Sophia

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The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton

Christopher Pramuk

A Michael Glazier Book

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For my parents, Jack and Gladys Pramuk,
who immersed me in music, and Merton, from the very beginning.

And in loving memory of Vincent J. O'Flaherty, SJ

The waking have one common world,
but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.
He that is awake lights up from sleeping.
—Herakleitos, 5th Century BCE

Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.
—Ephesians 5:14 (NAB)

The helpless one, abandoned to sweet sleep,
him the gentle one will awake: *Sophia*.
—Thomas Merton, 1962

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Abbreviations

Works by and about Merton

AJ	*The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1973)
BT	*The Behavior of Titans* (1961)
BW	*Bread in the Wilderness* (1953)
CGB	*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966)
CT	*The Courage for Truth* (1993)
CWA	*Contemplation in a World of Action* (1971)
DQ	*Disputed Questions* (1960)
DWL	*Dancing in the Water of Life* (1997)
ESF	*Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963)
FV	*Faith and Violence* (1968)
GNV	*Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965)
HGL	*The Hidden Ground of Love* (1985)
ICM	*An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008)
LE	*The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (1981)
LL	*Love and Living* (1979)
LTL	*Learning to Love* (1997)
MHPH	*Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart* (2003)
MZM	*Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967)
NM	*The New Man* (1961)
NSC	*New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962)
OB	*Opening the Bible* (1970)

RU *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966)

SD *Seeds of Destruction* (1964)

SFS *A Search for Solitude* (1996)

SJ *The Sign of Jonas* (1953)

SSM *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948)

TME *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (2002)

TTW *Turning Toward the World* (1997)

WCT *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965)

WF *Witness to Freedom* (1994)

ZBA *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968)

Other Works

ED *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (John Henry Newman)

GA *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (John Henry Newman)

HW *Holiness in Words* (Edward K. Kaplan)

MRT *Modern Russian Theology* (Paul Valliere)

OUS *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (John Henry Newman)

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Preface

In a recent volume of essays in constructive theology from around the world, Terrence Merrigan and Jacques Haers suggest that to survey the state of contemporary Christology is to be reminded of William Butler Yeats's celebrated poem, *The Second Coming*:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

What prompts Merrigan and Haers to cite Yeats's unsettling lines is the "multiplicity of portraits of Jesus which characterizes the contemporary theological landscape, and the challenges thrown up by this multiplicity." With a certain urgency and not a little polemic—"In an age such as ours when the discipline [of Christology] has been opened up to all comers"—the authors pose the following question: "Can properly Christian discourse survive if its traditional center, the God-man, Jesus Christ, is dissolved into a myriad of disparate and even conflicting images and notions?"[1]

The anxiety generating this question pertains not only to Christology, of course, but more generally to a perceived crisis of identity in Christian life in the postmodern world. On the one hand, this crisis is not, as Johann Baptist Metz insists, a crisis of faith *content* so much as a crisis of *praxis*, or discipleship. On the other hand, as Metz also insists, it is the language of dogmatic theology, as a form of ecclesial memory, which comprises the

1. Terrence Merrigan and Jacques Haers, *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), vii.

positive seedbed of Christian spirituality.[2] If Western Christians today appear to lack commitment to a life of faith, it may be because the terms of that faith have lost all purchase in their memory and imagination. It may be, as Yeats intimates, that even "the best" of their teachers "lack all conviction" or despair of passing on the received wisdom of an ancient tradition to a generation that seems increasingly spellbound by the glitter of technology, the lure of consumerism, and the surreal whirlwind of change in a global, media-saturated environment. What is more, that very environment seems daily to confirm that everywhere "the blood-dimmed tide" has been loosed, and this not in spite of religion but *because* of it, sanctioned by it, celebrated by it. If religion once awakened in human beings a sense of primordial innocence, its darker currents seem to whisper today, almost mockingly, that "the ceremony of innocence is drowned."

