

“Christopher Pramuk’s latest work, *At Play in Creation*, offers a truly stunning introduction to the long-held but often forgotten Wisdom tradition. Priming our theological imaginations with the rich and sensuous language of poetry and with Merton’s poem *Hagia Sophia* as a guide, Pramuk opens us to the divine music hidden in each of our encounters and allows us to glimpse the unseen Reality whom Merton calls Sophia. She is the breath of God poured out through the world, the one who shines from the faces of those who show courage and compassion in situations that cry for mercy. Pramuk explores her many manifestations within the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and to people of various faith traditions, inviting us to peer into the liminal spaces of our own lives, the dark places, the places of our poverty where Sophia dwells and from which love springs. Myriad examples evidence the power of her presence and the depth of her love. This is a truly beautiful work, one that encourages deep contemplation of Sophia at work in our every encounter with Earth and with members of the human community and one that helps us to imagine how to speak of Christ in an age of pluralism.”

— Kathleen Duffy, SSJ

Author of *Teilhard’s Mysticism: Seeing the Inner Face of Evolution*  
Professor of Physics and Director of the Institute  
for Religion and Science  
Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“In the midst of this absolutely beautiful book of reflections on Wisdom in Thomas Merton, Christopher Pramuk asks, after citing a passage, ‘Can somebody say Amen?!’ Well, I can and am doing so with true delight. Pramuk brings together in his writing the poet and the scholar, the artist and the critic, the monk and prophet Merton was. His study of Wisdom in Merton is outstanding. This collection of reflections is a feast; Wisdom truly has set her table for us in them.”

— Michael Plekon, PhD

Professor, Sociology/Anthropology, Coordinator  
of the Program in Religion & Culture  
Baruch College of the City University of New York

“Born of Christopher Pramuk’s prayerful pondering, and in sharing his questions and questing with others through retreats and talks, *At Play in Creation* is a lovely and inviting journey through the Sophia/Wisdom tradition. The writings of Thomas Merton, Etty Hillesum, poets, musicians, theologians/mystics of the Russian Sophia/Wisdom and Jewish traditions become the lens for exploring the Divine in the midst of a humanity bent on self-destruction. I found this oddly hope-filled and energizing. We *can* be the change we want to see in the world.”

— Laura Swan, OSB

Author of *The Benedictine Tradition and Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women’s Movement*

“In Christopher Pramuk’s marvelous new book, lyrical theology and thoughtfully grounded spirituality merge into one. His ‘voice’ resonates in harmony with Thomas Merton’s. As a professor of theology, Pramuk reads Merton well, but then as poet and musician, he sings and plays with Merton’s most significant themes in a fresh, new key. He hovers widely over Merton’s texts and darts after moments of beauty that represent Merton’s lived affirmation of the Divine Feminine, *Hagia Sophia*, as deeply implicated in Merton’s hopes for the world’s ultimate salvation. Pramuk lures his reader to appreciate Holy Wisdom’s epiphany among us as mercy and loving kindness, even as we experience the gaze of Sorrow’s face; Sophia is the divine blessing who grounds our renewal in the Spirit, even in the face of everything that is failing us. Pramuk is now my go-to theologian/poet for a trustworthy rendition of Merton’s legacy. I smell a ‘classic’ about to be born before my grateful eyes.”

— Jonathan Montaldo

Author of *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton*

# **At Play in Creation**

Merton's Awakening  
to the Feminine Divine

*Christopher Pramuk*



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*To my mother Gladys Pramuk,  
poet, woman of strength, friend*

*And to my son Isaiah, gentle and wise,  
who shares his birthday with Thomas Merton*

The experience of a great mystic is always paradoxical, even disquieting, to any system. . . . Over the centuries the “friends” of Job have polished and honed their concepts until they possess an amazing perfection of logical clarity. “In this system . . . widespread everywhere today, God is not killed; He is assimilated.” . . . In such “organized reality,” the Gospel paradox, with its explosive truth, is conjured away.

~ Paul Evdokimov,

*The Feminine and the Salvation of the World*

All categories and classifications fold  
when Presence fills the spaces of the soul.

