

Living our theology with Merton's feminine image of God

John Dear | Oct. 5, 2010 On the Road to Peace

My friend Fr. Bill called me a few months ago with great excitement.

"I just finished reading the best book ever about Thomas Merton," he said. Then my friend Fr. Pat came to visit from Ireland and, one of the first things he said was, "I just finished the best book ever written about Thomas Merton."

While having breakfast with my friend Trappist Br. Patrick Hart -- who was Merton's secretary -- at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky recently I asked him about the book.

He didn't miss a beat. "The best book ever written about Thomas Merton," Hart said.

The book? *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* [1] by Christopher Pramuk.

An assistant professor of theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Pramuk has broken new ground with this scholarly masterpiece. The book explores Merton's life and writings through his discovery of Holy Wisdom as a path -- in a time of "unspeakable violence" -- into the mystery of God, and thus the mystery of being human.

Merton scholar Larry Cunningham says the book is "far and away the most sophisticated theological study ever done on the writings of Thomas Merton."

Pramuk has jumped to the head of the pack and become one of our premiere theologians.

I've been reading Merton seriously for thirty years, but after reading this I think I understand him for the first time. Over the course of his monastic life, Merton discovered Sophia -- the Wisdom of God as Christ. It helped Merton turn toward the world beyond the monastery and led him toward Sophia/Christ.

St. John named Christ as the *Logos* (masculine), the Word; St. Paul named Christ as *Sophia* (feminine), Holy Wisdom. Pramuk proposes that we too -- individually and as a church -- can reclaim the divine feminine, Sophia, the Wisdom of God. And like Merton, we can be transformed anew into Christ and be able to help one another to fullness of life, hope and peace.

Some say we become the image of God we worship. Sophia, of course, is one name for the divine feminine, featured in famous passages such as Proverbs 8:25-31. But for centuries the institutional church has ignored the feminine dimension of God in and among us and cultivated a judgmental, violent, male image of God.

In our hunger for that feminine dimension Catholics looked to Mary even though she is not divine. Merton's hunger for the feminine in God and in his own life may be symbolic of the Western church's hunger for the divine feminine, the wisdom of God.

Many have written on Wisdom literature and theology, but Pramuk's use of Thomas Merton as our teacher and

exemplary practitioner shows us what "living with wisdom" looks like and how transformative it can become.

Pramuk names Merton as a theologian who bridges East and West. And he brings Merton's mystical-prophetic vision into dialogue with contemporary Christology, Russian sophiology and Buddhist Zen practice -- as well as John Henry Newman and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Pramuk suggests that the Hagia Sophia, which captured Merton's imagination and opened new doors to God for him, might do the same for us and lead us to a new understanding of God, ourselves, and healing peace. With the nightmarish problems in the church this is just what we need.

"Theology is a lifelong conversation with wonder and mystery," Pramuk says off-handedly in his acknowledgements. "To be "bitten by Merton" is to be initiated into a world of revelation, heightened expectation, and presence."

Pramuk then leads us into a fascinating conversation.

"The primary aim of this book is to draw out the features of Merton's mature Christology, especially its fruition in his view of Christ as Wisdom of God, the unknown and unseen Sophia, in whom the cosmos is created and sustained," Pramuk writes.

Merton's attention to religious experience was to more than doctrinal formulas. It was to divine presence and light more than revealed names, to personal transformation or awakening to the "true self" more than conceptual frameworks such as "salvation."

This attention facilitated Merton's uncanny ability to connect deeply with persons of enormously varied backgrounds -- he had that rare gift for allowing "the mystery of faith to be named and heard in a great many places where it is not usually named and heard."

Pramuk suggests:

with Merton's life as witness, that the remembrance of Sophia holds significant promise for invigorating (I do not say "centering") Christological and Trinitarian discourse in response to these increasingly fractured, technological, industrialized, and militarized times. Bound up closely with the biblical doctrine of creation and the patristic doctrines of incarnation, divinization and grace, a Wisdom or Sophia-inspired Christology offers a compelling narrative and metaphysical framework for making old things new again in theological discourse, for reimagining God's vital presence in the natural world, and for reaffirming in boldest dogmatic terms the transcendent dignity of human persons everywhere.

With this Christology, Pramuk seeks to do what the poet Merton did: lead others "into the realm of mercy, communion and presence."

"Sophia, the theological eros that animated Merton's religious imagination, might be capable of infusing new vitality into ours," Pramuk asserts. "Her voice might awaken in the lives of ordinary Christians, ways both ancient and new, of bringing to birth the love and mercy of Christ in a stricken world."

This book traces the emergence of Sophia in Merton's life and writings as a love and a presence that breaks through into the world -- a living symbol and name through which he encountered the living God and with which he chose, at his poetic and prophetic best, to structure theological discourse.

The book responds to the question of Merton's mature Christology by advancing the following thesis: it was Sophia -- the "unknown and unseen Christ" within all things -- who both centered and in many respects catalyzed Merton's theological imagination in a period of tremendous social, political, and religious fragmentation.

Drawing intuitively from sources in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as from non-Christian sources, and inspired especially by the Sophia tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, the Wisdom tradition became Merton's most vivid means of expressing "a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations."

Chapter one reviews Merton's awakening to Sophia as it weaved through the last decade of his life and how it shaped his mystical -- or sapiential -- approach to theology. Chapter two studies the pivotal role of the imagination in religious epistemology and theological method in light of Merton, Newman and Heschel -- arguing for "a poetic dimension" in theology.

