

Introduction: “Sophia Comes Forth, Reaching”

David Golemboski

As I write this, we are in the early days of the Advent season, and my young children are captivated by the nightly ritual of finding the next door to open on the Advent calendar, and then reading the next snippet of the Christmas story that is revealed behind it. I, in turn, am routinely humbled by the challenge of articulating to them what it means to profess faith in a God who arrives as a baby in a manger. The simplest expression I can find is also the one that feels most true: God came to Earth in Jesus because God wants to be close to people – close to *us*. That notion of an incarnate God was central to Thomas Merton’s spirituality. Christine Bochen has described Merton’s contemplative vision of the world as an “incarnational humanism,”¹ premised on the understanding that to be human is to be “the object of divine mercy, and of special concern on the part of God . . . as, in some mysterious sense, an epiphany of the divine wisdom.”²

Encounter with divine wisdom was a central theme of the Eighteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, held on the campus of Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana, in June 2023. The conference – at which the articles published in this volume were originally presented – was organized around a phrase from Merton’s magnificent prose poem *Hagia Sophia*.³ That poem is, as Christopher Pramuk writes, “Merton’s consummate hymn to the theological dignity of humankind and of all creation.”⁴ The phrase that provided the conference theme was this: “Sophia comes forth, reaching” (*ESF* 65; *CP* 367). Fittingly for a conference held at a Catholic women’s college, the figure of Sophia conjures a feminine face of the divine. Moreover, the phrase highlights the *activity* of divine wisdom: coming forth, reaching out to

1. Christine M. Bochen, Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) xxix (subsequent reference will be cited as “*CWL*” parenthetically in the text).

2. December 13, 1961 letter to Bruno Schlesinger (*CWL* 22).

3. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962); 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); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363-71 (subsequent references will be cited as “*CP*” parenthetically in the text).

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

humanity. As Merton writes elsewhere in the poem, “Her delights are to be with the children of men” (*ESF* 66; *CP* 368). At a moment in history when the world feels increasingly riven by war, division and alienation, the season of incarnational celebration offers both a consolation and a challenge: consolation that Sophia, divine wisdom, is reaching out to us; and a challenge to let that encounter with wisdom guide us to recover the humanistic core of Merton’s spiritual vision.

It is appropriate, then, that this volume of *The Merton Annual* opens with the words of one of the last century’s most notable Christian peace-makers. Completing the publication of the extant correspondence begun in Volume 35, we here present letters written by **Jim Forest** to Thomas Merton in the three final years of the monk’s life. Forest, of course, was a prominent peace activist who co-founded the Catholic Peace Fellowship and was active with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. These previously unpublished letters shed additional light on the deep friendship between Merton and Jim Forest. Merton served as a mentor to Forest; Forest once described Merton as “my spiritual father during the last seven years of his life.”⁵ The letters included here span from January 1966 through late 1968, and while they include many mundane pleasantries and minutiae, they also document Forest’s work in the peace activism communities of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Emmaus House in Harlem and beyond. They also detail his efforts at advocating for policy change in the midst of the Vietnam War. In 1967, Forest recounts his efforts advocating for medical relief for victims of the war, and invites Merton to contribute a statement on the issue. Describing a recent meeting with a U.S. senator, Forest writes: “How rare, altogether rare, are men in Washington who will say what they think, vote for what they believe!” Reading these in-real-time reports on the peace struggle provides a sense of the scrappiness and persistence of the movement that Forest helped to build, as well as of the importance of Merton’s monastic spiritual counsel to Forest’s own sense of purpose. With Forest’s death just a couple of years behind us, we are proud to continue celebrating his legacy by completing this set of letters.

Next, we present two texts that were originally delivered as plenary addresses at this summer’s ITMS conference. **Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer**’s essay “The Feminine in Merton’s Life” provides a survey of a number of women who played important roles in Merton’s life – from his mother, to the women he pursued as a rambunctious university student, to spiritual guides such as Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, to personal friends such as Dorothy Day and his literary agent, Naomi Burton Stone,

5. Jim Forest, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines: A Memoir* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020) 261.

to “M.,” the woman with whom he had a brief romantic affair in 1966. Bingemer makes the case that Merton grew substantially in his relationship to women over time, and presented an “unusual openness not only to the feminine but to concrete and real women.” As women continue to struggle for recognition of their perspectives, voices and gifts – in the Church as in society – Bingemer presents Merton as a guide and resource.

