

a global problem. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue could go a long way to easing strife and building peace. *Divine Discontent* is a welcome reminder of the wisdom and challenge of Merton's voice, a voice whose discontents we'd be wise to heed.

Joshua Brumfield

PRAMUK, Christopher, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), pp. xii + 138. ISBN 978-0-8146-4816-2 (paper) \$17.95.

Christopher Pramuk describes *At Play in Creation* as a "crystallization" (x) of his widely acclaimed volume, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* – an illuminating and ground-breaking study of Merton's sapiential Christological vision.¹ In 2011, The International Thomas Merton Society recognized the publication of *Sophia* by awarding Christopher Pramuk a "Louie" for "bringing provocative insight and fresh direction to Merton Studies." Pramuk characterizes *At Play in Creation* as a collection of "retreat conferences" (x). As such, each chapter, although integral to the book as a whole, is nevertheless complete in itself. Reading the chapters and ruminating on each – one by one – would be very much in sync with Pramuk's conception of the essays as conferences. The somewhat conversational tone of the book, which grew out of presentations in a host of settings – retreats, workshops and the like, is engaging and invites reflection and dialogue with the text. The sense that one is hearing Pramuk speak is enhanced by his interjection of personally revelatory anecdotes about his family as well as his sharing of the story of his own encounters and engagement with Merton's writings. Built on a foundation of a deep and meticulous scholarship, the book is guaranteed to delight readers across the spectrum – those new to Merton and those deeply immersed in his writings.

At Play in Creation is as appealing in appearance as it is profound in content. The cover, printed on textured card stock enhanced by French flaps, features an ink drawing by Thomas Merton entitled "Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament" that visually illustrates the subtitle, *Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine*. The cover image appears again in the book, along with three additional Merton ink drawings, a photo of the young Tom Merton peeking out from behind a door and a haunting photo of Etty Hillesum. These images alternate with carefully chosen epigraphs to draw the reader into the book's chapters. The back

1. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

cover features a photograph of Merton, taken during the 1960s by Merton's friend Gene Meatyard.

In addition to an Introduction, there are nine chapters. The title of each is a carefully chosen phrase that not only highlights the theme of the chapter but also serves as a focal point for meditation: I. "Rivers of Night"; II. "Liminal Spaces"; III. "Dawn of Wisdom"; IV. "From End to End Mightily"; V. "The Night Face of Sophia"; VI. "Bearer of Hope"; VII. "She Cannot Be a Prisoner"; VIII. "Breathe in the Air"; and IX. "To Say Something Worthy of God." Pramuk's endnotes (119-38) deserve special mention; in addition to providing the customary citations, many notes suggest related readings and fresh lines of inquiry.

Throughout the book, Pramuk is drawing on Merton's *Hagia Sophia*,² written in the spring of 1961, a prose poem Pramuk sees as a quintessential expression of the fruit of contemplative spirituality and a catalyst for his witness to peace and justice. In the first chapter of the book, "Rivers of Night" (1-11), Pramuk tells us how he "was hooked" (1) by Merton at the age of fifteen and in subsequent years discovered how Merton calls us back to our deepest selves to "hear again the music of our faith" (2). Then, reading Merton after 9/11, Pramuk was "haunted" (5) by *Hagia Sophia*, the poem Merton wrote during "a season of fury" (6) in the sixties. Ending with a reprise of Merton's biography, Pramuk emphasizes Merton's stirrings and awakenings. In the second chapter, "Liminal Spaces" (13-19), Pramuk highlights "Merton's 'sapiential,' 'sophianic,' or Wisdom-haunted way of seeing" (13). As a "poet of the liminal spaces of our lives" (15), who recognized the Incarnation as an ongoing event, Merton invites us to awaken "in mystery to our essential kinship with the whole cosmos" (21) and to join in the "general dance" (25) about which he writes so movingly in the concluding chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*.³

Chapters III and IV, "Dawn of Wisdom" (27-38) and "From End to End Mightily" (41-48), focus on *Hagia Sophia*. Pramuk identifies the "constellation of events" (38) in the late fifties that led to the breakthrough of Sophia in Merton's own life and culminated in the writing of the prose poem: his reading of Russian theologians; his dream of Proverb; his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut; his viewing of artist friend Victor Hammer's triptych, "Hagia Sophia Crowning the Young Christ." The writing of *Hagia Sophia*, Pramuk observes, coincided with the writing of the "Prayer to God the Father on the Vigil of Pentecost," which Merton recorded in

2. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 61-69; subsequent references will be cited as "ESF" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 290-97.

his journal⁴ and later included in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.⁵ In the prayer, Merton asks for the “the courage to ‘be a man of peace and to help bring peace to the world,’ to learn the way ‘of truth and nonviolence,’ and for the grace to accept whatever difficult consequences might follow” (33). Reflecting on the third and fourth sections of *Hagia Sophia*, Pramuk highlights two important themes: “the wonder of Sophia’s reception in the world of creatures” by creatures who give “glory to God simply ‘by being themselves’” (44); and Sophia as the “‘mercy of God in us’” (45). Pramuk also discusses the “mysterious ink drawing” (46) reproduced on the book’s cover and on page 40, “Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament.” The drawing “celebrates, if obscurely, the *wholeness* of God, the integral fullness of the *imago Dei*, male and female, realized (made real) wherever human beings seek to be and become Love in the rough and beautiful tumble of their ordinary lives” (47). In Merton’s words (*ESF* 62-63): “Gentleness comes to him when he is most helpless and awakens him, refreshed, beginning to be made whole. Love takes him by the hand, and opens to him the door to another life, another day” (47). The final scene of *Hagia Sophia* (*ESF* 69) is of a “homeless God” (48) – a testament to the “piercing loneliness” of God (47).

In Chapter V, entitled “The Night Face of Sophia” (51-58), Pramuk draws attention to a passage Thomas Merton wrote in January, 1965 in which Merton reflects on “living together with wisdom” (52) and records a thought that came to him during meditation. Pramuk quotes the somewhat lengthy passage, recorded in Merton’s journal *Dancing in the Water of Life*.⁶ It merits a place in this review as well because it illustrates so powerfully what all who seek to live together with wisdom today need to recognize and confront:

The error of racism is the logical consequence of an essentialist style of thought. Finding out what a man is and then nailing him to a definition so that there can be no change. A White Man is a White Man, and that is it. A Negro, even though he is three parts white is “A Negro” with all that our rigid definition predicates of a Negro. And so the logical machine can devour him because of his essence. Do you think that in an era of existentialism this will get better?

4. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 120-21.

5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 159-61.

6. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 200-201.

On the contrary: definitions, more and more schematic, are fed into computers. The machines are meditating on the most arbitrary and rudimentary of essences, punched into IBM cards, and defining you and me forever without appeal. “A priest,” “A Negro,” “A Jew,” “A Socialist,” etc. (52)

In his dreams and waking hours, Merton confronted the “‘the dark face, the “night face” of Sophia,’ the Child bound and disfigured by ‘the world of rapacious men,’” and in her, Christ still crucified (54). Turning to Merton’s relationship with M., the student nurse with whom Merton fell in love in 1966, Pramuk quotes a revealing passage from Merton’s journal *Learning to Love*:⁷ “Strange connection in my deepest heart – between M. and the ‘Wisdom’ figure – and Mary – and the Feminine in the Bible – Eve, etc. – Paradise – Most Mysterious, haunting, deep, lovely, moving, transforming!” (56). Merton’s love for M. enabled him to “believe – that is, to experience and trust – that at the base of all reality is the wisdom of Love, Sophia, a wisdom which deepens whenever we truly love another person” (57). Reading Merton’s relationship with M. in the context of Merton’s encounters with Sophia opens the door to viewing Merton’s falling in love with M. as one of a number of epiphanies of Merton’s life.

In Chapter VI, “Bearer of Hope” (61-69), Pramuk strikes a chord that is particularly germane for our times: “the breakthrough of Sophia corresponds with the crisis of hope in the human community” (61). Mindful of the times in which Merton was writing *Hagia Sophia* and of the times in which we are living, I find myself resonating with Pramuk’s thesis: “Hope in the key of Wisdom awakens ‘that freedom which we have often looked for,’ drawing us into the future, the future of God’s own imagining” (63). Sophia is “the great stabilizer” (61) in the face of evil and suffering. As Merton expressed it in *Hagia Sophia* (ESF 61-62), “It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth. It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions, into unity of love” (63).

As in Chapter VI he remembers the words of hope written by Fr. Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest executed by the Nazis,⁸ in Chapter VII, “She Cannot Be a Prisoner” (71-85), Pramuk honors the memory of Etty

7. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 131.