Nearly five decades ago the Roman Catholic bishops of the world at the Second Vatican Council committed themselves to the principle that Christianity is no Baroque museum but a living tradition, vibrantly responsive to the signs of the times. With open-eyed hope for the peoples of the modern world, the council urged us to learn anew from the lives of those women and men who have gone before us, those "companions of ours in the human condition" who have faithfully followed Christ (*Lumen gentium* 50). This book is predicated on the conviction that Thomas Merton is one of these faithful companions, indeed, one of our very best, who still has much to teach us, not only about the human condition but also about the mystery of God unveiled in Jesus Christ, the One who radically shapes our image of what it means to be truly human.

"The future of serious Catholic theology," writes David Tracy, "lies with its ability to recover [the] classic resources of the mystical tradition without forfeiting the need to retrieve them critically."[3] This book looks to Thomas Merton as a classic theologian of the mystical tradition from East to West, and offers a retrieval and interpretation of his mature Christology. While in no way presuming to provide a conclusive answer or solution to the myriad challenges confronting Christology today, this study will suggest, 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

2. See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. and ed. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), especially pp. 182–85. Metz describes Christian creeds and dogmas as "formulas of *memoria*" which—in a society "that is becoming ever more devoid of history and memory"—"break the spell of the dominant consciousness" in a "redemptively dangerous way."

3. David Tracy, "The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 548–70, at 565.

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.

No doubt the imaginative framework explored in these pages presses beyond the comfort zone of traditional fundamental or scholastic theology, with its circumscribed (and patriarchal) definitions, into the more fluid realm of biblical imagination, contemplative experience, and poetics. Awakening the memory of Sophia, in other words—whether in new kinds of God-language and symbols, new (but also ancient) forms of prayer, art, or liturgical praxis—will require *risk*, and therefore discernment, by the church and its theologians. It would be gratuitous to suggest here that such a discernment is soon forthcoming, despite an evident burgeoning of interest in Russian sophiology and in Wisdom Christology among Western specialists today.

Yet the life of Thomas Merton, and especially his sensitivity to Eastern sensibilities, still beckons to contemporary pilgrims like a supercharged magnet, pulsing with the energy of a life centered in Christ that is at once mystical and political, personal and ecclesial, sacrificial and life-giving. As longtime Merton scholar Jonathan Montaldo writes, "The effect of reading Merton's autobiographical works is a species of *metanoia*. Reading Merton threatens incidences of being changed, of wanting to lead a different, deeper kind of life."[4] Today I would add one point to this perceptive comment: reading Merton also awakens the desire to forge a different, deeper kind of *theology*. Why? Because, in the end, Merton succeeded in his desire to reunite in his own spiritual and intellectual life "the thought of the East and the West, of the Greek and Latin Fathers."[5] Such a witness gives at least preliminary credence to an intuition that may seem, to the uninitiated, frankly surprising: that Sophia, the same theological eros that animated Merton's religious imagination, might be capable of infusing new vitality into ours. And that 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.

She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner.[6]

4. Jonathan Montaldo, "A Gallery of Women's Faces and Dreams of Women from the Drawings and Journals of Thomas Merton," in *The Merton Annual* 14, ed. Victor A. Kramer (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 155–72, at 155.

5. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 87; hereafter SFS.

6. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 63–64; hereafter ESF.

Introduction

My first encounter with Thomas Merton came some thirty years ago as a teenager, when I happened across an old copy of *The Sign of Jonas* on my mother's bookshelf. Whether by chance or providence, I picked it up and began to read, and some days later came to the book's stunning epilogue, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952." Merton's dialogue with silence and mystery—*There is no leaf that is not in Your care. . . There is no water in the shales that was not hidden there by Your wisdom*—struck me deeply, and like many others before and since, I was hooked. Merton became a kind of spiritual guide and trusted companion throughout my young adulthood. It is curious, however, that when I began to drop roots in the field of systematic theology in my early thirties, Merton began to drift from my theological horizon. By my mid-thirties, his writings had all but faded from my imagination, like the beautiful, but dated, church of my childhood. Certainly the idea that I would write a book such as this would have seemed to me then a kind of category mistake: spirituality, yes, prophetic social criticism, yes, interreligious dialogue, certainly, but serious constructive Christology?

