

Theodicy and the Feminine Divine: Thomas Merton's "Hagia Sophia" in Dialogue with Western Theology

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Christopher Pramuk

Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Abstract

This article looks to Wisdom-Sophia as a lyric name and memory of God who brings hope for human beings and for suffering creation. The irruption of the feminine divine into Thomas Merton's consciousness is followed by a consideration of witnesses to the divine Presence emerging from Holocaust narratives and Jewish feminist post-Holocaust theology. Building from a poetic and narrative description of theological hope in a sophianic key, the article concludes with implications for spirituality, the theology of God, and discipleship: What would it mean to "live together with Wisdom" in the practices that shape our daily lives in the world and church?

Keywords

feminine divine, Etty Hillesum, Holocaust theology, incarnation, Thomas Merton, mystical theology, Melissa Raphael, Russian sophiology, Sophia, theodicy

For six weeks in the summer of 1998, I studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. One day I traveled by bus with my roommate, a Catholic priest in his sixties, to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial on the outskirts of the city. Nothing in my experience could have prepared me for the realities I confronted during that visit. How does one begin to appropriate a wall-sized photograph of an SS soldier pressing his

Corresponding author:

Christopher Pramuk.

Email: pramukc@xavier.edu

pistol into the temple of a young Jewish girl, her eyes clenched shut, waiting? My friend and I descended into a dark chamber in which a single candle glowing in the center became, through the use of mirrors, a heavenly dome of millions of lights. As we made our way through the chamber, the voices of children, one for every light, spoke their names to us: the silenced voices of the burning children of the Shoah. The father of a six-month-old boy myself at the time, I was crying when we finally walked out into the blinding sunlight. My priest friend squinted into the sky and said, “So much for the rational man.”

For many Christians, Elie Wiesel’s book *Night* was and continues to be a first jarring entrée into the darkness of Auschwitz, and, to be sure, the darkness lurking in human nature itself. Who can forget the young Eliezar watching the hanging of three prisoners, one of them a child, too light to die quickly? And the terrible question, “Where is God now?” left unanswered beneath “a silent blue sky”?¹ The theodicy question resounds primordially in the pathos of the Psalmist, Job, and Jesus’s cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Every parent, pastoral counselor, and priest recognizes the theodicy question—“How could God let this happen?”—as the most tortuous and insoluble question because it emerges from the crucible of dashed hopes and thwarted dreams. Because of its universal impact, some have suggested that theodicy is both the foundation and final test of all religion. All theology today, insists German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, is “theology after Auschwitz.”²

For both Jews and Christians, the theodicy question represents a searing cry into the precise nature and status of God: not only “*Where* is God?” but no less importantly “*Who* is God?” Is the God of our hope trustworthy? At the same time, as my friend’s comment at Yad Vashem suggests, the God-question is inseparable from the anthropodicy question: “Where, and who, are human beings?” With our eyes open on Auschwitz and so many other atrocities spiraling through history like a plague, it is not hard to wonder, are we really capable of empathy, justice, self-sacrifice, and compassion for those outside our ken? Both the dilemma and its response lie at the meeting point of two freedoms, divine and human. So much depends on our image of God. So much depends on our idea of humanity. And a great deal more today depends on our conception of divine-humanity in relation to the suffering Earth.

In this article I explore Wisdom-Sophia as a lyric memory and name of God who brings hope for human beings and for suffering creation.³ In provocative ways that

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1. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1960) 61, 32.
 2. Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998) 54–71, 121–32.
 3. The literature on biblical Wisdom-Sophia in the Jewish and Christian traditions is vast. For a balanced overview see Leo D. Lefebure, “The Wisdom of God: Sophia and Christian Theology,” *Christian Century* 111 (September 19, 1994) 951–57. In Western Christian feminist retrievals the definitive study is Elizabeth Johnson’s magisterial *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994; 2004). On the theology of Wisdom-Sophia rising from the Christian mystical tradition, see Barbara Newman’s invaluable

elude systematic categorization, mystical-theological discourse on the feminine divine bridges the Jewish and Christian memory of God while witnessing to a striking mode of divine-human Presence that comes to bear powerfully on the theodicy question, especially as intensified in the suffering of women, children, and the planet Earth. In the first part, the irruption of the feminine divine into Thomas Merton's religious consciousness and life of prayer serves as a doorway to explore God's presence and promise in existential situations often presumed by rational and even religious discourse to be "God-forsaken." A consideration of Holocaust narratives (Etty Hillesum) in the second part and Jewish feminist post-Holocaust theology (Melissa Raphael) in the third opens onto a wider view of Wisdom as a universal mode of divine Presence whose apprehension is by no means automatic, inevitable, or coercive but hinges on our acts of deep attention, loving freedom, and compassionate participation in the divine initiative in history. The fourth part traces the outlines of theological remembrance and sacramental imagination in a sophianic key: What would it mean to "live together with Wisdom" in the rough and tumble of our everyday lives? My conclusion gestures to implications for spirituality, the theology of God, and discipleship in the church.

The witness of mystics, sages, and ordinary people of faith down through the ages suggests that rising up from within creation itself there pulses an uncontainable Love, coming toward us "in all things," accompanying human beings and awakening hope even amid terrible suffering and evil. But can we believe it? Can we imagine a divine Love so large that it flashes like diamond light from within all the world's peoples and natural landscapes, across every race, ethnicity, and religion, all the earth's continents, oceans, and watercourses, and even in the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps 23), amid desolation and apparent God-forsakenness?

This article is an experiment in the kind of religious imagination that would affirm such a boundless vision of divine Presence, and therefore, of hope, which I take here as the graced capacity to imagine again. Hope is the fruit of an imagination given room enough to see beyond its circumscribed place inside the mosaic, as it were, and

studies, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), and *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005). Schüssler Fiorenza's critique of sociocultural constructs of sex-gender difference as systems "for maintaining kyriarchal domination" problematizes the clean lines drawn around sex and gender identity in ways that call the very idea of "the feminine" into question (35). By the term "feminine," as I hope this article will bear out, I imply neither an essentialist anthropology of sex and gender differences nor a purely socially constructivist view. I gesture rather to a multivalent incarnational vision of personhood, by degrees both "given" (biologically construed) and "received" (shaped by culture) in complex ways we are far from fully grasping, which eludes strict binaries and calls for theopoetic, narrative, and apophatic approaches. While I share Schüssler Fiorenza's suspicion of the ways gendered language can imprison the imagination, I do not believe the use of sex- or gender-differentiated terms always or necessarily involves "mystifications" masking hierarchies of domination.

envision a larger, more humane, and joyful future. The imagination that bears hope is fluid, permeable, and catholic, always stepping back from the great mosaic and then plunging in again, convinced that there is something still more to discover, seeking the greater sense of the whole. What follows is an experiment in the kind of religious imagination that bears such a hope even where despair is fully warranted.

The imagination that bears hope, hope in the key of Wisdom, sees promise rising in life itself and in life's protest, the sacred longing for life and communion that pulses in the very substance of things, beckoning freedom forward, daring us to imagine and make room for another possible future. By contrast the imagination that produces despair and world-weary cynicism is like a tightening barbed-wire circle, or like a series of closing doors that promise nothing new but only more of the same. Despair cannot see beyond or imagine a way out. It infuses life with a dread weariness.⁴ And still, she calls out to the human community from within all things. "Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator."⁵

In sum, my aim in this article is to draw forward in a respectively poetic, narrative, and theological way the following thesis: Hope in the key of Wisdom breaks open our freedom to imagine again, intensifying our receptivity to the divine presence and unveiling hope toward the hidden future of God's own imagining. I begin with "Hagia Sophia," Merton's strangely beautiful and disarming prose poem of 1962.

"My Creator's Thought and Art within Me"

"Hagia Sophia" is a prose poem which celebrates divine Wisdom as the feminine manifestation of God. Structured in four parts based on the canonical hours of prayer, it is Merton's most lyric expression of "Christ being born into the whole world,"⁶ especially in that most poor and hidden. It is a hymn of peace. The poem is the flowering in Merton of years of study and meditation on the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, Eastern iconography, Zen, patristic theology (especially Maximus the Confessor), Russian literature and theology—or "sophiology,"⁷ as developed by Sergius Bulgakov,

4. See William Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965) 47–80.

5. Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia," in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 61–69 at 66.

6. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 197.

7. The best English-language introduction to Russian sophiology is Bulgakov's *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1993), a mature work (orig. 1937) written with Western readers in mind, and the book that introduced Merton to Bulgakov. My understanding is much indebted to Paul Valliere's *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1997); and Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergeii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).

Paul Evdokimov, and others. As I have argued systematically elsewhere, the poem merits attention as a classic of Christian mysticism for its bold rendering of the Catholic sacramental imagination and luminous marriage of Eastern and Western spirituality.⁸ The poem opens in a hospital room at dawn, when the speaker is awakened “out of languor and darkness” by the “cool hand” of a nurse, “newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness.”

