

Shared devotion

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue



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Toward the end of 1960, Trappist monk Thomas Merton, living in a monastery in Kentucky, began a correspondence with Abdul Aziz, a Muslim civil servant in Karachi, Pakistan. Until Merton's death in 1968, the two men exchanged books and long letters in which they discussed their theological differences, introduced each other to their respective traditions of spirituality, asked each other questions about their daily practices of prayer and meditation, and described to each other how they ordered their days. One of the most detailed, personal accounts of Merton's daily life in his hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani is recorded in a letter to Aziz.

Merton and Aziz were deeply curious about and appreciative of each other's religious traditions. Merton wrote to Aziz about being stirred to the depths of his heart by the spirit of adoration and holy awe in Islam. Aziz read avidly all the books on Christian mysticism that Merton sent to him.

Neither tried to convince the other to move from appreciation to conversion. Aziz once sent Merton a translation of the Qur'an and suggested he add the chanting of the Qur'an to his daily prayer. Merton declined, explaining that his work was to chant

the holy books of his own tradition, and, besides, he didn't want to chant the Qur'an incorrectly. "But," he wrote to Aziz, "I read the Koran with deep attention and reverence." The deep attention and reverence that Merton and Aziz brought to each other's books, traditions and lives undergirded their friendship, and the frank and unembarrassed way they explored their similarities and differences enlivened it.

The two friends prayed for one another regularly and often asked for each other's prayers. Aziz prayed for Merton on the Night of Power, when the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad is celebrated. Merton prayed for Aziz on Pentecost. As both were early risers, they often prayed for each other at dawn.

"It is important," Merton wrote, "to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the experience of divine light. . . . It is here that the area of fruitful dialogue exists between Christianity and Islam." This conviction undergirded Merton's many interfaith friendships. Even when the two friends reached theological impasses, they remained connected to one another through their common desire to search for, grope after and find the living God. "We live in dreadful times," Merton wrote to Aziz in 1961, "and we must be brothers in prayer and worship no matter what may be the doctrinal differences that separate our minds."

There have been several convulsive episodes over Islam in our national life recently: the furor over the proposed Islamic community center in Manhattan, the threats of Pastor Terry Jones to burn the Qur'an, the apology of a newspaper in Maine for putting a story about Muslim observance of Ramadan on its front page. One of the oddest incidents took place in my part of the country. Middle school students from Wellesley, Massachusetts, who were studying "Enduring Beliefs in the World Today," were visiting the Islamic Society of Boston to learn about Islam. As a part of that visit, they were invited to observe the Friday prayers. At some point, as their Muslim hosts devoted themselves to their prayers, a few of the students bowed their heads, stood as their hosts stood and followed their movements of devotion.

This quiet moment of reverence and appreciation might have passed without comment, but a parent who had videotaped the visit decided to pass the video to a group known for its opposition to the Islamic Society of Boston. After doing some strategic editing, the group released portions of the video. Once the video became public, the superintendent of the Wellesley schools issued an apology, and the *Boston Globe* scolded Wellesley's school administrators for not drawing the line at

school prayer.

I wasn't there, and I don't know what those students were thinking. But what I imagine is that, like Thomas Merton and Abdul Aziz, they might have been stirred by the sight of another's devotion and wanted, for a moment, to share in it. The desire to understand another's practice of faith led Aziz to immerse himself in the writings of St. John of the Cross and Merton to join with Aziz in prayer during Ramadan.

The uproar that the video unleashed has done harm, contributing to the shameful harassment of Islamic communities in this country and perhaps making the study of religions in the public schools even more rare than it already was. But the gesture of reverence made by the students has contributed to the good of all of us. It bears within it what Merton once called "the unknown good" that God offers when people of different faiths increase their understanding of each other. It is what George Eliot would have called an "unhistoric act" that nevertheless helps human history move forward.