Love loves, speaks Love,  
all loves and all is well.

~ Susan McCaslin, “Night of Ecstasy”

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.

~ Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*

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O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth  
of the Most High,  
and reaching from the beginning to end,  
you ordered all things mightily and sweetly.  
Come, and teach us the way of prudence.

~ O Antiphon for Advent

## Introduction

# Merton and Sophia

This small book represents the distillation of many years of reflection on Wisdom-Sophia, the feminine manifestation of God's presence in the world, who speaks and sings in the life and writings of Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton. Since the publication of my book *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, I have been invited to present its major ideas in various settings before diverse audiences. Most of these gatherings have taken place at retreat centers and churches, a few at academic conferences. The present book is the fruit of my preparation for these gatherings but also of the many grace-filled conversations I've shared with participants at them. Though the written word cannot capture the spontaneity and sheer gift to me of engaging this material with strangers and new friends alike, I hope the reader will discern in these pages something of the music, and the quickening of hope, which I have felt on these occasions. Wisdom is like that, it seems. She comes alive in the dance itself, in the pregnant spaces between speech and silence,

solitude and community, delighting in God's creation and in the simplest acts of presence, vulnerability, and love between people.

My first aim in preparing these "retreat conferences" has been to offer a compact crystallization of the book's major themes but in a more narrative, poetic, and personal key than I was able to do in *Sophia*, which is set largely as an academic study.<sup>1</sup> A second aim, no less vital for me, was to extend the book's exploration of the deep question of God into realms of memory and experience that lay beyond Merton's writings and beyond even an overtly religious framework. In other words, if the "sophianic" or Wisdom-haunted remembrance of God that rises from the deep matrix of Merton's life is authentic and truly real—if it is *trustworthy*—then we ought to be able to discern hints of her Real Presence breaking through in lives other than Merton's, including our own. Thus the heartbeat of these conferences is not Merton as such but Sophia, the presence and mercy of God "pervading all things" to which Merton's witness points, even where through a glass darkly.

Merton wrote for a generation reeling from the Second World War, the global nuclear threat, the American war in Vietnam, and explosive race riots, an era he called a "season of fury." Like Gandhi, Heschel, and King, he saw our social ills as symptoms of a deeply entrenched spiritual malaise, not least our clinging to dangerous idols and idolatrous conceptions of God. Against the desecration of God, of nature, and of human persons everywhere, Merton would interject 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 piercing

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."<sup>2</sup>

Ours is a generation not so distant from Merton's: disillusioned with institutional religion; mesmerized by technology; distracted and surfeited by entertainment; haunted by the specter of terrorism and routine eruptions of gun violence; crippled by war; fragmented by gaping economic, racial, and gender inequalities; and threatened in ways we cannot yet imagine by the looming environmental crisis. Where is God to be experienced in all this? Who is God? *Is* God? Who will speak words of hope, of renewed theological imagination, for the next generation? Sophia emerges in Merton's writings as the Love and Mercy of God at play in creation who calls out from beneath the fog of ignorance and violence and unites all things "like the air receiving the sunlight." But are we listening? Here is Merton's lament. "Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. 'Wisdom,' cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend."<sup>3</sup>

All of this suggests a third aim for this book, admittedly more tenuous and more like 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." If we desire to know her, Merton

reassures us, she will speak to us “on all sides in everything,”<sup>4</sup> and we will never be the same again.

For all the words and books written by Thomas Merton, for all the words and books still being written about him, I think the man himself would be pleased if we remembered only this, which has also been said of St. Benedict, his monastic forebear: “He was a God-oriented man leading like-minded people on the way of the Gospel.”<sup>5</sup> To know God, Merton would discover, is to know God as Father, Son, and Spirit, and also as Holy Wisdom: Mother, Sister, Child, Brother, and Friend. This book celebrates, as it were, the *wholeness* of God, the *freedom* of God’s love as reflected in creation and in the lives of all God’s people, shining with particular intensity in the life of Thomas Merton. Merton was a friend of God, whose witness draws us likewise into the dance of God’s love, mercy, and friendship.