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.⁹

For years I have struggled and broken my head trying to get behind and inside the text and its long genesis in Merton to explain its particular magic. But I have come to embrace another possibility: that 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.

We do not hear the uncomplaining pardon that bows down the innocent visages of flowers to the dewy earth. We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing.¹⁰

If it is true, as Fr. Andrew Greeley once observed, that “the artist is a sacrament maker, a creator of emphasized, clarified beauty designed to make us see,”¹¹ then

8. See Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical, 2009); and *At Play in Creation: Merton’s Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2015). For a compact overview see Christopher Pramuk, “Wisdom Our Sister: Thomas Merton’s Reception of Russian Sophiology,” *Spiritus* 11 (2011) 177–99; with attention to interfaith dialogue see Christopher Pramuk, “‘Something Breaks through a Little’: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28 (2008) 67–89.

9. Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 61.

10. Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 63.

11. Andrew Greeley, “The Apologetics of Beauty,” *America* 183 (September 16, 2000) 8–12.

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 invitation to the wedding dance; she is “the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding”; she is the mercy and co-creativity of God, ever luring, never compelling, coming to birth in us whenever we risk saying yes to “the dawning of divine light in the stillness of our hearts.”¹²

When the helpless one awakens strong at the voice of mercy, it is as if Life his Sister, as if the Blessed Virgin (his own flesh, his own sister), as if Nature made wise by God’s Art and Incarnation were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live. This is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.¹³

I have just called Merton an artist, a sacrament maker; and yet I qualify. It is at once God the Artist, “the Gift of the Creator’s thought and Art” who speaks in and through him in “Hagia Sophia.” Merton is perhaps like the poet Lurii whom he celebrates in Pasternak’s novel, *Dr. Zhivago*, the poet who “felt that the main part of the work was being done not by him but by a superior power that was above him and directed him . . . And he felt himself to be only the occasion, the fulcrum, needed to make this movement possible.”¹⁴ For me and for countless others, Merton’s writings have served as a kind of “fulcrum,” making a little more possible in our lives the movement prayerfully between heaven and earth, matter and spirit, freedom and grace. The Archbishop Emeritus of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, reinforces this point if rather more provocatively when he likens Merton to “the poverty of the priest who vanishes into the Mass.”¹⁵

Merton’s genius was largely that he was a massively unoriginal man: he is extraordinary because he is so dramatically absorbed by every environment he finds himself in—America between the wars, classical pre-conciliar Catholicism and monasticism, the peace movement, Asia. In all these contexts he is utterly “priestly” because he is utterly *attentive*: he does not organize, dominate, or even interpret, much of the time, but responds. It is not a chameleon inconsistency (though it could be so interpreted by a hostile eye) because all these influences flow in to one constant place, a will and imagination turned Godward.¹⁶

These are points really worth pondering. How many would think to describe Merton as a “massively unoriginal man”? What is Williams driving at?

12. Thomas Merton to Abdul Aziz, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) 46.

13. Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 62.

14. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960; cited in reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985) 20–21.

15. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011) 19; citing Merton in *The Sign of Jonas* 187.

16. Williams, *A Silent Action* 19.

“The great Christian,” Williams continues, “is the man or woman who can make me more interested in God than in him or her.” Merton is a great Christian because he “will not *let* me look at him for long: he will, finally, persuade me to look in the direction he is looking,” toward a world everywhere haunted by God. “I don’t want to know much more about Merton,” Williams confesses. “He is dead, and I shall commend him regularly, lovingly, and thankfully to God. I am concerned to find how I can turn further in the direction he is looking, in prayer, poetry, theology, and encounter with the experience of other faiths; in trust and love of God our savior.”¹⁷ For all the fascination Merton himself continues to attract, at root I agree with Williams: “being interested in Thomas Merton is not being interested in an original, a ‘shaping’ mind, but being interested in God and human possibilities.”¹⁸ Thus, for me, the meaning of Wisdom-Sophia in Merton’s life is not primarily a psychological question, though it is surely that; nor is it a strictly literary or poetic question, though it is certainly that. At its core it is the question of God, which many others of his time were asking and which people today are asking with great urgency. Where is God? Who is God? Or simply: *Is* God? And if God is, then why is the world in such a damn mess? More precisely, how do we distinguish the true God, the One who is real and trustworthy, from the idols of sinfulness, violence, and death of our time?¹⁹

In her sensitive exegesis of “Hagia Sophia,” the poet Susan McCaslin observes that Merton was aware that the sophiological tradition “had been marginalized within Western Christianity” and with “Hagia Sophia” he “attempts to restore it.”²⁰ This much is clear to me and quite significant. Merton sought to retrieve a memory and experience of God largely lost in the West, and at great price. Yet an even more significant assertion follows: “While Merton recognizes the limitations of language, he assumes a metaphysical and ontological ground of being beyond language; that is, the ‘real presence’ of Wisdom behind and within the signs.”²¹ What can it mean to affirm “the real presence” of Wisdom behind and within the signs?

When Jesus of Nazareth prefaced his enigmatic sayings with the words, “let those with eyes to see, see, let those with ears to hear, hear,” scholars tell us he was speaking as a teacher of Jewish wisdom, appealing not just to the head but to the whole person

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. The task of the poet and contemplative, suggests Williams, is to interrogate the repetition of “old words for God, safe words for God, lazy words for God, useful words for God” (50). The alternative, what Williams calls “the politics of the self-enclosed world” (65), makes us into prisoners of our own “controlling will” (51) and our public and ecclesial spaces into fields of warfare. Few Catholic theologians have retrieved the biblical theme of idolatry more cogently than Jon Sobrino. See, e.g., *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 180–92.

20. Susan McCaslin, “Merton and ‘Hagia Sophia,’” in *Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart: The Eastern Church* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003) at 252.

21. *Ibid.* 253.

of his listener: heart, body, mind, senses, imagination.²² Like a lure darting and flashing before a fish, Jesus's words dance and play before the imagination, breaking open our habitual assumptions about "the way things are." This too is Merton's gift, but it is not necessarily an easy or pleasant gift to receive, either from Jesus or Merton. To be "born again" is to break free of the stultifying womb of conventional wisdom; it is to risk the vulnerability of a covenantal faith that holds no guarantees.

Now the Wisdom of God, Sophia, comes forth, reaching from "end to end mightily." She wills to be also the unseen pivot of all nature, the center and significance of all the light that is *in* all and *for* all. That which is poorest and humblest, that which is most hidden in all things is nevertheless most obvious in them, and quite manifest, for it is their own self that stands before us, naked and without care But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all.²³

While a feminist reading of the poem could find problematic the identification of the feminine with poverty and humility, mercy and tenderness, in fact, as McCaslin notes, there is no hierarchical "subordination of Sophia to a masculine God."²⁴ Qualities of tenderness and mercy are also attributed to God the Father, just as Sophia exercises power and authority throughout the poem, as when she crowns the Logos and sends him forth into the world in section IV. In short, gender metaphors are "inter-connected and interchangeable," "an expression of two aspects of a single dynamic at play, like Wisdom at the foundation of the world."²⁵ Merton's metaphors remain fluid. Sophia "is not just the feminine face of a masculine God, or a masculine God with feminine attributes (God in a skirt), but an active power permeating all things."²⁶ The

22. Biblical scholars have long recognized the Hebrew Wisdom foundations of New Testament Christology and almost certainly of Jesus's self-identity. Amid an enormous body of literature, James D. G. Dunn provides a balanced summary of the issues and texts at play in his *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 163–212; for a highly readable introduction see Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) 69–118; on Wisdom and apocalypticism, see John J. Collins, "Wisdom, Apocalypticism, and Generic Compatibility," in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, ed. Leo Perdue et al. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 165–85, and other essays in this volume.

23. Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 65–67.

24. McCaslin, "Merton and 'Hagia Sophia'" 248.

25. *Ibid.*

26. McCaslin, "Merton and 'Hagia Sophia'" 253. In his exegesis of Proverbs 8:22–31, the text that most captivated Merton's imagination, Walter Brueggemann observes that Proverbs 8 "imagines and articulates a way of God relating with the world that is not intrusive and occasional, but that is constant in its nurturing, sustaining propensity. It does indeed do 'God-talk' in a different tone, which witnesses to the mystery that can only be expressed as intuitive, playful, suggestive, doxological language, and which therefore necessarily opens the way for speculation about the precise relationship between the world and

poem “remembers” and “calls forth” from the deep tradition in such a way so as to break open the imagination of the receptive listener, and thus to dismantle idols, rather than reinforce them.²⁷

The final scene of “Hagia Sophia” is a scene of haunting “solemnity, great beauty, and piercing loneliness,”²⁸ proffering a God who shares freely without reserve the poverty, and hidden glory, of the human condition.

The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth.

