

**WISDOM FROM RUSSIA: THE PERSPECTIVES OF DOROTHY DAY
AND THOMAS MERTON**

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WISDOM FROM RUSSIA: THE PERSPECTIVES OF DOROTHY DAY AND THOMAS MERTON

By the 1960s, Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker (hereafter CW) movement in 1933, and the Trappist monk and prolific author Thomas Merton were renowned American Catholics—his autobiographical *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) had sold millions of copies. They were also both converts to their faith after years of spiritual wanderings. Day had had an abortion and later a daughter with an anarchist who refused to marry her. Merton apparently fathered a child while studying at Cambridge (England) in 1933-34. By the 1960s Day and Merton were friends by correspondence and social critics, with Merton contributing some of his writings to Day's paper *The Catholic Worker*. They both read widely and absorbed much from literature, including religious literature. They were also seekers of wisdom. Merton, the contemplative monk and poet, thought and wrote more about it—"How sweet my life would be, if I were wise!" was a line in his poem "Wisdom." But the activist Day also realized the need "to seek wisdom and live by it."¹ They found much of it in their Catholic tradition from the Bible through Sts. Augustine and Thomas of Aquinas to their French contemporary, whom they both knew and corresponded with, the philosopher Jacques Maritain. But they also believed that Russian literature, religion, and philosophy from Dostoevsky to Pasternak—and for Day, to Solzhenitsyn—contained many wise insights.

They, of course, were not alone in their belief that such a Russian wisdom existed. The tremendous global popularity of such writers as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov—in an age before mass hype—suggests that nineteenth-century Russian literature contained something special. And that special something was carried well into the twentieth century by Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn. Many writers have commented on it without exactly defining it. But George Steiner came close when he wrote, "Tolstoy and Dostoevsky stand foremost among novelists. They excel in comprehensiveness of vision and force of execution. . . . They possessed the power to construct through language 'realities' which are sensuous and concrete, yet pervaded by the life and mystery of the spirit."² Thus, the Russian writers and thinkers dealt with here, and appreciated by Day and Merton, plumbed the depths of human consciousness and complexity while dealing with the *big* questions of life: "How should one live?" "What is the meaning of death?" "Is there a God?" "What does true freedom mean?" "What are my responsibilities toward other humans?" And the questions their characters confronted are like those that wisdom-seekers around the world ask themselves, and so it is natural that they should find these Russian writers and thinkers appealing.

It is also helpful that the Russian writers dealt with these questions in a concrete, existential, artistic way so that their characters capture our imagination and their arguments and struggles become ours. And what a vast array of characters they gave us! The great novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, especially Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, are known for their amplex, but even Chekhov, known for his conciseness, presented us with "doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, lecturers, landlords, shopkeepers, industrialists, nannies, lackeys, students, civil

¹ Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974), 490; Day, Sept. 1963 column, at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=806>. All web sites referred to in this essay were accessed in May and June 2011.

² *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 8.

servants of every rank, cattle-dealers, tram-conductors, marriage-brokers, sextons, bishops, peasants, workers, cobblers, artists' models, horticulturalists, zoologists, innkeepers, gamekeepers, prostitutes, fishermen, lieutenants, corporals, artists, cooks, writers, janitors, nuns, soldiers, midwives, prisoners on the Sakhalin Islands.”³ No wonder Woody Allen said, “I’m crazy about Chekhov. I never knew anybody that wasn’t,”⁴ and reflected his appreciation of Russian literature in his comedy *Love and Death*.

Dorothy Day’s Russian Readings from Dostoevsky to Solzhenitsyn

In 1927, Dorothy Day (1897-1980) became a Catholic. Six years later after co-founding with Peter Maurin the CW movement, she became the editor and chief writer of its paper and began the work of providing shelter and other aid to poor people. For the remainder of her long life she took literally the Gospels’ words: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. . . . Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” In his *Audacity of Hope* (2006) future president Barack Obama listed her as one of five “great reformers in American history” who were motivated by their faith and “repeatedly used religious language to argue their causes.” And by 2011, the fruits of her labors were still multiplying with 213 CW communities committed to “hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken,” and opposed to “injustice, war, racism, and violence of all forms.”⁵ Moreover, following the formal request of New York’s Cardinal John O’Connor more than a decade ago, the Vatican is still considering proclaiming her a saint.

Dostoevsky, Kropotkin, Tolstoy and Other Pre-Soviet Writers

After first reading Dostoevsky and the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin while still in high school, Day attended the University of Illinois from 1914 to 1916. While there, as later related in her first book of memoirs (1938), she “read everything” of Dostoevsky she could obtain, as well as works of other Russian writers such as Kropotkin, Chekhov, Turgenev, Gorky, and Tolstoy. Although not yet a Catholic, she maintained that Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy made her “cling to a faith in God.” She added that “the call to my youth was the call of Kropotkin, and the beauty of his prose, the nobility of his phrasing, appealed to my heart.” He advised young people, “Quit the environment in which you are placed,” and work “for the utter destruction of all this injustice, economic, social and political.” She believed then that he was “a saint in his way.”⁶

After her conversion to Catholicism in 1927 she often read lives of officially proclaimed saints, but the influence of Kropotkin remained with her throughout her life and she continued to consider herself an anarchist. She referred to Kropotkin and Tolstoy, “the modern proponents of anarchism,” as “sincere and peaceful men.” She recognized that the term anarchism was often associated with violence, but she followed Tolstoy’s example in favoring a non-violent anarchism that retained the essential elements of how the term is defined—opposition to a

³ Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate: A Novel*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: Perennial Library, 1987), 282-83.

⁴ Woody Allen and Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (New York: Grove Atlantic Press, 2005), 156.

⁵ *Audacity of Hope* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 218; <http://www.catholicworker.org/>.

⁶ Dorothy Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, Ch. 4, at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=204>.

centralized government and the desire to set up “a new order based on free and spontaneous cooperation among individuals, groups, regions and nations.”⁷

She seemed most fascinated by Dostoevsky’s great novels such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. In her first memoir, addressing her younger brother, she declared that characters like the prostitute Sonya in the first novel, the Idiot in the second, and Alyosha and the monk Father Zossima in the third, all moved her deeply. She added, “You will notice that I quote the Russian author [Dostoevsky] a good deal, but that is because we both have read him. And I quote him often because he had a profound influence on my life, on my way of thinking.”⁸

In her mid seventies preparing for a trip to Russia, she wrote in her July-August 1971 column of *The Catholic Worker*:

From my high school years, I have been fascinated by Russia, and it was the books of Tolstoi, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Chekhov which did much to bring about my conversion. I was haunted by Lenin’s [should be Levin’s] struggle for faith in *Anna Karenina*, by the reminiscences of Fr. Zossima in the *Brothers Karamazov*, Raskolnikov’s in *Crime and Punishment*, turning to the Gospels in Siberia, Turgenev’s story of the crippled yet radiant peasant girl [in “A Living Relic”] in one of his Sportsman’s Sketches, etc. . . . The very struggle for non-violence, and growth in love of brother, love of enemy, which goes on within us all, the very struggle to put off the old man and put on the new, was made easier by those words of Fr. Zossima which I have so often quoted, “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”⁹

Besides the works of Dostoevsky mentioned above, she often cited others that she had read, from his novels (like *The Possessed* and *Raw Youth*) and stories (like “An Honest Thief”) to his prison memoirs, *House of the Dead*, and his journalistic articles in his *Diary of a Writer*. On her trip to Russia in 1971, she visited his grave at a monastery in Leningrad—she was not, however, permitted to visit Tolstoy’s estate near Tula.

In a 1973 column she cited Konstantin Mochulsky’s *Dostoevsky, His Life and Work*, where he quoted Dostoevsky as stating that “beauty will save the world,” and that art “has its own integral organic life,” which answers man’s inborn need for beauty, “without which, perhaps he might not want to live upon earth.” Mixing together Mochulsky’s own words with those he took from Dostoevsky, Day added the following:

When a man is in discord with reality, in conflict . . . the thirst for beauty and harmony appears in him with its greatest force. Art is useful here because it pours in energy, sustains the forces, strengthens our feeling of life . . . Man accepts beauty without any conditions and so, simply because it is beauty, with veneration he bows down before it, not asking why it is useful and what one can buy with it . . . Beauty is more useful than

⁷ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 54-55. This second book of memoirs was first published in 1952.

⁸ From *Union Square*, Chs. 1 & 2, at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=201> and <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=2>.

