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“Something Breaks Through a Little”: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton

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The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk, far from separating us, makes us most like one another. How many centuries is it going to take for people to discover this fact?¹

Though Merton’s “turn to the East” began well before Vatican II would turn the eyes of Roman Catholics toward the ecumenical and non-Christian world, its fruits would not generally appear in published form until after the Council. In works such as *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), Merton spends much labor correcting caricatures of Eastern spirituality prominent in the West, especially in the American counterculture. These remain vital texts today because they give us the mature Merton at his best, pressed to the limit of discursive communication on vexatious systematic and epistemological problems—and this after more than a decade of reflection and growth with respect to interfaith dialogue. Indeed, brilliantly realized essays such as “The New Consciousness” and “A Christian Looks at Zen” reveal Merton to be much more “conservative” than conservative caricatures make him out to be, and much more “liberal” than most progressives. Merton writes with the authority of a committed Christian immersed in serious dialogue, with all its challenges and risks, and not just as one who talks about it.

Few serious students of Merton’s life and writings—whether inspired by his universal scope of vision or scandalized by it—would dispute that his conception of the divine changed as he allowed deeper encounters with Eastern traditions to interrogate his faith. What is less commonly understood, however, is how closely Merton’s engagement with Zen corresponded with his internalization of a deep thread in the Christian East, namely, the Sophia tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, or “sophiology” as known in its speculative form, associated with thinkers such as Vladimir Soloviev (d. 1900), Sergius Bulgakov (d. 1944), and Paul Evdokimov (d. 1970). What attracted Merton to these thinkers was their recasting of the Christian narrative of salvation in the boldest imaginative and metaphysical terms; from biblical, patristic, and modern philosophical sources they had fashioned a “positive theology,” a theology brimming with content. Though Merton himself would never develop a formal

sophiology, his internalization of Russian imagery is amply evidenced in journals, letters, notes, and in seminal works such as *The Behavior of Titans* (1961), *The New Man* (1961), and *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961). The prose poem *Hagia Sophia* (1962), still one of Merton's most understudied and "secret" works, is by far the most realized, lyrical, and daring of his meditations on the Wisdom figure of Sophia.

In this article I wish to suggest that the striking "coincidence" of Zen and Sophia in Merton's life during the late 1950s was not merely a coincidence, but hinged in part on epistemological difficulties he was wrestling with in the midst of radically shifting cultural, ecclesial, and political horizons. While in one sense the irruption of Sophia into Merton's consciousness in the late 1950s was just one thread woven into the larger mosaic of his "turn to the world," it was, I believe, the golden thread that helped him to hold the fabric together, ever more centered in Christ. In other words, this "bringing together" of apparent opposites does not end with epistemology. What emerges in Merton's concurrent study of Zen and Russian sophiology is a kind of "story-shaped" Christology, a story told through the life of Merton but haunted more and more by the mysterious figure of Sophia.²

NONDUALISM: A ZEN AND ANCIENT CHRISTIAN "WAY OF SEEING"

In a letter dated March 12, 1959, Merton introduced himself to Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, then known worldwide for his gift for translating the teachings of Zen Buddhism to the West.³ After receiving a warm reply and some poems from Suzuki, Merton wrote a second letter. His tone is warm and forthright, written as one might address a respected mentor or a long-time friend. What is most striking is the intimacy with which this Catholic monk from the West opens himself to a Japanese Buddhist he has never met on the mystery of Christ as experienced in prayer. Merton writes:

The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be "found in Him" and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself. You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men and stand in the way of God's freedom. But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him . . . and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. *He is ourself*. Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are "doctors in Israel."⁴

The Christ of deep Christian experience is "unknown and unseen," Merton suggests, because he "is even closer than that. He is *ourself*." Why, we may ask, does Merton presume Dr. Suzuki will understand this paradoxical experience of Christ, even though many "doctors in Israel" (i.e., Christian theologians) do not? He con-

tinues, pointing to the problem of language and mystical experience: “As you know, the problem of writing down things about Christianity is fraught with ludicrous and overwhelming difficulties. No one cares for fresh, direct and sincere intuitions of the Living Truth. Everyone is preoccupied with formulas.”⁵ The dilemma is not merely dogmatic, Merton suggests, as in the inability to accept traditional formulas on the basis of authority or a flat appeal to “Tradition.” In an age of scientific rationality and historical consciousness, the dilemma is also profoundly epistemological. How do we come to authentic Christian faith in such an age, if by “faith” we mean a real and not merely notional relationship with the living Christ?

In a letter written in November 1959, Merton once again brings the epistemological dilemma before Suzuki, now in the guise of his struggle with the Buddhist notion of “emptiness.”

I am much happier with “emptiness” when I don’t have to talk about it. . . . As soon as I say something, then that is “not it” right away. Obviously the conclusion is to say nothing, and that for a great deal of the time is what I manage to do. Yet one must speak of it. Obviously one must speak and not speak. . . . But at any rate, I thought you would be happy to know that I struggle with . . . not [the] problem, but [the] *koan*. It is not really for me a serious intellectual problem at all, but a problem of “realization”—something that has to break through. Every once in a while it breaks through a little. One of these days it will burst out.⁶

By no means, as we have already seen, did Merton set aside the importance of words, of doctrine, or of Christian theology: “Obviously one must speak and not speak.” Still, what we call today the “problem” of Christian faith in a “post-Christian” world—including the problem of Christ among the religions—was not for Merton an intellectual or philosophical puzzle to be solved so much as a problem of realization: *something has to break through*. It is not a problem, as he wrote to Suzuki, but a koan.

While in these early letters Merton seems to be struggling for analogies between Christian mystical experience and Zen realization, some years later he revisits the issue more systematically and with greater confidence in the striking essay “The Zen Koan.”⁷ Here Merton observes that through the koan, the Zen master aims to foster in the student a “way of seeing,” a “pure seeing” of reality and a “pure subjectivity *that needs no object*.”⁸ The struggle of the Zen student to “break” the koan leads to a gradual deepening of consciousness “in which one experiences reality not indirectly or mediately but directly, in which clinging to no experience and to no awareness as such, one is simply ‘aware.’”⁹ Merton notes that this kind of language, which describes the contemplative experience of immediacy, unity, or non-dualism, inevitably confuses the Western mind, which tends to be Cartesian, dualistic, object-oriented. “For the West consciousness is always ‘consciousness of.’ In the East, this is not necessarily so: it can be simply ‘consciousness.’”¹⁰ Suzuki, for example, often cites Meister Eckhart with approval: “The eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me.”

But most importantly, far from the Western caricature of Zen as cultivating a quietist or escapist tranquility, Zen demands and even forces an active response to life.

What the *Roshi* [Zen master] wants is not a correct answer or a clever reaction but the *living and authentic* response of the student to the *koan*. If he finally responds directly and immediately to the *koan*, he shows that he is now able to respond fully, directly, and immediately to life itself. . . .

