

## Review Symposium

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PRAMUK, Christopher, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), pp. xxx + 322. ISBN 978-0-8146-5390-6 (cloth) \$29.95.

In his contemporary study of Christology, *Desire, Gift and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy*, Jan-Olav Henriksen opens with the observation: "In many ways Christology – the doctrinal formulation of the identity and work of Jesus Christ – seems to express something impossible."<sup>1</sup> His intuition is indeed correct. The articulation of the mystery of Christ and the formal study of that mystery at the center of Christianity is ostensibly riddled with impossibility. Nevertheless, some find the strength to delve into the work of making the impossible possible through study, dialogue and mysticism. Thomas Merton was one such person. His commitment to elucidating those elements of faith that seemed paradoxical remains an inspiration for others, like Christopher Pramuk, to move forward in similar study.

Pramuk's *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, laudable as it is for its significant contribution to the field of Merton scholarship, deserves wider praise for how it helps construct an interdisciplinary bridge between theology and other fields (poetry and literature, for example), while at the same time making an original contribution to contemporary Christology. Toward the end of the first chapter Pramuk reflects on the fact that study of Merton often remains constricted by the perception of many in the academy that his work pertains "more to psychology or popular spirituality than to the dense theological tradition of the church" (24). In an effort to expand the analytical horizon of Merton scholarship, and in turn theological scholarship, Pramuk suggests that this preconception is in need of serious reconsideration. He writes, "It seems, quite to the contrary, that Catholic theology might learn a great deal from this rare theologian who allowed, and still allows, 'the mystery of faith to be named and heard in a great many places where it is not usually named and heard'" (24). It is in this respect,

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1. Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Desire, Gift and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) 1.

the introduction of Merton's thought into the ongoing systematic theological conversation about contemporary Christology, that this work merits particular attention.

Pramuk is not the first theologian to attempt a critical engagement of Merton's thought through the lens of systematic theology. Prior to Pramuk's study, the standard treatment of Merton's Christology came in the form of George Kilcourse's still relevant *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, one can find in more recent literature traces of serious correlative work that dialogues Merton's thought with the Christological projects of contemporary theologians. Such is the case in a chapter of Iliia Delio's *Christ in Evolution* entitled "The Transcultural Christ: Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths."<sup>3</sup> Though Pramuk is not entirely original in his effort to re-imagine and then (re)present Merton's work as substantially more fecund for theological engagement than popularly conceived, what his efforts yield – particularly in terms of concretely illustrating Merton-as-nexus of Eastern and Western Christological perspectives – is a map of a sophiological landscape that any theological cartographer could enjoy. Pramuk highlights the foundations, resources and possible trajectories of further study, leaving the reader with several proceeding paths to pursue.

The book begins with the thesis that it was Sophia – "the unknown and unseen Christ" – that served as the inextricable centerpiece of Merton's mature Christology, the theme that "catalyzed Merton's theological imagination in a period of tremendous social, political, and religious fragmentation" (xxiii). Pramuk advances this position in six chapters, beginning with an overview of Merton's appropriation of various sophiological sources including the Russian theologians (Vladimir Soloviev, Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Berdyaev, Paul Evdokimov, etc.) and poetic expression of this Eastern theological insight. It is from this context that Sophia as theological form emerges as – dare I say – the systematic structure of Merton's so-called mature Christology. This assertion again highlights Pramuk's effort to de-center the popular, *status quo* reading of Merton as unhelpful for contemporary theological inquiry.

Drawing on David Tracy's work on the theological category of imagination, Pramuk then sets the epistemological framework for what follows in his study by establishing the (narrative, poetic and

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2. George A. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

3. Iliia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) 102-22.

sacramental) imagination as the medium through which Merton is able to rediscover or re-appropriate the sophiological tradition to inform his Christology. Pramuk uses both John Henry Newman and Abraham Heschel to illustrate instances of theology guided by the "sacramental imagination." From Newman we learn that wisdom provides a holistic theological development that is integrative and not an approach that results in simple "polymathy" or fragmentation (43). From Heschel we see the sacramental and aesthetic nature of language, a vision that allows Merton to adopt Sophia as a "sustained metaphor for the divine-humanity of God" (63). Central to all three thinkers is the sense of human experience as necessary for theology.