It wasn't until my late thirties—as it happens, around 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 contemporary Christology, above all, how to speak of Christ in an age of pluralism, and, to be sure, an age of increasing violence between cultures and nations. Curiously enough it was Newman, specifically, his forays into the realm of epistemology, that provided the interpretive key, opening my eyes to the pivotal role of the imagination both in the encounter with Jesus Christ and in structuring religious discourse through theology and doctrinal development. In short, Newman's spirited insistence on a theological method that takes account of the whole person, and not just the rational or empirical mind narrowly conceived, reminded me not a little of Thomas Merton, not only one of the twentieth century's most successful communicators of the faith, but also one

of its foremost pioneers of interfaith dialogue. I began to revisit Merton's life and writings with fresh eyes, focusing especially on his Christology. If it is the imagination, as Newman so compellingly argues, which governs our experience of God, which assembles and makes sense of the whole, then I wanted to know: who is this Christ that centered Merton's capacious religious imagination during the extraordinary last decade of his life?

The question, I soon found, is a slippery one. For the moment one tries to say something too assuredly about "Merton's Christology," one finds right away—as Merton said of his own struggle to understand Zen—that *that* is assuredly "not it."[1] Obviously one solution is to say nothing, that is, to abandon any attempt to pin down Merton's Christology as either too unwieldy, given the sheer range and scope of his writings, or more skeptically, as a misguided confusion of "spiritual theology" and "mystical poetry" with the *real* thing, meaning the kinds of Christology usually formulated and debated in lecture halls. But gradually I came to see that there is another way to approach Merton's Christology, and that is to frame it not as an intellectual puzzle to be solved so much as a unifying thread to be discerned in the larger tapestry of his life, or, to switch metaphors, a harmonizing key rising from his mystical biography. Such an approach would recognize (again, as in his struggle to grasp Zen) that the problem is not first and foremost an intellectual problem so much as "a problem of 'realization'—something that has to break through."[2] To get inside Merton's Christology is to allow "something to break through," an inner music to be heard, indeed, to be *enjoyed*, in the wide-ranging symphony that comprises his life and writings.

At the same time, and not to overdraw the analogy with Zen, for Merton himself the task of theology as such involves *both* "realization" (contemplation; mystical experience) *and* intellectual struggle, the two movements circling and informing each other as perhaps in a fugue or carefully patterned dance. Just as good choreography is careful not to foreclose or rigidly confine the dance but aims rather to structure, support, and unleash its spontaneity, its surprise, its grace, just so theology at its Catholic (and literary) best aims to structure, support, and unleash the living experience of God, contempla-

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 569; hereafter HGL. It is a curious fact that in the countless pages of Merton's writings "one would look in vain for a systematic presentation of Christology" (William H. Shannon, "Christology," in idem, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002], 51–54, at 51; hereafter TME). For this reason any attempt to retrieve and interpret Merton's Christology will have to be done with an eye toward a wide range of texts and genres; no single study, not least this one, can aspire to be exhaustive.

2. HGL, 569.

tion, the inner dynamism of faith. At the very least, theology, even in its most academic or speculative mode, ought not to *foreclose* the possibility of grace, surprise, or resonance in the community for which it is intended. In short, to do Christology as Merton reflexively understood and practiced the term is not only to "become fully impregnated in our mystical tradition,"[3] it is also to "bring out clearly the mystical dimensions of our theology, hence to help us to do what we must really do: live our theology . . . , fully, deeply, in its totality."[4] This is perhaps the most enduring lesson I have learned from Merton, and which I have tried to bring to the writing of this book. For, indeed, the more I tried to force-fit Merton's Christology into preconceived or abstract conceptual categories, the more I found that *that* was assuredly "not it." Yet the more I listened, meditated, 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.