A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.²⁹

McCaslin sees in these lines “a strangely modern figure of the exile or God as exile in us”³⁰—suggesting that human destiny in a world exiled from Sophia is not altogether different from that of Jesus, the Son of Man who “has nowhere to lay his head.” Merton scholar Patrick O’Connell cites Philippians 2:6–11, Paul’s striking hymn of *kenosis*, to draw a similar reading: “In identifying fully with the human condition, Christ is the perfect epiphany of Sophia, embodying and extending to all the redemptive mercy of God.”³¹

All of this is to suggest that Merton is not just painting pretty pictures in “Hagia Sophia.” Immersed body and soul in the tradition, he writes as a mystical theologian, a poet of the presence of God. His task is not to defend a traditional understanding of God but rather to articulate a mode of divine presence hidden in and responsive to the crisis of his times: a mode of presence faithful to the revelation of God and humanity fully alive in Jesus, and at the same time, a vision of Christian hope, a kind of God-talk (i.e. a mystical theology), that will resonate in a key familiar to others beyond Christianity and Catholicism. To grasp the “real presence” of Wisdom implies no magic, literary or otherwise. It does imply that we, like Merton, like Jesus and Mary, like all our forefathers and foremothers in faith, must learn to discern the signs of our times patiently and prayerfully “with penetration.”³² It is to learn with constant

God.” Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 346.

27. See Pramuk, *Sophia* 117–21, 203–4, 291–95.

28. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 363.

29. Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 69.

30. McCaslin, “Merton and ‘Hagia Sophia’” 250.

31. Patrick F. O’Connell, “Hagia Sophia,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 193.

32. The phrase is taken from M.-D. Chenu, O.P., whose analysis of “the symbolist mentality” in medieval monastic theology goes far in illuminating Merton’s own theological sensibilities. See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans.

humility and wonder “the freedom of God at work outside of all set forms, all rites, all theology, all contemplation—everything.”³³

For the Christian and Catholic sacramental and sophianic imagination, hope rises from what pulses beneath the surface of things, calling our freedom forward, inviting us to imagine and make room for another possible future, the future of God’s own imagining. As a theological virtue centered in the Incarnation, Christian hope rises not from human vision or effort alone but from the comingling of human and divine freedom, history and eternity, matter and spirit, freedom and grace. In other words, the mosaic of human history and planetary life unfolding is still being imagined, and while promises of great wonders spring forth from the mouth of God, nothing is fixed ahead of time. Our freedom as sons and daughters of God hinges on the present moment of imagination and decision, pregnant with possibility and risk. *See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* (Isa 43:19, New American Bible used throughout).³⁴

On this point we shall leave Merton behind for a time and embark on a kind of experiment in sophianic imagination. If Merton’s remembrance of God 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. In the spirit of Williams’s call to turn “further in the direction [Merton] is looking,” we shall chase after the lure of Wisdom-Sophia in other places, beginning with the Jewish community, whose corporate memory is painfully replete with the problem of God. Merton’s interest in Judaism flourished during the 1960s, inspired not a little by his friendship with Abraham Joshua Heschel and Vatican II’s radical reevaluation of the “Jewish question.”³⁵ Moreover, some of his most devastating essays and poems in this period were written in response to accounts of Nazi atrocities made public at the Nuremberg Trials. Much in the way of Metz, Merton does not shy away from considering the horrors of Auschwitz as a *locus theologicus*.³⁶ We turn, then, to the witness of Ety Hillesum, a young Jewish woman whose story intensifies the question of God

Jerome Taylor and Lester Little (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957) 99–145, at 99; cf. Pramuk, *Sophia* 107–10. It should be clear that Merton was no biblical literalist, but saw theology’s task as discerning “the theological content of the Bible” in the context of the “atmosphere of proclamation and liturgy [in which] the sacred texts themselves took shape.” Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) 223.

33. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love* 566.

34. Thus Bulgakov described sophiology as a “theology of crisis,” hinging on the church’s ongoing need to discern the mystery of divine-humanity articulated at Chalcedon but still unfolding (and still meeting resistance) in every domain of human culture and creativity: natural science, economics, politics, art, sexuality, and so on. See *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* 21.

35. See *Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words: Recognition, Repentance and Renewal*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003).

36. It is not incidental that Merton’s chilling “Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces,” in which the poet adopts the persona of SS Officer Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz from 1940 to 1943, appears in the same volume as “Hagia Sophia.”

during the Holocaust. Her memory and the death camp accounts of other women like her compel us to ask not only “Where was God?” but perhaps more significantly, “Who was God?” during the Shoah.

“To defend your dwelling place in us to the last”

Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jew who lived in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation and was murdered in Auschwitz at age 29. Her diaries, which survived the war, give witness to a spirit in humanity that defies rational explanation. In May of 1942, just before Hillesum was arrested and sent to the transit camp of Westerbork, she wrote the following passage in her diary, lines that have haunted me since I first read them some 25 years ago:

Saturday morning, 7:30. The bare trunks that climb past my window now shelter under a cover of young green leaves. A springy fleece along their naked, tough, ascetic limbs.

I went to bed early last night, and from my bed I stared out through the large open window. And it was once more as if life with all its mysteries was close to me, as if I could touch it. I had the feeling that I was resting against the naked breast of life, and could feel her gentle and regular heartbeat. I felt safe and protected. And I thought, How strange. It is wartime. There are concentration camps . . . I know how very nervous people are, I know about the mounting human suffering. I know the persecution and oppression and despotism and the impotent fury and the terrible sadism. I know it all.

And yet—at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life, and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop. That is also my attitude to life, and I believe that neither war nor any other senseless human atrocity will ever be able to change it.³⁷

Robert Ellsberg uses the phrase “earthy and embodied” to describe the sense of the divine that saturates Hillesum’s diaries. “For Etty, everything—the physical and the spiritual without distinction—was related to her passionate openness to life, which was ultimately openness to God.”³⁸ Our bodies, the trees, the earth—even the hard soil

See *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, 43–47; see also “A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann,” and “Auschwitz: A Family Camp,” in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 199–201, 276–86.

37. Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996) 135–36.

38. Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses from Our Time* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 522. Ellsberg notes that Hillesum’s diary, published four decades after her death, “was quickly recognized as one of the great moral documents of our time” (521).

beneath the camps—pulses with the whisper and protest of life itself, enfolding us “in her gentle and regular heartbeat.”

Hillesum was no naïve romantic. She felt the noose tightening, the impending “cruelty and deprivation the likes of which I cannot imagine in even my wildest fantasies.” Yet there pulses throughout her diaries an enduring sense of grace and consolation:

I don't feel [caught] in anybody's clutches; I feel safe in God's arms, to put it rhetorically, and no matter whether I am sitting at this beloved old desk now, or in a bare room in the Jewish district, or perhaps in a labor camp under SS guards in a month's time—I shall always feel safe in God's arms . . . [All] this is as nothing to the immeasurable expanse of my faith in God and my inner receptiveness.³⁹

The key image may be the last: her determination to maintain an “inner receptiveness” that no amount of barbed wire or ideological fury could contain. Indeed Hillesum's journals reflect an inner freedom and faith that seem to flow much more from sensual receptivity and wordless silence than from any explicit religious creed or ritual action. “Such words as ‘god’ and ‘death’ and ‘suffering’ and ‘eternity’ are best forgotten,” she writes. “We have to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain. We must just be.”⁴⁰ Hillesum's sensual openness to God included her closest friendships and intimate sexual relationships. She writes of the freedom from fear that comes through embracing life's gratuity from moment to moment, a freedom the Germans could not take away.⁴¹

Two weeks before her internment at Westerbork, Hillesum speaks directly to God, confessing her growing realization that the felt presence or absence of the divine in the world depends considerably upon us, on our “safeguarding” God's hidden dynamism within creation.

Sunday morning prayer. Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. I shall promise You one thing, God, just one very small thing: I shall never burden my today with cares about my tomorrow, although that takes some practice. Each day is sufficient unto itself. I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well . . . You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.⁴²

39. Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* 176.

40. *Ibid.* 171.

41. *Ibid.* 144–45.

42. *Ibid.* 178. Compare to the preface of *Raids on the Unspeakable*, in which Merton describes the book's central message as “to be human in this most inhuman of ages, to guard the image of man for it is the image of God.” Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 6 (emphasis original).

Like many other stories of courage and resistance during the Holocaust, what most defies rational explanation in Hillesum's story was her willingness to take suffering upon herself "in solidarity with those who suffer."⁴³ As Ellsberg notes, this was not a masochistic embrace of suffering for its own sake but rather a vocation "to redeem the suffering of humanity from within, by safeguarding 'that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.'"⁴⁴ To redeem the suffering of humanity from within: black or white, Jew or Christian, Hindu or Muslim, Buddhist or atheist, is this not what it means to live in solidarity with friends and strangers alike in the merciful womb of Love? Hillesum's last known writings were scribbled on a postcard thrown from the train that delivered her to Auschwitz. "We left the camp singing,"⁴⁵ she wrote.