What follows the presentation of Newman's and Heschel's thought in light of Merton's theological approach is Pramuk's concurrently chronological and thematic examination of Merton's later work. Of the many themes introduced in chapter 3, the observation – interpreted by Edward Kaplan – that Merton would come to identify both Scripture and the name Sophia with "God's anthropology" (80) resonates well with some strains of contemporary theological anthropology, particularly that of Karl Rahner and those who follow him. As we are led through a variety of Merton's work from the last decade of the monk's life, Pramuk highlights the ways in which the convergence of human experience, Catholic imagination and word-as-sacrament emerges in the poetic and increasingly eclectic work of Merton. What results is the recognition of Merton as a theologian of the "everyday" or "every-text," to draw on some postmodern philosophical analysis. Key to the unification of these divergent texts and experiences, Pramuk asserts, is the centrality of Sophia. It is Merton's own Christocentricity that provides the clearest thread of continuity in his later work.

This thread of Christological and sapiential continuity is what Pramuk focuses on at the heart of the book. To "test" his hermeneutical hypothesis – Sophia as the unifying theme in Merton's Christology – Pramuk considers Merton's engagement with four "mentors": D. T. Suzuki, Herakleitos the Obscure, Maximus Confessor and Boris Pasternak (133). He sees Merton's reading of these four figures informing the monk's epistemological grounding, understood to be "wisdom or *sapientia* as a way of seeing" (133). Pramuk asserts that it is Merton's turn toward Sophia in the late 1950s and early 1960s that provides the condition for the possibil-

ity of his openness to the social concerns of his day and his deep commitment to interreligious dialogue. Merton's appropriation of Eastern Christological wisdom – so compatible as it is with the pre-Platonic or Heraklitean philosophical currents – opens new avenues for contemporary Christology. It is this openness, this freedom, which allows the twentieth-century monk to bring together the wisdom of these traditions in theological reflection.

Pramuk's fifth chapter delves into the question of Merton's own use of sophiological imagery and its relationship to his understanding of contemplation and Christology. Pramuk identifies several sources for what practically amounts to Merton's own *bricolage* of Christological vision in the books *The New Man* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*. What we begin to see is that beneath, or concurrent with, the more overt Patristic and Medieval sources drawn upon to build his Christological reflections stands an Orthodox, and particularly Russian, strain of sophianic influence. Pramuk sees Merton's 1962 prose poem *Hagia Sophia* as the zenith of this "marriage of East and West" (193). After tracing the historical origins of the creative and theological work, Pramuk offers an exegetical commentary on the poem itself. In addition to the sapiential Christology that arises from such a reading of *Hagia Sophia*, one sees an emergent Mariology that merits further consideration. Set in contrast to the Christological impulses of *The New Man* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Pramuk sees Merton's use of Sophia in *Hagia Sophia* as uniquely unencumbered, free and creative. To put it another way, it is in *Hagia Sophia* that Merton's mature Christology, his sapiential impulse, is exhibited as the poetic sacramental imagination anticipated early in Pramuk's study.

This example of Sophia-Christology *par excellence* leads Pramuk to consider why Merton would draw on this particular symbol and not resource another. His answer comes in the last chapter, which traces Merton's own reading of Russian theologians and poets. Merton's fascination with the Russian thinkers examined by Pramuk stems in part from their particular take on theological themes and currents seemingly "forgotten" in the West and certainly novel to the mind of many Roman Catholic religious of Merton's day. Pramuk skillfully highlights several of these themes including Christology, theological anthropology, Trinity and the feminine in God, among others.

