

Christopher Pramuk, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2015), pp. xiv + 138, paper, \$17.95, ISBN-13 978-0-8146-4816-2.

WHEN I FIRST picked up this book, I feared it would be merely a pop-psychological assessment of how the early loss of his mother led Merton to a sometimes misguided search in relation to women. Fortunately, my misgivings were quieted by the author's strong emphasis on the last two words in the title: Feminine Divine. Within the first five pages, he introduces the concepts in Merton's prose poem "Hagia Sophia," which is a lyrical expression of Merton's understanding of the mystery of God's Wisdom as the feminine Sophia. Personified as Sophia, Wisdom becomes a sister and presence who is "the candor of God's light, the expression of his simplicity." Sophia is expressed not only in human females, but in all of creation as an expression of God's love and joy.

Yet striking as Merton's writings about Sophia are, and novel as they sometimes appeared at the time (and to some extent even now) to those in the West, the concepts were not born solely of divine inspiration *ex nihilo*. Merton was familiar with the Eastern Christian wisdom tradition from his readings of Sergei Bulgakov and Paul Evdokimov as well as other patristic and Eastern theologians, from his study of Hebrew Scriptures, and of iconography.

Pramuk elucidates in detail how nature being itself is an expression of God's feminine love for his creation, as well as the lack of subordination of feminine portions of God to masculine portions. Both are an integral and equal part of God. Yet this free, child-like innocence of nature and people can also be broken, bound, and damaged by humans who view both the earth and people instrumentally, as material or tools provided for their selfish use.

At present, we are experiencing the pain of the Syrian crisis. Merton would see Sophia as essential to giving people the hope and stability necessary to persevere and move toward peace, through seeing God's presence in all things.

Yet amid the fervor of the Merton anniversary year, it is interesting to contemplate a quotation (which I abridge here) Pramuk takes from Rowan Williams, formerly archbishop of Canterbury. Williams wrote in

*A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), page 19:

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. . . . In all these contexts he is utterly "priestly" because he is utterly *attentive*: he . . . [has] a will and imagination turned Godward.

In the end, Pramuk concludes that learning to know the feminine manifestations of God is important for all of us, but perhaps especially so for those whose concept of a benevolent, loving father has been damaged by the absence or the reality of their human father.

The richness of this book, and the leads it provides to other sources for learning about the Eastern Christian wisdom tradition merit taking time to savor the text, and then go beyond it.

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Diego Fares, SJ, *The Heart of Pope Francis: How a New Culture of Encounter is Changing the Church and the World* (New York: Crossroad, 2015), pp. 103, hardback, \$14.95, ISBN-13 978-0-8245-2074-8.

AS ANTONIO SPADARO informs us in the foreword, Diego Fares has been a friend of Pope Francis for over forty years. Friendship begets knowledge, and there is no better way of knowing a person than by living with him day in and day out and sharing each day's sorrows and trials as well as its joys and occasional triumphs. Here in this little book of scarcely over a hundred pages Fares deals with the formation of the mind of our new Pope, which is inseparable from his physical and material existence. Fares is eminently qualified to present the thought of his former provincial, sponsor, rector, and director, in short his beloved confrère in the Society of Jesus.

It is important to know the early spiritual and intellectual influences that formed the thought of any wise person we are interested in. According to Fares, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was primarily influenced by Romano

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