⁹ [Http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=511](http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=511). Russian spellings often vary according to systems of transliteration. In quoted material, I have left the spellings as quoted, but whereas Day often bolded titles, I have italicized them.

the simply useful, for it is the ultimate goal of being. On this height, the way of art meets with the way of religion.”¹⁰

In the last few years of her life, she reread three of Dostoevsky’s four great novels, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed*.

Although she loved Dostoevsky’s fiction and what she called his religious spirit, her thinking and actions were more akin to the non-violent anarchist Tolstoy than to that of the nationalistic and often prejudiced Dostoevsky. But she also loved Tolstoy’s fiction from an early age. And as late as 1977, she was still commenting that “to re-read a good, long novel like *War and Peace* is also healing.” And in 1978, she noted, “Started to read *Anna Karenina* again. What a genius Tolstoy!”¹¹ But she also read some of his fiction written after his middle-aged spiritual crisis, which turned him into a major moralist for the last three decades of his life. Among these readings were stories (like *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”) and the novel *Resurrection*. She also read some of his non-fiction works (like *What Then Must We Do?*) that spelled out his thinking on such topics as pacifism, non-violent anarchism, the treatment of criminals, and poverty. Perhaps most importantly, she tried to reconcile her life with her religious beliefs, as Tolstoy struggled to do during his final decades. And she greatly admired a man who had once considered himself a follower of Tolstoy—Gandhi.¹²

Helene Iswolsky, Vladimir Soloviev, Nicholas Berdyaev, and Russian Spirituality

In an October 1949 column in *The Catholic Worker*, Day listed the poet, philosopher, and religious thinker Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), along with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, as being one of “the three great Russians,” and she said that her friend Helene Iswolsky was “giving a course” on them at the CW farm at Newburgh, New York. Day wrote that “these three men wrote of the struggle of man towards God and to all of them the golden key which opened the doors of prisons and led out of darkness was the key of love. To listen to such talks is not only to learn more of Christ, but to learn to love the Russians who are truly Christ-bearers in their sufferings and poverty.”¹³

Iswolsky was the daughter of the last Czarist Russian ambassador to France and came to the United States following the German occupation of Paris during World War II. Day wrote, “My own love for Russian literature—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov—drew me to Helene at once.”¹⁴ Among Iswolsky’s endeavors was beginning an ecumenical group called the Third Hour, where Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants met to discuss ecumenical ideas—like Day, Iswolsky had become a Catholic herself in the 1920s. It was a remarkable group that included the poet W. H. Auden and the theologian Ursula Niebuhr, wife of the more famous Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Day spoke at many of their meetings.

¹⁰ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=527>; the quotes can be found in the 1971 Princeton University Press paperback ed. of Mochulsky’s book, p. 224.

¹¹ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=578>; Dorothy Day, *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 593. Hereafter *Diaries*.

¹² In Ch. 1, “A Century of Violence,” of my *An Age of Progress? Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (London: Anthem, 2008), 6-8, I briefly touch on Tolstoy’s pacifist ideas and his influence on Gandhi.

¹³ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=474>; Mikhail Epstein’s web site, “The Basic Ideas of Four Russian Thinkers,” at http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/four_thinkers.html, offers a good brief summary of Soloviev’s chief concepts.

¹⁴ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=566>.

Iswolsky's ecumenical inclinations were in keeping with those of Soloviev, who was the most prominent ecumenical thinker of his day. She once said to Day that he "is the prophet of ecumenism, and indeed of everything good in Russia."¹⁵ She also wrote, "Soloviev's christological interpretation of the world led him toward ethical principles which he described in his famous work, *The Justification of the Good*. It is the basis of his social teaching which was carried on by his disciple Nicholas Berdyaev and has continued to stimulate modern Orthodox thought. It coincides with Western Catholic trends, with the Christian humanism of Jacques Maritain. Soloviev may be considered the precursor of *personalism*."¹⁶ Through Iswolsky and her own reading, Day was aware of Soloviev's ecumenism and friendship with Dostoevsky, but she mentioned most often his insights on love and sexuality in his *The Meaning of Love*.

To Day, love was the most important of virtues. In a 1958 letter she wrote: "If we could only learn that the only important thing is love, and that we will be judged on love—to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not, seventy times seven, to mothers-in-law, to husbands, to children—and to be oblivious of insult, or hurt, or injury—not to see them, not to hear them. It is a hard, hard doctrine. I guess we get what we need in the way of discipline. God can change things in a twinkling of an eye. We have got to pray, to read the Gospel, to get to frequent communion, and not judge, not do anything, but love, love, love."¹⁷ A decade earlier, in a column of September 1948 in which she quoted from and commented on Soloviev's view of love, she wrote, "What is God but Love? What is a religion without love?" It is her stress on love and her long decades of displaying it for society's poor that most distinguishes her. A sampling of her quotes from Soloviev include:

It is well known to everyone that in love there inevitably exists a special idealization of the beloved object, which presents itself to the lover in an entirely different light from that in which outsiders see it. I speak here of light not merely in a metaphorical sense; it is a matter here not only of a special moral and intellectual estimate, but moreover of a special sensuous reception; the lover actually sees, visually receives what others do not. And if for him too this light of love quickly fades away, yet does it follow from this that it was false, that it was only a subjective illusion?

. . . The true significance of love consists not in the simple experience of this feeling, but what is accomplished by means of it, in the work of love.

For love it is not enough to feel for itself the unconditional significance of the beloved object, but it is necessary effectively to impart or communicate this significance to this object. . . .

. . . each man comprises in himself the image of God. Theoretically and in the abstract this Divine image is known to us in mind and through mind, but in love it is known in the concrete and in life. And if this revelation of the ideal nature, ordinarily concealed by its material manifestation, is not confined in love to an inward feeling, but at times becomes noticeable also in the sphere of external feelings, then so much greater is the significance

¹⁵ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=515>.

¹⁶ "Soloviev and the Eirenic Movement," at <http://stmichaelruscath.org/spiritual/iswolsky/3rdhour/eirenic.php>.

¹⁷ Dorothy Day, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 245.

we are bound to acknowledge for love as being from the very first the visible restoration of the Divine image in the world of matter.¹⁸

Day was critical of those who denigrated sex, and must have found the following Soloviev statement appealing: “In order to undermine egoism in a genuine way, it is necessary to counterpose to it a love just as concretely defined that permeates all our being, absorbing everything into it. . . . We find such a love, or at least the most proximate possibility of it, in sexual love.”¹⁹ Catholic that she was, however, she believed that true sexual love could only flourish within a marriage; and, as with Soloviev, that love in its broadest and deepest sense was the key to bringing closer the Kingdom of God on earth.

Exactly how familiar she was with other Soloviev writings, such as those dealing with Sophia (or Divine Wisdom) or critical of nationalism or anti-Semitism, it is difficult to say, but she would have agreed with his belief that Christians needed to be active in the fight for social justice and should be willing to work with non-Christians in pursuit of that aim.²⁰

Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Soloviev greatly influenced another Russian philosopher whom Day often quoted, Nicholas Berdyaev. Like Helene Iswolsky, he had been born in Russia but lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, where he took part in discussion groups with Iswolsky and others like the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. Both Day’s co-founder of the CW organization, the French émigré Peter Maurin, and Iswolsky had enlightened Day about this Russian philosopher. Like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Soloviev, Berdyaev believed that Christians should work toward creating the Kingdom of God on earth. His understanding of human freedom, tolerance, and the need for social justice were close to the views of Soloviev, who also emphasized these points. Berdyaev quoted his words “It is impious to wait upon God to do that which simple justice could bring about,” but he thought Soloviev’s *The Meaning of Love* was his most remarkable work. Like all three of his major Russian influences, Berdyaev was critical of any materialistic “bourgeois spirit,” including any of its technological achievements that deemphasized the spiritual.²¹

In a 1976 column, Day referred to “the Personalist and Communitarian Revolution of Emmanuel Mounier and Nicholas Berdyaev.” Mounier was a French thinker who greatly influenced Peter Maurin and eventually Day. He stressed the individual person and personal responsibility, but also the importance of love and community. For Day to suggest that Berdyaev deserved equal credit with Mounier for the “revolution” was high praise indeed. In her writings

¹⁸ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=470>.

¹⁹ *The Meaning of Love* was translated into English in 1945. The above quote is taken from an excellent new translation in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics* by V. S. Soloviev, ed. and trans. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 97. This collection also contains three speeches that the philosopher-poet gave on his friend Dostoevsky soon after his death.

²⁰ We shall examine Soloviev’s ideas on Sophia when we come to Merton. I have dealt extensively with Soloviev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy in my *Russia in the Age of Alexander II, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), also available in an [online edition](#). An example of Soloviev’s concern with social justice can be found in my “Vladimir Soloviev and the Jews in Russia,” *The Russian Review* (April 1970), 181-91, available (with some text inexplicably bolded) at <http://www.american-buddha.com/lit.soloviev.2.htm>.