Sergei Bulgakov insisted that theological reflection on divine Sophia does not advance new dogmatic claims or doctrines, but

instead offers a new way to look at the entirety of Christianity. Likewise, Merton's expression of a sophiological Christology rooted in his poetic sacramental imagination offers us a new way to consider the *kerygmatic* or even dogmatic core of Christian belief. As Pramuk notes in the conclusion of his last chapter, the pragmatic and soteriological quality of sophiology provides a postmodern world with another resource to intelligently, practically and relevantly present Christianity. There is something intuitive about the tradition of Sophia that certainly captured the heart and mind of Merton and continues to speak to today's generations of spiritual seekers. That the prose poem *Hagia Sophia* was penned during tumultuous social and ecclesial times also bolsters Pramuk's claim that such a contemporary *ressourcement* of forgotten theological wisdom may be just what we are in need of today. While such an argument is indeed clear to understand, Pramuk expresses concern that Merton's own presentation of his Christology may not be as clear (291). Nevertheless, Merton's work – particularly *Hagia Sophia* – provides an oft-overlooked resource for those who wish to carry forward contemporary reflections on Christology. Pramuk's position is that, while Merton's work itself is an asset to (post)modern systematic theologians, one must not lose sight of the fact that Merton himself was, to use Pramuk's description, a "mystical theologian, a poet of the presence of God" (293).

*Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* is indeed a masterful work that reflects the highest caliber of scholarly research. Although I generally consider book-jacket blurbs to be subjectively positive, I would agree with the insight of Pramuk's *doktorvater*, Lawrence Cunningham – a fine Merton scholar in his own right – when he says that *Sophia* "sets a very high bar for anyone else who intends to comment on the writings of the monk whose writings, nearly a half century after his death, still exert such a powerful influence on contemporary religious seekers." The one critical remark I feel obligated to offer relates to the readability and voice of the text. While the Michael Glazier imprint of the Liturgical Press is an academic line of books and one can expect a book from this publisher to be at times challenging to read, Pramuk's *Sophia* can read like a dissertation. As a result, the voice of the author can be lost in a sea of primary and secondary literature – granted, all valuably resourced – that significantly influences the tone of the text. That said, when Pramuk's own voice comes through, it does so with striking clarity and insight. Although this book is

not for your average Merton enthusiast, it does reward the committed reader with a new look at Merton as theologian, a greater appreciation for the wisdom tradition and a new hermeneutical appreciation for the work of contemporary Christology. Indeed, Thomas Merton, through the scholarship of Christopher Pramuk, is able to express something of the impossible.

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This important book calls for a personal, not only a professional response. First and foremost, I applaud the author's humanistic ideal of scholarship: "while this book is set as an academic study, its writing is also an act of gratitude and commitment" (xxviii). To that end, Christopher Pramuk defines the historical context of his theological analyses: "Born in 1964 to parents of East European and Irish Catholic descent, and raised more or less in a post-Vatican II church, I belong to that generation of American Catholics (and dutiful altar boys) caught somewhere between the best of two distinct worlds: the High Tradition, with its wondrous cathedrals, icons, and 'smells and bells,' and the Low Tradition, with its thoroughly (and beautifully) human Jesus, concern for social justice, and intimate house church esthetic" (xxviii). Pramuk shares Merton's viewpoint, sustained by the monk's followers, to revere Tradition while extending the theological emancipation sanctioned by Vatican II, one value of which is religious pluralism.

In this graceful, meticulous, and devout study of Merton's last years, Christopher Pramuk opens readers of all backgrounds to Sophia, a figure of Wisdom and feminine aspects of God as nourished by Eastern Orthodoxy. He expertly introduces the insights of Bulgakov, Soloviev, Evdokimov, Paul Valliere, Rowan Williams from the Orthodox perspective, in addition to Abraham Heschel, Cardinal Newman and others, to prepare his convincing explication of Merton's great poetic breakthrough in *Hagia Sophia*.

In his Introduction, Pramuk promises to trace "the emergence of Sophia in Merton's life and writings as a Love and a Presence that breaks through into the world, a living symbol and Name through which he encountered the living God and with which he chose, at his poetic and prophetic best, to structure theological discourse" (xxiii). He traces how Merton arrived at a mature position, accepting, even loving, the world, recognizing his own past outrages – especially in relationships with women – and becoming

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