

“THE TRADITION OF WISDOM AND SPIRIT”: WISDOM IN THOMAS MERTON’S MATURE THOUGHT

by **Bonnie B. Thurston**

For myself, I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and in Islam.¹

What in the biblical, Christian tradition is called “wisdom” became for Thomas Merton an integration factor in his mature thought.² Wisdom is seen in three primary ways in Merton’s work of the late 1950s and 1960s. First, wisdom as a concept helped Merton resolve his own, personal issues in connection with women. Second, he understood wisdom as the way the transcendent God is made approachable. Third, for Merton wisdom represented the focal attainment of all religious life. These three threads are woven together in the long prose-poem, “Hagia Sophia,” which was first published in 1962.

I. Wisdom as the Feminine Principle in the World

Merton used the biblical figure of wisdom as a way to deal with his own ambivalence toward women and his self-perceived inability to give and receive love. It is a fact of Merton’s biography that his mother was cold and distant. He, himself, called her “severe” and suggested that solitaries are made by severe mothers. She “abandoned” him by dying when he was six years old. Merton’s childhood schooling was largely in boys’ schools. His career at Cambridge University was a disaster which culminated in his fathering a child out of wedlock. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he speaks of the women he dated and misused while a student at Columbia. And there is the now well-known episode of the relationship with a student nurse who had attended him in hospital in 1966.

To put it bluntly, Merton had trouble with women. It was wisdom as an image of the feminine principle in the world which finally extracted him from these difficulties. In a letter to Boris Pasternak dated 23 October 1958, he wrote:

One night I dreamt I was sitting with a very young Jewish girl of fourteen or fifteen, and that she suddenly manifested a very deep and pure affection for me and embraced me so that I was moved to the depths of my soul. I learned that her name was “Proverb”³

Then Merton quips, “you are initiated into the scandalous secret of the monk who is in love with a girl, and a Jew at that!” (*SL*, p. 12)

The point is that Proverb was not so much an individual as a personification of the whole tradition of faith. Evidence for this assertion comes from a restricted journal of 1957 which Michael Mott quotes in his biography



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phy of Merton. In 1956-57 Merton was studying Russian mysticism and noted:

They [the Russian mystics] have dared to accept the challenge of the Sapiential books, the challenge of the passages in proverbs where Wisdom is “playing in the world” before the face of the Creator. And the Church herself says this Sophia was, somehow, mysteriously revealed and “fulfilled” in the Mother of God and in the Church.⁴

In a letter to Victor Hammer on 14 May 1959, Merton wrote, “Now the Blessed Virgin is the one created being who in herself realizes perfectly all that is hidden in Sophia. She is a kind of personal manifestation of Sophia.”⁵ In analyzing Merton’s dream of Proverb and his pronouncements about Sophia, Robert Waldron has used Jungian terms to refer to Wisdom as Merton’s *anima*.⁶ Even without recourse to Jungian analysis, I think it is the case that from difficulty with real women, Merton came to see women as the way in which God’s generativity and creativity is manifested in the world. That creativity he called “Sophia.”

Merton visited Victor and Carolyn Hammer in Lexington in 1959 and was fascinated by a painting in which a stately woman is placing a crown on the head of a young man. He asked who she was, and Victor no longer knew. Merton says, “know her. I have always known her. She is Hagia Sophia.” He later explains in a letter to Hammer (and that letter became the basis of the poem “Hagia Sophia”) that Hagia Sophia is the feminine principle in God. The poem states that “The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father’s glory. She is His manifestation in radiant splendor! But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all.”⁷

II. Wisdom Makes the Transcendent God Approachable

For Merton, as for the biblical tradition deriving from Proverbs 8, Sophia was the incarnation of the force operative with God in creation, the principle of generativity, the way God is able to be approached by human beings. Merton wrote in the same letter to Hammer:

. . . Hagia Sophia is God Himself. God is not only a Father but a Mother. He is both at the same time, and it is the “feminine aspect” or “Feminine principle” in the divinity that is the HS to ignore this distinction is to lose touch with the fullness of God For the “masculine-feminine” relationship is basic in all reality — simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God.

In its most primitive aspect, HS is the dark, nameless Ousia of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the incomprehensible, “primordial” darkness which is infinite light. . . . the wisdom of God . . . is . . . the “feminine child” playing before God the Creator in His universe . . . This feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of the creative realizations of the Father’s glory in the world and is in fact the manifestation of His glory . . . Hence Sophia is the feminine, dark, yielding, tender counterpart of the power, justice, creative dynamism of the Father. (*WTF*, p. 4)

It is exactly these two “faces” of God, the masculine and the feminine, that Merton contrasts in the poem “Hagia Sophia.” Merton’s poem finds its origins in the letter to Hammer quoted here. Its speaker, who is “like all mankind” (*CP*, p. 363), is a man in a hospital wakened from sleep by the voice of a nurse. Structurally, the poem follows the canonical hours, with sections for Lauds, Prime, Terce, and Compline.

In Part II of the poem, Wisdom is “the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine,” “the candor of God’s light, the expression of his simplicity” (*CP*, p. 365). In Part III, God is fiercely masculine. “The Sun burns in the sky like the face of God, but we do not know His countenance as terrible. His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia” (*CP*, p. 366). Sophia is “the feminine child” “playing in the world.” “She is God-given and God Himself as Gift.” “Sophia is God’s sharing of Himself with creatures”

(*CP*, p. 368). “The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realization of the Father’s glory.” “She is in us the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice, and creative dynamism of the Father” (*CP*, p. 369. Note how the poem quotes the Hammer letter almost verbatim.) In Part IV, the Blessed Virgin Mary “shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia.” God enters into His creation “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” (*CP*, p. 370).

