "God in Creation," assert that the basic "name" of God in Islam is "merciful" and provide a meditation on names (God's and ours), reminding us that names reveal a view of reality/creation. Merton summarily explains the fundamental Sufi practice, *dhikr* (remembrance). "The Straight Way" (talk 4), introduces the Five Pillars of Islam as expressions of the will of God for humans. With presentations 5 and 6 ("Patience" and "A Sense of Loss"), Merton seems to lose focus. One hears therein little explicit material on Sufism, but interesting observations on the more general matter of identity.

Talks 7 and 8 treat mystical life and traditions, and with 9 and 10 ("Love of God" and "The Heart"), form the substantive core of the collection. Merton notes that God wants to manifest the

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Divine Self, *wants* to be known. Merton stresses the importance in Sufism of a spiritual guide and provides incisive insights into the difference between intellectual knowledge and “knowledge of” – experiential knowledge – warning of the dangers of systems of meditation and of distractions in terms more general than Islamic. Merton notes that love of God is “central, basic” to Sufi spirituality. Our desire for God, he suggests, is grounded in our very being; thus we do not love a “First Cause,” but a personal God. Merton introduces what was to me the most fascinating idea in his thirteen talks, that Adam’s pact with God was made on behalf of and implicates all of humanity. Merton is most eloquent when he speaks of the heart, the organ that knows God and is the locus of encounter with God and of the secret of identity.

Hereafter, I found the talks meandering and distracted. “Love Speaks in Creatures” (11) and “The Serious Life of Prayer” (12) allude to the spiritual aspiration to *fana* (self-extinction or egolessness), to his Pakistani Sufi friend (Abdul Aziz) and to the work of psychologist A. Reza Arasteh on final integration of human personality. Talk 13, “Awareness of Love in an Awake Heart,” reprises ideas from 7 and 8 on knowing God, and 14 is a disorganized piece focusing on an Anglican priest’s appearances at night clubs. (The priest in question sounded to 1960s me as if it were Fr. Malcolm Boyd, author of the then best-selling *Are You Running with Me Jesus?*)

There is a great deal that is of value in these talks if one approaches them to explore prayer and spirituality in general. Readers of this review will not be surprised that, on these matters, Merton is incisive and stimulating. His careful highlighting of the relevance of his material to monastic life and practice certainly would have edified the original audience (with whom he seems irritated when interrupted with a question or comment). I was surprised by the paucity of clear, substantive material on Sufism, about which Merton knew a good deal, and was distracted by Merton’s disorganization, his tendency to wander from the subject at hand and his ubiquitous use of the verbal tic “see?” More often than one might expect he seemed to “play the crowd” for laughs, which, I regret to report, in at least four instances were at the expense of women. This is particularly disappointing since the talks were given near the times of Merton’s meetings at Gethsemani with the contemplative prioresses, found in *The Springs of Contemplation*. When he does speak of Islamic belief and practice Merton is surprisingly glib. His Pakistani Sufi friend and long-term correspondent, Abdul Aziz, was profoundly disappointed when he heard Merton’s “Sufi” talks, and, frankly, so was I.

When scholarship assesses the legacy of a writer and his or her work, it is important to have as much information as possible. Thus both the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center are to be commended for promoting dissemination of Merton talks on widely available, professionally produced CDs. That these have apparently not been heavily edited means the listener has direct access to and greater understanding of Merton’s style as a speaker (at least in one setting). Unfortunately, the listener won’t garner much information on Sufism or on Merton’s thoughtful understanding of Islam. (Both are more fruitfully sought in the volume *Merton and Sufism*, and in the work of Merton scholars like Sidney H. Griffith and Erlinda G. Paguio, than in these tapes.)