

Illuminating Wisdom

Review of

Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton

By Christopher Pramuk

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Reviewed by **Ryan Scruggs**

Christopher Pramuk's *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, is nothing less than a gift to Merton scholars, serious theologians, and contemplatively-minded Christians alike. If it is not too contrived to conceive of the impact of this book in concentrically increasing spheres of influence, it is first of all a contextualization of and commentary on Merton's hailed prose-poem, *Hagia Sophia*; it is moreover a theologically penetrating and poetically beautiful exposition of Merton's mature Christology, with all its implications for interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement; and finally, it is a call to contemporary theology in the broadest sense for a holistic methodology that is content not simply with thinking right thoughts about God, but rather seeks to invoke the very presence of God through sacramental imagination – through *Sophia*.

By “sacramentalizing” I mean that the speculative language of sophiology – and above all, the biblical *name* Sophia – is not mere wordplay for Merton but bears the analogical capacity to awaken in the responsive human community an authentic memory of God, a palpable hope for liberation, and a real Presence in whom we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). (169)

Thus he sums up his argument in the first five chapters by suggesting that “the name Sophia can become a privileged meeting place for the encounter with God, the one God of all peoples” (209).

Throughout the text Pramuk acknowledges – along with Merton – the “risk” and even “danger” of engaging the sophianic tradition, yet his courage is resolute and his discernment intact as he presses forward offering an insightful and even inspiring interpretation of what he concludes to be a “compelling and trustworthy case of dogmatic searching” (292). But it is so much more for Pramuk than simple “dogmatic searching.” Although he is aware of the tentative place of sophiology both within Scripture and the teaching of the Church (293), he is persuasive in his argument that “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). Although Pramuk possesses all the tools of a systematic theologian his primary task is *spiritual* because he recognizes both his Subject and his Reader as *personal*. As such Pramuk's commitment – following Rahner – is “to a manner of doing theology that rises out of prayer, communal life, and the doxology of faith” (23).

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This marriage of theological acumen and spiritual vision is wholly suited to understanding Merton who was unable to view them apart.

The book is a sustained argument, so I'd like to offer a brief summary of my own reading. In chapter one Pramuk offers a helpful introduction to Merton's mystical theology, his expansive Christology, and his awakening to universal wisdom in the last decade of his life. We are initiated to Merton's understanding of the Christian mystical tradition as "a collective memory and experience of Christ" (22), which is a pivotal definition for Pramuk as he unpacks the role of *memoria* for knowing in chapter three.

In chapter two Pramuk constructs an epistemological framework that fundamentally affirms an accessible and even immediate ontological Reality beyond and within theological poetics. He enters into fruitful conversation with John Henry Newman and Abraham Joshua Heschel with the aim to "ground the epistemological claim supporting the remainder of [his] study – namely, that Merton's theology makes old things new 'not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions . . . by description'" (33). By this he means to suggest that Merton as a writer used words not simply to interpret his experience – much less to batter around concepts – but as religious symbols through which to encounter the very presence of God: "Merton guides the reader through word and image into the pivotal realm of communion and presence" (33).

Chapter three extends this argument by showing how Merton utilizes "theological symbols such as 'Logos,' 'Christ,' 'Spirit,' and 'Sophia'" not as "word-magic" but "as *sacraments*, vessels of memory, presence, and hope that bring together realities, 'the flowering of ordinary possibilities' ever present but hidden in the world" (80-81). This capacity for encountering the Other (human or divine) is strange and difficult for moderns shaped by a Cartesian consciousness that, at its root, tends toward the objectification of all reality beyond my own subjectivity. The notion of God-as-object has led to the "death of God" and in turn to a commodification of the whole world – "The time will come when they will sell you even your rain" (95). In response to this spiritual sterility Merton offers us old things made new: specifically, a *sapiential* consciousness that Merton considers "ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division" (98); one that is capable of immediate and concrete experience of God by grace. This, according to Pramuk, is an expression of Merton's mature epistemology and theological method: "Wisdom is not only speculative [beyond "systematic knowledge"], but also practical: that is to say, it is 'lived.' And unless one 'lives' it, one cannot 'have' it. It is not only speculative but creative. It is expressed in living signs and symbols" (102-103). Most significantly it is an awareness common, even revealed, to all (103). Pramuk ties his argument in the first half of the book together by suggesting that the theological symbol serves as "a privileged vessel of *memory*," "a vessel of *real presence*," and "a locus of participatory *hope*" (114-15). Theological symbols, then, guide us into the mystical tradition of the Church which is "a collective memory and experience of Christ living and present within her" (118).