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. It 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—or "sophiology," as known in its speculative form—the Wisdom tradition became Merton's most vivid means of expressing "a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations."[5]

Above all it was the prose poem *Hagia Sophia* (1962), by far the most realized, lyrical, and daring of Merton's meditations on Sophia, which, like a kind of magnetic north, drew my imagination back into itself again and again. That sublime text, the flowering in Merton of years of study and meditation on the Bible, patristic and Russian theology, and Zen, seemed at once

3. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2008), 35; hereafter ICM.

4. Ibid., 16; see also Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 175–76 (hereafter CWA), where Merton cites Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* 8 to accent the same point.

5. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 39; hereafter ZBA.

to multiply, and silence, all my questions. Rather than succumbing to my preconceived christological and trinitarian categories, it broke them open; in so doing, it awakened me to the mystical dimensions of theology. This book looks especially to *Hagia Sophia* as the culmination of a mystical theology construed under the light of Wisdom, a classic marriage of Eastern and Western spirituality, and a bold rendering of the Catholic sacramental imagination. *Hagia Sophia* is Merton's consummate hymn to the theological dignity of humankind and of all creation. It is a hymn of awakening, a call to peace. The remembrance of Sophia, I will suggest here, with Merton's life as witness, opens onto an integral spirituality of engagement in the world.

While this study is set as an exploration in systematic theology, because its protagonist is Thomas Merton its logic is not neatly linear but unfolds as a kind of story-shaped Christology, a theology of God retrieved through the life of Merton, but haunted more and more by the mysterious figure of Sophia. Because she remains largely unknown to readers in the West, even close readers of Merton, it will be important to begin by recounting in broadest strokes the story of Merton's awakening to Sophia, a narrative that weaves like a golden thread through the last decade of his life. Chapter 1 takes up this introductory task and then attempts to situate Merton's writings within the broader horizon of modern (and postmodern) Catholic theology. The central question posed in chapter 1 is this: what is it in Merton's mystical or sapiential approach to theology, and especially in his reception of Russian sophiology, that merits sustained consideration by the church and its theologians today? Readers less familiar with the broad contours of Merton's life and writings should find here enough touchpoints to be on firm ground for the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 builds a case for the validity of Merton's approach to theology through an analysis of the pivotal role of the imagination in religious epistemology and theological method. Here we look to the respective epistemologies and semantic strategies of Newman and the great philosopher-poet of Judaism, Abraham Joshua Heschel, to argue that theology today will remain much impoverished without "a poetic dimension of theological thinking or even a theological literature in search of a poetic form and voice."[6] Newman's balanced appeal to the imagination as the dynamic faculty that aids and enlarges reason gives considerable sanction to the tradition of monastic theology in which Merton stands; Heschel's philosophy of religion, or "depth theology," comprises one of the most profound defenses of revealed religion

6. Mark S. Burrows, "'Raiding the Articulate': Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyers and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005), 341–61, at 348.

in the modern period and bears striking affinities with Merton's mystical-prophetic approach to language.

Crucial to any understanding of Merton's mature period is its increasingly prophetic and global content, a turning to the world shaped not only by his friendship with Heschel but also by his living relationship, as a Trappist monk, with the revelatory word of the Bible. Chapter 3 explores a wide range of texts, seeking to get inside the "archaeology" of Merton's expansive religious imagination, and above all, to probe his basic confidence in, and fluency with, the sacramental power of language. This chapter sets the stage for the second half of the book by framing the breakthrough of Sophia into Merton's consciousness in terms of his desire to remember and name God anew on the other side of his revolutionary awakening to the world beyond the monastery.