What is required is not the ability to repeat some esoteric formula learned from a book . . . but actually to *respond* in a full and living manner to any “thing,” a tree, a flower, a bird, or even an inanimate object, perhaps a very lowly one. . . . When one attains to pure consciousness, everything has infinite value.¹¹

If we substitute the word “Christ,” “Spirit,” or “Sophia” for the word “koan” in this passage, we will begin to hear the resonances Merton perceived between the Zen mind and Christian mystical experience, a mysticism which “sees” the whole cosmos transfigured “in Christ”—or as he wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, bursting forth in “the general dance” of Sophia. Like Zen practice, Christian faith involves “a living and direct response” to life, a response grounded in a posture of openness and expectation, of waiting to be grasped. As Jon Sobrino writes, faith is “the willingness to be swept along by the ‘more’ of reality.”¹² To the degree I attend directly to reality in its “suchness,” no longer will I be conscious of my “self” as a separate thing in a world of parallel, competing objects. Liberation is the dawning awareness of our true selves already living “in Christ,” which is to say, resting in the womb of God, in creation, and in one another. It is, as Merton described his experience at Fourth and Walnut, “like waking from a dream of separateness.”¹³

Thus what is required of the “student” of the Gospel is not to construct new formulas or repeat old ones, but to allow the living God (Christ/Sophia) to break into one’s consciousness and restore His (Her) Image in us. Whether this liberation happens gradually through lifelong discipline, or rather quite suddenly—think of Saul on the road to Damascus—the immediacy of divine presence liberates us from exhausting efforts to maintain the false, habitual, or socially constructed masks we wear. Christian liberation is an experience of divine love and mercy that allows us to share something of St. Paul’s own awakening: “The life I live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). The grace of discovering our “true self” in Christ, the “hidden ground of Love,” frees us to respond “in a full and living manner” to every human being, every tree, flower, and bird, even the lowliest objects, with the new eyes of faith. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal. 3:28), clean or unclean, for *everything has infinite value*.

There is nothing novel, abstract, or esoteric, Merton insists, about this experience of creation transfigured in divine presence. It accords with an ancient conception of God as “light,” or, as St. Thomas explained, not “that which” we see, but rather “that through which” we see. But more than this, it is the intuition of creation’s radical goodness and gratuity that turns into *an accusation* of every dehumanizing decision, every “Unspeakable” force or structure of evil churning through the world. For Mer-

ton, contemplative practice (*theoria*) is the living seedbed of a prophetic worldview that seeks always and everywhere to “guard the image of man for it is the image of God.”¹⁴

What, then, is the koan that Zen offers to Christians? It goes something like this: How are we to speak not only *about* Christ—the Christ “out there” whom we tend to manipulate according to our personal needs or ecclesial agendas—but *in* Christ? What sort of language mediates the living Christ as experienced in prayer, liturgy, or contemplation—that is to say, “not as object of seeing or study, but Christ as center in whom and by whom one is illuminated”?¹⁵ What kind of language allows Christ to walk along at our side, and then, if we will risk it, allows him to vanish, in a manner of speaking, trusting that he now lives in and through us, as in the disciples on the road to Emmaus? If our story-shaped Christology has a kind of metaphysical turning point, let it be Merton’s words to Suzuki in 1959: “Something has to break through. Every once in a while it breaks through a little. One of these days it will burst out.”

THE IRRUPTION OF SOPHIA: 1957–1961

By the late 1950s Merton’s outlook had certainly come a long way from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which, like much of the Catholic theology that formed him, was sharply dualist and triumphal in tone. But something else was breaking into Merton’s consciousness during these years of dialogue with Suzuki. One has only to read the journals from 1957 through 1961 to be struck by the frequency and poignancy with which the image of Christ as the Wisdom of God, as Sophia, began to haunt Merton’s religious imagination, due largely to his immersion in the thought of Soloviev, Bulgakov, and their theological heirs at the Russian Orthodox St. Serge Theological Institute in Paris.¹⁶

One of the earliest clues to the impact of the Russian sophiological tradition appears in Merton’s journal on April 25, 1957:

Bulgakov and Berdyaev are writers of great, great attention. They are great men who will not admit the defeat of Christ who has conquered by His resurrection. In their pages . . . shines the light of the resurrection and theirs is a theology of triumph. . . . These two men have dared to make mistakes and were to be condemned by every church, in order to say something great and worthy of God in the midst of all their wrong statements. 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.¹⁷

The passage crescendos to almost ecstatic pitch, as Merton begins to draw out for himself the implications of the Russians’ “daring” theology centered in Wisdom:

Most important of all—man’s creative vocation to prepare, consciously, the ultimate triumph of Divine Wisdom. Man, the microcosm, the heart of the universe, is the one who is called to bring about the fusion of cosmic and historic process in the final invocation of God’s wisdom and love. In the name

of Christ and by his power, man has a work to accomplish. . . . Our life is a powerful Pentecost in which the Holy Spirit, ever active in us, seeks to reach through our inspired hands and tongues into the very heart of the material world created to be spiritualized through the work of the Church, the Mystical Body of the Incarnate Word of God. (86)

If there is a clear thread running through Merton's early notes on the Russians, it is his admiration for their theological creativity, their willingness to make mistakes "in order to say something great and worthy of God." "One wonders," Merton 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" (86). But there is also a clear tenor of wonder and enthusiasm with respect to the Russian theologians' willingness to say something great and worthy of *humanity*. "Reading such things," Merton confesses, "one is struck with compunction. Look at us! What are we doing? What have I done?" (89). Made in the "image and likeness of God," insists Berdyaev, humanity is called to witness to "the creative work of God"; human beings have no less than a cosmic "work to accomplish." The key to this "powerful Pentecost" at work in our lives is the union between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. "The *Incarnation*," Merton observes, "is absolutely crucial here (and here [Berdyaev] is a real descendent of the Greek fathers)" (89).

While it is not unusual to find Merton rhapsodizing over new ideas, these passages convey something more than the joy (and labor) of a mind quickened by intellectual discovery. What we find here is the ecstasy of revelatory insight, as if the Russians had unlocked a door deep inside of Merton, a door that had been there but had never been fully opened, at least not in such a radically personal way. Interrupting his notes on Berdyaev there comes what seems to be a sudden flash of insight, and the birthing of a personal creed.

If I can unite in *myself*, in my own spiritual life, the thought of the East and the West of the Greek and Latin Fathers, I will create in myself a reunion of the divided church and from that unity in myself can come the exterior and visible unity of the church. For if we want to bring together East and West we cannot do it by imposing one upon the other. We must contain both in ourselves and transcend both in Christ.¹⁸

This was, as Cunningham writes, "a critical moment in Merton's intellectual and spiritual maturity,"¹⁹ a revelatory moment that would spill forth vividly in the years to follow.

Above all, what appeals to Merton in these early encounters with Berdyaev and Bulgakov, despite "all the scandals one may fear to encounter," is their celebration of human history as a "powerful Pentecost," an ever-possible marriage of human and Divine Wisdom: "In their pages . . . shines the light of the resurrection and theirs is a theology of triumph" (86). In this respect, Merton concludes that Berdyaev has "profound insights into the real meaning of Christianity—insights which we cannot

simply ignore” (88). His is a bold theology of Christ and humanity, “the New Adam, the new creation,” bound together in God. It is “good news” about human being, a revolutionary truth which hinges on the radical meaning of Incarnation, and its elemental empowerment of human freedom.

Even more, what Merton finds especially “new” and compelling in Bulgakov is his willingness (following Soloviev) to reach back further into the biblical and Jewish sources of Christology to retrieve the feminine Wisdom-figure of Proverbs 8 and other Wisdom texts in his exposition of dogmatic theology. Bulgakov has “dared” to make explicit that which has remained largely implicit in the Wisdom Christology of the New Testament and the patristic period. How exactly Bulgakov renders this retrieval and development, and whether he does so in an “orthodox” way, will take Merton some time to consider, as the journal entries of July and August 1957 bear out. In any case, after the initial passage on Berdyaev, it is Bulgakov’s sophiology that captures Merton’s attention.