# Rivers of Night

The night, O My Lord, is a time of freedom. You have seen the morning and the night, and the night was better. In the night all things began, and in the night the end of all things has come before me. Baptized in the rivers of night, Gethsemani has recovered her innocence. Darkness brings a semblance of order before all things disappear. With the clock slung over my shoulder, in the silence of the Fourth of July, it is my time to be the night watchman, in the house that will one day perish.<sup>1</sup>

So begins one of the most-celebrated passages in Thomas Merton's vast body of work, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*. I was fifteen when I read these words for the first time. Merton's dialogue with silence and mystery struck me with the force of a revelation. Like many others before and since, I was hooked, and Merton became a kind of

spiritual companion through my young adulthood. Even today, when I sink into “Fire Watch,” it is like walking into the church of my childhood: the words steady my pulse, deepen my breath, slow my mind, and open my imagination. With Merton I see again, from a perch high atop the monastery, a great canopy of stars and feel the night wind on my face. I become small before the majesty and mystery of God. I pray like a child.

In this centenary year of Merton’s birth, the words of “Fire Watch” seem to me a fitting entry point as we join with people around the world to remember and celebrate Merton’s witness to faith and hopefulness in a troubled world. Like the monks of Gethsemani laying themselves down to sleep in the monastery, like Jonah, hiding from God in the belly of the whale, we too are “baptized in rivers of night,” exiles “sailing to slavery, [yet still] hoping for glory.”<sup>2</sup> We too are haunted by life “singing in the watercourses,” stirred by ancient stories of a God who journeys with us through desert and darkness and promises to renew all creation with resurrection hope. Of course, the rhythms of Merton’s life were suffused with all of these: word and silence, storytelling and song, labor and stillness, memory and hope. Like the biblical poets and prophets of old, Merton interrupts our habitual or half-tied vision of things, calling us back to ourselves, to our deepest identity in God, in one another, and in the natural world, before it is too late. As both a monk and an extraordinarily gifted writer, Merton helps us to hear again the music of our faith.

Most readers well acquainted with Merton will have a story to share, a favorite book or passage that got them “hooked” or still

haunts their imagination. An elder African American woman and former nun in my parish once shared with me that *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was her “Bible” during the 1960s, when she was an activist for racial justice and felt increasingly alienated by her religious community. “Merton got it,” she said to me, with a somewhat pained look on her face, “when few others did.” For many older readers it is Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which marks a pivotal signpost or even a major turning point in their life’s journey. For me, it was reading “Fire Watch” as a teenager, and then throughout my twenties his journals, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and the incomparable *Raids on the Unspeakable*.

It is curious, however, that by my mid-thirties Merton’s writings had drifted and all but disappeared from my consciousness. It wasn’t until I began doctoral studies in theology—two years after September 11, 2001, and in the charged atmosphere surrounding the launch of the second Iraq war—that Merton reemerged with some force for me as a locus of real interest for the most pressing issues in theology and Christian spirituality today. Like many of my peers, I was fixed on the problem of how to speak of Christ in an age of religious pluralism and, to be sure, an era of increasing violence between cultures and nations. Merton had dedicated many years of study and witness to interfaith friendship and dialogue. Who is the Christ, I wondered, that centered Merton’s outreach during the extraordinary last decade of his life? In whom did he find his deepest identity and place his prayerful trust? Who is the God of his intimate companionship and faith?

The more I studied, meditated on, and pored over his writings, the more I discerned an unmistakable music, a kind of unifying harmonic “key,” awakening in me the remembrance of God, a sense of a real Presence, and stirring dormant seeds of hope. Above all it was Merton’s prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, which, like a kind of magnetic north, drew my imagination back into itself, again and again. The flowering in Merton of years of study and meditation on the Bible, patristic and Russian Orthodox theology, and Zen, the poem seemed at once to multiply and silence all my questions. Rather than succumbing to my preconceived theological categories and preconceptions of God, it broke them open. To this day, there is a music in the poem that eludes all understanding for me, yet reverberates deeply when I surrender myself to its imagery.