Chapter 4 chronicles the dawn of Wisdom in Merton's theological consciousness, beginning with the pivotal influence of four key mentors during the late 1950s, D. T. Suzuki, Herakleitos the Obscure, Maximus Confessor, and Boris Pasternak, followed by his study of Russian Orthodox sophiology. From the much-discussed epiphany at Fourth and Walnut in March of 1958 to his climactic pilgrimage in Asia, Sophia emerges here 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. We come to the christological heart of things in chapter 5, which offers an interpretation of three of Merton's most formally and brilliantly realized sophiological texts: *The New Man* (1961), *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), and *Hagia Sophia* (1962). A description of events surrounding the composition and publication of *Hagia Sophia* sets the stage for a close theological reading of the text.

Chapter 6 takes up questions of a more historical, systematic, and constructive nature, which is to say, questions that Merton himself never fully addressed. Not least of these is the contested place of Sophia in traditional Christology and trinitarian theology. Who *is* Sophia? Is Russian sophiology trustworthy? Is it orthodox? Is it possible, or even desirable, to translate mystical texts such as *Hagia Sophia* into the terms of systematic or fundamental theology? And most compelling to me: Why did Sophia capture the imaginations of this small (and subsequently marginalized) group of thinkers who lived amid the ashes of World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Watts race riots, and the Vietnam War—a century in which theology had every reason to lose its nerve? Might Sophia be grasped against this fractured horizon as a kind of *apocalyptic* figure? All these questions may be boiled down to one: why Sophia—and not simply a vigorous renewal of the more familiar terms of christological or trinitarian discourse?

Chapter 6 advances the case that Russian sophiology—or more broadly, the "sophiological tradition," from the Russians in the East to Merton in the West—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 (or theological anthropology), (2) Trinity (or cosmic theology), (3) Earth (or environmental theology), and (4) eros and the feminine in God (sexuality, feminist theology). Drawing from striking resonances in the spiritual biographies of Merton and the Russian theologians, the chapter concludes by exploring what amounts to a fifth area: apocalyptic, or the sanctification of time. Indeed, the apocalyptic tenor of both Russian theology and Merton's mature period suggest that sophiology is in many respects 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.

The conclusion briefly looks back to reprise the book's major arguments and then attempts to broadly assess the shape of the whole, considering how the sophiological perspective casts new light on some of the most pressing theological and spiritual questions of our time. Here we shall ask whether, and in what ways, the remembrance of Sophia might be brought to bear in Christian theology, liturgical life, and spirituality today. Indeed, with respect to Merton's central concern for everyday Christian spirituality, it will be emphasized throughout this book that the sophiological tradition implies not the embrace of an elaborate theology so much as a *way of life*: a commitment to prayer, community, simplicity, solitude, artistic and vocational creativity, asceticism—all tested means in the Christian tradition for cultivating a wider love in relation to the world, or what monastic spirituality calls purity of heart, poverty of spirit. For Merton the Trappist monk (or Father Louis, as he was known at Gethsemani), poverty of spirit is the a priori disposition required for realizing, in a holistic and transformative way, the sacramental presence of God in all people and things; it is the prayerful ground of sanity, of peace.

This brings me to a final introductory point about the central theological symbol at play in the following pages. As I understand her presence in Merton's writings and in the Russian theologians before him, Sophia is more, really, than a sustained metaphor for the universal presence of God, a kind of "anonymous Christology" in a feminine key. While that description would not be inaccurate, it tells only half of the story. For Merton and the Russians, Sophia 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*. In Bulgakov's favored expression, she is "the Humanity of God, the

Body of God . . . , the Divine World existing in God 'before' the creation."[7] Sophiology responds to the dehumanization of a blood-soaked century by daring to speak, with Chalcedon as its starting point, of the *humanization of God*, a certain humanness *in* God, made possible by God's free act of love-humility in the incarnation. Sophia is the eros of God become one with creation. And here the Russian theologians, with Merton close behind, take their cues from the haunting invocation of Wisdom in the Bible, especially Proverbs 8, where she emerges as a kind of "go-between" in creation.[8]