It is not for me or any Christian to claim the victory for love, and thus for God, by Etty Hillesum's witness. And yet an undeniable spirit of hopefulness endures and comes to life again in remembering her. Here I want to linger a moment longer with the striking feminine imagery that Hillesum uses in her attempt to express her sense of God's presence, "her arms round me" so close and protective that she can scarcely distinguish it from her own heartbeat. Of course Hillesum is not the first Jew to express the divine encompassing Presence in such vividly feminine terms. From the books of Proverbs and Wisdom to the wisdom sayings of Jesus and much of the earliest christological hymns of the New Testament, the feminine face of God haunts the Bible itself, even where she has largely been marginalized or banished from institutional Judaism and Western Christianity.⁴⁶ She saturates Jewish kabbalism's mystical narrative of *zimzum* (Hebrew: "contraction") in which God creates and nurtures the world not through sheer omnipotence or dominating power but rather more like a mother, freely opening a space in God's very self for the emergence of the material cosmos, and consummately for human freedom. Paradoxically, it is the emptiness or womb-like openness of God's expansive love that sustains the ripening fullness of a vibrantly unfolding creation.⁴⁷ But what can such feminine imagery have to do with the birthing of hope amid racist genocide or the horrors of human history?

43. Ellsberg, *All Saints* 522. Edith Stein (St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross), a Carmelite nun, philosopher, and Christian convert from Judaism, offers a similar witness during the Holocaust, bringing Carmelite spirituality into solidarity with her Jewish brothers and sisters. Stein, like Hillesum, was among the murdered in the camps. See *Edith Stein: Essential Writings*, ed. John Sullivan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

44. *Ibid.*

45. Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* 360.

46. See notes 3 and 22 above. To be clear, Hillesum also addresses God in traditionally masculine terms.

47. From the teachings of Isaac Luria (1534–1572), or the *Lurianic Kabbalah*. Among Christian theologians the notion of *zimzum* has been linked with Sophia-Shekinah and the theme of divine *kenosis* by Jürgen Moltmann (see *God in Creation: The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993]) and Sergius Bulgakov, if more implicitly, in his dogmatics of the humanity of God, or divine-human Sophia (n. 7 above).

“She cannot be a prisoner”

In her breathtaking study, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, Jewish theologian Melissa Raphael joins other contemporary feminist theologians in arguing that patriarchal or exclusively male images, discourses, and practices in synagogue and church have sanctioned a great deal of injustice, misogyny, and violence in society, in no small part by obscuring the female face of God: God’s nurturing, indwelling Presence known in the Hebrew Bible as Wisdom, Shekinah, Sophia, or Spirit.⁴⁸ Patriarchal forces have veiled the feminine divine “to the point of disappearance,” argues Raphael, perhaps nowhere more horrifically than in Auschwitz. Indeed it is not altogether surprising, she suggests, that traditional Jewish theology, with its own patriarchal imagination, could not conceive how the all-powerful God of Moses and the prophets would have been so utterly powerless, so impotent, in the face of Auschwitz. In effect, traditional post-Holocaust approaches accuse God, Raphael notes, for not being patriarchal enough.⁴⁹ Her thesis, rendered with considerable intellectual humility and deference to the inexplicable horrors of Auschwitz, hinges on the need to challenge patriarchal assumptions about how God’s power and presence are (and are not) manifest in the world: “There has been too much asking ‘where was God in Auschwitz?’ and not enough ‘who was God in Auschwitz.’”⁵⁰

In truth, Raphael suggests, God was not wholly eclipsed in Auschwitz but became incarnate in women who turned in compassion and bodily care toward one other, defying the most inhumane and desperate circumstances. With unsparing detail, Raphael unearths the largely ignored and forgotten stories of women in the camps who maintained the practices of Jewish prayer and ritual purification with whatever resources were available to them—not excluding their own bodily fluids where water was nowhere to be found.⁵¹ Within the barbed-wire enclosure of the camps, wherever one woman’s body was bent in compassionate presence over another woman’s body, or over the body of a child, an encircling space was formed wherein the divine Presence could dwell. Thus could God be bodily reconciled with humanity over against the patriarchal god of raw power, the false and idolatrous god of nation-states and National Socialism. Even, and especially, in Auschwitz, the most basic gestures of compassion constituted “a redemptive moment of human presence: a *staying there* against erasure”⁵²—not only for women in the camps, but through them, for God.

Raphael tells the story of a woman who, torn from her husband and children by SS guards immediately after arriving at the camp, falls weeping on the frozen ground “with the flaming crematoria before her,” when she suddenly feels two hands lay a garment around her shoulders. An old Frenchwoman had stepped forward, wrapping

48. Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

49. Raphael, *Female Face of God* 35.

50. *Ibid.* 54.

51. *Ibid.* 68.

52. *Ibid.* 157.

her in her own cloak, whispering “It will be over and done soon, it will be over.”⁵³ Raphael recalls another now-iconic story of an old woman who is remembered “for holding in her arms a motherless one-year-old child as she stood at the edge of the communal pit, about to be shot with the rest of her village by Nazi troops. The old woman sang to the child and tickled him under the chin until he laughed with joy. Then they were shot.”⁵⁴

Clearly Raphael’s case for the divine presence in Auschwitz does not hinge on numerical or otherwise logical analyses, as if hints and gestures of the good could cancel out the overwhelming weight of evil. Hers is not “a quantitative theology, contingent upon circumstance”; it is “a qualitative, ethical theology”⁵⁵ in which “the truly numinous spectacle was not the horror of the flaming chimneys but the *mysterium* of human love that is stronger than death, the *tremendum* of its judgment upon demonic hate, and the *fascinans* of its calling God back into a world which had cast her out.”⁵⁶ Indeed, the sacramental or sophianic impulse, as I would call it here, whether Jewish or Christian, is an impulse that “attaches very large meanings to very small signs.”⁵⁷

There is a beautiful teaching in the Jewish tradition called *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase meaning “the reparation,” the “making good,” “the rescuing to make good of what is left of this smashed world.”⁵⁸ The wellspring of *tikkun olam* is love received and love freely given, a fierce love that seeks justice and the flourishing of life for all God’s children. In her study of Auschwitz Melissa Raphael gets it exactly right when she concludes that the restoration or *tikkun* of the world “does not occupy a quantity of space and time; it is the theophanic possibility of a moment.”⁵⁹ The fearful mystery

53. Ibid. 58.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid. 71.

56. Ibid. 74; with reference to Rudolph Otto’s famous description in *The Idea of the Holy* of religious experience as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

57. Ibid. 139. To risk a personal example much closer to home, several years ago my wife and I adopted two children from Haiti. Immediately after our adopted son Henry was born, somewhere in the vast slum of Cite Soleil in Port-Au-Prince, his mother abandoned him in a latrine, believing she had been impregnated by an evil spirit. My wife and I were told this story when we held Henry for the first time at the age of six months. We also learned that sometime after he was abandoned, another woman from the area heard his cries and found the newborn struggling in the latrine, half-submerged in feces. The neighbor retrieved him, brought him back to his mother, and insisted that she take him to the orphanage. She did. The rationalist may hear this story and call it a happy accident of circumstance. I call it a miracle of grace, which brought Henry crying and fighting for life from one woman’s womb into another’s sheltering arms, and, less than a year later, into my family’s embrace. Of course for every story like ours there are ten thousand (and six million) more that defy theological meaning. Even ours is haunted by ambiguities. Even still, when I contemplate this beautiful child who came to us “in the fullness of time,” from a chain of events and innumerable acts of selflessness well beyond my capacity to understand, I cannot help but fall mute in wonder.

58. George Steiner, “To Speak of Walter Benjamin,” in *Benjamin Studies: Perception and Experience in Modernity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002) 13–23, at 22.

59. Raphael, *Female Face of God* 80.

of grace hinges precisely on the moment—the accumulated constellation of moments—in which we, and people we will never meet, say yes or no to love.

Collectively what such moments reveal is a picture of God’s power as manifest in the vulnerability and weakness of incarnate love. “Where the communal fabric of the world was being torn apart, human love was anticipating its renewal.”⁶⁰ Where racist ideology sought to obliterate God as God-incarnate in the Jews there were nevertheless women (and certainly there were men) who “made a sanctuary for the spark of the divine presence that saved it from being extinguished.”⁶¹ Here is a central Jewish insight that Christian theology has too often obscured: God asks, God invites, God needs our participation in the indwelling drama of love. We encounter that same flash of incarnate loving presence in Etty Hillesum. The realization of God’s own hope for the world, what Jesus calls the Reign of God, hinges on our inner receptiveness, our fiat, our participation.