²¹ An excellent treatment of Berdyaev’s influence on Day and the CW movement can be found in Mark and Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), Ch. 5 (Berdyaev’s quote of Soloviev, on p. 77), and a briefer version is available at <http://www.cjd.org/paper/roots/rmateri.html>, where the Zwicks include some excerpts from Berdyaev’s writings. See also Ch. 13, where the Zwicks deal with the influence of Dostoevsky and other Russian writers on Day.

and correspondence she refers to and/or quotes many of Berdyaev's works including his study of Dostoevsky, *Christianity and Class War*, *The Destiny of Man*, and *The End of Our Time*.²²

Another link between Day, Iswolsky, and Russian religious thinkers was their shared interest in the early Church fathers and in the Russian monastic tradition. In the 1950s and again in 1962, Day wrote favorably of G. P. Fedotov's *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, a collection of writings from those of the monk St. Theodosius (d. 1074) to those of two early twentieth-century parish priests. Before reading Fedotov's collection, Day had long admired Dostoevsky's fictional *staretz* (elder) Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. And Fedotov also included material dealing with real-life Russian monastic prototypes of Zossima like St. Tikhon and St. Seraphim. One *staretz* not included was Ambrose at the Optina Monastery, whom Dostoevsky and Soloviev visited together in 1878 and who served as one of the models for Zossima.²³

One long work included in *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality* was *The Pilgrim* (sometimes rendered *The Way of a Pilgrim*). In a 1954 column, Day recommended this mid-nineteenth century anonymous work as a spiritual classic comparable to the medieval *Imitation of Christ*, which she had read even before converting to Catholicism. A *staretz* teaches the pilgrim (really more of a religious "wanderer" often found in nineteenth-century Russia) the Jesus Prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me"—and how to constantly recite it. Despite her busy life directing the CW hospitality houses and newspaper, Day often stressed the importance of prayer. One of her comments about *The Pilgrim* was, "When I read it I thought with joy that here was a teaching on prayer that could be used by the worker on his way to and from work, by the busy housewife, by the mother of many children, by the traveller." And she ended her column, written at the Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island, with these words: "I have been writing this in the midst of the care of five children and the cooking of meals and washing of clothes and the attending to the comings and goings of people in our hospice, and I can testify to the joy and peace even the remembrance of such prayer gives, let alone the practice of it."²⁴

Anton Chekhov

Among Russian writers of fiction Chekhov assumed a position in Day's heart close to that of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. We have already seen that she wrote that the works of Chekhov and Turgenev, along with those of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, "did much to bring about" her conversion. In the late 1920s, when living at her beach cottage, she had a friend, Varya Bulgakov, who acted in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Yet, it is in the 1960s and 1970s that she mentions Chekhov most often in her writings, including her diaries and letters. In a December 1961 column she wrote:

This last month I have been reading a lot of Chekhov, beginning with an article by [German novelist] Thomas Mann. . . . [The] question which Chekhov brings out in all his stories is "What is to be done?" What is life for? Chekhov's conclusion is that we are here to work, to serve our brother, and he was a doctor and wrote on the side in order to support himself through medical school and to support also his father, mother and brothers. He said toward the close of his life that much had been done for the sick but nothing for the prisoner so he set out to visit the far off prison island of Sakhalin, travelling by carriage over

²² <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=572>.

²³ I describe this visit in Ch. 30 of my *Russia in the Age*. A good introduction to the Russian *startzi* (elders) can be found in Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

²⁴ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=883>.

flooded country side, and finally spending three months with the convicts, in the convict colony north of Vladivostok, a visit which resulted in many reforms.

Not to be a parasite, not to live off of others, to earn our own living by a life of service, this answered the question for him. And we have too that sureness of an answer—We must try to make that kind of a society in which it is easier for man to be good.²⁵

In a column the following summer she wrote: “All winter I had been reading Chekhov, his letters, stories and novelettes and the very basic philosophy of work that he expressed in his plays and stories gave me good ammunition in my talks about man’s necessity to earn his living by the sweat of his brow, not to be a parasite on the social body, but mindful of the common good.”²⁶

In the spring of 1971, she mentioned having read Chekhov’s story about mental patients, “Ward No. 6,” and compared some of her hospitality houses to this fictional ward. A year later, preparing for her trip to Eastern Europe and Russia she wrote: “Circling Warsaw . . . the thought for some reason comes of *The Seagull*. And Chekhov spitting blood in the loneliness of Yalta, and writing those minimal and yet ultimate lines for the betrayed and suffering girl [Day is referring to Nina in his play *The Seagull*]—‘. . .to endure. To be able to bear one’s cross and have faith. I have a faith. I am not afraid of life.’ How terrible that seventy years later, seventy years of the most astonishing acquisition of knowledge in man’s history, it is so very much harder to speak these lines without fatuousness on this planet.” In another column about her trip, she mentioned Moscow’s Novodevichye Monastery, where Soloviev was buried. She then added: “Chekhov is also buried there, brought back from Yalta where he was dying of tuberculosis. . . . I remember one of the things Chekhov wrote in a letter after visiting the prison camp in Sakhalin Island. ‘God’s world is good. It is only we who are bad. . . One must work, and to hell with everything else. The important thing is that we must be just and all the rest will come as matter of course.’”²⁷

In a February 1972 diary entry, she wrote: “This morning I read Chekhov’s ‘Peasants’ and again was shamed by the contrast between their lot and our own. He saw too, in the ‘House with the Mansard,’ how important it was for people to ‘have time to think of their souls, of God, and to develop their spiritual facilities.’” She also commented on Chekhov’s stress on work and how important it was for intellectuals to do their fair share. Several months later, she noted that she saw Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, as well as the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, and found them both “wonderful.” About a year later, she jotted down, “Reading Chekhov letters [apparently the recently released 1973 Karlinsky edition]. . . . His work during cholera epidemic. Dostoevsky influenced my youth and gave me the insights for today (such work as ours). But Chekhov’s stories and letters are a never-failing inspiration now.” Weeks later she wrote, that she was still reading his letters. “How could he write so many! He loved his family and friends.” She also noted that a friend gave her *The Portable Chekhov* (a Viking paperback which contained stories, letters, and two plays). She quotes his letter to a friend about the arduous trip he was about to

²⁵ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=788>.

²⁶ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=792>.

²⁷ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=513>; <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=515>. Day sometimes quoted from memory, so her quotes are not always word-for-word from printed sources, but they adequately convey the writer’s thought. In addition, various translations in the case of foreign writers like Chekhov allow for additional variations.

make to visit prisoners on the island of Sakhalin: “Won’t the whole journey yield at least two or three days that I shall remember all my life, with rapture or with bitterness?”²⁸

In March 1977 she mentioned having a book of Chekhov’s plays with her to read, and a month later reported feeling depressed, but then added, “Reading Chekhov helps [her feel better].” In the summer she stated that she was again reading *The Island*, his account of his trip to the prison colony of Sakhalin. A year later she wished to read it again together with a few friends, but could not find her copy. In 1979, she reported talking to a friend about Chekhov’s play *Three Sisters*.²⁹

Although in 1971 Day mentioned Turgenev as one of the Russian writers who helped bring her to conversion, she seldom refers to him except for a sketch (“A Living Relic”) in his *A Sportsman’s Sketches* that deals with a horribly crippled young woman whose faith helps her, despite her condition, experience some of the joy of life and nature. When mentioning this sketch, Day also referred to “a fascinating book,” N. Gorodetzky’s *The Humiliated Christ in Russian Thought*, which referred to the story’s heroine, Lukeria.³⁰ In 1979 she noted that a friend was trying to obtain this book for her. Some of Gorky’s stories and plays, many of which dealt sympathetically with the down-and-outs of society were also familiar to her, but did not seem to influence her as much as the writings of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov.

Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn

A later Russian novel that she did love a great deal was Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. In 1958, the year it first appeared in English translation, she mentioned reading it. In 1977, she wrote of re-reading it. In 1979 she recounted that someone had given her a hard copy of the book and that her first great grandchild had been named Lara (after the heroine of the novel) because the child’s mother liked the character after seeing the film based on it with Day. As we shall see, Day’s friend the monk Thomas Merton had actually corresponded with Pasternak and wrote a few essays on him and *Doctor Zhivago*, and Day valued these essays.