> Before the mountains had been shaped,
> before the hills, I was brought forth—
> when he had not yet made earth and fields,
> or the world's first bits of soil.
> When he established the heavens, I was there,
> when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
> when he made firm the skies above,
> when he established the fountains of the deep,
> when he assigned to the sea its limit,
> so that the waters might not transgress his command,
> when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
> then I was beside him, like a master worker;
> and I was daily his delight,
> rejoicing before him always,
> rejoicing in his inhabited world
> and delighting in the human race. (Prov 8:25-31)

I was brought forth, I was there, I was beside him—from Soloviev and Bulgakov in the East to Merton in the West, the sophiological tradition hears in these lines the music of an expansive divine-human mystery, a dual hymn evoking not only the presence of Christ, the uncreated Wisdom of God who orders and plays in the universe, but also, through Christ's humanity, as it were, the primordial presence of the human race, created Sophia, in whom God rejoices and delights always.

At play in the following chapters, then, is not just a traditionally conceived Wisdom Christology but also a daring cosmology and theological anthropology, a vision of all things caught up in the life story of God "from the beginning." To say it another way, the remembrance of Sophia as described

7. Cited in Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 336.

8. Andrew Louth, "Wisdom and the Russians: The Sophiology of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church, and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1999), 169–81, at 173.

in this book is a distinctively modern case of *dogmatic searching* or discernment in response to the signs of the times, a lucid case of what Newman calls the "illative sense" in theological method: the process of growing into the truth about the mystery of God. But this also means, for the robustly analogical imagination, growing into the truth about *the mystery of the human person*.[9] While the irruption of Sophia into Merton's consciousness was just one thread woven into a much larger fabric of his awakening to the world beyond the monastery, it was, I believe, the *golden* thread that helped him to hold the fabric together, ever more centered in Christ and forging in his life and theology the kind of Christ-centered humanism that Vatican II would envision for all the pilgrim people of God: to "recognize Christ . . . in the persons of all men and women and [to] love them with an active love, in word and deed" (*Gaudium et spes* 93).

As I hope is clear from these prefatory remarks, my approach in this study accords broadly with Anselm's description of theology as "faith seeking understanding," a method Merton once described as "experiencing theologically with the Church."[10] I presuppose an understanding of theology as a public conversation that always involves the questions, commitments, and prejudgments of the theologian. In my case these include a commitment to Roman Catholic faith and to the vocation of theology in communion with that tradition. Born in 1964 to parents of East European and Irish Catholic descent, and raised more or less in a post–Vatican II church, I belong to that generation of American Catholics (and dutiful altar boys) caught somewhere between the best of two distinct worlds: the High Tradition, with its wondrous cathedrals, icons, and "smells and bells," and the Low Tradition, with its thoroughly (and beautifully) human Jesus, concern for social justice, and intimate house church aesthetic. Were Merton alive today, I believe he would *still* say that the best way forward, the way of wisdom, will allow ample room for both theological trajectories and worship styles in the mosaic body of faith.

Finally, while this book is set as an academic study, its writing is also an act of gratitude and commitment. Though I first came to Merton's writings as a teenager, trying simply to understand the world and my place in it, it has been enormously invigorating to return to him later in life with all the questions and methods of a systematic theologian. It is remarkable, to say

9. This insight, as we shall see in chapter 6, lay at the heart of Russian sophiology's "positive Chalcedonianism," the idea that theology, through open and mutually enriching dialogue with other disciplines (natural science, sociology, economics, literature, anthropology, politics, and so on), must continually seek to "fill out" the content of Christology as articulated at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), in both its divine *and* its fully human dimensions.

10. ZBA, 46.

the least, that his writings are so responsive to both kinds of readers, the nonspecialist and the specialist, the spiritual seeker and the so-called expert, who nevertheless is, and will always remain, a seeker. No matter what else this book may or may not accomplish, I hope its pages reflect something of Merton's own spirit of intellectual openness and inquiry, a "way of seeing" that has left an immeasurable impact on my own imagination.[11]

11. While much literature has focused on Merton's witness as a Christian humanist, ecumenist, poet, interfaith pioneer, and peacemaker, there have been few systematic treatments of his Christology as such, and no sustained study to date of his relationship to Russian sophiology. Yet the potential fruitfulness of examining this relationship has been suggested, explicitly or implicitly, by a number of scholars.

