

**Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton**

Christopher Pramuk

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It has been sixteen years since we have had a full length, systematic study of Merton's Christology. George Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) pioneered this aspect of Merton studies which is now followed by Pramuk's book. Notre Dame Professor, Lawrence S. Cunningham, who has spoken to the Thomas Merton Society at Oakham, describes it as 'the most sophisticated theological study ever done on the writings of Thomas Merton'.

The book evolved from Pramuk's 2007 Notre Dame Ph.D. dissertation. It is densely written and presumes knowledge of theological movements, figures and terms (occasionally coining one like 'commodification', p.97). Sometimes I felt not quite up to the writer's expectations of his reader and thought someone more conversant with systematic and Russian theology (Rowan Williams?) could have rendered a better overall assessment of the book. I remind you, therefore, gentle reader, that I am a Merton scholar not a systematic theologian.

Pramuk's aim '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...' (p.2). Pramuk correctly

states that Merton has been neglected in the academy (p.24). But certainly this is because he is not a systematic theologian as Pramuk notes: Merton 'is not seeking after doctrinal precision so much as exploring the terrain of deep religious experience' (p.21). So I pondered to what degree it is fair to compare him to modern systematicians? That basic methodological question aside, I found the book both challenging and stimulating in its presentation of theologians who influenced Merton.

Happily, each chapter begins with a drawing by Merton, lovely additions to a beautifully produced book. Chapter two opens the discussion of the religious imagination which Pramuk rightly argues is the basis of Merton's epistemology and theological method, which are then compared with those of Newman and Abraham Joshua Heschel. His transition to the work of Sergius Bulgakov (p. 67) might have been smoother had he first defined 'the erotic structure of metaphor' (p. 68) and 'the erotic structure of the whole Bible' (p.72). I stumbled over the frequently used term 'erotic'. Chapter three explores 'the priestly and prophetic contours of Merton's religious imagination' by examining his 'epistemology and use of language' (p.80). It is a lively and helpful discussion. In the following chapter the book hits its stride, describing four of Merton's mentors in the 1950s: D. T. Suzuki, Herakleitos, Maximus the Confessor and Boris Pasternak, all more or less in the context of his Fourth and Walnut experience.

Chapter five 'brings us to the theological heart of things' (p.177). Its reading of Merton's prose poem 'Hagia Sophia' (which appears at the end of the

volume) was for me the most accessible section of the book. Chapter six returns to systematic theology, discussing Russian theologians Soloviev, Bulgakov and Evdokimov. The chapter relies heavily on Paul Valliere's *Modern Russian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2000) as the reading of 'Hagia Sophia' depended on Susan McCaslin's essay 'Merton and "Hagia Sophia"' in *Merton and Hesychasm* (Fons Vitae, 2003). The conclusion summarises previous material (pp.279-281) and reprises the initial observation that 'Merton was not a systematician but a mystical theologian, a poet of the presence of God...' (p.293).

Several omissions are noticeable. There is no evidence of readily available primary material from the various Merton archives on subjects the book treats. Articles on Merton and Wisdom, the Russians, and other theologians Pramuk mentions which have appeared in *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Merton Annual* and *The Merton Journal* were absent, as were standard reference works by Breit & Daggy and Patricia Burton from the bibliography (which perhaps explain the lacunae). In general, secondary material on Merton is thin and uneven. Absence of any discussion of Islam, which Merton also began to study in the 1950s, seems strange in view of the book's interest in visionary epistemology and the Eastern Church.

Pramuk's presentations of the nature of religious language and of visionary experience/mysticism as ways of knowing are precise and helpful especially since Merton is more poet than systematics professor. Pramuk's expansive knowledge of thinkers in the late 19th and 20th centuries is impressive, his commentary on many is enlightening. But, for me, the

lauded theological framing, while interesting in itself, did not always illuminate Merton's thought. (Again, this may be because I come to Merton 'by another way'.) I was certainly left with a profound sense of my limitations as a reviewer of theological argument and a corresponding humility in the presence of this young and very able scholar whose work after the dissertation I eagerly await.

**Bonnie Thurston** was a founding member and former president of the International Thomas Merton Society and a recipient of a 'Louie' for service to the Society.

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### **Beneath the Mask of Holiness:**

#### **Thomas Merton and the Forbidden Love Affair that Set Him Free**

Mark Shaw

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I dislike negative reviews. A lot of work goes into a book from a number of people and their efforts merit respect. However, the truth needs to be told. In this case the truth is that the work has been misdirected, and this is not a respectable book.

I am left with the uneasy feeling that this is quite a cynical book, as well as being misguided. Cynical because it goes to huge lengths to project a particular slant on Merton's life and in particular his relationship with Margie, the nurse who cared for him following his back operation in St Joseph's Hospital, Louis-