The last Russian writer that Day expressed admiration for was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whom she considered a “great writer.” Her friend Helene Iswolsky wrote reviews of some of his works for *The Catholic Worker* and gave at least one talk on him at the CW house. In one of her 1971 columns, Day wrote that he “was another of the reasons I wanted to visit Russia, to set foot on the soil that produced the likes of him. There is nothing fatuous about his writing. He is a man of ‘faith and not afraid of life.’” She mentioned “that wonderful sense of faith, that of the little Baptist in *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in a labor camp.” By the time she arrived in Moscow in the summer of 1971 two more major novels of his, *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle*, had been published abroad; the Soviet government had overseen his expulsion from the Writer’s Union; and (in 1970) he had been awarded, as Pasternak had in 1958, the Nobel Prize for Literature. Like Pasternak, however, political pressures prevented him from attending the award ceremony in Stockholm. While in Moscow, Day protested to three members of the Writers Union the treatment Solzhenitsyn had received. What she seemed to admire most about him was his faith in God and his courage in expressing it. She ended her column with the words “I find it

²⁸ *Diaries*, 502, 508, 534, 536 (cf. *The Portable Chekhov*, 607). For some reasons that Day might have felt like this about Chekhov, see my two 2010 online essays, “[The Wisdom Of Anton Chekhov \(Word Format\) \(or PDF\)](#), and “[Anton Chekhov: A Man for Our Times.](#)”

²⁹ *Diaries*, 575, 578, 586; <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=589>; <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=260>.

³⁰ [Http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=511](http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=511).

hard to express my own joy that Solzhenitsyn himself exists and that not only Russia, through the underground circulation of his writings, is hearing these great truths, but our own confused country also.”³¹

In a 1973 column she wrote, “Reading is an escape from agony. Solzhenitsyn’s works—*Cancer Ward*, *The First Circle*; Harrison Salisbury’s *The 900 Days*, *The Siege of Leningrad*. Such books remind one that in such crises today man often is of indomitable spirit. ‘There is that which is of God in every man,’ the Quakers say.” In April of 1973 she noted that she was reading Solzhenitsyn’s Nobel speech (which he was not able to deliver personally) and that it was “beautiful.” In April 1976, she referred to the Russian novelist as someone whom she loved and revered. A year later she mentioned reading a biography of him, and at about the same time devoted a column partly to him. By then he was living in Vermont, not far from Day’s daughter Tamar, after being forced out of the USSR. She referred to him as “one of the greatest writers of our day,” and thought that he ranked with Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. In both *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Cancer Ward* she “found the same sense of the nobility of man capable of enduring, even transcending, all that might befall him.” In March 1979, she mentioned in her diary that she was rereading or going to reread these two novels, plus *The First Circle*. The year before, she had watched Solzhenitsyn deliver a commencement address at Harvard University and proclaimed it “very good.”³²

It is not difficult to see why Day thought Solzhenitsyn’s Nobel address was “beautiful.” His main point was the power of writers and literature to serve beauty, truth, and goodness, and she had always believed in literature’s power. He had quoted two of her favorite Russian writers, Dostoevsky and Soloviev, including one of her favorite Dostoevsky quotes (from Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*), “The world will be saved by beauty.” A man who knew her well wrote that she had “a gift to see not only what is wrong in the world, but to see beauty and to discern signs of hope. Day loved a sentence from St. Augustine in which he said, ‘All beauty is a revelation of God.’ . . . She was profoundly attentive to beauty and managed to find it in places where it was often overlooked — in nature, in a piece of bread, in the smell of garlic drifting out a tenement window, in flowers blooming in a slum neighborhood, in the battered faces of people who had been thrown away by society.”³³ She would also have liked Solzhenitsyn’s linking of violence with lies—“Violence finds its only refuge in falsehood, falsehood its only support in violence.” She herself believed in Gandhi’s linking of truth with passive resistance and non-violence in his teaching of “satyagraha” or truth force. She believed, as she stated in a eulogy column upon his death, that “there is no public figure who has more conformed his life to the life of Jesus Christ than Gandhi.”³⁴

It is also not difficult to guess what portions of Solzhenitsyn’s Harvard Commencement address would have appealed to her. She shared his dismay at Western materialism, sexual license, excesses of the mass media, and scarcity of spiritualism. His conviction that “the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today’s mass [Western]

³¹ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=513>.

³² <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=527>; *Diaries*, 529, 557, 575, 608, 626; <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=577>.

³³ The Noble lecture is available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html; Day mentioned his quoting of Dostoevsky’s line on beauty in a column of September 1974, at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=543>; Jim Forest, “Personal Reflections Regarding Dorothy Day,” at <http://www.jimandnancyforest.com/2008/04/21/dorothyday/>.

³⁴ Day’s eulogy of Gandhi is at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=463>; see also her column of November 1939, at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=349>.

living habits” was also her belief. Being a Christian anarchist and social critic, she apparently was not upset at his criticism of American legalism and its political system generally. And his view that Western civilization had taken a wrong turn during the Renaissance and Enlightenment period when “rationalistic humanism” . . . proclaimed and enforced [the] autonomy of man from any higher force above him” was a historical view similar to the one she had developed as a result of various influences, including previous Russian thinkers, Peter Maurin, and two sources that had influenced him: the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and papal encyclicals. Committed pacifist that she was, however, she must have disagreed with Solzhenitsyn’s strong criticism of Vietnam War critics: “But members of the U.S. antiwar movement wound up being involved in the betrayal of Far Eastern nations [like South Vietnam and Cambodia], in a genocide and in the suffering today imposed on 30 million people there. Do those convinced pacifists hear the moans coming from there? Do they understand their responsibility today? Or do they prefer not to hear?”³⁵

But Day’s appraisal of Russian writers and thinkers seldom mentions their flaws. Dostoevsky’s writings, for example, reflected many prejudices, but I have been unable to find any dissatisfaction that she expressed over them. Human-rights advocate Andrei Sakharov, who was a wise man in many ways, criticized Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s for “his lack of tolerance for the opinions of others,” his “distinct anti-Western bias,” and his underestimating “the need for a global approach” to world problems.³⁶ Again, however, Day, who stressed tolerance and dialoguing with others including Marxists, seems to have ignored the dogmatism and intolerance Solzhenitsyn sometimes displayed.

Thomas Merton and Russian Wisdom from Soloviev to Pasternak

Dorothy Day had sent a letter to Thomas Merton (1915-1968) at his Trappist Monastery in Kentucky as early as December 1956, when she thanked him for saying a Christmas Mass for her and the CW organization.³⁷ The record of their more frequent and extended correspondence, however, extends from June 1959 to August 1968. Their letters are primarily about other matters than Russian writers and thinkers, but they do share their enthusiasm for Pasternak and Dostoevsky, whom Merton thought of as a genius-novelist akin to Hawthorne, Melville, Dickens, and Faulkner.

Merton’s correspondence with Day coincided with a period in which he emphasized openness and dialogue with those of other faiths more than he had prior to the late 1950s. One author contends that around 1957 we see a “turning point” as significant as Merton’s conversion to Catholicism in 1938. In the 1960s, Merton described himself in the 1940s “as a superficially pious, rather rigid, and somewhat narrow-minded young monk.” In a 1967 letter he wrote, “When I first became a monk [December 1941], yes, I was more sure of ‘answers.’ But as I grow

³⁵ See <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexandersolzhenitsynharvard.htm> for Solzhenitsyn’s Harvard address; for Peter Maurin’s historical view and the influence of various sources on him, see William Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1984), 238-43,

³⁶ Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 407. For Sakharov’s wisdom, see also my “The Wisdom of Andrei Sakharov at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SakharovEssay.pdf>.

³⁷ Jim Forest, “Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day: A Special Friendship,” at

<http://www.jimandnancyforest.com/2010/10/20/thomas-merton-and-dorothy-day-a-special-friendship/>.

old in the monastic life and advance further into solitude, I become aware that I have only begun to seek the questions.”³⁸

Vladimir Soloviev’s Godmanhood and Sophia

In the late 1950s Merton began expressing a strong interest in Pasternak and in the ecumenical Vladimir Soloviev, whom Day had referred to as one of “the three great Russians.” In August of 1956, Merton noted in his journal some quotes from Soloviev’s *Lectures on Godmanhood*, and in April 1958 he wrote, “Soloviev, the ‘Russian [Cardinal] Newman,’ is to me a thousand times more interesting than Newman.”³⁹ The central theme of Soloviev’s *Lectures* was the falling away of the world from the Divine and then the gradual incarnation throughout history of the Divine into the world. The appearance of Jesus Christ (the Godman) was the most perfect expression of this incarnation, the philosopher believed, but it was up to humanity to help bring about the more complete worldly incarnation of the Divine in the world soul, thus creating Godmanhood and the Kingdom of God on earth. When Soloviev first presented his *Lectures* in 1878 they were a major event, with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, who never met each other, attending one of them on the same night.