Naturally enough, his early questions pertain to the identity of Sophia in relation to the “one” essence (*ousia*) of God and the “three” Persons (*prosopon*) of the Trinity: “Bulgakov’s explanation of his sophianology seems to me clear and satisfactory. The divine nature is distinct from the 3 Divine Persons, but is not therefore a 4th Principle superadded to make a ‘quaternity.’ No one imagines that it does. When the same nature is regarded as ‘Sophia’—why should that constitute a 4th person?” (101). Merton’s comment that “no one imagines” Sophia to be a fourth hypostasis is curiously inaccurate, since this is precisely one of the key (mis)readings that led the Russian Patriarchate to accuse Bulgakov of heresy in 1934. For his own part, Merton recognizes correctly that “Sophia” refers not to a “Person” so much as the “Divine Nature,” or the Love between Persons, which in turn “constitutes for the Divine Person the ‘world’ which they themselves are.” Merton cites Bulgakov: “The divine nature is not only the dynamism of life but its content. . . . The life of God is this total positive unity and this total unity is the nature of God,” and then notes parallels in Western mysticism: “This would seem to throw light on Ruysbroeck, Tauler, etc. ‘Grund’ [ground], ‘Geburt’ [birth], ‘Wesen’ [essence] names of God” (101). Near the end of this long and somewhat tortured passage, it is significant that Merton highlights the centrality of *love* in Bulgakov’s sophiological vision.

In the following days Merton continues to cite from Bulgakov’s *The Wisdom of God*, drawing nearer to its roots in Soloviev’s doctrine of “Godmanhood,” or the “humanity of God.” Two citations (July 31 and August 2, 1957) are of particular importance:

Within ourselves humanity is so close that one can seek to discover and will discover that “God is all in all” . . . Divine Wisdom, the ground source of all ideas, is the eternal humanity in God—the divine prototype and foundation of the being of man.

Sophia is the Wisdom of God, the glory of God is humanity in God, the “theanthropy,” body of God, the divine world which was in God at creation.

It is there that one finds the sufficient reason of creation . . . the foundation of Wisdomness. (104)

In these lines we find a certain ambiguity—perhaps a fruitful ambiguity—with respect to the relation of Sophia to Christ, or “Christology” as such. On the one hand, Bulgakov identifies Sophia directly with the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity: She is “the eternal humanity in God,” the “divine prototype” of humanity. On the other hand, Bulgakov seems to employ “Sophia” as a sustained metaphor for God’s *ousia*, the one Divine Nature: She is the love of Love, the “ground source of all ideas,” the “body of God,” and the “divine world which was in God at creation.”

Notwithstanding Merton’s difficulty in sorting out these metaphysical distinctions—recall that he had studied theology in an atmosphere of scholastic precision—he has no difficulty in grasping the exalted anthropology at play here, and its implications for a spirituality of divinization, or *theosis*. According to Bulgakov, Merton notes, “Man’s vocation is to *humanize* and *clarify* perfectly the potential ‘human’ Sophia of creation which is entrusted to him. To make God shine in its charity” (106). This “cosmotheandric” vision—that is, the marriage of cosmology and anthropology in a spirituality of divinization—seems to come together for Merton in a journal passage from August 7, 1957:

I think this morning I found the key to Bulgakov’s Sophianism. His idea is that the Divine Sophia, play, wisdom, is by no means a fourth person or hypostasis, yet in *creation* spiritualized by the church, it is, as it were, hypostasized, so that creation itself becomes the “Glory of God.” Man has frustrated this to some extent—“created Sophia” is “fallen” with man. . . . Yet man remains the one who, in Christ, will raise up and spiritualize creation so that all will be “Sophia” and true glory of God. For this man must be himself perfectly united and subjected to the wisdom of God. (107)

In September 1959, Merton notes that he has been reading Paul Evdokimov, a student of Bulgakov’s and member of the first graduating class of St. Serge: “Here is a real theologian,” he comments, “one of the few.”²⁰ Evdokimov describes sophiology as “the glory of present-day Orthodox theology” because of its cosmic, liturgical, and iconic way of seeing reality, a worldview built on the twin doctrines of Creation and Incarnation. Merton had already seen that Bulgakov’s sophiology was built on the same conviction: that God “created for the sake of the Incarnation,” that the Incarnation is not “only the means of redemption but its supreme crown.” Significantly, Merton then noted, “It has always been difficult for me to see how a Christian would possibly think otherwise. . . . And of course, Proverbs 8 makes it seem obvious. But of course a theologian can always approach the mystery of Christ from some angle which leaves Wisdom out in the exterior darkness.”²¹

The careful reader of Merton’s corpus will find that he certainly did not leave Wisdom out in the darkness. To the contrary, the image of Christ as Wisdom of God, as Sophia, began to haunt Merton’s religious imagination. First, there is a hauntingly intimate dream (February 28, 1958) in which a young Jewish girl named “Proverb”

comes to embrace him “and will not let go,”²² a dream Merton later confesses to the Russian novelist Boris Pasternak (October 23, 1958).²³ She comes to him in the crossroads of a great city (March 18, 1958), the much-celebrated “epiphany” at the crossroads of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville.²⁴ Less than a year later (March 19, 1959), she finds him in the burning woods near Gethsemani, this time in the faces of local farm children, “poor little Christs with holes in their pants and . . . sweet, sweet voices.”²⁵ And then on July 2, 1960, the Feast of the Visitation, Merton records perhaps the most significant of all the Wisdom passages, that of his “awakening” by the soft voice of a nurse, whose gentle whispers awakened him early one morning as he lay in the hospital. The experience strangely prefigures his encounter with “M.,” the student nurse with whom he would fall in love in the spring of 1966.

At 5:30, as I was dreaming, in a very quiet hospital, the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream—and it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams of my life—as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom had awakened me. We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the feminine voice, the voice of the Mother: yet she speaks everywhere and in everything. Wisdom cries out in the market place—“if anyone is little let him come to me.”²⁶

During Pentecost of 1961, Merton recast the Visitation passage into the wondrous prose poem *Hagia Sophia* (1962), now weaving a complex of feminine, biblical, and patristic archetypes into his gentle “awakening” by the nurse.

At five-thirty in the morning I am dreaming in a very quiet room when a soft voice awakens me from my dream. I am like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world. It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth. It is like all the minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions, into unity of love. It is like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia, and will know where they stand. . . .

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 live. This is what it means to recognize Hagia Sophia.²⁷

Sophia emerges in the poem as Merton’s most lyric symbol of the “communal eros” that is the very life of God, eternally emptying itself in creativity, mercy, and love for creation. From God’s side, as it were, Sophia is the luminous “cloak” of divine presence that joins heaven with earth, the “ground” or “pivot” of nature, *natura naturans*; Sophia is the voice of God at the crossroads of a world in crisis, calling not only Christians but all peoples to a “sense of community with things in the work of salva-

tion.”²⁸ From our side, Sophia is “poverty of spirit”; she is “the protest of life itself, of humanity itself, of love”²⁹ in the reign of numbers. *She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory.*³⁰

It is important to note that *Hagia Sophia* sprang from Merton’s meditation on an icon of Holy Wisdom, the gift of his friend, the artist Victor Hammer. For Merton, the act of praying before an icon draws us into participation in the real presence of the saint, Christ, or, in this case, God revealed as Sancta Sophia. “An icon is a theology in lines and colors,” writes Evdokimov, “a true *locus theologicus*, one of the most expressive elements of the Tradition. . . . It is a sacrament, not of divine action, but of a divine presence. . . . It makes the invisible visible to ‘the eyes of the mind.’”³¹ In the act of praying before an icon, we might say, *something breaks through a little*. We find ourselves drawn into the general dance of Sophia, at play in the garden of the Lord.

Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off “one to his farm and another to his merchandise.” Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. “Wisdom,” cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend.³²

DISCERNING THE HEART OF REALITY: GOD/CREATION/KENOSIS

Up to this point I have been gesturing toward a realm of shared wisdom (*sapientia*) between Merton’s Christian mysticism and Suzuki’s Zen³³ that is more or less epistemological, centering on the pivotal experience of “breakthrough” and “death” of the “false self.” But the dialogue between these two teachers passed quickly beyond epistemological issues into the more difficult realm of metaphysical and theological exploration, centering on the deepest “ground” and “source” of reality in all its “suchness.” Indeed, their most compelling exchanges, as recorded in Merton’s letters, in journals, and in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, might be boiled down to one question: What is the *content* of this suchness when laid bare of every false construction? It is precisely in this realm, specifically in Suzuki’s discussion of “Emptiness” (*sunyata*) and Merton’s conception of “God” (“Christ”/“Sophia”), that the lines of my thesis might begin to emerge more clearly: namely, that in Russian sophiology Merton discovered a bold language for sacramentalizing the Christian answer to the question of suchness: Sophia is compassion (*karuna*) without reserve, sacrificial love, poverty of spirit. She is, in a word, the unfathomable kenosis of God.

“The metaphysical concept of Emptiness,” Suzuki writes in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, “is convertible in economic terms into poverty, being poor, having nothing: ‘Blessed are those who are poor in spirit.’”³⁴ In what, to my mind, is one of the crucial threads in the Merton-Suzuki dialogue, Suzuki compares Jesus’s beatitude of “poverty of spirit,” so dear to ancient and Eastern Christian monasticism, to the Zen realization of Emptiness which “breaks through” when “the mind or heart is emptied of ‘self and all things’”—above all, of attachment to “self,” since “all evils and defile-

ments start from our attachment to [self].” Thus the monk who “has anything to loan” and remains “anxious to have it returned . . . is not yet poor, he is not yet perfectly empty” (111). Elaborating further on Zen poverty and Emptiness, Suzuki turns to Mahayana Buddhism’s teaching of the Six Paramita, the “moral virtues of perfection” practiced in daily life.

The first of the Six Paramita, explains Suzuki, is *dana*, or “giving,” and the last is *prajna*, or “transcendental wisdom,” “an intuition of the highest order” into “the truth of Emptiness” (112). While the Buddhist life starts with *dana* and ends in *prajna*, Suzuki notes that “in reality, the ending is the beginning and the beginning is the ending; the Paramita moves in a circle with no beginning and no ending. The giving is possible only when there is Emptiness, and Emptiness is attainable only when the giving is unconditionally carried out.” This “circular” relationship in Zen between *dana* (unconditional giving) and *prajna* (the highest order of spiritual insight) is already deeply resonant with the Christian narrative of kenosis. Indeed, the classic New Testament formulas of preexistence (Jn. 1:1–18, Col. 1:15–20, Rev. 1:8), kenosis (Phil. 2:6–11, Jn. 12:24), and awakening (Rom. 8: 14–17, 2 Cor. 3:17–18, Eph. 5:14)—texts infused with a nonlinear, “circular” metaphysic—occupy the hub of Merton’s christic imagination. But let us linger for a moment longer with *dana*.

In the path of “crossing over” to the shore of perfection, continues Suzuki, *dana* “does not just mean giving in charity or otherwise something material”; more than this, it means “going out of oneself, disseminating knowledge, helping people in difficulties of all kinds, creating arts, promoting industry or social welfare, sacrificing one’s life for a worthy cause and so on” (112). Yet even this “is not enough as long a man harbors the idea of giving in one sense or another.” The way of perfect giving that ripens and flowers in *prajna* “consists in not cherishing any thought of anything going out of one’s hands and being received by anybody else; that is to say, in the giving there must not be any thought of a giver or a receiver, and of an object going through this transaction.” This is “poverty in its genuine sense,” says Suzuki: “Nothing to gain, nothing to lose, nothing to give, nothing to take; to be just so, and yet to be rich in inexhaustible possibilities” (109).

How then, does this true “poverty of spirit” relate to the Absolute, to the Infinite, to “God”? “We are generally apt to imagine,” Suzuki observes, “that when the mind or heart is emptied of ‘self and all things’ a room is left ready for God to enter and occupy it. This is a great error” (109). In contrast to this dualist or dialectical conception of God, Suzuki looks to Eckhart as the Christian mystic who draws nearest to Zen Emptiness and enlightenment (*sambodhi*) when he describes God’s “breaking through” in *nondualistic* terms: “In my breaking-through . . . I transcend all creatures and am neither God nor creature: I am that I was and I shall remain now and forever. Then I receive an impulse which carries me above all angels. In this impulse I conceive such passing riches that I am not content with God as being God, as being all his godly works, for in this breaking-through I find that God and I are both the same” (114). As Suzuki interprets Eckhart here, “God is at once the place where He works and the work itself” (110). This “circular” intuition of oneness with God, the

intuition in *love* that “God and I are both the same,” accords, suggests Suzuki, with the “suchness” of Zen emptiness, which is, paradoxically, a kind of *fullness, ripening, and consummation*:

Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is “no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease,” in which this equation takes place: zero = infinity. The Godhead is no other than this equation. In other words when God as Creator came out of the Godhead he did not leave the Godhead behind. He has the Godhead with him all along while engaging in the work of creation. Creation is continuous, going on till the end of time, which has really no ending and therefore no beginning. For creation is out of inexhaustible nothingness.³⁵

Much more could be said about Suzuki’s reading of Christian mysticism through the eyes of Zen, but we have already struck, I think, upon the key metaphysical insight: namely, that “when God as Creator came out of the Godhead *he did not leave the Godhead behind*.” In an early exchange of letters, Suzuki had put the same insight as follows, again in Christian terms: “God wanted to know Himself, hence the creation”; to which Merton responded enthusiastically by referencing Bulgakov: “The Russian view pushes very far the idea of God ‘emptying Himself’ (kenosis) to go over into His creation, while creation passes over into a divine world—precisely a new paradise.”³⁶ A year later, Merton puts kenosis at the very center of Christian mysticism, theology, and, to be sure, Christian anthropology:

In emptying Himself to come into the world, God has not simply kept in reserve, in a safe place, His reality and manifested a kind of shadow or symbol of Himself. He has emptied Himself and is all in Christ. *Invisibilis in suis; visibilis in nostris*. [Invisible in his own; visible in ours.] Christ is not simply the tip of the little finger of the Godhead, moving in the world, easily withdrawn, never threatened, never really risking anything. God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves.³⁷