In chapter four Pramuk excavates the sources of Merton's sophiology. The logical progression from symbols to Sophia is clear: "our task here is to illumine the emergence of Sophia as Merton's most vivid symbol for expressing 'a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations'" (132). Pramuk succinctly and surely guides us through four significant "Mentors in Wisdom" for Merton: D. T. Suzuki, Herakleitos, Maximus Confessor, and Boris Pasternak. Then he turns to the Russians and their substantial influence on Merton –

Sergius Bulgakov and Paul Evdokimov especially. In both cases his analysis is rich and rewarding. Following Bulgakov, he clarifies the temptation to view Sophia as a fourth Person in the Godhead; she is rather the very *ousia* of God. Yet she is more. She is also paradoxically identified with “the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity,” and even “the eternal humanity in God” (156). While a deeper look here is required, suffice it to say that Pramuk is a refreshing read because of his courage and ability to address thorny theological issues without reducing Merton’s spiritual imagination to theological abstraction. He insists that there is “nothing abstract or esoteric for Merton about the experience of Christ as Sophia, the Wisdom of God” (171); the experience is simply a matter of opening oneself to the spiritual nature of all matter raised and sanctified through the incarnation. Note that for Merton the incarnation is not automatically redemptive; the cross and our subsequent obedience are still paramount (186).

Chapter five is the heart of Pramuk’s study. His theological analysis here is the most helpful introduction to the nature of Merton’s inclusive and cosmic Christology of which I am aware: “Christ as the Wisdom of God, Sophia, in whom the cosmos is created and sustained” (177). He rightly contends that Merton’s theological vision is thoroughly analogical rather than dialectical; the complementary doctrines of incarnation and *theosis* therefore take on immense importance. “If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God,” as Merton puts it in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, “there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ” (179). Said another way, “Our vocation as images of the Image, living reflections (icons) of Sophia, is already written, so to speak, in the eternal dance of trinitarian life. Human life always and everywhere ‘is ontologically suspended from the life of God’” (181). Pramuk wrestles briefly with the lingering neo-scholasticism in Merton’s ecclesiology, though I am not as convinced as he that Merton would have purged himself of all distinction between the Church and the world had he written *The New Man* a decade later – triumphalistic though it may sound. Finally, Pramuk delves into his primary task in the book by undertaking a close reading and interpretation of Merton’s *Hagia Sophia*. His service in further opening this beautiful yet difficult prose-poem is greatly appreciated; his theological evaluation of its significance in light of five chapters of preparation is invaluable. What strikes me most is Pramuk’s suggestion that “the naming of God is not about identification, but *identity*”; thus, “the name Sophia can become a privileged meeting place for the encounter with God, the one God of all peoples” (209). “The poem disrupts all self-enclosed worldviews, every arrogance, idolatry, patriarchy, or religious fundamentalism that would justify the erasure or diminishment of person, any person, in the name of God” (210).

The book’s final chapter is an opportunity for Pramuk to delve more deeply into the sophiology of Soloviev and Bulgakov, and to probe the significance of sophiology for contemporary theology. Admittedly these final thoughts are dense and not easily penetrable. At times it seems as though Pramuk has left Merton behind to concentrate on the Russians, but his wide-ranging expertise can only be applauded as a tremendous contribution to understanding the sources of Merton’s sophianic theology. “*This is precisely what Merton saw in the Russians*: the doctrine of the humanity of God as a basis for Christian humanism, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, and the church’s engagement in the modern world” (235). He explores various possible avenues of discovery opened by sophiology including: Christology and theological anthropology; trinitarian thought and cosmology; ecology; and feminist theology. Although Pramuk acknowledges many of the potential

problems – I raise nothing that he does not address – some remain live questions in my mind. Does Merton’s cosmic Christ risk losing the particularity of Jesus as a unique Person *in history*? Does Merton’s “high anthropology” tend toward a “wholly realized” eschatological vision of reality – one that neglects the radical reality of evil here and now? Does the panentheism proposed by Bulgakov (and taken up by Merton?) leave space for the creature to act freely as a creature distinct from God? However, despite these reservations I can wholeheartedly affirm a sophiological view of revelation “not as the disclosure of once-for-all truth so much as the invitation to participate in the ongoing *event* of drawing the created order into communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Wisdom is not simply knowledge but participation, the graced effort to make every dimension of human and natural life transparent to God’s glory” (269).

Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton represents a new starting point in Merton studies. There is no doubt that Pramuk’s book deserves and will receive significant attention. Merton has been praised and criticized for his accessibility – praised because his works are filled with life and spiritual vitality and criticized because his works at times seem to lack theological rigor. Perhaps in this light the greatest gift Pramuk offers in his book is twofold: it is first a reminder for those who read Merton that his *theology matters*; but it is also a reminder for serious theologians that *Merton matters*. Of course I would be remiss not to conclude that more than these, *Sophia matters*.