Haunted by memories of his own childhood in war-ravaged Germany, Metz has asserted that Christians can pray *after* Auschwitz only because there were Jews who prayed *in* Auschwitz.⁶² The implications are painfully clear: the Christian community has been both the vehicle of grace in history and too often its tragic obstacle. Wherever Jews struggled in faith before the seeming silence of God to keep the circle of grace open, through resistance, prayer, and compassion, they not only helped to redeem humanity from its most vile capabilities, they also opened the way for God to dwell bodily within God’s suffering creation. Of course there were also many Christians who resisted to their deaths the terrifying closed circle of Hitler’s Final Solution. Their “No,” in fact, was a powerfully kenotic “Yes” to participate in the defense of life and love. And this mystery, too, must be accounted for and celebrated.⁶³

For Catholics, of course, and for Thomas Merton, not only Christ but Mary stands as our model for the call to such participation. Thus from “Hagia Sophia”: “Through her wise answer, through her obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia, God enters without publicity into the city of rapacious men.”⁶⁴ But we must never forget that Mary’s fiat, her deep attunement to the divine presence, had long been prepared in her by the people Israel, whose stories resound everywhere with the call of covenant relationship in history. The word “presence” evokes a gift that is both spatial and temporal: “I am here with you now, in this place, in this moment”—not just with you, but in you, and you in me. God awaits, as it were, our bodily surrender to a communion that is deeper, yet more hidden and tenuous (because free) than

60. Ibid. 142.

61. Ibid. 79.

62. Metz, *A Passion for God* 1–2, 63, 122–23.

63. See *Ultimate Price: Testimonies of Christians Who Resisted the Third Reich*, selected by Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), which gathers select writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Franz Jagerstatter, Alfred Delp, Sophie Scholl, Jochen Klepper, Bernhard Lichtenberg, and Rupert Mayer. Also highly recommended is the film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, dir. Marc Rothmund (Zeitgeist, 2006).

64. Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 68. The consequences of Mary’s fiat are made known to her from the beginning: “And a sword shall pierce your heart” (Luke 2:35).

any earth-shaking or army-defeating theophany. Deeper still, yet too much forgotten, is the silent yet symphonic Earth, in whose sustaining presence all creatures live and move and have their being.

The Earth indeed, from a sophianic perspective, is “the silent memory of the world that gives life and fruit to all,” she who “preserves everything in herself” and in whom “nothing perishes,”⁶⁵ not even the smallest and most forgotten of creatures. Hillesum frequently describes a sense of divine presence consoling her from within the silences of nature, as in “the jasmine [outside] and that piece of sky beyond my window.”⁶⁶ Likewise Raphael notes that when no person was capable of a kind word or compassionate touch amid the dehumanizing conditions of the camps, “inanimate natural objects could take on the functions of divine presence for women.” Here she recounts Victor Frankl’s story of a girl who told him as she lay dying that a bare chestnut tree “was the only friend she had in her loneliness and that she often talked to it.” When Frankl asked the girl if the tree replied, she answered, “‘It said to me, ‘I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.’” Raphael concludes, “If God has chosen Israel as God’s vehicle of self-revelation then [such stories] must tell us something about the nature and posture of God’s presence among us. It may seem little more than a tree stripped of its leaves by an untempered wind.”⁶⁷

We might think of other places today, mostly hidden and marginal places, where the protest of Life itself, of Earth, and a Mother-Love’s rebellion against cruelty and arbitrary violence, seeks to break through into a world increasingly engineered for war, for violence of an unspeakable kind against women and children, and for planetary destruction. She rises from the threatened rainforests of the Amazon river basin, not least in their silent lament for Sr. Dorothy Stang, murdered for her defense of the trees

65. Sergius Bulgakov, cited in Bernice Rosenthal, “The Nature and Function of Sophia in Sergei Bulgakov’s Prerevolutionary Thought,” in *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Kornblatt and Richard Gustafson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1996) 154–75, at 167. Bulgakov’s celebration of the mutual relationship between the “holy flesh” of humanity (Adam) and “matter-mother” (the Earth) is often hymnic—“In you we are born, you feed us, we touch you with our feet, to you we return”—yet never sentimental, or merely bucolic. Indeed his constructive theological justification of the natural world presages contemporary environmental theologies by some 50 years. “The fate of nature, suffering and awaiting its liberation, is henceforth connected with the fate of man . . . the new heaven and new earth now enter as a necessary element into the composition of Christian eschatology” (cited in Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle* 138–39); also Pramuk, *Sophia* 88–9, 240–50.

66. Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* 152.

67. Raphael, *Female Face of God* 58, citing Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon, 1962) 69. For Christians the evocation of divine presence in a tree stripped bare may recall patristic meditations linking the Cross of Jesus with the Tree of Life in the book of Genesis. Raphael is careful to draw a distinction between the Jewish memory and experience of Shekhinah as “the real presence of a suffering God” and a “quasi-Christian incarnation of God crucified in Auschwitz.” She cites Jürgen Moltmann’s theology (*The Crucified God*) as a Christian depiction “that is close but not identical” to her own, noting that in Jewish understanding “the suffering is that of one who, being among us, suffers with us, but does not suffer

and indigenous culture. She speaks to us in the “Mothers of the Disappeared,” who dance together in the Plaza de Mayo of Buenos Aires in silent remembrance of their missing sons and daughters, husbands and grandsons, sisters and granddaughters. She weeps and rises defiantly in the story of Somaly Mam and countless other women and children worldwide sold into the horrors of sexual slavery, often by their own families.⁶⁸ She hides in Hagar, the slave of Sarah and concubine of Abraham; in Mary Magdalene, witness to the crucifixion and resurrection but demoted and maligned in word and imagery down through the ages; and in all the hidden women of the Bible silenced or misread through the eyes of racism and patriarchy.⁶⁹ She shines in Pakistani teenager and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head, in the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, “just because of her determination to go to school. The extremists showed what they fear most—a girl with a book.”⁷⁰ In biblical terms Malala Yousafzai gives us a riveting glimpse of the *anawim*, the still, small voice of Sophia breaking through in our time.

She speaks in the sophianic icons of Russian Orthodoxy; in the pages of Georges Bernanos’s mournful classic, *The Diary of a Country Priest*; in Sojourner Truth’s still-electrifying “Ain’t I a Woman”; and in the soulful storytelling of Bill Withers’s “Grandma’s Hands,” live at Carnegie Hall in 1973. She sings in the artistry of Joni Mitchell, Billie Holiday, and Fannie Lou Hamer and from almost every page in Sue Monk Kidd’s resplendent first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, where the image of the Black Madonna infuses hope into the life of a young white girl who has none. She cries out in the silent aftershocks of destroyed natural landscapes and in the faces of the global poor and victimized women and children of color.⁷¹ She echoes in the poetry of the late Maya Angelou, who speaks for all such women with fierce

vicariously for us” (54–55). To be sure, great care must be taken not to conflate Jewish and Christian interpretations of a suffering God, particularly in the case of the Shoah. Much depends from the Christian side on precisely how we understand Jesus’s crucifixion to be redemptive, as well as keeping in full view the Jewishness of Jesus and the various Judaisms that shaped the early church. Indeed Bulgakov’s deep respect for historic Israel and insistence on the integral Jewishness of Mary and Jesus in continuity with the Hebrew prophets is one of the most striking elements of Russian sophiology. See Pramuk, *Sophia* 238–39; on the crucifixion as *apokalypsis* of divine-human kenosis, presence-in-absence, and mercy, see Pramuk, *Sophia* 265–68.

68. See Rosanne Murphy, *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007); Somaly Mam, *The Road of Lost Innocence: The True Story of a Cambodian Heroine* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2008).
69. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Diana Hayes, *Hagar’s Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995); Kathy Coffey, *The Hidden Women of the Gospels* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).
70. Amanda Holpuch, “Malala Yousafzai Calls on Governments to Provide Free Education for All,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2013, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/12/malala-yousafzai-calls-free-education. (This and subsequent URLs were accessed January 11, 2016.)
71. Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (New York: MacMillan, 1937); Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman,” <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>; Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Penguin,

resilience and sass in her poem, “Still I Rise.”⁷² She recoils and fights back in young women on college campuses, where at least one in five are victims of sexual assault, and educators and mental health professionals struggle to respond to what many describe as a “rape culture.”⁷³ She finds her voice in the courage of sexual abuse survivors as they confront the systematic denial and obfuscation of a number of bishops around the world concerning a plague that stole their childhood and still haunts the Roman Catholic Church.⁷⁴ She hides in the quotidian seams of parish life, where a culture of patriarchy and clericalism continues to disempower and demoralize many Catholics, discouraging not a few from active participation in the life of the community.⁷⁵

What binds these diverse narratives into one wondrous yet troubling mosaic is the affirmation of divine presence precisely, urgently, and most intensely in those persons and places written off by conventional wisdom as inhuman, God-forsaken, or effectively “less than” *imago Dei*, *imago Christi*. Indeed where conventional wisdom registers no disconnect between our complacent worship of “God” and the systematic violation of women, children, and the planet itself, divine Wisdom cries out from the crossroads in protest, identifying herself especially with the little, the hidden and forgotten ones, and with suffering earth, the Mother of all God’s

2003); Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

72. Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994) 163–64.

73. B.S. Fisher, F.T. Cullen, and M.G. Turner, *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*, National Institute of Justice (2000); C.P. Krebs et al., *The Campus Sexual Assault Study*, National Institute of Justice (2007); see both reports at <http://www.union.edu/offices/dean/sart/campus>; Center for Disease Control, “Sexual Violence: Facts at a Glance,” <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-datasheet-a.pdf>; David Lisak, “Understanding the Predatory Nature of Sexual Violence,” <http://www.middlebury.edu/media/view/240951/original/>, and references therein.