Jung Eun Sophia Park’s essay, “Dancing with Thomas Merton in the Borderland,” takes a more personal tack. Building on the reflections in her book *An Asian Woman’s Religious Journey with Thomas Merton: A Journey to the East / A Journey to the West*,⁶ Park shares how Merton’s wisdom has informed her sense of vocation and identity. Park admits that her early engagement with Merton was primarily a matter of intellectual analysis of his writing, shaded with some suspicion of the perspective of a white, male, American monk – a perspective far from her own as a Korean woman. Over time, however, she reports that “I began to feel humbled before Merton’s struggle to find his true self,” and “I found my true self in this process of pondering and doubting Merton’s life.” Park ends her essay with Merton’s famous prayer – “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going”⁷ – and any reader who was present for Park’s delivery of this prayer at Saint Mary’s College will doubtless recall how touchingly powerful those words rang. For all the differences of identity, location and experience that may distance Merton from his readers, the experiences of uncertainty, searching and hoping are ones with which any of us can identify.

The volume then continues with seven original works of scholarship on Merton, all of which were presented in earlier form during the 2023 conference at Saint Mary’s. A fitting opening to this collection of work is an essay by **Patricia A. Sayre** titled “Alone Together: The Solitary Ties That Bind Thomas Merton and Elena Malits, CSC.” Sayre is a professor of philosophy at Saint Mary’s, and her essay weaves recollections of her personal relationship with Sr. Elena Malits along with an analysis of the “mysterious alchemy” in the relationship between Malits and Merton. Malits was a founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society and authored the pioneering book *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton’s Transforming Journey*.⁸ Though she and Merton never met in

6. Jung Eun Sophia Park, *An Asian Woman’s Religious Journey with Thomas Merton: A Journey to the East / A Journey to the West* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

7. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 83.

8. Elena Malits, *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton’s Transforming Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

person, Sayre portrays Malits's decades-long engagement with Merton as a "dialogue" that gives Merton's work "an on-going life in return for the life he gave to her." Sayre's reflections are as insightful as they are touching, and provide a worthy tribute to Sr. Elena Malits in wake of her death in 2022.

Callie Tabor continues in the spirit of plumbing Merton's relationships to holy women in an essay relating Merton's thinking on sainthood with the writings of Sr. Thea Bowman. Bowman was a leader in the African American Catholic community, and a founder of the National Black Sisters' conference, and Tabor's essay highlights her notion of "selving" – of being her "fully functioning self" – as an exemplification of Merton's understanding of sanctity as the discovery of one's true identity. Titled "The Sanctity of the Self: Women and Sainthood in Conversation with Thomas Merton and Sr. Thea Bowman," the essay argues that this way of conceptualizing holiness can challenge narrow conventional paradigms of female sainthood that have centered on purity, motherhood and self-abnegation.

Merton's understanding of holiness as identification with one's true self is encapsulated in his well-known assertion that "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree."⁹ The tree is, in a sense, a model of the holiness to which we humans might aspire. The next essay in this volume further explores the important place of nature in Merton's contemplative spirituality. In an essay titled "Neither This nor That: Merton's Communion with Nature," **Aaron J. Godlaski** shows that Merton's growing attentiveness to nature – especially to the woods surrounding his hermitage – guided him toward non-dualistic forms of mystical spirituality. In one portion of his essay, Godlaski points to a striking passage in Merton's journals where he recounts a moment of insight prompted by the sight of a flower in the sunlight: "This flower, this light, this moment, this silence = *Dominus est*, eternity! Best because the flower is itself and the light is itself and the silence is itself and I am myself – all, perhaps, an illusion."¹⁰ Merton recorded this moment of insight five weeks before his famous Fourth and Walnut epiphany, and Godlaski provocatively notes that before Merton was struck by his love for the strangers in Louisville's shopping district, it was an encounter with the natural world that facilitated a moment of insight into the self and its connection to the world around.

The next essay in this volume explores connections between Merton

9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 29.

10. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 164.

and an important figure in modern literature. In “‘A World That Wants to Flourish in Love’: Thomas Merton, Rainer Maria Rilke and the Hidden Wholeness of Creation,” **John M. Gillespie** draws comparisons between Merton’s work and that of the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Merton was drawn to Rilke over the course of his life, and a number of scholars have previously explored this connection. Gillespie builds on that existing work by exploring new areas of intersection. Perhaps most notably, Gillespie relates Merton’s embrace of the feminine face of divine wisdom in the figure of Sophia to an exhortation that Rilke offers in his poem “Turning Point”: “Learn, inner man, to look at your inner woman.” Both authors, Gillespie argues, recognize a feminine aspect of their personalities that are essential to both creativity and communion with others. This way of framing the “common vision” shared by Merton and Rilke invites the reader to a deeper appreciation of both authors, and enriches our understanding of the relationship between the two.