Joining Zen insight, then, with kenotic Christology from the New Testament forward, Merton suggests (i.e., analogically) that the dance between *dana* and *prajna* comprises the very life, the very suchness of God.³⁸ While this revelation into the kenotic “heart” of the cosmos was already enshrined for Merton in the twin doctrines of Creation and Incarnation, in Russian sophiology he discovered a new (and also ancient) theological form, at once biblical, poetic, and metaphysical, for sacramentalizing this experience of divine Love without limit, of the free and unreserved self-donation of God. By “sacramentalizing” I mean that the speculative language of sophiology—above all, the biblical name Sophia—is not mere wordplay for Merton, but bears the analogical capacity to awaken in the responsive human community an authentic memory of God, a palpable hope for liberation, and a real Presence in whom we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).³⁹

DHARMAKAYA-SOPHIA

At the end of a retreat in January 1961, just a few months before composing *Hagia Sophia*, Merton recorded a journal passage that seems to me crucial in getting “inside” his religious imagination during this extraordinary period of tension and growth:

Long quiet intervals in dark hours. Evdokimov on orthodoxy—once again, as I have so many times recently, I need the concept of *natura naturans*—the divine wisdom in ideal nature, the ikon of wisdom, the dancing ikon—the summit reached by so many non-Christian contemplatives (would that it were reached by a few Christians!) Summit of Vedanta?—Faith in Sophia, *natura naturans*, the great stabilizer today—for peace. The basic hope that people have that man will somehow not be completely destroyed is hope in *natura naturans*.—The dark face, the “night face” of Sophia—pain, trouble, pestilence.⁴⁰

At least two things stand out in this dense and evocative passage. First, with his reference to the “ikon of wisdom” Merton joins Evdokimov’s description of iconography as “a sacrament, not of divine action, but of a divine presence” with the “summit reached by so many non-Christian contemplatives,” the “summit of Vedanta.” At the very least, in epistemological terms, the wordless experience at the heart of contemplation across religious boundaries has to do with making “the invisible visible to ‘the eyes of the mind.’”⁴¹ Second, several years of meditation on the Russian theologians had brought Merton here to the rather striking insight that faith in Sophia is “the great stabilizer today for peace”—an intuition that would find its most sublime expression in *Hagia Sophia*.

But here we move decidedly with Merton and the Russians from the realm of epistemology to Christology and the theology of God. Indeed, beneath their narrative, psychological, and metaphysical elements, what all the Wisdom texts of Merton’s mature period share is a contemplative vision of life in which terms such as “Creation,” “Incarnation,” and “Resurrection” leap off the page not as objective doctrines *about* God, nor merely historical events that “happened” long ago, but rather as living and present realities—“facts of the imagination,” as Newman would say—that break into consciousness from the ground of mystical experience. Bound up closely with Hebrew creation texts, Wisdom literature proclaims that the “suchness” of the universe is not a “what” but rather a “Who,” a hidden “Power” and “Presence” (Hebrew: *Shekhinah*) in whom all things are created and sustained. A sophianic epistemology rules out a negative or gnostic view of the world and of history. The world “is no longer seen as merely material, hence as an obstacle that has to be grudgingly put up with. It is spiritual through and through.”⁴² By contemplation and grace we are able “to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom” in ourselves, and so participate in the “communal eros” that gives birth, in every new moment, to the whole of creation.⁴³

Following Western Catholic theology we may call this nondualist “way of seeing” and participating in divine life “sacramental,” but in the pattern of Eastern Orthodox spirituality we might just as well use the term “iconic.” Merton’s sophianic writings

are iconic in the way that the theologies of Maximus Confessor, John Damascene, and contemporary Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas are iconic. By contrast to a historicist imagination that takes as its starting point historical causality and continuity, here an appreciation of God's living presence in the material world issues forth from a liturgical sensibility and a symbolic, meta-historical, or eschatological approach to space and time.⁴⁴ To grasp the "real presence" of Sophia in an icon, mystical text, or in the "text" of the world implies no "magic," literary or otherwise. It does imply that the person or community situated before the text has to listen, discern, and read the signs "with penetration."⁴⁵

It is crucial to reiterate that there was nothing abstract or esoteric for Merton about the experience of Christ as Sophia, the Wisdom of God. "It is simply opening yourself to receive. The presence of God is like walking out of a door into the fresh air. You don't concentrate on the fresh air, you breathe it. And you don't concentrate on the sunlight, you just enjoy it. It is all around."⁴⁶ Note how much Merton sounds here like his friend Suzuki when he insists that theologians "may go on discussing the matter," but ordinary people, including religious outsiders, simply "live the mystery."⁴⁷ To say it another way, the marriage of Zen and Sophia shines forth most vividly and lyrically not in Merton's "Christology" or "theology" so much as in his life.

Consider Merton's much-discussed "realization" at the Buddhist shrine of Pollanaruwa, just days before his death.

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . The thing about this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.⁴⁸

At the risk of over-reading a multivalent experience that Merton himself never had the chance to formally assess, there is more than an echo here of Russian theology's bold accent on sacred corporeality, *natura naturans*—as if "the rocks themselves" profess the Incarnation! There are echoes, too, of Hopkins—"There lives the dearest freshness deep down things"—and Maximus Confessor's exposition of *theoria physike*, about which Merton had noted in 1961: "When a man has been purified and humbled, when his eye is single, and he is his own real self, then the *logoi* of things jump out at him spontaneously."⁴⁹ One might even think of Jesus's playful (i.e., sophianic!) response to the Pharisees, when they warn him to silence the crowds who were praising God "with joy for all the mighty deeds they had seen" (Lk. 19:28–40). "I tell you," Jesus proclaims, "if they keep silent, the stones will cry out!"

In other words, Pollanaruwa need not be interpreted as a complete break from Merton's Christ-haunted view of reality. To the contrary, Pollanaruwa sums up what is for him the whole climate of the New Testament: "all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya," the self-emptying love and mercy of God.

COMMUNION IN WISDOM/GROWTH IN LOVE

His rebellion is the rebellion of life against inertia, of mercy and love against tyranny, of humanity against cruelty and arbitrary violence. And he calls upon the feminine, the wordless, the timelessly moving elements to witness his sufferings. Earth hears him.⁵⁰

By the late 1950s Merton's correspondence with Suzuki and others such as Boris Pasternak had already convinced him that "simple and human dialogue" across religious, cultural, and political boundaries is the real basis for peace in the world, "worth thousands of sermons and radio speeches. It is to me the Kingdom of God, which is still so clearly, and evidently, 'in the midst of us.'" ⁵¹ Of course this conviction, rooted in "the whole spirit of the New Testament," would grow in Merton to the end of his life. Nor would it die with him in Asia, but it lives on today in Christians and non-Christians who dedicate themselves to the labor and grace of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. The key theme here is *growth*: while dialogue was always invigorating for Merton, it was never easy or automatic, a fact that comes through clearly in the journals and letters, especially those of 1957 to 1961.

A few months after initiating the correspondence with Suzuki, for example, Merton interrogates himself about the meaning of his relationship with this Zen teacher, who makes "statements that would make theologians fall over into a dead faint, and yet behind them is a sharp intuition of a very great reality—our life in the Risen Christ."⁵² Merton recognizes it as "a basic fact of primary importance" that he and Suzuki "can speak the same language and indeed that we speak much more of a common language than I can, for instance, share with the average American business man, or indeed with some of the other monks." He reflects "that if I tried baldly and bluntly to 'convert' Suzuki, that is, make him 'accept' formulas regarding the faith that are accepted by the average American Catholic, I would, in fact, not 'convert' him at all, but simply confuse and (in a cultural sense) degrade him. Not that he does not need the Sacraments, etc. but that is an entirely different question."