Set according to the liturgical hours, the poem begins in a hospital room at dawn, where the speaker is awakened “out of languor and darkness” by the soft voice of a nurse. The experience is all gift, belying its setting in a place of disease and subjugation to machines, for in “the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit.”

### **Dawn. The Hour of Lauds**

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, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

The poem has haunted me for years, and I have struggled and broken my head trying to get inside the text to explain its particular magic. But there is nothing to explain, and no magic; there is only the music of divine Mercy, realized in each of us according to our willingness to receive it.

O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere!

We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine.

We do not hear mercy, or yielding love, or non-resistance, or non-reprisal. In her there are no reasons and no answers. Yet she is the candor of God's light, the expression of His simplicity.<sup>4</sup>

If it is true, as the late Fr. Andrew Greeley writes, that "the artist is a sacrament maker, a creator of emphasized, clarified beauty designed to make us see,"<sup>5</sup> then Merton in *Hagia Sophia* is the consummate artist, helping us to see—that is, to *feel* in our whole person—that while the world is stricken deeply by sin, it is also limned in the light of resurrection.

Sophia is the *eros* of God become one with all creation, the love in God that longs for incarnation from before the beginning. She is the co-creativity of God, always inviting, never compelling,

coming to birth in us when we say yes to “the dawning of divine light in the stillness of our hearts.”<sup>6</sup> She is the invitation to the wedding dance, and at once the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding. In a century of unspeakable violence and fragmentation, *Hagia Sophia* is Merton’s most lyric expression of “Christ being born into the whole world,”<sup>7</sup> especially in that which is most “poor” and “hidden.” It is his consummate hymn to peace.

That the poem came to birth in an era Merton described as a “season of fury” is not incidental. Half a century earlier, in the Russian Orthodox East, she had haunted the imaginations of mystics, artists, and intellectuals caught in the throes of the Bolshevik Revolution and two devastating world wars, a time of total war and massive human displacement. As for the Russian theologians of Sophia, so it was for Thomas Merton. Indeed, it is impossible to separate Merton’s awakening to Sophia or any aspect of his spiritual autobiography from the remarkable century in which he lived. Let us briefly review the broad tapestry of Merton’s life, which will prepare us in the next conference to reflect on a number of classic texts from his extraordinary body of work.<sup>8</sup>

Merton was born in France in 1915 to Ruth Jenkins, from America, and Owen Merton, from New Zealand, itinerant artists who had met in Paris. By the time Merton was sixteen, both of his parents were dead. His account of the loss of his mother when he was six years old is one of the most poignant passages in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, clearly affecting him profoundly.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, as not a few have wondered, it set Merton forth unconsciously “on a lifelong quest for the feminine.”<sup>10</sup> But there was also, many years later, the loss of his younger brother,

John Paul, killed in a bomber crash during the Second World War, remembered in a stirring poem that concludes the autobiography: "Sweet brother, if I do not sleep / My eyes are flowers for your tomb."<sup>11</sup> The "flowers of paradise" were indelibly scented for Merton, from a very early age, with the loneliness of loss and suffering.

Merton's godfather, Dr. Tom Bennett, became his guardian when Merton was sixteen, in the wake of his father's death. Merton completed his studies at Oakham School in England and then enrolled at Cambridge. His raucous behavior there led to his being sent back to the United States, where he enrolled at Columbia in New York City and soon thrived among an *avant-garde* and literary group of friends: Robert Lax, Ed Rice, Sy Freedgood, and his teacher and mentor Mark van Doren. At Columbia Merton's reading became "more and more Catholic." Reading Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* was transformative. He devoured works by Blake, Hopkins, Joyce, and Maritain. As Merton later described this period, something deep "began to stir within me . . . began to push me, to prompt me . . . like a voice."<sup>12</sup> To the shock of many of his friends, he announced his desire to become a Roman Catholic and was baptized on November 16, 1938, at Corpus Christi Church in New York City. In September 1940, Merton began teaching English at St. Bonaventure in New York. After spending Holy Week of 1941 on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the hills of rural Western Kentucky, Merton decided to become a Trappist monk.

