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.

Daniel P. Horan, OFM

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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

an ecumenical monk affirming the value of other religious traditions, admitting to Rabbi Heschel, for example, that he wanted to become "a Jew under his Catholic skin."[1]

As a Jew in search of integrity, I am inspired by Merton's writings on prayer and insight, his personal life struggles, and his goal of opening Christian spirituality to everyone.[2] And I am honored that Pramuk has applied *Holiness in Words*,[3] my study of the Jewish theologian, mystic, and social activist Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), to help explicate Merton's incarnational theology, culminating in the poetic revelation of *Hagia Sophia*.

Especially sensitive to Heschel's incandescent writings, Pramuk creates a model of interfaith exegesis by elucidating his analysis of Christian symbols with Heschel's theory and practice of poetic discourse. Heschel's writings, in fact, had originally opened me to a holy dimension I felt lacking in the 1950s American Judaism in which I was raised. Heschel saved Judaism for me; Pramuk enabled me to imagine more fully, more personally, and sympathetically, the sacred mysteries of Christology.

There is some irony to that fact. It is a historical reality that most Jews have perceived the Cross as a symbol of persecution. Christology as such was for me a stumbling block, and the early Thomas Merton broadcast a pre-Vatican II triumphalism, interpreting the Psalms (in *Bread in the Wilderness*, for example), in supercessionist terms – excluding me from the feast. I am still more comfortable with Merton's outreach to other religions, especially to traditions of Asia.

Heschel himself, intensely involved in Vatican II negotiations on the status of Judaism, considered Christology to be a peril

1. See Edward K. Kaplan, "'Under My Catholic Skin': Thomas Merton's Opening to Judaism and to the World," in Beatrice Bruteau, ed., *Merton & Judaism: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal – Holiness in Words* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003) 109-25; and E. K. Kaplan, "'A Humanly Impoverished Thirst for Light': Thomas Merton's Receptivity To the Feminine, to Judaism, and to Religious Pluralism," *The Merton Annual* 17 (2004) 137-52.

2. First identified as a Merton scholar and teacher (along with others) in *St. Anthony Messenger* (August 1974) 18-27, I joined the Merton community at the 1978 Vancouver Merton conference with a paper on Merton and Heschel; see E. K. Kaplan, "Contemplative Inwardness and Prophetic Action: Thomas Merton's Dialogue with Abraham Joshua Heschel" (with correspondence between Heschel and Merton), in Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins, eds., *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983) 85-105; reprinted in *Merton & Judaism* 253-68.

3. Edward K. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

within Christianity itself, leading, Heschel judged, to an excessive focus on the Son while neglecting the preeminence of God. Writing in the 1960s, Heschel reproached the so-called "death of God" theologians who settled for "Jesus of Nazareth." In this way, post-modern Christians (mostly Protestants) might feel authorized to abandon theology in favor of the "historical Jesus." That common humanistic denominator, compatible with the protocols of interfaith dialogue, risks voiding theology of its lifeblood, a loss far greater to all sides than those inflicted by diplomatic taboos.[4] Pramuk follows Thomas Merton in restoring the theological radicalism of apophatic mysticism and its practice in poetic discourse – also favored (and theorized) by Heschel.

For Christopher Pramuk, Heschel, Cardinal Newman, and Russian Orthodox thinkers train readers to experience religious language as metaphorical, in Heschel's terms, as understatements, as alluding to divine reality, more not less than literally true. Chapter 2, "Making Old Things New: Imagination and Poetics in Theological Method" (31-74), features Newman and Heschel as masters of poetic rhetoric, reconciling intelligence and imagination. I cannot do justice to Pramuk's discerning exposition of Heschel on poetry, prayer, faith, depth theology, and religious thinking – culminating in the recentering of subjectivity from the person to God. Suffice it to quote this formulation inspired by Heschel that helped me overcome my discomfort with narrow connotations of Christology: "Drawing intuitively from sources in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as from non-Christian sources, and inspired especially by the Sophia tradition of Russian Orthodoxy – or 'sophiology,' as known in its speculative form – the Wisdom tradition became Merton's most vivid means of expressing 'a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations'" (xxiii).[5]

4. See Stanislaw Obirek, "Is Christology an Obstacle for Jewish-Christian Understanding," which refers to Heschel's only explicit critique of contemporary Christian theology, in Stanislaw Krajewski and Adam Lipszyc, eds., *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Philosophy, Theology and Interreligious Dialogue* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009) 202-206. Heschel delivered his paper at the 1967 Congress of the Theology of the Renewal of the Church Centenary of Canada, 1867-1967; reprinted in Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, Essays of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996) 274-75. See also Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: A. J. Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 288-93.