Clearly Merton was still struggling in 1959 with the theological predicament he had gotten himself into. On the one hand, he thought Suzuki "would be immeasurably more sincere and more saintly *per se*, if he came to the Sacraments and were a visible member of the Church"; on the other hand, "who says that Suzuki is not already a saint?" He further ponders that "*visibility* . . . is not the most important thing," and adds the humbling fact "that the visibility of the conversion we demand of others may, perhaps, be demanded not by our charity but by our weakness: as an exterior prop to our own lack of faith." In a moment of evident lucidity, Merton fixes on what he judges to be "the most important thing," i.e., fostering his "simple and human" relationship with Suzuki: "[If] I can meet him on a common ground of spiritual Truth, where we share a real and deep experience of God, and where we know in humility our own deepest selves—and if we can discuss and compare the formulas we use to describe this experience, then I certainly think Christ would be

present and glorified in both of us and this would lead to *a conversion of us both*—an elevation, a development, a serious growth in Christ.”⁵³

Five years later, Merton was given the chance to meet his Buddhist friend on “common ground.” On June 17, 1964, after traveling on an airplane for just the second time in his life, Merton met with Suzuki at New York’s Columbia University. The two sat on a couch and “talked of all kinds of things to do with Zen and with life.”⁵⁴ Assisted by Suzuki’s secretary, they shared an informal tea ceremony. Merton describes the meeting in several warm, if strikingly spare, paragraphs. “These talks were very pleasant, and profoundly important to me—to see and experience . . . that there really is a deep understanding between myself and this extraordinary and simple man whom I have been reading for about ten years with great attention. A sense of being ‘situated’ in this world. . . . For once in a long time felt as if I had spent a moment in my own family.”⁵⁵ Before departing the meeting, Suzuki had made a final comment: “The most important thing is Love!”—a statement that Merton later confesses left him “profoundly moved. Truly *Prajna* and *Karuna* are one (as the Buddhist says), or *Caritas* (love) is indeed the highest knowledge.”⁵⁶

Did anything of significance “happen” on this occasion? In flatly empirical terms, two human beings sat together, talked about the concept of “person,” read poems, and drank tea. And yet, as Merton-Suzuki scholar Matthew Zyniewicz suggests, the situation contained something more than this, more “than what was immediately and expressly described in Merton’s journal entries.”⁵⁷ During their years of deepening exchange, and in what Zyniewicz calls their developing “in-betweenness,” “Suzuki’s silence became ever more relational,” less and less a private or “exotic” activity hidden behind the caricatures of Western misunderstanding. After a struggle of many decades, the elderly Zen teacher had finally found “a capable, living, Western dialogue partner to whom and through whom he could communicate his enlightened wisdom to the West.”⁵⁸

While Merton, for his part, had initially agonized over the question of Suzuki’s “conversion” and “need” for the sacraments, by the time they met in New York he desired only to share with Suzuki his presence. As Zyniewicz observes, Merton came to believe that in himself, “in his own person, [he] could unite Suzuki to God. For at the base of all reality was the wisdom of love (Sophia), a wisdom which deepened when a Christian loved a non-Christian.”⁵⁹ What Zyniewicz observes here is of profound significance: Merton’s evolving openness to Suzuki was not the result of simply a psychological change, nor merely a concession of religious diplomacy, a “goodwill gesture” of peacemaking. Rather his growing willingness to engage and accept Suzuki on his own terms had both a contemplative and theological root in Christ/Sophia, the love and mercy of God, whose presence in all things and all peoples had become ever more palpable in the “eyes of his heart.”

It is fascinating that at the end of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* Suzuki’s “Final Remarks” seem almost as if they could have been written by his friend, Thomas Merton. “Eschatology is something never realizable and yet realized at every moment of our life. We see it always ahead of us though we are in reality always in it. . . . It is the Great Mystery, intellectually speaking. In Christian terms, it is Divine Wisdom. The

strange thing, however, is: when we experience it we cease to ask questions about it, we accept it, we just live it. Theologians, dialecticians and existentialists may go on discussing the matter, but the ordinary people inclusive of all of us who are outsiders live ‘the mystery.’”⁶⁰

“PEACE IS EVERY STEP”

For Catholics of a post-conciliar generation, it is easy to overlook just how radical Merton’s commitment to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue would have been in the years before Vatican II. In a journal entry of June 8, 1959, Merton recognizes the precarious theological position he has gotten himself into with typical candor and self-deprecating humor: “You have put your nose in Dostoevsky and Berdyaev and Zen Buddhism and now where are you? On the road to heresy. Well, what about St. Paul, and all the saints? What about the gospel? Certainly, it is a dangerous problem, and I am in danger. Thank God for it. I beg Him to protect me and bring me through the danger. And I still do not know what to do.”⁶¹

That Merton would recognize his situation as “dangerous” in one breath and “thank God for it” in the next will surprise few readers familiar with his life and writings. But these lines reveal more than the musings of an insatiably curious monk in the late 1950s. Just as he had captured the spirit of a war-ravaged generation in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, here again Merton had his finger on the pulse of the Church he loved, a community standing on the brink of its new self-consciousness as a global Church at Vatican II. We know of course that Merton would continue to cross boundaries, trusting in God’s protection, right up to his Asian pilgrimage and death in Bangkok in 1968. But what will be our part?

Now over four decades removed from the Council, it seems that most of us in the Western Catholic world “still do not know what to do” with our still-emerging global self-consciousness. Driven by a creeping anxiety that too much dialogue with secular culture, much less with other religions, has put legions of believers “on the road to heresy,” vague indifferentism, or moral relativism, and dogged by the fear that the “center cannot hold” in Christological discourse, the church and not a few of its theologians seem to be expending a great deal of pastoral energy and spilling a lot of ink staking out old lines in the sand. Perhaps it should not surprise us that Merton remains a polarizing figure in the Roman Catholic Church. It was in a similarly polarized atmosphere, we might recall, that Newman concluded that theology needed a “Novum Organon”: “A new question needs a new answer.”⁶²

One of the great challenges facing Western Catholic theology today is finding the right balance between historical and eschatological, prophetic and mystical, scholastic and poetical sensibilities, and nowhere is this more acutely felt than in Christology. To my mind, Merton’s mature period remains compelling precisely for its masterful attunement of these distinct trajectories in the tradition, too often assumed to be antithetical. One measure of that success, surely, is the fact that his writings continue to resonate with seekers everywhere, young and old, Christian and non-Christian. In a word, Merton’s writing “rings true” with people from a remarkable range of back-

grounds. Yet what accounts for this resonance is more than literary elegance and goes deeper than epistemology. Texts such as *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Hagia Sophia* do not just paint pretty pictures. What is at stake is “the discernment of the profound truth that lies hidden within the dense substance of things.”⁶³

Let me attempt to summarize the theological position I have advanced in these pages. When one first approaches Merton’s mature Christology against the horizon of religious pluralism, it appears to risk little by way of traditional dogmatic and Trinitarian formulations. Yet when his Christology is approached holistically as a piece of his life, a very different picture emerges. In particular, Merton’s “sophiological” turn in the late 1950s and early 1960s emerges as the theological subtext that would both center and catalyze an uncommonly radical openness to others during the 1960s. Russian sophiology seems to have carved out something rather new and unexpected in Merton, a space and a language in which there was enough room, both conceptually and imaginatively, to envision God’s unbounded freedom, love, and presence to peoples and cultures everywhere.