How to account for this extraordinary turn of events? In fact, the seeds for Merton's conversion had been planted some

years earlier, when Merton was eighteen and visiting Rome, as described in a memorable passage in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. An orphan in the world, he found himself drawn into the city's ancient churches. In one of these he was overwhelmed by "a great mosaic, in the apse, of Christ's coming in judgment in a dark blue sky, with the suggestions of fire in the small clouds beneath his feet."<sup>13</sup> Something stirred within the teenaged Merton as he wandered into these sacred spaces and gazed on the Byzantine mosaics that adorned their walls.

And now for the first time in my life I began to find out something of Who this Person was that men called Christ. It was obscure, but it was a true knowledge of Him, in some sense, truer than I knew and truer than I would admit. But it was in Rome that my conception of Christ was formed. It was there that I first saw Him, Whom I now serve as my God and my King and Who owns and rules my life.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that Merton describes his knowledge of Christ in these early encounters as "a true knowledge," even if it "was obscure." The dormant seeds of his faith had been stirred, significantly, through an immersion in a cultural landscape quite different from his own. But there is more. It is fair to intuit that in gazing on these ancient mosaics and icons Merton had felt himself *the object of Christ's gaze* for the first time in his life. It seems there was something in the eyes of Christ resonating in the eyes of Merton's heart, coming toward him, as it were, speaking to him. A few nights later, a similar kind of presence came to him.

I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that [my] Father, who had been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash . . . I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in. . . .

And now I think for the first time I really began to pray—praying . . . out of the very roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery.<sup>15</sup>

The following day Merton returned to the Church of Santa Sabina to pray. Self-conscious and afraid he might be thrown out, he nevertheless prayed, feeling as though he had been reborn. It would be several years before he found himself drawn back into a church, this time to Corpus Christi, near Columbia, and five years before he would become a Catholic on November 16, 1938.

From 1941 to 1968 Merton lived as a monk of Gethsemani. It was the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948 that established him as a famous monk and a wholly unexpected literary phenomenon. In addition to publishing widely read spiritual meditations, journals, and poetry, during the last decade of his life Merton would write penetrating essays on the most explosive

social issues of the day, the religions of the East, monastic and church reform, and questions of belief and atheism. Above all, he made the case for the contemplative life in a world of relentless action.

Several other experiences profoundly shaped Merton's life as a monk and spiritual writer. Between 1955 and 1965 he served as master of novices, helping the young monks imbibe from the deepest wellsprings of the Christian mystical tradition. Always meticulously prepared, he clearly loved his students and taught them with great spontaneity, energy, and humor. In 1965 Merton received permission to live as a hermit on the grounds of the monastery, which freed his spirit and voice in new ways. Much of his best writing comes to us from the hermitage. During a hospital stay in Louisville in the spring of 1966, Merton fell in love with a young student nurse named Margie, or "M.," as she is rendered in the journals. For some six months they had a kind of clandestine affair until, with considerable anguish and regret, Merton finally broke it off, helped not a little by his abbot's discovery of the affair. The relationship was transformative for Merton and bears a spiritual significance that we will revisit later.

In October 1968 Merton set out for Asia on what would be his final pilgrimage, desiring "to drink from [the] ancient sources of monastic vision and experience."<sup>16</sup> He dreamed of meeting the Dalai Lama and fulfilling what he believed to be the vocation of every Christian: to be an instrument of unity, to "realize the unity that already is and to find ways to live together that are consistent with unity."<sup>17</sup> It would be difficult to name another twentieth-century Christian who sought after this vision more

tenaciously, publically, and prophetically than Thomas Merton. The fruits of his outreach are still being realized today in many who have found courage and grace in his example.

Merton died in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, the victim of an accidental electrocution and probably a resultant heart attack. His body was returned to the United States in a military transport plane that was carrying the bodies of servicemen killed in Vietnam, a war he had condemned forcefully. His body was laid in the earth on a hillside behind the monastery, overlooking the Kentucky woods where he lived as a hermit the last years of his life. Pilgrims continue to visit and pray before the simple white cross that marks Merton's grave.