Soloviev’s idea of Godmanhood was closely related to another idea of his that captivated Merton in the late 1950s and 1960s—the concept of Sophia, or Holy Wisdom. An editor of one of Merton’s journals wrote, “It is, in short, in Sophia that one finds the thread that holds these journals together.”⁴⁰ This concept was not original with Soloviev, but he refined it and popularized it so that subsequent Russian philosophers like Berdyaev and even more so Sergei Bulgakov followed his lead in stressing it. The concept itself dates back to the Bible’s Old Testament (see, e.g., Proverbs, 8:25) and continued to be emphasized in the Jewish Kabbala, and the Greek and Russian Orthodox traditions. In Orthodoxy, icons sometimes depict St. Sophia (Holy Wisdom) and some churches were given that name including the famous St. Sophia in Constantinople. In Russia’s Novgorod there was a Cathedral of St. Sophia that dated back to the eleventh century, and inside was an icon of Sophia that Soloviev greatly admired. Within the Protestant tradition the German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), whose ideas influenced Soloviev, also stressed the concept of Sophia.⁴¹

³⁸ George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 103-04; Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1966), 172; *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 156. Although describing his earlier self as a “narrow-minded young monk,” Merton was not provincial or inexperienced in life’s tragedies. He had been born in France, spent years in Europe, and seen both of his parents die before he was sixteen. In 1941, after teaching literature at St. Bonaventure’s in the summer, he did volunteer work at Friendship House in Harlem, which was run by a friend of Dorothy Day who shared her passion for helping the needy.

³⁹ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, Pursuing the Monk’s True Life, 1952-1960*, vol. 3 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 62, 63, 191. The phrase a “Russian Newman” may have come from Michel d’Herbigny’s *Vladimir Soloviev: A Russian Newman*, trans. A. M. Buchanan (London: R. & T. Washbourne, 1918), at <http://www.archive.org/details/vladimirsoloviev00dheruoft>.

⁴⁰ *Search for Solitude*, xvii.

⁴¹ An excellent introduction to Bulgakov’s writings can be found in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); Berdyaev’s essay on Soloviev’s Godmanhood (and Sophia), at http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1925_307.html is useful, as is his “Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme. Etude II: The Teaching about Sophia and the Androgyne; J. Boehme and the Russian Sophiological Current,” *Put* (April 1930): 34-62, online at http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1930_351.html.

Soloviev thought of Sophia as the universal oneness, the oneness of God with creation. He saw history as a process of man and nature falling away from God and splintering into separateness and then eventually reuniting in a higher synthesis. Sophia symbolized that potential synthesis. For Soloviev that all-oneness with God became the goal of history. But Sophia was to him more than just the abstract idea of Divine Wisdom. Influenced by the symbolic language of the mystics and by the description of Wisdom in Proverbs, he perceived Sophia in feminine form. She was the Eternal Feminine, “the feminine soul of the world.”

In his most famous poem dealing with Sophia, “Three Meetings,” first published just two years before his death in 1900, he tried to describe the three indescribable mystical encounters that he apparently had with her.⁴² The last was in an Egyptian desert in 1875, and he writes of her eyes full of azure flame, appearing amidst the purple of heavenly splendor and the smell of roses. The image of her filled his being. Only she existed. Past, present, and future were all encompassed in her gaze, as were the blue “seas and rivers,” the “distant forest,” and the “heights of snowy mountains,” all of which Soloviev stated he saw stretched out before him. Earlier, before even leaving Cairo in 1876, he wrote a poem (“My Queen Has a Magnificent Palace”) about Sophia, his “queen,” which described her palace with its golden pillars, her jewel-filled crown, and her garden full of roses and lilies and a silvery stream. But when far below she sees her abandoned and desolate friend, she comes to him bathed in light and full of quiet tenderness. She covers him with her radiance. Thus, to Soloviev, Sophia represented not only the mystical oneness of the universe, but also a tender, loving, maternal force, and his most potent symbol of beauty.

In one of his *Lectures on Godmanhood* he stated that “Sophia is the ideal or perfect humanity, eternally contained in the integral divine being or Christ.”⁴³ Both Godmanhood and Sophia represented his utopian desire to bridge the gap between heaven and earth and to create a universal oneness. As he had indicated years earlier in a letter to a cousin, he hoped to help bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, “the kingdom of eternal, spiritual relations, of pure love and happiness.”⁴⁴

Merton on Berdyaev and Sergei Bulgakov

Working toward the establishment of this kingdom and the full development of Sophia also became important to Merton, especially after he became more familiar not only with Soloviev, but also with two of his followers, Berdyaev and Bulgakov. As he said in the Preface to his 1960 book *Disputed Questions*, “The vocation of man is . . . to work for the establishment of that ‘Kingdom of God’ which is the unity of all men in peace, creativity and love.”⁴⁵ In a journal entry of April 1957 he emphasized the importance of Bulgakov and Berdyaev. Merton called them “great men who will not admit the defeat of Christ.” In their thinking, “Sophia was

⁴² An English version of the poem can be found at <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/S/SolovyovVlad/ThreeMeeting.htm>, but readers should remember that poetic works generally lose a great deal of their beauty, more than prose translations, when rendered into a different language.

⁴³ Vladimir Solovyev [Soloviev], *Lectures on Godmanhood*, trans. P. Zouboff (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1948), 159.

⁴⁴ More on his *Lectures*, including this quote, can be found in Ch. 30 of my online edition of *Russia in the Age*, at <http://people.emich.edu/wmoss/publications/atpt3.htm>; more on Sophia is in Ch. 27 at the same URL.

⁴⁵ *Disputed Questions*, Mentor-Omega ed. (New York: New American Library, 1965), xi. See also Patrick F. O’Connell, “Thomas Merton’s Vision of the Kingdom,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 3 (Fall 2000): 195-216.

somehow, mysteriously, to be revealed and ‘fulfilled’ in the Mother of God and in the Church. 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—to offer the cosmos to the Father, by the power of the Spirit, in the Glory of the Word.”⁴⁶ Much of Merton’s subsequent writing about Divine Wisdom or Sophia would be influenced by Bulgakov’s interpretation and further development of Soloviev’s emphasis on Sophia.⁴⁷ As a biographer of Bulgakov wrote, “Everywhere in Soloviev’s philosophy Bulgakov saw ‘Her, the Eternal Feminine, the Divine Sophia, the Soul of the world.’”⁴⁸

Merton, Pasternak, Sophia, and *Doctor Zhivago*

In October 1958, Merton wrote to Boris Pasternak about his novel *Doctor Zhivago*— we shall take a closer look at the Merton-Pasternak connection later in this essay. Merton wrote that “the book is a world in itself, a sophiological world,” and that the ideas in it seemed to “run closely parallel to those in Soloviev’s *Meaning of Love*.” He then went on to describe to Pasternak several encounters he had had with a form of Sophia. Like Soloviev and Pasternak, Merton was also a poet, and his language often reflected his poetic sensibility and the poet’s fondness for symbols and other images. Since Sophia was the “Eternal Feminine,” Soloviev, Pasternak, and Merton often perceived reflections of Sophia in real or imagined women. Merton related to Pasternak, “I dreamt that 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,’ which I thought very simple and beautiful.” (Merton frequently mentioned the Biblical portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs.)

Merton also told Pasternak of another encounter with Proverb/Sophia, which occurred not long after his dream. It was in March 1958 in Louisville. He was “walking alone in the crowded street and suddenly saw that everybody was Proverb and that in all of them shone her extraordinary beauty and purity and shyness, even though they did not know who they were. . . . And they did not know their real identity as the Child so dear to God who, from before the beginning, was playing in His sight all days, playing in the world.”⁴⁹ (This last phrase is a version of Holy Wisdom speaking in Proverbs 8:31.) He also had earlier described this event (at the corner of Louisville’s 4th and Walnut) in his journal, and many years later would do so in his book *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*. In his journal, he followed up a description of his

⁴⁶ *Search for Solitude*, 85-86.

⁴⁷ Christopher Pramuk in his *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) has persuasively argued that the concept of Sophia was central to Merton’s mature religious thinking and that the Russian religious thinkers, mainly Soloviev and Bulgakov, were chiefly responsible for enkindling his fascination with Sophia. On pp. 159-163 he also mentions the influence on Merton of the French writing on Sophia by Paul Evdokimov, a student of Bulgakov. Born in France and receiving some education there, Merton was fluent in French.

⁴⁸ Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross & the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 139.

⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 89-90.

experience by reflections on women and his own vow of chastity, and he stated that in each woman “is Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady.”⁵⁰

Earlier in March, he had written in his journal to the Proverb of his dream: “How grateful I am to you, for loving in me something I thought I had entirely lost, and someone who, I thought, had long ago ceased to be. In you, dear, though some might be tempted to say you do not even exist, there is a reality as real and as wonderful and as precious as life itself.” Later in the month, the day after his trip to Louisville, he again addressed Proverb in his journal. “I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and Truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child, sent to me by God!”⁵¹

Merton realized the similarity of his encounters with Proverb/Sophia to those of Soloviev in the Egyptian desert, and what he wrote immediately afterward in his journal for the same day speaks to his affinity for Soloviev’s concept of Godmanhood. “Marvellous books for a few pennies—including *The Family of Man* for 50 cents. All those fabulous pictures. And again, no refinements and no explanations are necessary! How scandalized some men would be if I said that the whole book is to me a picture of Christ, and yet that is the Truth. . . . It is the Divine Power and the divine Joy—and God is seen and reveals Himself *as man*, that is in us and there is no other hope of finding wisdom than in God-manhood: our own manhood transformed in God!”⁵²

The Family of Man contained photos selected by photographer Edward Steichen from almost seventy countries and were meant to demonstrate humanity’s oneness. In the Prologue to the book, written by Steichen’s brother-in-law the famous poet Carl Sandburg, we read

Everywhere is love and love-making, weddings and babies from generation to generation keeping the family of Man alive and continuing. Everywhere the sun, moon and stars, the climates and weathers, have meanings for people. Though meanings vary, we are alike in all countries and tribes in trying to read what sky, land and sea say to us. Alike and ever alike we are on all continents in the need of love, food, clothing, work, speech, worship, sleep, games, dancing, fun. From the tropics to arctics humanity lives with these needs so alike, so inexorably alike.

And Sandburg closed the Prologue with a portion of a poem he had first written a few years before.

There is only one man in the world
and his name is All Men.
There is only one woman in the world
and her name is All Women.
There is only one child in the world
and the child’s name is All Children.⁵³

A year later (March 19, 1959), Merton witnessed Proverb/Sophia in a group of small children. He had led a group from his Gethsemani Monastery to put out a fire nearby and commented on the little children who watched them: “I came home thinking of nothing but these

⁵⁰ *Search for Solitude*, 182.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 176, 182.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 182-183.

⁵³ As quoted in my “The Wisdom of Carl and Paula Sandburg,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.pdf>.

poor little Christs with holes in their pants and their sweet, sweet voices. Once again I had seen Proverb and heard her speak and remained heartbroken with love for her.”⁵⁴

A month later he again experienced Sophia after seeing a picture painted by an artist friend, Victor Hammer, in his home in Lexington (KY). Hammer had earlier thought of it as a depiction of a madonna and child.⁵⁵ Merton said that to him the woman represented Sophia and a month later in a letter to his friend he elaborated on what Sophia meant to him.

The first thing to be said, of course, is that Hagia Sophia [*Sancta Sophia* or Holy Wisdom] 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 Hagia Sophia. . . . This is a very ancient intuition of reality which goes back to the oldest Oriental thought. . . . For the “masculine-feminine” relationship is basic in *all* reality—simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God.

In its most primitive aspect, Hagia Sophia is the dark, nameless *Ousia* [Being] of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the incomprehensible, “primordial” darkness which is infinite light. The Three Divine Persons, each at the same time, are Sophia and manifest her. But where the Sophia of your picture comes in is this: the wisdom of God, “reaching from end to end mightily” is also the Tao, the nameless pivot of all being and nature, the center and meaning of all, that which is the smallest and poorest and most humble in all: the “feminine child” playing before God the Creator in His universe, “playing before Him at all times, playing in the world” (Proverbs 8) This feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father’s glory in the world and is in fact the manifestation of His glory. Pushing it further, Sophia in ourselves is the *mercy* of God, the tenderness which by the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of God’s love.

Hence, Sophia is the feminine, dark, yielding, tender counterpart of the power, justice, creative dynamism of the Father.

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. . . .

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 (which Christ took upon Himself, ordained for this by the Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin) (the crowning in your picture), 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. . . .

The beauty of all creation is a reflection of Sophia living and hidden in creation.

But Merton went on to say that it was only a pale reflection of the dazzling beauty of Sophia and that she “is not an ideal, not an abstraction, but the highest reality.”⁵⁶

A year later while in a hospital for X-rays, he recorded the following in his journal for July 2, 1960:

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

⁵⁴ *Search for Solitude*, 270.

⁵⁵ A reproduction of the painting is available at <http://fatherlouie.blogspot.com/2007/03/hagia-sophia-tryptich-by-victor-hammer.html>.

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 183-85.

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."⁵⁷

During the following year he worked on a prose poem about Sophia that recounted this experience, his beautiful "Hagia Sophia" (1962). It is broken into four times of day from dawn to sunset and begins with the following lines:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.

Then, after describing as he did in his journal the experience of being awakened by the nurse, he adds:

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.⁵⁸

Like Soloviev's narrator in his poem "My Queen Has a Magnificent Palace," Merton's narrator is a "helpless one" to whom Sophia appears manifesting her love and tenderness. Merton depicts her as God's Diffuse Shinning, "embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light."

She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight. In her they prosper. In her they glorify God. In her they rejoice to reflect Him. In her they are united with him. She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites them. She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory.⁵⁹

Merton's October 1958 letter to Pasternak that mentioned the parallel of *Doctor Zhivago* to some of the ideas found in Soloviev's *Meaning of Love*, as well as the similarity of Zhivago's love, Lara, and the Sophia-like Proverb he (Merton) had mysteriously encountered was not his first to the Russian writer. That came two months earlier, before Merton had read *Doctor Zhivago*, which first appeared in an English translation only earlier that year.

In his first letter to Pasternak, Merton introduced himself. He mentioned that he was a Catholic monk and wrote, "We are both poets—you a great one and I a very minor one." He told

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World, The Pivotal Years, 1960-1963*, vol. 4 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 17.

⁵⁸ *Merton Reader*, 506; also available at <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/poetry/merton01.html#sophia>. In an interesting coincidence, in 1966 while in a Louisville hospital, Merton met a student nurse name Margie and fell in love with her, but before the end of the year broke off meeting with her. See Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, 193-203, for a brief account of their relationship.

⁵⁹ *Merton Reader*, 507, 508, 510.

the Russian that he felt a strong kinship with him and clasped his hand in “deep friendship,” hoping they could begin a dialogue that would contribute to peace—the countries of the two poets were, of course, still in the midst of a Cold-War rivalry. He told Pasternak that he intended to learn Russian—he later abandoned this quest— so he could read his poems and other Russian literature in the original. Merton mentioned a few deceased Russian poets whom he was familiar with and asked Pasternak’s opinion about one of them as well as of new [Russian?] poets. He also wrote that he had read Pasternak’s early autobiographical work *Safe Conduct* and was “profoundly impressed.” He added that he was sending him a copy of his essay “Prometheus: A Meditation.”⁶⁰

Pasternak answered Merton expressing his own feeling of kinship and thanking him for sending him the essay. It was late October before Merton had managed to read *Doctor Zhivago* and write to Pasternak, telling him how much he enjoyed the novel, which also contained poems of the fictional doctor/poet. The correspondence between the two real-life poets did not last long—Pasternak died in May 1960. But in this period of almost two years, Merton gave much thought to Pasternak and not only wrote to the Russian poet but also wrote about him.

In January 1960, Dorothy Day wrote to Merton, “Your beautiful and profound essay on Pasternak kept me awake from midnight until four this morning.” In October 1960, she thanked Merton for sending her his book *Disputed Questions*, which contained the earlier essay on Pasternak she had read, plus two others on him, all three combined in what Merton labeled “The Pasternak Affair.”⁶¹ Merton also mentioned Pasternak in some of his letters during this period, most significantly in one he wrote to the head of the Soviet Writers’ Union, protesting the expulsion of the Russian poet from its organization.⁶²

In the second of his three “Pasternak Affair” essays, Merton wrote that “Lara [whom Zhivago loved] is Eve, and Sophia (the Cosmic Bride of God) and Russia,” and that “the Christ of Pasternak is the Christ of Soloviev’s ‘God-manhood.’ His view of the cosmos is, like Berdyaev’s, ‘sophianic’ and his ‘sister Life’ [title of a Pasternak poem and collection] has, in fact, all the characteristics of the Sancta Sophia who appeared to Soloviev in Egypt.”⁶³

In the third essay, he analyzed the symbolism of “the candle in the window” that appears in both the prose portion of the novel and in one of Zhivago’s poems (“Winter Night”) affixed at the end. “The candle in the window is kind of an eye of God, or of the Logos (call it if you like *Tao*), but since it is the light in the window of the sophianic figure, Lara, and since Blok [a poet friend of Pasternak] in those days (1905) was absorbed in the cult of Sophia he had inherited from Soloviev, the candle in the window suggests, among other things, the Personal and Feminine Wisdom Principle whose vision has inspired the most original Oriental Christian theologians of our day.” In that same essay he also wrote that Pasternak’s novel depicted “love as the highest expression of man’s spirituality and freedom.” He added that “Love and Life (reduced to one and the same thing) form the great theme of *Doctor Zhivago*.” And “one can see in Pasternak a strong influence from Soloviev’s *Meaning of Love* and his theory of man’s vocation to regenerate the world by the spiritualization of human love raised to the sophianic

⁶⁰ Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 87-89. The essay is available in the *Merton Reader*, 338-44.