5. Quoted from Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York:

Pramuk's religious epistemology overcomes the apparent contradiction of poetic versus literal understanding. He quotes Heschel's book on prayer and symbolism, *Man's Quest for God*, to assert that "the heart of prayer . . . is the existential and semantic paradox. Heschel's extraordinary account of the praying person provides a fitting conclusion to our schematic overview of his depth theology. The account is, to my mind [writes Pramuk], one of the most penetrating descriptions of faith, understood as both a human act and as an event in the life of God, ever penned in the modern period:

> In no other act does man experience so often the disparity between the desire for expression and the means of expression as in prayer. The inadequacy of the means at our disposal appears so tangible, so tragic, that one feels it a grace to be able to give oneself up to music, to a tone, to a song, to a chant. . . . What the word can no longer yield, man achieves through the fullness of his powerlessness." (64)[6]

And that is where the doubt-laden Jewish academic that I am makes common cause with the certainty of Rabbi Heschel – and the Catholic theologian's loyal faith. Resistance to dogma is no longer relevant.

Spiritual insight, enabling pluralism, emerges from meaning beyond words, beyond images and dogmas. A rather technical discussion of religious metaphor leads Pramuk to conclude: "While Sophia as a metaphorical vehicle 'can never render the tenor [God / Christ / Trinity] accurately and positively,' [footnote to Kaplan, *Holiness in Words* 56] nevertheless her name, precisely when voiced *as Name* (e.g., in prayer), can facilitate an experience of real presence, communion with the hidden God who is both beyond all words *and* ever waiting to break through from within them" (63).

And Pramuk applies his analysis of poetic discourse in Cardinal Newman to reaffirm the reality of Incarnation in all people: "God is mysteriously present in human beings always and everywhere, a 'presence' that can be grasped, even if dimly and in shadows, before it has been reflected on, recognized, named, categorized, or defined (e.g., in explicitly christological terms) as a notion" (48).

Merton (and Heschel) make faith plausible for those of us who

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New Directions, 1968) 39.

6. Quoted from Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Scribner, 1954) 39-40.

falter, for those who reach out to other religionists in the common quest, the shared thirst for God. People who have made a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani – or participated in meetings of the ITMS – know what it means to be part of a "community of faith."

Sophia thus fulfills the promises made in the introduction and along the way. I would only add that the book is written in a lucid style, both analytical and meditative, quoting generously, but not excessively, from sources which match the author's own elegance. His exposition of the sophiology of Eastern Orthodox thinkers was a special gift to me, as was his surpassing the dogmatic notion of Christ. With consummate mastery of practical theology, gifts of the spirit, Christopher Pramuk has charted the crucial role of *Hagia Sophia* and sophiology in Thomas Merton's opening to the world, to the feminine, and to religious traditions not his own. Unobtrusively personal, yet without false modesty, this is a book with which to think and to pray.

Edward K. Kaplan

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This fine study first came to my attention in an earlier version as the author's doctoral dissertation ("Hagia Sophia, Imagination, Poetics and Presence in the Christology of Thomas Merton" [Notre Dame, 2007]), recently procured and bound when I visited the Thomas Merton Center in May 2009. Segments of it had appeared in earlier vintages in places such as "'Something Breaks Through a Little': The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton."[1] It was a delight to survey its contents and study its arguments on Thomas Merton's Christology, a subject not taken up with similar intensity and care since George Kilcourse's seminal work, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*.[2] In a salient footnote in the book's concluding chapter, Pramuk makes his purpose clear: "one way to avoid a comparison of Merton's Christology with contemporary historical-critical approaches is to claim that what Merton does is, in fact, *not theology*; it is spiritual writing, poetry, autobiography, edifying literature, and so on. I hope this study has helped put to rest such claims" (291 n. 66).

It is not surprising that on its appearance Pramuk's incisive treatise is receiving much critical attention, considering its focus

1. *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28 (January 2008) 67-89.

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