74. John Jay College Research Team, “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010” (May 2011), <http://old.usccb.org/mr/causes-and-context.shtml>.

75. To cite just two representative examples, teachers and pastoral staffs in dioceses across the United States are increasingly required to sign loyalty oaths indicating that they unambiguously support the teachings of the Church on matters that implicate the lives of women, such as contraception and women’s ordination. Many choose to sign; some refuse and resign, or are terminated. A number of pastors in Arizona, Michigan, and Virginia, following the reinstatement of the Tridentine form of the Mass, have forbidden altar girls during *all forms* of the Mass under the logic that “replacing girls with boys as servers will lead to more vocations to the priesthood.” Facing objections from parishioners, a Phoenix pastor says he did not consult the parish council “because they are not theologically trained.” The diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, has forbidden girl servers since 1994. The premature closure of theological imagination in such cases, it seems to me, and therefore of hope and vitality in the people of God, is staggering. See John Coleman, “Church Loyalty Oaths Revisited,” *America* online, June 29, 2012, http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=5221; Michelle Boorstein, “Arlington Diocese Parishioners

children. Neither blood, nor political boundaries, nor religion can contain the reach of God's loving presence. "She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner. Not that she is strong, or clever, but simply that she does not understand imprisonment."⁷⁶

"She cannot be a prisoner," Merton writes, in a singular flash of hope. Yet we know that she can, and is. Surely the unraveling of the world in our time is bound up with our ongoing violence against and willful sundering of God. As theologian Rita Gross writes, "When the masculine and the feminine aspect of God have been reunited and the female half of humanity has been returned from exile, we will begin to have our *tikkun*. The world will be repaired."⁷⁷

What does it mean, then, to live together with Wisdom? It is to live fully awake in the center of these contradictions of our times while refusing to be defined by them, to accommodate ourselves to them, like an "essence" fed into a computer. "For when I am home with her I can take my ease, for nothing is bitter in her company."⁷⁸ Hope in the key of Wisdom refuses to accommodate itself to the lock-tight logic of The Way Things Are as preached by the powers and principalities in society or church. In an atmosphere marked painfully by impasse and despair, Sophia sings words of unity and hopefulness, of revelatory wonder and beauty. Above all, she summons us to freedom and full participation in the life story of God. This is the meaning of her innocence, and ours, when we open our imaginations to possibilities hidden yet manifest right before our eyes. This is what Merton, citing Julian of Norwich, calls the "eschatological secret" of Christian hope, and the very "heart of theology: not solving the contradiction, but remaining in the midst of it, in peace, knowing that it is fully solved, but that the solution is secret, and will never be guessed until it is revealed . . . The wise heart lives in Christ."⁷⁹

Question Need for Fidelity Oath," *The Washington Post* online, July 11, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/sunday-school-teachers-balk-at-oath-agreeing-to-all-church-teachings/2012/07/11/gJQAcAvGeW_story.html; "Save the Altar Girls," *America* October 10, 2011, http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=13056; Tom Gallagher, "No Girl Servers at Latin Masses," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 9, 2011, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-no-girl-servers-latin-masses>; Alice Popovici, "Catholics Protest Altar Server Policy," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 3, 2011, <http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/catholics-protest-altar-server-policy>.

76. Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 63–64.

77. Rita Gross, cited in Raphael, *Female Face of God* 150. A convert to Judaism from Lutheranism in the 1960s, Rita Gross (d. November 11, 2015) became a Buddhist in the 1970s, and was widely known and celebrated as the leading Buddhist feminist theologian in the United States. She never renounced her Jewish identity.

78. Wis 8:16. See Merton's remarkable fiftieth birthday journal, January 31, 1965. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* vol. 5, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 200–201.

79. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 212.

The Power of the Name / The Empowerment of Naming

In his classic study, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann identifies one of the crucial tasks of prophetic ministry as the “*offering of symbols* that are adequate to contradict a situation of hopelessness in which newness is unthinkable.” This voicing of hope, Brueggemann adds, “cannot be done by inventing new symbols, for that is wishful thinking. Rather, it means to move back into the deepest memories of [the] community and activate those very symbols that have always been the basis for contradicting the regnant consciousness.”⁸⁰ If Brueggemann’s insight may be applied to pastors and religious leaders, then to think prophetically in our times is to pray theologically for a word of hope where things look hopeless, for a renewed sense of presence where God feels absent, for a memory of healing and liberation where relationships seem broken or coercive beyond repair. This remembering of our deepest identity in God is, I believe, what Merton discovered in the music of the Wisdom tradition. In the pregnant spaces between divine invitation and creation’s response, something new and wordlessly ancient waits to be born into the world, something beautiful, in the very flesh and spirit of our lives: *Sophia*. But can we believe it? As Brueggemann says of Jesus and the prophets, as Merton says of Pasternak, maybe it is the poet, after all, who will “help us get back to ourselves before it is too late.”⁸¹

But why not also the theologian? Consider Merton’s earliest notes on the Russian Sophia tradition: “Bulgakov and Berdyaev are writers of great, great attention . . . They have dared to accept the challenge of the sapiential books, the challenge of the image of Proverbs where Wisdom is ‘playing in the world’ before the face of the Creator.”⁸² What stands out in Merton’s engagement with the Russian writers is his admiration for their theological creativity, their willingness to make mistakes “in order to say something great and worthy of God.” “One wonders,” he muses, “if our theological cautiousness is not after all the sign of a fatal coldness of heart, an awful sterility born of fear, or of despair.”⁸³ Yes, one wonders. But the Sophia tradition also dares to say something great and worthy of humanity. In a word, as Merton wondered in his famous epiphany in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, how do you tell people that they are walking around shining like the sun?⁸⁴ Imbibing the thought of the

80. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 63–64.

81. From Thomas Merton, “Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) “at 340.” “Speech about hope,” writes Brueggemann, “cannot be explanatory and scientifically argumentative; rather, it must be lyrical in the sense that it touches the hopeless person at many different points. More than that, however, speech about hope must be primarily theological, which is to say that it must be in the language of covenant between a personal God and a community. Promise belongs to the world of trusting speech and faithful listening.” See *Prophetic Imagination* 67.

82. Merton, *A Search for Solitude* 85–86.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 156–57.

Russian theologians, Merton would find his answer in the remembrance of Proverb, Wisdom, Sophia.

If the mystical tradition from East to West would be our guide, the naming of God is not about circumscribing God with this or that political or theological badge and then trying to persuade as many people as you can to wear your God-badge on their chest. Rather, the naming of God involves sensitive discernment of the divine–human relationship through long meditation on the images and poetical symbols that shine through quietly, or break through dangerously, from the revelatory firmament of the Bible: YHWH, Adonai, Spirit, Shekinah, Christ, Wisdom, Sophia. To name is not primarily to identify; to name is to reveal and shape a person’s deepest relational identity. In the biblical tradition to know someone’s name is to know something fundamental about them, what to expect when we approach them. Names in the Bible convey meaning. They unveil. They unmask.⁸⁵ Sophia is God herself and God’s freedom for love coming alive in all creation. As the power of God’s mercy, Merton dares to suggest, she makes possible in us—as she did in Christ—miracles greater even than the creation: the work of truth-telling and justice, joy-making and peace.

Such a realization raises a compelling thought experiment for Christian theology, one that has long been raised by feminist and biblical theologians, and with much greater scriptural acuity than I can pursue here.⁸⁶ What might be the effect on the Christian (and human) community of remembering God not only as Person, as in Jesus Christ, but as a Woman, calling out at the crossroads urging all the peoples of the world to see and relate to one another as members of one diverse but radically interdependent family? As a Mother, bent over her children in fierce protection, or crowning them with purpose and strength for the difficult journey ahead?⁸⁷ As a Child, playing joyfully in the mountains, deserts, and watercourses of creation? As a Lover, not abstract and fleshless, but as one who loves us precisely in and through our bodies and who, despite our moral failings, still holds us in mercy and calls forth something strong and beautiful in us, something that we have “long ago ceased to be”?⁸⁸ As Sister, Companion, Friend? Perhaps such a God would ignite our hope, our capacity to breathe, and to imagine again.

85. Steven Weitzman, *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2011) 2–3.

86. For example, Sandra Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (New York: Paulist, 1986); Johnson, *She Who Is*; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: 1993); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

87. See Prov 4:8–9. Merton’s poem was inspired in part by an icon written by his friend, the Viennese-born artist Victor Hammer, depicting “Hagia Sophia” crowning the youthful Christ. See Pramuk, *Sophia* 193–96, 300.

88. Merton, *A Search for Solitude* 182. From Merton’s letter to “Proverb,” following her unexpected “epiphany” in the passersby at a busy street corner in Louisville.