Without the more gentle figure of Sophia, finally personified in the poem by the Blessed Virgin, God would, for Merton, be unapproachable. In an essay entitled “The Contemplative Life in the Modern World,” Merton says, “Contemplative wisdom is . . . a living contact with the infinite Source of all being, a contact not only of minds and hearts, not only of ‘I and Thou,’ but a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become . . . ‘one spirit.’”⁸ This union is made possible by Sophia.

III. Wisdom as the Focal Attainment of the Religious Life

As Patrick O’Connell pointed out, it “is wisdom which is the vital element in the tradition, which is the point of contact and communion between East and West, which must be renewed if individual and society are to recover a sense of meaning and purpose” (O’Connell, p. 2). Michael Mott notes that the poem “Hagia Sophia” “had been a celebration of the wisdom and the *chesed* (fortitude in charity) of women” (Mott, p. 422). But it was much more than that. It summarizes in a word the goal of the religious life. Wisdom is what must be sought in the spiritual life, indeed, in human life itself.

On 2 July 1960 while in the hospital for X-rays, Merton recorded:

At 5:30, as I was dreaming . . . 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’” (Mott, p. 361).

In this remarkable passage the three aspects of Merton’s use of wisdom which I have been lifting up come together. First, the voice of the real woman, the nurse, becomes an image of the feminine principle which, for Merton, is at the same time Wisdom and the Blessed Virgin. Second, this wisdom makes God available as she continually calls to all people everywhere. And, third, it is this very voice that people must strain to hear, to which they must listen.

The poem “Hagia Sophia” confirms this assertion. Part I asserts, “. . . Wisdom cries out to all who will hear . . . and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and helpless” (*CP*, p. 364). Unfortunately as Part II of the poem laments, “We do not hear” “We do not see” (*CP*, p. 365). What we must come to hear and see is precisely this sapiential aspect of experience, God’s manifestation through Sophia. In an essay entitled “Contemplation and Dialogue” Merton asserted: “. . . in all religions it is more or less generally recognized that this profound ‘sapiential’ experience, call it gnosis, contemplation, ‘mysticism,’ ‘prophecy,’ or what you will, represents the deepest and most authentic fruit of the religion itself.”⁹

“Merton finds wisdom terminology particularly useful for articulating some of the common or at least analogous elements found in diverse traditions” (O’Connell, p. 4). But, more particularly, he finds that what religious souls seek is wisdom herself. At the end of January 1961, Merton wrote, “I need the concept of *natura naturans* — the divine wisdom in ideal nature, the ikon of wisdom, the dancing ikon — . . . 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 hoped in *natura naturans* . . . The dark face, the ‘night face’ of Sophia” (Mott, pp. 361-362).

IV. Conclusion

What Michael Mott says of the poem “Hagia Sophia” is also true more generally of the concept of wisdom in the mature thought of Thomas Merton. “Many of the strands of Merton’s deepest and most unorthodox thought over several years come together” (Mott, p. 361). Through the figure of Wisdom as a personification of the feminine principle in life, Merton was able to come to terms with and reconcile his own, personal ambiguity about women. Woman became more than a source of disappointment or temptation or abandonment. She became an incarnation of God, a way that God’s love is manifested in the world. Merton came to understand that, without the tender, yielding, dark, soft, feminine face of God, God would, to some degree, remain forever unapproachable. By conflating the figure of Sophia and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Merton was able to make the point even more clearly for Roman Catholic Christianity.

Unfortunately, the presence of Wisdom is often ignored, obscured, or unheeded by the world in which we live. Without it, Merton thought that world was doomed. Hope for spiritual survival rests in the recovery of wisdom. And, amazingly, Merton located much of the burden for that recovery with women. Writing about a program for Christian culture at St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, he remarked, “I think women are perhaps capable of salvaging something of humanity in our world today. Certainly they have a better chance of grasping and understanding and preserving a sense of Christian culture We are concerned not just with culture but also with wisdom above all” (Mott, p. 422).

Finally, of course, the quest for “wisdom and spirit” is a human quest, and thus a quest for the answer to one of the basic religious questions: “Who Am I?”

The key to the whole thing is, of course, *mercy and love*. In the sense that God is Love, is Mercy, is Humility, is Hiddenness, He shows Himself to us within ourselves as our own poverty, our own nothingness . . . and if we receive the humility of God into our hearts, we become able to accept and embrace and love this very poverty, which is Himself and His Sophia. And then the darkness of Wisdom becomes to us inexpressible light. We pass through the center of our own nothingness into the light of God. (*WTF*, p. 5)

NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p. 194. Hereafter in the text as *CGB*.
2. I borrow the term “integrating factor” from Patrick F. O’Connell’s paper, “Wisdom as Integrating Factor in Thomas Merton’s Later Work,” given at the Second General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in June 1991 in Rochester, New York. Hereafter in the text as O’Connell.
3. Boris Pasternak and Thomas Merton, *Six Letters* (Lexington, Kentucky: King Library Press, 1973), pp. 11-12. Hereafter in the text as *SL*.
4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 307-308. Hereafter in the text as Mott.
5. *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*; edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 4. Hereafter in the text as *WTF*.
6. Robert G. Waldron, “Merton’s Dreams: A Jungian Analysis,” *The Merton Seasonal* 16:4 (Autumn 1991), pp. 11-23.
7. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 369. Hereafter in the text as *CP*. William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 175.
8. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 222.
9. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing Company/ A Delta Book, 1967), p. 204.