

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).

and mission. As a treatise on the influence of the Russian sophiologists on Merton, particularly of Bulgakov, Berdyaev and Soloviev, it is and will be without match, well into the future.

Its front matter and back cover offer endorsements from eminent and enthusiastic theologians and its numerous reviewers from other vantages further the well-founded embrace of its students. Kevin Burke, SJ, announces it as an interpretation that "breaks completely new ground" in its discovery of Merton as "one of the spiritual giants of our age." Wendy M. Wright tells us that *Sophia* is "a compelling meditation on the doing of theology in the contemporary world." Pramuk's doctoral supervisor and prestigious Merton scholar Lawrence Cunningham proclaims the work as "far and away, the most sophisticated theological study ever done on the writings of Thomas Merton."

They are not alone in their endorsement of this new work on Merton's influence as a theologian and more importantly, as a Western sophiologist. In the *National Catholic Register* online, Merton devotee and activist John Dear, SJ writes on October 5, 2010 that he recently discussed the work with Br. Patrick Hart, Merton's personal secretary and posthumous editor, whose vantage point includes most of what has been written about Merton. Br. Patrick certified *Sophia* as "the best book ever written about Thomas Merton." And in *The Merton Seasonal* (Spring 2010), important for its inclusive accessibility to lay readers of Merton, Ryan Scuggs provides readers with an ample and valuable review of each of the book's six chapters, claiming as would I, that chapter 5 "is the heart of Pramuk's study."³

In that chapter, "*Hagia Sophia: The Marriage of East and West*," Sophia is rendered as the image of Merton's mystical and cosmic Christ. Pramuk claims that the central myth for Merton, that of Genesis – the loss of paradisaic unity (182) – is realized in her magnificently drawn theological portrait, the prose-poem *Hagia Sophia*. As a literary critic, I looked with particular interest to this chapter to see how Merton's mystical poetics, understood as the site in which Sophia arises from the marriage of *logos* and image, would be archived. After providing the reader with the lovely anecdotes about the origins of the poem (a triptych painted by Victor Hammer and viewed by Merton in 1959), Pramuk takes us ably through Merton's writings adjacent to the poem: the integral

3. Ryan Scuggs, "Illuminating Wisdom," *The Merton Seasonal* 35.1 (Spring 2010) 36.

letter of exploration written to Hammer on May 14, 1959 following their visit,⁴ and the phenomenological recounting of Merton's dream-revelation of Sophia dated July 2, 1960,⁵ on the Feast of the Visitation when he was in St. Anthony's Hospital in Louisville for x-rays (not to be confused in its foretelling with the much later encounter with M. at St. Joseph's Hospital on March 24, 1966).

My response to Pramuk's deeply intellectual and spiritual study of *Hagia Sophia* as theology is one of great admiration and absorption. I am not capable of adequately assessing its theological arguments and implications; rather, I have focused my attention on the manner in which he probes the relationship between language, symbol and what Heschel calls the "ineffable." He recognizes the religious imagination as the ground of their coherence, if somewhat seemingly inchoate, quoting Merton's well-known diagnosis of "the crisis of meaning [in twentieth-century America] as a crisis of imagination" (275). His argument continues by calling on *memoria*, *theoria* and hope as the site of revelation of the hidden ground of Love because they "imply a formal relationship between biblical symbols and the deep revelatory structure of reality" (279). The argument completes itself in the claim that human beings have a "memory and experience of God that . . . binds everything together across all distances, cultures, physical landscapes, and times" – a kind of "pan-unity" (279). In this framework, *Hagia Sophia* becomes a rendering of Catholic sacramental imagination, a classic marriage of Eastern and Western spirituality.

Into this profound historical, theological and literary moment, Pramuk propels his exegesis of the poem itself, armed with his sophisticated knowledge of and extensive call upon the Russian sophiologists and the multiplicity of theologians who had nourished the capacious intellect and untested limits of Merton's religious imagination by the time *Hagia Sophia* was written. Pramuk's own musicianship is apparent in his gestures to the musical resonances of the language and his recognition of its lyricism. He perceptively indicates that this is a "performance poem" (see 196), explaining that the "moment [Sophia's] name awakens in us a sense of mercy, communion, and presence . . . is not symbolic, but real" (207). Continuing in that vein, Pramuk claims the force

4. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 4-6.

5. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals*, vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 17-18.

of the performance as “undeniable,” without artifice or hidden agenda anywhere in its lines (208).