Chapter three explores Merton's prophetic and global content, his turning to the world and to the Word of God -- to understand his religious imagination and to probe his basic confidence in and fluency with the sacramental power of language. Merton's awakening to Sophia in his desire to remember and name God anew is the other side to his revolutionary awakening to the world beyond the monastery. This is an original insight which explains the explosion of peacemaking in the last decade of Merton's life.

Merton chose the path of solidarity with a world in crisis, his prophecy taking the form of ruthlessly naming the present through the practice of language. Like Heschel -- in whom mysticism, poetics, and prophecy were also one -- Merton's mature voice is both "prophetic" and "apologetic," serving "not the justification of a fixed system" but the interruption of fixed systems -- not least theological ones -- in order "to convert our minds and hearts to God-centered consciousness."

Against the radical commodification of nature, sex, and human beings everywhere, Merton interjects the gentle voice of Sophia: "at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me." And a lament: "We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine. We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people."

"It is significant that Merton directs our gaze not to some nameless presence or hidden God-beyond-God," Pramuk asserts, "but to Christ the Wisdom of God, whose light transfigures all creation with love and resurrection hope, and whose presence shines in the face of every human being."

Chapter four chronicles the dawn of wisdom in Merton's theological consciousness, through Merton's essays on Suzuki, Herakleitos, Maximus, and Boris Pasternak.

"From the much-discussed epiphany at Fourth and Walnut in March of 1958 to his climactic pilgrimage in Asia, Sophia emerges as a kind of unifying presence and theological wellspring in Merton's life, both centering and catalyzing his outreach to others in friendship, dialogue and peacemaking," Pramuk writes in the chapter.

Chapter five analyzes the culmination of Merton's Christology in his 1962 prose poem masterpiece "Hagia Sophia", which celebrates divine wisdom as the feminine manifestation of God.

Pramuk calls the poem "a classic of modern Christian mysticism" not only for its bold rendering of the Catholic sacramental imagination, but also its "rare and wondrously realized marriage of Eastern and Western spirituality."

Pramuk traces Merton's growing awareness of Sophia as God; as the feminine child playing before God at all times and in the world; and as "unfathomable mercy, made manifest in the world by means of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Merton's famous paean to "My Sister Wisdom" begins:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being?

"Against a century of unspeakable violence and dehumanization, Hagia Sophia is Merton's consummate hymn to the theological dignity of humankind and of all creation," Pramuk writes. "It is a hymn to peace."

The concluding chapter takes up questions Merton was not able to address.

Why did Sophia attract new attention during the last century? Why Sophia -- and not simply a vigorous renewal of the more familiar terms of Christological or Trinitarian discourse?

Might Sophia be grasped against this fractured horizon as a kind of apocalyptic figure? Pramuk answers that sophiology represents a distinctive response to both the profound challenges of modernity and a century of unspeakable violence, breaking open and potentially revitalizing theology and spirituality in four areas:

1. Christology;
2. Trinity or cosmic theology;
3. Earth (or environmental theology); and
4. Eros and the feminine in God (sexuality, feminist theology).

He adds that sophiology could lead to a new "apocalyptic theology," "a theology of crisis" -- a bold attempt to retrieve the biblical vision of manifold creation and the diverse human community as essentially one, bound together in the life story of God from the beginning of time.

"Christ/Sophia is the presence of God breaking into history now," Pramuk writes, "calling human persons to a decisive break from the past, and renewing in the world, through human hearts and hands, a "sense of community with things in the work of salvation."?"

Pramuk concludes that the sophiological tradition implies a way of life -- a commitment to prayer, community, simplicity, solitude, artistic and vocation creativity, and asceticism -- all tested means in the Christian tradition for cultivating a wider love in relation to the world. It's what monastic spirituality calls purity of heart, poverty of spirit -- what Merton called "the prayerful ground of sanity, of peace."

Sophia is more than a metaphor for the universal presence of God, a kind of anonymous Christology in a feminine key. It is also a kind of real symbol and revealed name for what Orthodox theology calls "divinization" -- meaning the fullness of participation in the life of God.

Pramuk offers, in his own words, "not just Wisdom Christology, but a daring cosmology and theological anthropology, a vision of all things caught up in the life story of God from the beginning."

Were Merton alive Pramuk concludes he would recommend the way of wisdom as "the way forward."

"What we must really do," Merton told his brother monks at Gethsemani toward the end of his life, "is live our theology." Pramuk concludes: "To the degree we desire to live in peace with others and in sustainable harmony with "Mother Earth," we, too, will have to "live our theology," and all such living begins with prayer."

Thomas Merton called Sophia "the great stabilizer for peace," which means for me, the wisdom and way of nonviolence. He taught that "living with wisdom" is a life of peace, a life in Christ.

I've been amazed by the book and have been studying it all summer. While much of it sails over me, I'm excited and heartened by this new understanding of Merton's awakening to Sophia -- the hidden Christ, the Wisdom of God, who permeates all of life, who liberates us into the fullness of life. I hope that -- like Thomas Merton -- we too can awake to Sophia and discover anew the Wisdom of God within us and among us for the transformation and healing of our lives, our broken church, and the warring world.

This week, John will receive the "William Sloan Coffin Award" from Peace Action in New York City and will lead a retreat at the Adrian Dominican Center in Michigan. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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[1] <http://www.amazon.com/Sophia-Hidden-Christ-Thomas-Merton/dp/0814653901>

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