

Fruitful Encounters

Review of

At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine

By Christopher Pramuk

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Reviewed by **Edward K. Kaplan**

Enthusiastic endorsements welcome readers to Christopher Pramuk's new book as a sensitive spiritual journey. Combining meditative and analytical approaches, each of the nine brief chapters carefully steers us through Thomas Merton's varied works and dwells upon turning points in his life – all the while maintaining a focus on Merton's grand and mysterious prose poem, *Hagia Sophia*. Pramuk is a lucid and dependable guide, and he explains at the outset that "This small book represents the distillation of many years of reflection on Wisdom-Sophia, the feminine manifestation of God's presence in the world" (ix).

Our shared goal is both meditative and dialogical: "I invite the reader in the following pages to try to listen from the inside, as it were, so as to discern something of the music or intuitive process by which Merton comes to internalize the vision of Sophia fully as his own and begins to communicate it with vitality in his writings" (28). Indeed, Pramuk has fine-tuned these reflections as elements of a retreat, which we gladly join, as individuals or in groups.

Pramuk's elegant, devout writings are essentially interfaith, revitalizing and transcending Catholic theology: all human beings are incarnations of the divine, created in God's image as the Jewish tradition defines it, a position worked out in his foundational, and prize-winning, theological study, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (2009). There he explains his radically humanistic theology with the linguistic insights of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and John Henry Cardinal Newman. Pramuk's next book was more explicitly personal, more autobiographical, even "activist." *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line* (2013) ranges over diverse elements of contemporary culture, such as music (especially Motown and Stevie Wonder); the Jewish origins of "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday's haunting blues ballad about the horrors of lynching; conflicts in the United States around sexual and racial identity, and much more – accompanied by deeply sensitive photographs. Pramuk turns to writings by the African-American mystic Howard Thurman, and returns to Rabbi Heschel, Cardinal Newman and Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman from Amsterdam incarcerated by the Nazis, whose diary treasures memories of sensual intimacy, and hope, before she was murdered in Auschwitz. Pramuk shares deeply personal events: how he

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and his wife adopted two children from the demolished slums of Haiti, and his family's grace-filled moments of worship, embraced by an African-American Catholic congregation. A chapter on "Differences" specifies particular cases of racial and class hatred, including the death of Matthew Shepard, the young man left for dead by homophobic peers.

At Play in Creation advances the itinerary traced by the first two books. Readers will appreciate the clarity of this intense focus on Merton the thinker, the poet and the man. Chapter 3, "Dawn of Wisdom" (27-38) traces the emergence of Sophia in Merton's consciousness, from his reading of Russian theologians (see also chapter 5, "The Night Face of Sophia" [51-58]). Assimilating the analyses of Susan McCaslin, Pramuk provides the most accessible interpretation of this central text. Another highlight is chapter 8, "Breathe in the Air" (87-95), which develops an especially poignant analysis of Howard Thurman and Abraham Heschel on "radical amazement" (88). Pramuk celebrates the "disarming paradox of religious experience" (90), recalling the spontaneous prayer of his young son, Henry, before the mighty ocean. And yes, he deals forthrightly with Father Louis's infatuation with M., the student nurse, an authentic love, Pramuk insists, that opened the world to him. Pramuk cites other interpreters of the "'erotic' dimension of the sophiological worldview" (123, n. 26).

Above all, this book is concise without compromising depth and significant detail. His informative endnotes (which preserve the simplicity of his exposition) call upon writings by Heschel, Thurman, Rowan Williams, Bill McKibben and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (for a Sufi perspective), among many others. It is an accessible, intimate journey, activist and contemplative – worthy of frequent rereading and meditation.