It is here that my literary instincts become a little unsettled; I sense a theologian reaching for the means by which to uncover the power of a poem’s language – its centrality in Logos, the Word/word made flesh – in the black marks on white pages that script the poetic genre, uniquely, in its rupture of the lines of syntax, parataxis and ultimately, intellection. Merton’s poetry from its early parodies and lyricism to its last, complex *Geography of Lograire*, is haunted by his subscription to a precise theory of poetry as a unique “kind of knowledge, . . . concerned with the aspects of experience that can never be well described but only reproduced or imitated” in action (*mimesis*), as delineated in his early review of John Crowe Ransom’s textbook of New Criticism, *The World’s Body*.⁶ One must hasten to add here that Merton is indebted to his Shakespeare professor and mentor in literature at Columbia, Mark Van Doren, for his understanding and embrace of a poetics in which there is always a recovery of craft, if not artifice, and hiddenness, if not artfulness; a host of other literary luminaries and friends also called on Merton to mature in his aesthetics of poetry within the context of the monastery, not the least of whom were Boris Pasternak, Czeslaw Milosz and Jacques Maritain. Indeed, in the final decade of his life he increasingly came to agree with Maritain “that perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems in our day was in the form of ‘creative writing and literary criticism.’”⁷

Perhaps this agreement is exactly what Pramuk is intending to honor in his exegesis, but I would contend that the poetic genre, the means by which *Hagia Sophia* is incarnated in language, calls for more literary criticism than what is offered. One wishes, at this juncture, to find the address of the literary genealogy which engendered Merton’s poetry. The Romantic tradition in British literature irrevocably and profoundly impressed upon its progenitors the possibility of deifying the imagination as the site of wisdom, even Divine Wisdom. In the American tradition, the Transcendentalists tilled the ground for our current understanding of human consciousness in its relations to creation and Divinity. These surely were the literary forebears for Merton’s embrace and configur-

6. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 463.

7. Patrick Hart, Introduction to *Literary Essays* (xv).

ing of Sophia, the Eros of God in creation, "the general dance." Their intersections with Merton's religious imagination cannot be overstated for the arousal of his mystical poetics. The intellectual influences on Merton's aesthetics of poetry, along with his religious and theological formation, are necessary considerations here (i.e. all the schools of poetry with which he familiarized himself and experimented during the same time as he was exploring the traditions of the East). Without setting *Hagia Sophia* into the context of Merton's entire poetic corpus, a study of its theological poetics produces potential risks of impairment.

Pramuk has, of course, attempted with impressive success to call on the aid of scholars whose insights have been gleaned from particular vantage points specific to his concerns. Susan McCaslin's assistance is wisely chosen since she is a feminist scholar of Merton's poetics, a poet herself and a mystic. The fine distinctions that she makes regarding gender and Sophia are taken up instructively by Pramuk. His meticulous inductions defining Sophia in relation to the Trinity, particularly its Second Person, are worthy of all the attention he gives them and offers us. Although there is much remaining to be addressed by scholars of Merton's poetry, several essential allies in this cause would have aided Pramuk's process efficiently and effectively. Ross Labrie's books *The Art of Thomas Merton* (1979) and *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (2001)⁸ would have lent Pramuk valuable context and refinement of the terms of Merton's poetics as a backdrop to the "poetics of theology" for which Pramuk relies heavily on Edward Kaplan's understandings of Abraham Heschel's theological aesthetics. It is also interesting to note that Pramuk's call on Patrick O'Connell, whose survey and analysis of Merton's writings (both prose and poetry) are more complete and robust than any other, is almost completely restricted to O'Connell's commentaries on Merton's theological writings. For his enormous knowledge, perspective and prowess, and particularly his meticulous explications of Merton's poetry, O'Connell's literary insights are also essential to this study.

Although literary theory has been hard at work in attempting to define the play between the symbology, typology and embryology of language, Merton has given us enough in his poetics alone

8. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979); Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

to imply much about his own sacramental embrace of language. For him, there are manifestations of mystery and wisdom (*logos/Logos*) – its words, silences and absences – in which language is not symbol at play to be approached by the human imagination or its religious/theological capacities. In this mystic tradition, language itself is sacramental, as indeed, is every category which one might offer the discussion of cosmology, human and otherwise. As Merton's poetics demonstrate most complexly in his anti-poetry, language is not confined to its powers as an instrument of communication or as a site of communion. Its ground is the Incarnate/*Logos/Word* made Flesh, in and of itself. As in the "general dance" in which we all play, like Sophia, language is one of the essences of God Himself – *analogia entis* – in which created being, including human language, is in analogical relation to divine being. In poetry, uniquely and essentially, Merton would contend, the incarnation is embodied in experience that cannot, in any other way, be engendered. *Hagia Sophia*, as the *magnum opus* of this *theoria*, manifested in creative writing as a way of doing theology, requires the privileging of an aesthetic different from that of any other of Merton's writings. It is literary mysticism in its purest poetic form, not excluding, but also not limited to, any form of inquiry, case study, disciplinary initiatives, etc.; Trinitarian, sophianic and cosmic in its proportions primarily because it has been conceived in the language of poetry which is the word/Word of Genesis, of the Incarnation, and of the Resurrection of Christ Himself without mediation or proposition – of God.

Upon these observations and prejudices, I rest any case that might arise from my engagement with this perspicacious and probing study of *Hagia Sophia* and its sophiological influences on Thomas Merton's Christology.

Lynn R. Szabo

Author's Response

It is an unexpected privilege to be invited into this conversation about my book, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, with such able and inspiring scholars as Daniel Horan, Lynn Szabo, and Edward Kaplan. I wish to thank each of them, as well as editors David Belcastro and Gray Matthews, for the opportunity to participate in this review symposium. In what follows I have tried to address the reviewers' major points of appreciation and criticism in a way that is not simply mechanical but that might be

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