The two subsequent articles further situate Merton in his time, examining his relationship to elements of counter-culture that burgeoned during the latter half of the 1960s. **David M. Odorisio**’s essay “‘Not Drugs but Night’: Thomas Merton on LSD and the Psychology of Religious Experience” takes a careful look at Merton’s thinking on the relationship between psychedelic drugs and mystical experience. Odorisio surveys journal entries and letters in which Merton is generally critical toward the popular turn toward psychedelics. The essay takes its title from a journal entry in which Merton expresses his preference for religious experiences in the vein of St. John of the Cross’s “dark night of the soul” over the synthetic spirituality provided by what Merton describes as the “quicker, cheaper, easier means” of drugs. Odorisio shows, however, that Merton was not merely a prudish scold, but demonstrated sensitivity to the desire for intense mystical experience that drove many people to psychedelics, and used the phenomenon as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of “authentic” mysticism. As psychedelic drugs are finding something of a revival in the present day, this survey of Merton’s careful – yet critical – assessment of their relationship to genuine spirituality is a timely contribution.

Additionally, Odorisio has prepared a handful of previously unpublished texts by Merton that further illuminate his thinking on spirituality and psychedelic drugs: an unpublished 1967 letter of Merton to Dr. John Aiken, who had written to Merton to express his support for therapeutic uses of psychedelics; transcriptions of audio recordings of a conference Merton gave to the monastic community on “LSD and Youth Culture” in 1967 and a self-recording produced in the hermitage in that same

year; and an original translation of a review essay by Merton, also from 1967, titled “Psychedelic Spirituality” that was originally published in French. These texts enrich the portrait of Merton’s engagement with the psychedelic movement of the 1960s that Odorisio paints in his article.

Then, **Jim Robinson**’s article “Both ‘Hippie Monk’ and Distanced Critic: Thomas Merton and the 1960s Counterculture” explores Merton’s ambivalent relationship to the hippie movement. Merton’s ambivalence is captured succinctly (and hilariously) in a sentence Robinson draws from a letter Merton wrote to Rosemary Radford Ruether: “You ask about the hippies and from what I know of them the idea sounds good, attractive, and also pathetic.”¹¹ Robinson argues that Merton actually identified with the hippie movement’s embrace of marginality. Taking up such a vantage point can provide one – whether hippie or monk – with a critical perspective on social ills. At the same time, Robinson shows that Merton was critical of the hippie movement’s impulse to simplistic romanticism. Robinson also offers reflections on Merton’s relationship to psychedelics, effectively situating that specific issue within the context of Merton’s broader relationship to the counter-cultural movements of his day.

Finally, in an essay titled “*Dao* and *Sophia*: A Dance of Two Names,” **Huili S. (Kathy) Stout** places Merton in dialogue with the Eastern religious tradition of Daoism. Drawing once again on Merton’s *Hagia Sophia*, as well as his book *The Way of Chuang Tzu*,¹² Stout explores the connection that Merton drew between *Sophia* and *Dao*. For instance, Stout highlights that both *Sophia* and *Dao* are commonly represented with feminine qualities. Stout ultimately concludes that there are substantial doctrinal obstacles to fully reconciling *Sophia* and *Dao* on an intellectual level, but suggests that through a “sophianic stance” of openness to and communion with others, *Sophia* may inspire dialogue between Christians and followers of *Dao*, building on the very model of dialogue that Merton exemplified.

Then, as always, the volume concludes with a bibliographic review of new works by or about Merton, written by co-editor Bernadette McNary-Zak, and ten reviews of recent books.

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As the contents of this volume were being edited, news arrived of the passing of Victor A. Kramer, a founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society, editor of the fourth published volume of Merton’s

11. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 512.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).

journals,¹³ and a founding editor of this journal. Kramer's 1984 book, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist*,¹⁴ remains a classic. I revisited it after receiving news of his death, and I am struck by the paragraph that closed the original edition: "Merton would be amused if he could see the army of scholars at work on his literary production. Yet he would also be pleased that so many readers can gather so much, learn, *be* – because of what he has given us. Above all, Thomas Merton's writing is a gift, and through that gift given to him, others can make a similar journey" (Kramer 153).

Nearly four decades later, the "army of scholars" has grown wider than even Kramer would likely have anticipated in 1984. The work compiled in this volume is a testament to the gift that Merton's writing continues to provide. It is also a testament to the pioneers in the study of Merton, like Victor Kramer, who brought Merton's letters and journals to publication, who did the first wave of biographical and exegetical study on Merton, and who laid the foundation for the community of scholars (as well as poets, artists, pastors, activists and all manner of other vocations) who continue to build on that early work today. We dedicate this volume in his honor.

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

14. Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton* (Boston: Twayne, 1984); augmented edition: *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987) (subsequent reference will be cited as "Kramer" parenthetically in the text).