To be clear, as a father myself, as the son of a loving father, the paternal face of God evokes beautifully for me Christianity's sublime teachings about love, both human and divine. For many men, women, and children, "Father" has long been and will forever be an empowering divine Name, a sustaining metaphor of divine presence, mercy, and loving care—picture the father in Rembrandt's incomparable *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Yet for many whose experience of "father" is traumatic, domineering, or cold, the image does not make room enough for love. For many, the line between paternal presence and patriarchal power is much too thin. We must remember that God is also Mother, Spirit, and Shekhinah, lest we deny our maternal and feminine experiences of grace, tighten the noose around divine and human wholeness, and foreclose the imaginative flexibility of the Bible itself, not to mention the great intellectual and mystical tradition of the church. For Christians from East to West for nearly two millennia, ecclesial and personal prayer life has been enormously enriched by the biblical memory of God as Sophia, as Holy Wisdom. How, then, to realize her presence more palpably in the practices that shape our world and our church, and pass her remembrance on to our children?

Without question all gender-bound metaphors for the divine are inadequate, since God is not an object of direct knowledge. It is also significant, as noted above, that Merton uses gendered metaphors interchangeably in "Hagia Sophia" to suggest a God beyond traditional gender binaries. Yet we should not be too quick to move "beyond" feminine images of God prior to having lingered with them for a very long while, allowing depths of memory, thought, and feeling to rise to the surface. By "we," I mean the Roman Catholic and Christian communities from East to West who share the same Scriptures. But the point radiates outward to include Jews and Muslims and other "Peoples of the Book" whose religious imaginations—and therefore families, communities, societies—also call for the healing of patriarchal deformations.⁸⁹ It is a delicate thought experiment, to be sure, but by no means a gratuitous one in an era such as ours, in which oppressed women, men, and children "have their history inscribed on their bodies."⁹⁰

89. For Islamic perspectives on divine-human relationality and the divine feminine see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Male and Female in the Islamic Perspective," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 14 (Winter-Spring, 1980), http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/authors/Seyyed%20Hossein_Nasr.aspx; and Laurence Galian, "The Centrality of the Divine Feminine in Sufism," *Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities* (2004), <http://www.hichumanities.org>. For Merton's dialogue with Sufi practitioners, see *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story*, ed. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).

90. Kwok Pui-lan, "Mending of Creation: Women, Nature, and Eschatological Hope," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 144–55, at 150. Kwok's discussion of the sex trade throws the vision of Sophia into a darkly urgent and apocalyptic light. In far too many places of the world, gays and lesbians, too, it must be said, live under the shadow of constant threat and "have their histories inscribed on their bodies."

The realization of Jesus—and Jesus crucified—as Wisdom incarnate reinforces the point powerfully. For Christ is crucified still in the bodies of the hungry, the lonely, the tortured, the lost, the exterminated. The crucifixion of Jesus unveils what Merton calls the “night face of Sophia”—Sophia bound up in “pain, trouble, pestilence.”⁹¹ To behold Wisdom incarnate in the crucified Christ is to grasp what Christian theology claims for all: that in and through Christ Jesus, God has assumed the whole of our condition, integrally, bodily, into the very life of God, not merely a segment of humanity or an aspect of the human condition. The alternative, “that womanhood is not included in what has been assumed,” or the poor, the criminal, the immigrant, the non-Christian, the homosexual, and so on, is theologically absurd.⁹² The love of God in Christ and through the Spirit knows no bounds (Gal 3:28; Rom 8:38–39). Father or Mother, Sister or Brother, in our acts of mercy, justice, and compassion, we become God’s translucence in the world, and divine and human freedom become as one body.

The remembrance of Wisdom neither solves the theodicy problem nor absolves God of the demands of justice. Rather it shifts theodicy’s weight from a question focused unilaterally on God’s power and willingness to set things right—what is *God* waiting for?—to a question that intensifies the existential immediacy and beauty, blessings and costs, of divine–human partnership—what are *we* waiting for? The life of faith and commitment to justice is unspeakably beautiful and painful all at once. In the face of entrenched sin, both personal and structural, our efforts can seem to blow away like so much chaff in a gale storm. Yet to dwell palpably in God’s friendship and mercy reassures and galvanizes the pilgrim community of faith. Indeed, without the reassurances of divine mercy, how can anyone reasonably hope to escape, in this life or the next, the whirling wheel of retribution? More than this, the remembrance of Sophia intensifies divine-sacramental agency in the “little” ones, the hidden and disinherited, all those “without identification, without even a number.”⁹³ In a climate of impasse and looming despair, she beckons “friends of God and prophets” (Wis 7:27) to imagine again, and rekindles hope, if not in things seen then in things unseen: the promise of life and love, of peace and reconciliation, shimmering just behind the veil. “You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going,” writes Merton. “What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges

91. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 91; citing Paul Evdokimov; cf. Pramuk, *At Play in Creation* 51–58.

92. Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 293: “From a theological perspective, Jesus could have been a woman, and to make specific theological points from the facticity of his manhood without further warrant would seem to be fundamentally wrong.” See also Andrew Greeley: “The sacramental imagination, when working properly, apparently does sense a correlation between a lurking God and equality of women. It does perceive, however dimly, that a woman’s body is as much a sacrament of God’s love as a man’s body.” From “The Mother Love of God,” in *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) 89–103, at 103.

93. Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 69.

offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love.”⁹⁴

Conclusion: To Say Something Worthy of God

During his historic address to the US Congress on September 24, 2015, Pope Francis celebrated Thomas Merton as “a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.”⁹⁵ If there is golden thread that joins Pope Francis and Thomas Merton in challenging “the certitudes” of our times, perhaps it is that prophetic wisdom and contemplative praxis for which the pope’s namesake, Saint Francis, is most celebrated: the fate of suffering Earth and the fate of all God’s creatures are not separate but are bound beautifully, integrally, and urgently together. As Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*,

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental . . . There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.⁹⁶

To the extent this crisis does not paralyze us it gives rise to creative thought: what images and memories of hope can we offer the next generation? Indeed the great struggle for theology in our times seems to be the struggle for a thoroughgoing renewal of theological anthropology: a vision and corresponding praxis of the human person and human community linked organically to the whole, to all creatures and the entire Cosmos, wherein the *imago Dei* saturates our reverence for and celebration of the “all in all.”

Notwithstanding its highly philosophical and distinctive cultural content, the Wisdom tradition from East to West begins and ends in the ecstasy of love, of being

94. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 208.

95. See “Address of the Holy Father, United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., Thursday, 24 September 2015,” https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.

96. “*Laudato si’*” 139, 118; on Saint Francis, see *LS* 10–12, 246, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. The link between anthropology, theology, and ecology is everywhere implicit and often explicit in Merton’s nature writings and in innumerable social essays; it surfaces powerfully as well in his frequent laments for the West’s (and Christian Europe’s) refusal to learn from the ancient sapiential traditions of the conquered indigenous peoples of Mexico and Latin and North America. See Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin, 2003); “The Time of the End is the Time of No Room,” in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 65–75; “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants,” in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 70–89; see also Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), and Daniel Horan, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2014) 117–58.

loved gratuitously by God, spilling over into an embodied sense of unity with all things. Yet rising from this mysticism of grace and of “being at home” in the physical universe, Sophia gives voice at once to a deep sense of exile, historical urgency and danger, a prophetic cry “from the crossroads” to hear and respond to God’s revelatory word in history. It is not incidental that “Hagia Sophia” was written during what Merton called a “season of fury” in the United States, nor that Russian sophiology was born “at the very time that Russia lost its *axis mundi* and was coming apart.”⁹⁷ Without question Merton’s awakening to Sophia in the last decade of his life was cut from much the same cloth as Bulgakov’s had been in the wake of the horrors of the Russian Revolution and two world wars: the cloth of protest. In Merton’s case the embrace of Wisdom-Sophia marked a protest against the “flight from woman”⁹⁸ wounding his own past, and perhaps even crippling the prospects for renewal in the Roman Catholic Church. But no less prescient was his protest against the deadly “seriousness” of American power and its Promethean grasping for life that plays out tragically, in fact, as an addiction to death. Under a reigning consciousness bent on war and its endless preparation, the sophianic Child—and real children everywhere—lay forgotten, dead, buried. Christian “eschatology” in such an atmosphere becomes little more than “the last gasp of exhausted possibilities,”⁹⁹ our secret desire to get it all over with.

Enter the diaries of Etty Hillesum and the death-camp accounts retrieved with such theological sensitivity by Melissa Raphael. What Hillesum and Raphael add to Merton’s sophianic writings is a measure of raw witness to faith in God and human possibilities that has been tested by historical-political fire, the fire of the crematoria. To paraphrase Metz, their witness to the presence of God not in spite of history but in and through histories inscribed blasphemously on women’s bodies represents a refusal to be consoled by myths.¹⁰⁰ To say it another way, authentic religious hope, hope in the key of Wisdom, has little patience with fantasy or gnostic flights from corporeality. Fantasy is a flight from reality, a flight from enfleshed freedom, insofar as it creates alternative worlds and a diversity of images largely untethered to human history, memory, and corporeal experience. The imagination that produces hope, by contrast, involves a profound engagement with the real, and “a refusal to let go until one goes

97. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, “The Nature and Function of Sophia in Sergei Bulgakov’s Prerevolutionary Thought,” in *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Kornblatt and Gustafson 154–75, at 172.