Lawrence Cunningham identifies Wisdom or Sophia as the unifying thread in Merton's religious imagination during his pivotal years of "crossing over" to other traditions ("Introduction," in SFS, xii; idem, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 54, 62–63, 120). Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris looks to Merton as an exemplary model of East-West spirituality and asks whether Sophia might be the key to an "all-embracing, comprehensive and holistic" approach to Christology (*Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996], 146; idem, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988], 9–13). Matthew Zyniewicz has examined the myriad sources contributing to Merton's complex understanding of wisdom and poses the question for future research, "What would a close reading of the Russian mystics' texts suggest about Merton's understanding of wisdom and doctrine?" ("The Interreligious Dialogue Between Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki" [PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2000], 262). Gerald O'Collins—citing not Merton, but Elizabeth Johnson—concludes his survey of contemporary Christology by gesturing toward a "Christology of presence," a variation on Karl Rahner's anonymously graced world but proceeding from "the image of Lady Wisdom." O'Collins asks, "At the end of three millennia of a strongly masculine consciousness reflected in the Bible, what might this feminine, nurturing image convey about Christ's salvific function for all people?" (*Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 304; citing Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for a Non-androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 41 [1985]: 261–94).

The broad impact of Eastern Orthodoxy on Merton's thought is chronicled in *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart*, ed. Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003); hereafter MHPH. Of special note here are several studies by Anglican scholar A. M. Allchin, unparalleled in highlighting Merton's theology as a bridge between Eastern and Western Christianity, and the lucid commentary on *Hagia Sophia* by the poet Susan McCaslin. Christopher Nugent has written two penetrating studies of Merton's "way of seeing," with special attention to *Hagia Sophia* ("Merton, the Coincidence of Opposites and the Archeology of Catholicity," *Cistercian Studies* 26 [1991]: 257–70; idem, "*Pax Heraclitus*: A Perspective on Merton's Healing Wholeness," unpublished, 2005).

The most thorough study of Merton's Christology as such is that of George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993). Taking his cues from what he calls Merton's "sapiential method," Kilcourse draws on a staggering range of texts (including chapters dedicated to Merton's poetry and literary criticism) to demonstrate his thesis that Merton's Christ is the "hidden Christ of kenosis." Most compelling is his association of Merton's mature theology with Karl Rahner, suggesting that as Merton opened his heart to the world, his lens shifted from a descending to a more historically conscious

ascending Christology from below. Against the notion suggested by some scholars that Merton gravitated toward "a universalist, theocentric spirituality" in his last years, Kilcourse defends a "christocentric" reading of Merton's theology, citing *Hagia Sophia* as Merton's paradigmatic "hymn to celebrate God as Trinity" (cited in "Review Symposium on *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*," with Douglas Burton-Christie, Anthony Padovana, and Christine Bochen, *Horizons* 21 [1994]: 332–47, at 345). While this study also advances christocentric and kenotic reading of Merton's theology, I will suggest a somewhat more fluid reading of *Hagia Sophia*, one not too quick to reject a theocentric or universalist metaphysic at play in the poem's polysemic imagery. It is important not to draw too sharp a dichotomy between a christocentric and theocentric spirituality, as if the latter term can *only* mean a spirituality "sans Christ," which the debate surrounding Kilcourse's book intimates. Both a christocentric and theocentric dynamic come into play in Christian theology and spirituality, and this is especially so, it seems to me, in the case of Merton and the Russian theologians.

Finally, Michael Mott, Anne Carr, William Shannon, Bonnie Thurston, and Jim Forest have each authored (or edited) masterful studies of Merton's life and thought with wisdom more or less as a unifying theme. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); Anne Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Bonnie Thurston, ed., *Merton and Buddhism: Realizing the Self* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2007); Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).