⁶¹ *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*, ed. Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996), 102, 103. Day’s letters to Merton are found in this collection’s Ch. 8; Merton’s to her are in his *Hidden Ground*, 135-54. A detailed list of the Merton-Day correspondence can be found at <http://www.mertoncenter.org/Research/Correspondence/z.asp?id=460>.

⁶² Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 93-95; see also pp. 96-103, where Merton often mentions Pasternak in letters to Helen Wolff, who published *Doctor Zhivago* at Pantheon Books.

⁶³ Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 26, 29.

level of perfect conscious participation in the mystery of the divine wisdom of which the earthly sacrament is love.”⁶⁴

There is much more in “The Pasternak Affair” than Merton’s mentions of the influence of Soloviev, and to a lesser extent Berdyaev. He also compares and contrasts Pasternak with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, whom he couples with Soloviev as “the greatest Russian minds of the past century.”⁶⁵ (In a letter of August 17, 1960 Merton told Day, “Yes, I too love Dostoevsky, very much. Staretz Zosima [in *The Brothers Karamazov*] can always make me weep and a lot of the beat people in the books also. I love the little Jew in *The House of the Dead*.”)⁶⁶ Merton saw Pasternak as writer who, like all three of his “greatest” nineteenth-century Russian predecessors, looked for a “real and creative [spiritual] solution to man’s problems.” Like Dostoevsky and Soloviev, Pasternak saw life in a mystical way, but his mysticism was “more cosmic, more pagan if you like,” and less influenced by any church dogma, than that of the Orthodox Dostoevsky; and his spirituality emphasized ethics less than did Tolstoy’s religious approach, and to Merton’s mind it was less pedestrian. Pasternak’s work also reflected the fact that he was “a poet and musician which Tolstoy was not.”⁶⁷ And Merton compared Pasternak with Gandhi in that both were life-affirming men.

There is much in these essays on Pasternak’s development and changing attitudes toward revolution and communism from his youth onward. Merton also comments on Pasternak’s Nobel Prize for Literature award in 1958 and the shabby treatment he received by many Soviet writers and authorities because of the Soviet government’s displeasure with *Doctor Zhivago* and its publication abroad. But Merton also makes clear that he doesn’t want his essays on Pasternak to be interpreted as his contribution to the Cold War—“I don’t want any part of the war, whether it is cold or hot.” He believed that “Pasternak’s ability to rise above political dichotomies may very well be his greatest strength,” that “this transcendence is the power and essence of Dr. Zhivago.” Merton wished his comments on Pasternak to be in the same spirit. The Catholic American monk and poet believed that “Pasternak looks at our world, dismembered by its obsessions and its factions, each one claiming to be on the side of the angels and calling everyone else a devil.” Merton then adds, “Egged on by journalists, politicians and propagandists, we cling with mad hope to fanatical creeds whose only function is to foment violence, hatred, and division.” He contrasts the freedom-loving, spontaneous, and life-affirming Pasternak to both Soviet man and “Western man the captive of economic, social and psychological forces,” and he maintains that Pasternak provided an answer to how humans of his time, East and West, could deal with the alienation and the pessimistic view of modern life typified by the title of Sartre’s play *No Exit*.

Merton thought that *Doctor Zhivago* was a “superb novel,” but realized that Zhivago is “not a saint or a perfect hero,” but also that the conditions he lived in made it extremely difficult to live “successfully.” But the doctor/poet faces his conditions with humility and tries to live his life as honestly as he can. Merton’s conclusion is that “under such conditions his tragic life is lived ‘successfully’ under the sign of wisdom.”⁶⁸

Merton often quotes from the novel to illustrate his points. Like Dorothy Day, Merton emphasized a type of Christian personalism that placed the needs of individual human beings before any political ideologies or slogans and stressed that meaningful social and political

⁶⁴ Ibid., 37, 47-48.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁶ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 138.

⁶⁷ Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 22-25, 47.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 17, 30, 46, 47, 58, 59.

change had to begin with individual transformations and actions. And he wrote of Pasternak's "existential dedication to the supreme inner value of personalism," and quoted his words that "only individuals seek the truth, and they shun those whose sole concern is not the truth." Lara, Pasternak's main Sophia symbol in the novel, tells Zhivago that she thought that World War I, out of which came the Communist Revolution, marked the transition to disintegration. She then says, "It was then that untruth came down on our land of Russia. The main misfortune, the root of all the evil to come, was the loss of confidence in the value of one's own opinion. People imagined that it was out of date to follow their own moral sense, that they must all sing in chorus, and live by other people's notions, notions that were being crammed down everybody's throat."⁶⁹

One of Merton's last quotes from the novel supports his idea that humans are called, as Soloviev believed, to work toward the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth.

You can't advance in this direction without a certain faith. You can't make such discoveries without spiritual equipment. And the basic elements of this equipment are in the Gospels. What are they? To begin with, love of one's neighbor, which is the supreme form of vital energy. Once it fills the heart of man it has to overflow and spend itself. And then the two basic ideals of modern man—without them he is unthinkable—the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice.⁷⁰

With the death of Pasternak and the publication of "The Pasternak Affair" in *Disputed Questions* (both in 1960) Merton's most intense period of studying Russian spiritual wisdom ended, but he continued occasionally to absorb new Russia wisdom. In 1962, for example, he read over a manuscript on Russian mystics and commented that he was "glad to make the acquaintance of the great Startzi [plural of *staretz*] of Optima," the monastery mentioned earlier that was visited by Dostoevsky and Soloviev together in 1878 (and Tolstoy a year earlier). The lessons Russian wisdom taught him never abandoned him and he maintained his great admiration for Pasternak.⁷¹

Sophia as Merton's "Golden Thread" in the 1960s

Merton's interest in Sophia merged with his interest in Eastern religions like Buddhism and Taoism, which had also grown stronger in the late 1950s, and remained with him until his death in Bangkok in December 1968.

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 . . . the golden thread that helped him to hold the fabric together, ever more centered in Christ. . . . 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. . . . [His embracing of Sophia] 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,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 50, 57, 59.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 59-60.

⁷¹ Merton, *Hidden Ground*, 102; for his continuing admiration of Pasternak, see, e.g., Merton's "Pasternak's Letters to Georgian Friends," completed less than a year before Merton's death in 1968, in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1985), 84-91.

both conceptually and imaginatively, to envision God's unbounded freedom, love, and presence to peoples and cultures everywhere.⁷²

In such 1960s works as *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961), *A Thomas Merton Reader* (1962), *Seeds of Destruction* (1964), *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner" (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), and *Faith and Violence* (1968) we see "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."⁷³

As with Soloviev earlier, Merton's emphasis on Sophia and Godmanhood spurred his concern to overcome human divisiveness and prejudice and to work toward establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. In 1961, the same year he was working on his poem "Hagia Sophia," he wrote to Dorothy Day, "I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues."⁷⁴ His increasing criticism of such global problems as war, technology run amok, and racism reflect this conviction. Some of his essays and reviews, especially on war and peace, appeared in Day's *Catholic Worker*.⁷⁵

In his 1962 essay "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," in a *Merton Reader*, he emphasized what Soloviev had before him: the necessity of incarnating "truth in a social and cultural context" in order to achieve the full development of Sophia and Godmanhood. And he emphasized that the wisdom of the East, as found in such books as the *Tao Teh Ching*, contained truths from which Christians could benefit. He stated, for example, that the Taoist classic had much to say on war and peace and that our political leaders could profit by reading it.⁷⁶

Seeds of Destruction contains pieces on a variety of topics. They include U. S. race relations, "The Christian in World Crisis," "Monastic Thought in the Russian Diaspora"—in which Merton discusses the relevance of Dostoevsky's Father Zossima (in *The Brothers Karamazov*)—and letters to various individuals including Dorothy Day. Peace in an atomic age and wisdom were very much on his mind in this collection, and he states that we will not be able use atomic power as we should "without an interior revolution that abandons the quest for brute power and submits to the wisdom of love and of the Cross." In a letter to a professor of Humanities, Merton tells him that a program of Christian culture "needs to be rooted in" a view of man that sees him as "an epiphany of the divine wisdom"; that "the whole question of Christian culture is a matter of wisdom more than culture"; and that "wisdom is the full epiphany of God the Logos." In another letter in which he discusses Marx's early essays on alienation, Merton emphasizes that technology must be controlled by wisdom and maintains that a dialogue

⁷² Christopher Pramuk, "Something Breaks Through a Little: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28 (2008): 68, 84; see also Pramuk's *Sophia*, which incorporates much of this earlier article.