From the point of view of traditional theology, the risks Merton takes in *Hagia Sophia* are considerable; it is the same “daring” that led Bulgakov to discover in the ancient church of Hagia Sophia, then filled with Muslim worshipers, the eschatological sign of Christianity’s “true ecumenical mission.”⁶⁴ By stirring biblical memory and imagination, and above all, by narrating his own awakening to Sophia’s gentle voice, Merton interrupts our own ideologies and “dreams of separateness” to draw us back into the realization of radical kinship and social interdependence. “It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes, and confusions, into unity of love.” In *Hagia Sophia*, Merton not only anticipates the concerns of feminist and environmentalist theologies, he gives us “an elemental model on the birthing of peace.”⁶⁵

“The effect of reading Merton’s autobiographical works is a species of *metanoia*,” observes Merton scholar Jonathan Montaldo. “Reading Merton threatens incidences of being changed, of wanting to lead a different, deeper kind of life.”⁶⁶ Today I would add one point to this perceptive comment: reading Merton also awakens the desire to forge a different, deeper kind of theology, for, in the end, Merton succeeded in his desire to reunite in his own life “the thought of the East and the West, of the Greek and Latin Fathers.”⁶⁷ Such a witness gives at least preliminary credence to an intuition that may seem, to the uninitiated, frankly surprising: that Sophia, the same theological eros that animated Merton’s religious imagination, might be capable of infusing new vitality into ours. Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris gestures toward just such a possibility, I think, when he observes, “It was really not in Asia that Merton discovered the East; there he only recognized and named what he had already sought and found in his own monastic cell. . . . The West can recover its *Eastern sense* by dialoguing with its own monks.”⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the spirit of peacemaking lives on today in unassuming places, in organizations such as Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, for example, and in figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh, who urges us to look deeply at reality, to take the time to open ourselves to ordinary experience and its extraordinary suchness. “Peace,” as

Nhat Hanh reminds us, “is every step.”⁶⁹ As simple (or quaint) as the contemplative path may sound to our coarsened political sensibilities, it must not obscure the radical costs of discipleship for the believer who stands before another human being, *any* human being, face to face. “If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God,” Merton writes, “there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.”⁷⁰

Is this not, after all, the deepest mystery of Christian faith that has to “break through a little” if we are going to live as children of God, companions of Jesus, bearers of presence, peace, and hope in the twenty-first century? And every time this grace enfolds us, even just a little, it will be “like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last Morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia, and will know where they stand.”⁷¹

“It might be good,” Merton suggests, “to open our eyes and *see*.”⁷²

NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 566.

2. Much of the material that follows is drawn from a book-length study of Merton’s Christology that I am presently completing. For an earlier exploratory study, see my “Hagia Sophia: The Unknown and Unseen Christ of Thomas Merton,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2006): 1–25.

3. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 561–562.

4. *Ibid.*, 564.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 569.

7. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), 235–254.

8. *Ibid.*, 238.

9. *Ibid.*, 237.

10. *Ibid.*, 238.

11. *Ibid.*, 249–250.

12. Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 19.

13. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 156–157. While Merton draw strong parallels “on the psychological level” between the “dark night” mysticism of John of the Cross and the “pure consciousness” of Zen—both involve the necessary “death” of “a calculating and desiring ego”—he does not fail to draw crucial distinctions between the two: “The difference is theological: the night of St. John opens into a divine and personal freedom and is a gift of ‘grace.’ The void of Zen is the natural ground of Being—for which no theological explanation is either offered or desired” (*Mystics and Zen Masters*, 242). The essay includes a fascinating comparative riff on Paleolithic cave art as a celebration of “the *act of seeing* as a holy and transcendent discovery” (247–248), as well as Rilke’s poetic consciousness, or “in-seeing” (243–246).

14. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 6; citing Berdyaev.

15. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 643.

16. The best introduction to sophiology is Bulgakov's *Sophia: The Wisdom of God* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1993; orig. French, 1937), a mature work written with Western readers in mind that introduced Merton to sophiology. In both Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology today there is something of a resurgence of interest in sophiology. The best English-language resource to date is Paul Valliere's *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); see also Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergei Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999); Judith Kornblatt and Richard Gustafson, eds., *Russian Religious Thought* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1996); and *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (2005), dedicated to Bulgakov's legacy. Andrew Louth has also written a balanced study sympathetic to Bulgakov's aims, not least his effort "to find a positive place for the feminine in Christian experience": "Wisdom and the Russians: The Sophiology of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church, and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 169–181.

17. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 85–86; subsequent citations parenthetical.

18. *Ibid.* 87; also *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 21.

19. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 55.

20. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 330. Evdokimov's sophianic vision of the natural world, and especially his celebration of eros as rooted in the very life of God, cast a severe light on the instrumentalization of nature and of human bodies that Merton saw poisoning modern Western society; much more personally, it cast a harsh light on his own relationships with women in his past.

21. *Ibid.*, 109.

22. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 176.

23. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 90.

24. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 181–182; also *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 156–157.

25. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 270.

26. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 17.

27. "Hagia Sophia," in *Emblems in a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 61–69, at 61–62; also in *A Thomas Merton Reader: Revised Edition*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 506–511; and *Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), 255–260; the latter includes a lucid commentary by the poet Susan McCaslin.

28. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 131.

29. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), 11.

30. Merton, *Emblems in a Season of Fury*, 66–67.

31. Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 230; cf. *A Search for Solitude*, 124, where Merton comments on a "deeply moving" article on icons by Evdokimov. "How rare it is to find such theology!" It is not incidental that late in his life Merton would describe his image of Christ as the "Christ of the icons," nor that the first stirrings of his faith came as a young man in Rome, where he found himself haunted by the Byzantine mosaics of Christ in the city's ancient churches. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948; 1976), 108–110.

32. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 132.

33. I am grateful to Zen Buddhist scholar David Loy, currently my colleague at Xavier University, for pointing out to me that Suzuki's Zen is just that—*Suzuki's*—and cannot be identified wholesale with “generic,” “mainstream,” or “classical” Zen. While the same might justly be said of Merton and his conception of “Christian mysticism,” not a few “mainstream” Catholic scholars have described Merton without qualification as a “spiritual master” and “classic” interpreter of the Christian mystical tradition from East to West.

34. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 108–109; hereafter *ZBA*; subsequent citations parenthetical.

35. *Ibid.*, 133–134. Borrowing again from biblical imagery, Suzuki writes, “Paradise has never been lost, [it] is right away with me, and the experience is the foundation on which the kingdom of heaven is built.” In a string of typically paradoxical Zen formulations, Suzuki insists that the realization of Emptiness should be understood “not only statically but dynamically; it ‘takes place between being and becoming’; it ‘is and at the same time it is not.’” In any case, the “it” that begins in *Dana* and “breaks through” in *prajna* is centered in the realization of “no self, no ego, no *Atman* that will pollute the mind.”

36. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 563. On kenosis as a central category in Bulgakov's scriptural exegesis and dogmatics of the Trinity, see Valliere, 331–332, 337–344; it is striking the degree to which Bulgakov's speculative theology gives primacy to what we call today “the historical Jesus,” e.g., the Jewishness of Jesus and the nascent church; the bloodletting of the cross as the climactic (historical) drama in the kenosis of the Son.

37. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 381.

38. “Pseudo-Dionysius says that the wisdom of the contemplative moves in a *motus orbicularis*—a circling and hovering motion like that of the eagle above some invisible quarry, or the turning of a planet around an invisible sun. The work of Dr. Suzuki bears witness of the silent orbiting of *Prajna* which is (in the language of the same Western tradition of the Pseudo-Areopagite and Erigena) a ‘circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere’” (*ZBA*, 65).

39. It is crucial to note here that, consistent with the Catholic sacramental imagination, Merton's “immanentism” carefully avoids a Hegelian or pantheistic view of creation by underscoring the utter freedom of God's creative love and the radical giftedness (grace) at the ground of all being (see, e.g., *ZBA*, 136–137; *Contemplation in a World of Action* [New York: Image, 1973], 175). Likewise, Russian sophiology, as Paul Valliere masterfully argues, cannot justly be characterized or dismissed as a kind of pantheistic monism clothed in Hegelian (or “New Age”) theosophical garb. While Bulgakov's accent on “sacred corporeality” made him sympathetic to pantheism, his dogmatics of “the humanity of God” is better described (though still not perfectly) as pantheism, which respects the God-creation distinction (see Valliere 334–337). In any case it will surprise no one engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue that this is precisely where Merton and Suzuki “agree to disagree,” namely, on the question of whether the deep structure and dynamism of reality—*sunyata*, God, true self—is experienced and so conceived in personal (biblical, theistic) terms as a gift of grace. Yet it is also clear that Suzuki shares with Merton the conviction that human beings and cultures everywhere, especially in the West, need urgently to recover the contemplative way in the midst of, in Suzuki's words, the “industrialization and the universal propagandism of ‘an easy life’” (*ZBA*, 115).

40. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, 91.

41. Evdokimov, 230.

42. Merton, *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, 126.

43. I resist the inclination—understandable, especially in interreligious contexts—to characterize Merton too rigorously or one-sidedly as an apophatic theologian, overlooking the degree to which his mature work in fact reflects a positive theology of divine/human presence, a lyrical (if increasingly ironic) vision of the world redeemed in Christ/Sophia. It is significant, for example, that when Merton is pressed to the limits of apophatic theology in his dialogue with Suzuki, he keeps coming back to “the realm of concept and image” (i.e., to

the sacramental principle) at the heart of Christian revelation, namely, the memory of God's self-communication in Jesus Christ; here he is clearest about the "mediating structure" of language in Christianity as a religion of revelation, as the *event* of the inbreaking Word. Thus he observes (with much greater nuance than can be stated here) that while Zen uses language itself to explode doctrine, in Christianity the relationship between doctrine and experience is mutually conditional, with the former taking a certain priority. To experience God or the mystery of Christ "is to transcend the merely psychological level and to 'experience theologically with the Church'" (ZBA, 46; cf. 40, 132, 136). The same case can be made for his most enduring prophetic works (e.g., *Raids on the Unspeakable, Faith and Violence*), where we might say that Merton (much like Bulgakov) counters the modern gospel of "absence" with a boldly metaphysical and/or sapiential theology of "presence," even where he does so in a sharply ironic, sometimes apocalyptic key. Most important, classic texts such as *Hagia Sophia* and *New Seeds of Contemplation* press through and beyond Merton's own oft-repeated predilection for apophatic silence; at his poetical and sapiential best, Merton carries the participative reader beyond the dialectic of positive/negative theology into a kind of a mystical and fluid "third moment," in which idols are dismantled not in silence and negation but in the plenitude of affirmation, unity-in-difference, and praise. Here theology becomes an invitation to enter into "the general dance" of God's never-ceasing incarnation in the world.

44. Noting the centrality of worship in Orthodox spirituality, Zizioulas describes his worldview as "theophanic" and "meta-historical," citing Yves Congar's description of Orthodox ecclesiology as embodying the idea of a 'showing,' or a manifestation of invisible heavenly realities on earth" (John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985], 171). Here I am indebted to Roger Haight for his discussion of the iconic imagination and for suggesting to me the resonances between Merton and contemporary thinkers such as Zizioulas. See Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History: Volume 2: Comparative Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 441–442.

45. Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, ed. J. Taylor and L. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 99; here Chenu describes monastic theology's appeal, above all through biblical memory and imagination, to the whole person, inclusive of the senses.

46. Merton, *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart*, 454 (ZBA, 114).

47. ZBA, 134. Or as Suzuki writes elsewhere, with characteristic directness, when realization comes it comes to "the ordinary Toms, Dicks, and Harrys we had been all along" (ZBA, 114).

48. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), 233, 235.

49. Merton, *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, 132.

50. Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 13–14.

51. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 225.

52. *Ibid.*, 273–274, this and the following citations on Suzuki.

53. *Ibid.*, 273.

54. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 116.

55. *Ibid.*, 116–117.

56. Merton, ZBA, 62; referencing the traditional Cistercian emphasis on love as integral to knowledge and wisdom, or *amor ipse intellectus est* (William of St. Thierry).

57. Matthew C. Zyniewicz, "The Interreligious Dialogue between Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki" (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2000), 242.

58. *Ibid.*, 240.

59. *Ibid.*, 177.

60. Merton, ZBA, 134.

61. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 288.
62. Cited in Terrence Merrigan, “Newman and Theological Liberalism,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 614.
63. Chenu, 99. The poet Susan McCaslin puts a fine point on the argument in the final lines of her exegesis of *Hagia Sophia*: “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” (*Merton and Hesychasm*, 253).
64. In January 1923, while Russia was being consumed by the flames of civil war, Bulgakov came to the mosque of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople on his way to exile in Paris. He did not know whether he was in heaven or on earth. “My soul became the world: I am in the world and the world is in me.” In the midst of these sensations, writes Catherine Evtuhov, “Bulgakov experienced a new apocalyptic vision. As he stood at the very source of Orthodox Christianity, Bulgakov was struck by the dignity and grace of the Muslims who now prayed to Allah in Justinian’s church; and he felt the misguidedness of wartime Slavophile dreams of restoring a cross to Hagia Sophia, their misunderstanding of Sophia’s true ecumenical mission. And if the world crisis had at once destroyed the first and second Romes, there would be a new, true third Rome, in which, before the end, the church must appear in its fullness and entirety. St. Sophia would fulfill its designated role of universal, ecumenical church—a role it had lost in history. It would become again the meeting place of heaven and earth experienced by Vladimir’s emissaries almost a thousand years earlier” (Evtuhov, 232–233).
65. Christopher Nugent, “*Pax Heraclitus*: A Perspective on Merton’s Healing Wholeness,” unpublished manuscript (2005), p. 4; used with permission of the author.
66. Jonathan Montaldo, “A Gallery of Women’s Faces and Dreams of Women from the Drawings and Journals of Thomas Merton,” *Merton Annual* 14 (2001): 155–172, at 155.
67. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 87.
68. Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 146; also *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 9–13. Advocating for an “all-embracing, comprehensive and holistic” approach to christology, Pieris asks whether “Sophia” might be the key.
69. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (New York: Bantam, 1992). The international group Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) exemplifies the commitment to wisdom-centered (“sophianic”) dialogue and evidence for its mutuality. For their bulletin and remarkable archives, see www.monasticdialogue.org.
70. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 296.
71. Merton, *Emblems in a Season of Fury*, 62.
72. Merton, *ZBA*, 141.