8. See Thomas Merton, “The Prison Meditations of Father Delp,” in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 47-68.

Hillesum, a twenty-nine-year-old Dutch Jew executed at Auschwitz. The title of the chapter captures the freedom of Hillesum's spirit – a freedom that could not be extinguished by “cruelty and arbitrary violence” (81). In her diary, published under the title of *An Interrupted Life*,⁹ Hillesum wrote: “at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life, and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective” (72). In another passage, she records a prayer in which she identifies what really matters: “that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves” (74). In women consenting to the divine presence – in Mary the Mother of Jesus, in Hillesum, in women demanding justice such as Sr. Dorothy Stang, the “Mothers of the Disappeared,” Somaly Mam and other Cambodian women; in women of the Bible such as Hagar and Mary Magdalen; in literary characters and artists – in all these women and the multitude of others, women and men who go unnamed, “divine Wisdom cries out from the crossroads in protest, identifying herself especially with the little, the hidden, and the forgotten ones and with suffering earth, the Mother of all God's children” (82-83). In Merton's words (*ESF* 64), Wisdom-Sophia “cannot be a prisoner” (83). “Hope in the key of Wisdom,” Pramuk concludes, “refuses to accommodate itself to the lock-tight logic of The Way Things Are as preached by the powers and principalities in society or church” (84).

The title of Chapter VIII, “Breathe in the Air” (87-95), is inspired by African-American theologian Howard Thurman, who recalled walking a Florida beach at night:¹⁰ “I had the sense that all things, the sand, the sea, the stars, the night, and I were one lung through which all of life breathed. Not only was I aware of a vast rhythm enveloping all, but I was a part of it and it was a part of me” (89). Thurman's unitive vision is not merely descriptive; it is prescriptive – as is Merton's. Breathing in the air is breathing *in* Sophia-Wisdom – breathing *Her in* and breathing *in Her*. So doing, we come “to see with eyes of mercy and love” (93).

Noting that the whole book “has circled around the question of God, and thus, the struggle for faith, hope, and love, in unsettling times,” Pramuk begins the last chapter, “To Say Something Worthy of God” (97-109), with this simple, but nonetheless profound, observation: “So much depends on our image of God! So much depends

9. Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

10. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979).

on our idea of humanity” (97). Merton guides us as we seek to see God as God is and to see humanity as it is – knowing the discovery of God and self-discovery are two aspects of a single movement. As prophet and poet, Merton “unveil[s]” Sophia as “the power of God’s mercy” (99), thus showing us who God is and who we are. Drawing from Walter Brueggemann’s book *The Prophetic Imagination*,¹¹ Pramuk notes that the prophet and the poet “must speak for a silent God” (103). Prophets draw us into “the breach,” and poets, Merton wrote,¹² “help us to get back to ourselves before it is too late” (103). Inspired by Merton’s Sophia-God, we can, as Pramuk does, see God not only as a person in Jesus Christ but as Woman, Mother, Child, Lover, Sister, Companion, Friend (104). In closing, Pramuk returns full circle to his pre-eminent theme: “*Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator*” (107; *ESF* 66).

This book is a must-read. In it, Merton’s life, theology and spirituality come alive in a way that can make a difference in how we see God and ourselves as well as how we read and understand Merton. This is not just another book about Merton. Rather, Pramuk challenges the reader to take Merton seriously as a spiritual and moral guide and thus to go “beyond Merton.” While he contextualizes Merton’s experience and vision in his own times, Pramuk urges the readers to respond to our times as Merton did to his. Just as Merton interjected “the gentle voice of Sophia” into what he termed “a season of fury,” so too must we awaken to Sophia in our own time of fury. In his Introduction to *At Play in Creation*, Pramuk expresses an aim in the form of “an author’s humble prayer: that these pages might stir in others what awakens in me as I engage Merton’s dance with Sophia – a renewed sense of God’s nearness and friendship, and above all a fierce hope, rising not from any formal ‘theology’ as such but divined from the hidden matrices of life itself, Life made from Love. For Wisdom ‘cries out to all who will hear, and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless’” (xi). It is not enough to be content with learning what Merton had to say about Sophia-Wisdom; we need to awaken to the life-giving presence of Sophia-Wisdom as Merton did and then to live joyfully and justly with one another in Her presence on this earth that is our common home.

Christine M. Bochen

11. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

12. See Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 340.