98. For the impact on Merton’s consciousness of psychologist Karl Stern’s book *The Flight from Woman* see Jonathan Montaldo, “A Gallery of Women’s Faces and Dreams of Women from the Drawings of Thomas Merton,” *The Thomas Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 155–72; an important companion piece is Margaret Bridget Betz, “Merton’s Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God,” in *The Merton Annual* (2000) 190–207. For a lucid analysis of Merton’s evolving (and maturing) relationships with women over the course of his life, see Christine Bochen, “Women,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 537–41.

99. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* 75.

100. Metz, *A Passion for God* 66, 81–85.

beneath the surface.”¹⁰¹ Where fantasy involves the kind of free-wheeling imagination that Hollywood and the masters of the culture industry—and not a few religious-apocalyptic fundamentalists—tend to exploit, the sacramental/sophianic imagination grasps reality by starting with the world as we encounter it, the world of the senses, the world in which God became flesh, “a broken world with many broken people in need of healing.”¹⁰² Authentic hope must begin there, lest it be a false and fantastical hope, pie in the sky hope, mere dreaming.

As a systematic theologian, a host of critical questions have occupied my attention in studying Merton’s reception of Russian sophiology. Does Merton make “mistakes” in “Hagia Sophia”? Does he violate God’s transcendence by thinking too highly, too analogically, of human beings and of material creation? Is it possible or even desirable to attempt to translate mystical texts such as “Hagia Sophia” into the terms of systematic theology, as in, for example, a Wisdom-centered Christology of Presence? Or are such texts better left at the margins, like Sophia Herself, with those narratives that form a kind of “penumbra around the canon”?¹⁰³ In a word, *Why Sophia?* rather than a reinvigoration of traditional terms of christological and trinitarian discourse? And most compelling for me, Why did Sophia capture the imaginations of a small (and subsequently marginalized) group of thinkers living in the ashes of World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, urban race riots, and the Viet Nam War, a century in which Christian theology had every reason to lose its nerve? Might Sophia be grasped against this fractured horizon as a kind of apocalyptic figure? The rendering of Sophia in terms of the apocalyptic genre—no stretch in view of Merton’s affinity with William Blake, Paul Evdokimov, and Flannery O’Connor—is certainly intensified when one considers the terrifying contents of reality for so many, and for all life, tied into the fate of suffering Earth.¹⁰⁴

101. See Adolfo Nicolas, S.J., “Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today,” Mexico City, April 23, 2010, http://www.sjweb.info/curiafrgen/curia_frgen.cfmno.4.

102. *Ibid.* By no means do I dismiss the value of “fantasy,” still less apocalypticism, as a literary-artistic genre capable of rendering religious or sacramental hope. The question is whether the imaginary “playing field” remains more or less tethered to memory and historical consciousness, to the world and human–cosmic relationality as we have come to know and experience it. See Christopher Pramuk, “Apocalypticism in a Catholic Key: Lessons from Thomas Merton,” *Horizons* 36 (2009) 235–64, at 252–59.

103. Wayne Meeks uses this picturesque image to describe the non-canonical gospels and their influence in the community long after the canon of the New Testament had been fixed. Cited in Lawrence Cunningham, “*Extra Arcam Noe*: Criteria for Christian Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2005) 171–78, at 177 n. 5.

104. See Pramuk, “Apocalypticism in a Catholic Key” 256; and *Sophia* 25–27, 257–65. Iconographer William Hart McNichols recalls that when Sophia first dawned in his consciousness, she came to him “much more as a flashing red light than as a pleasant apparition” (conversation with the author, March 2010). His sophianic icons can be viewed at www.fatherbill.org.

For Merton and the Russian mystical tradition, to invoke the feminine divine is to reclaim a buried aspect of our own deepest identity; it is to be drawn intimately into the realm of eschatology realized, sanctified time, the intensified apocalyptic moment. It is to place oneself in the divine presence, to open oneself to God's energy, and to offer oneself as an instrument and a living sacrifice in God's hands. Her name communicates essentially no "new information" but awakens what is and always has been: a communion in God that already exists but is tragically far from being realized. And that is why her name is disruptive, uncomfortable, dangerous—awakening timeless *memoria*, disturbing conscience, and provoking response. "It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions, into unity of love."¹⁰⁵ In "Hagia Sophia," Merton not only anticipates many of the concerns of feminist and environmentalist theologies, he gives us "an elemental model on the birthing of peace."¹⁰⁶ That he did so, as Jesus did, not through a chain of discursive arguments but through a mosaic of images and silences, in poetic language at once patterned by the memory of the tradition but also inviting an utterly new and fresh response, should neither disqualify Merton as a "theologian" nor the poem as a trustworthy expression of mystical theology.¹⁰⁷

Certainly it is fair to ask whether Merton and his mystical forebears, in their visions and dreams of Sophia, were not *merely* dreaming. It is beautiful, to be sure, but is it true? How is the mind to make sense of it? On the other hand, might these poets, prophets, artists, and philosophers of Wisdom be giving voice to our own deepest intuition that something essential, beautiful, and true has been lost in the life story of God? Of course, to answer in the affirmative is not to claim a rational proof or "explanation." As in all prayerful theological discernment, one has to test everything received in light of everything given anew to our minds, senses, and the eyes of our hearts. But

105. Merton, "Hagia Sophia," *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 61–62.

106. Christopher Nugent, "Pax Heraclitus: Heraclitus, 'Hagia Sophia,' and a Hard Night's Peace," *The Merton Seasonal* 35 (2010) 14–21, at 18. Whether Merton can be described as a proto-feminist is a complex question. His many sketches of women's faces as well as the journals of his much-discussed affair with the woman known as "M." in the spring of 1966 help to counter the suspicion that he may have (still) conceived of "women" or "the feminine" in his later years in an abstract or essentialist manner. That Merton understood and resisted the dangers of gender essentialism for both women and men, and especially within the life of the church, is clear in his 1967 conference with religious sisters on "The Feminine Mystique," where he also resists rigidly binary notions of male–female complementarity. See *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1992) 125–35. In any case it is important to place Merton in his mid-20th-century context and not expect him to reflect present or latter 20th-century developments. On Russian sophiology's implications with respect to eros, sexuality, and potential feminist concerns, see Pramuk, *Sophia* 245–56.

107. See Daniel Rober, "Was He a Theologian?," *Commonweal* 138 (October 7, 2011) 37–38; cf. Paul Knitter, review of *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, *Theological Studies* 71 (2010) 731–33; and Andrew Louth, review of *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, *Sobornost* 37 (2015) 87–89.

let us also remember, as Sandra Schneiders reminds us, that just as images of the self and world can be healed, “so can the God-image. It cannot be healed, however, by rational intervention alone.”¹⁰⁸

In the midst of all such questions—and at once breaking free of them—Merton gives voice to a disarming but wondrous hope: “She smiles, for though she is bound, she cannot be a prisoner.”¹⁰⁹ And that hope, nourished by sustained meditation and theological discernment, may come to breathe in us like unto a prayer. Indeed her memory “beats in our very blood,” hints Merton, “whether we want it to or not.”¹¹⁰ This gathering sophianic vision of the world in God bursts forth in the final meditation of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where we meet the Wisdom-Child of Proverbs 8, “playing in the world, playing before Him at all times.”¹¹¹ “We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts.”¹¹² All of these, “If we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all,” would no longer appear trivial but would strike us as invitations to “forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds,” and join in “the general dance” of Sophia, at play in the garden of the Lord.

Author biography

Christopher Pramuk holds a PhD from the University of Notre Dame and is Associate Professor at Xavier University, where he teaches courses at the intersection of theology and spirituality, the arts, race, and social justice. He is the author of two books on Thomas Merton, and a meditation on race relations in society and church, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line* (Liturgical Press, 2013). His current book project explores the power of the arts in the theology classroom.

108. Schneiders, *Women and the Word* 19. In an address to the International Theological Commission of May 12, 2014, Pope Francis cites *Gaudium et spes* to affirm the dialogical spirit of Vatican II as it comes to play in the vocation of the theologian. “Along with the entire Christian people, the theologian opens his eyes and ears to the ‘signs of the times.’” The theologian “is called to ‘hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our time, and judge them in the light of the word of God.’” Francis further asked the ITC to “take the best advantage” of the contributions of female theologians who “can detect, for the benefit of all, some unexplored aspects of the unfathomable mystery of Christ.” The address in its original Italian can be found at <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/12/05/0922/01994.html>.

109. Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* 63–64.

110. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 297.

111. *Ibid.* 290; Merton and the Russian theologians are careful to distinguish their intensely sacramental, sophianic view of creation (or “sacred corporeality”) from pantheism, monism, or materialist views of the natural world and human history. See Pramuk, *Sophia* 99–101, 240–45.

112. *Ibid.* 296–97.