⁷³ Pramuk, "Something Breaks," 67.

⁷⁴ *Hidden Ground of Love*, 140.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., the essays and reviews in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 11-13, 20-26, 56-64, 127-32, 150-53, 241-47, 263-69, 276-86, 315-321. These pieces cover the years 1961-1968, with the last *Catholic Worker* essay reprinted here being entitled "The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity."

⁷⁶ *Merton Reader*, 299, 302.

based on this understanding between Western Christian thinkers and Eastern revisionist Marxists is “vitally important.”⁷⁷

One of the most interesting articles in the collection was “A Tribute to Gandhi.” Like Dorothy Day, Merton thought that the Indian leader was one of the greatest and wisest leaders of the twentieth century. Among the statements Merton made in his “Tribute” are the following.

Gandhi certainly spoke often of Jesus, whom he had learned to know through Tolstoy. And Gandhi knew the New Testament thoroughly. [226]

[Gandhi] not only understood the ethic of the Gospel as well, if not in some ways better, than most Christians, but he is one of the very few men of our time who applied Gospel principles to the problems of a political and social existence in such a way that his approach to these problems was *inseparably* religious and political at the same time. [226]

For Gandhi, strange as it may seem to us, political action had to be by its very nature “religious” in the sense that it had to be informed by principles of religious and philosophical wisdom. [226-27]

But Gandhi emphasized the importance of the individual person entering political action with a fully awakened and operative spiritual power in himself, the power of *Satyagraha*, non-violent dedication to truth, a religious and spiritual force, a wisdom born of fasting and prayer. [228]

Paradoxically it was his religious conviction that made Gandhi a great politician rather than a mere tactician or operator. [229-30]

However, his wisdom differed from ours in this: he knew that in order to speak truth he must rectify more than his inner *intention* [he must also act]. . . .

Gandhi’s religio-political action was based on an ancient metaphysic of man, a philosophical wisdom which is common to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity: that “truth is the inner law of our being.” . . . His wisdom is based on experience more than on logic. [231-32]

He [Gandhi] recognized the impossibility of being a peaceful and non-violent man if one submits passively to the insatiable requirements of a society maddened by overstimulation and obsessed with the demons of noise, voyeurism and speed. [232]

“Jesus Died in Vain,” said Gandhi, “if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love.” [233]⁷⁸

In his 1966 collection, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton again has much to say about wisdom that reflects his immersion into the Russian philosophical tradition begun with Soloviev. In a section on “Truth and Violence” he outlines what might be needed to “transform the world by political principles spiritualized by the Gospel”: “three great emphases,” the human, the personal, and an emphasis on wisdom and love. The first two emphases reflected the Christian Personalism he shared with Soloviev, Pasternak, and Dorothy Day and called for the “liberation of man from the tyranny of the faceless mass in which he is submerged without thoughts, desires, or judgments of his own, a creature without will or without light, the instrument of the power politician.” Merton believed that “Christian social action must liberate man from all forms of servitude, whether economic, political, or psychological. The third

⁷⁷ *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 124, 245, 249, 271, 272.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pages as indicated in brackets after each quote. This essay originally appeared in *Ramparts* (December 1964) with the title “The Gentle Revolutionary.”

emphasis, on wisdom and love, “a sapiential view of society is less activistic, more contemplative; it enables men and institutions to see life in its wholeness, with stability and purpose.”⁷⁹

In the same book in a later section, “The Madman Runs to the East,” Merton compares the monk and the philosopher and says that for both the “‘highest wisdom’ was to be sought beyond mere reasoning and clear understanding, beyond intellection as such. . . . To be wise is . . . to enter into a whole new dimension of existence, where the division of subject and object, ends and means, time and eternity, body and soul either appears in a totally new perspective or vanishes altogether.” In this same section, Merton writes that he has been “working on the Russian mystics” and reading about the Russian *startzi*. And on the next page he notes how unwise humans have cut themselves off “from the cosmos, the world of sense and of nature” and imprisoned themselves in their “own technocratic and self-centered ‘worldliness.’”⁸⁰

In his 1967 publications, Merton again often speaks of wisdom. In a review for Day’s *Catholic Worker* of a book dealing with “American Indians,” he wrote that “the Indian lived by a deeply religious wisdom which can be called in a broad sense mystical.”⁸¹ But his most extensive comments on wisdom come in his essay of that year “Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner.” In this piece Merton emphasizes the “natural wisdom” found in Faulkner, especially in his *Go Down, Moses* (specifically in “The Bear” story within it) and in *Wild Palms*.⁸² Only in passing does he mention a different “Christian wisdom,” as found in such works as those of the American novelist Flannery O’Conner and the Russian *The Pilgrim*, which, as we have seen, was also a favorite of Dorothy Day. But Merton, though believing “Christian wisdom” higher than “natural wisdom,” did not believe that the two types of wisdom were contrary to each other. He writes about “The Bear,” for example, that Faulkner described it as depicting “a wisdom based on love: love for the wilderness and for its secret laws; love for the paradise mystery apprehended almost unconsciously in the forest; love for the “spirits” of the wilderness and of the cosmic parent (both Mother and Father) conceived as symbolically incarnate in the great Old Bear.”⁸³ Before these words, however, he clarifies what he means by wisdom.

Sapientia is the Latin word for “wisdom.” And wisdom in the classic, as well as the Biblical, tradition is something quite definite. It is the highest level of cognition. It goes beyond *scientia*, which is systematic knowledge, beyond *intellectus*, which is intuitive understanding. . . . It embraces the entire scope of man’s life and all its meaning. It grasps the ultimate truths. . . . Wisdom is not only speculative, but also practical: that is to say, it is “lived.” And unless one “lives” it, one cannot “have” it.

Merton thought that some literature and literary criticism, “enriched and stimulated by depth psychology, comparative religion, social anthropology, existentialism, and the renewal of classical, patristic, Biblical and mystical studies,” had enriched wisdom. Besides many of Faulkner’s writings, he mentions works of T. S. Eliot, Pasternak, St.-John Perse, D. H. Lawrence, and William Butler Yeats, as well as Jacques Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and*

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1968), 82-83; see Day, *All the Way to Heaven*, 329, for how much she enjoyed reading this book.

⁸⁰ *Conjectures*, 291, 293, 294.

⁸¹ “Ishi: A Meditation,” in *Passion for Peace*, 267.

⁸² Merton’s lectures on *Wild Palms* are available on youtube. For the first in the series and links to the rest of them, plus other Merton materials, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmRv2lB90Ak>; for Dorothy Day’s reflections on *Wild Palms*, see <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=561>.

⁸³ Merton, *Literary Essays*, 108.

Poetry, D. T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*, and William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*. He then goes on to say that

the "wisdom" approach to man seeks to apprehend man's value and destiny in their global and even ultimate significance. Since fragmentation and objectivity do not suffice for this and since quantitative analysis will not serve, either, sapiential thought resorts to poetic myth and to religious or archetypal symbol. . . . [Symbols] seek to help man liberate in himself life forces which are inhibited by dead social routine, by the ordinary involvement of the mind in trivial objects We need to eat and to manage our everyday lives. But we also need an overall perspective to liberate us from enslavement to the immediate without taking us altogether outside the "real world." Sapiential awareness deepens our communion with the concrete: It is not an initiation into a world of abstractions and ideals. The poetic and contemplative awareness is sapiential — and it used to be, normally, religious. In fact, there is a relation between all "wisdoms." Greek wisdom was not out of harmony with that of the Bible. . . .

Wisdom, in any case, has two aspects. One is metaphysical and speculative, an apprehension of the radical structure of human life. . . . The other is moral, practical, and religious, an awareness of man's life as a task to be undertaken at great risk, in which tragic failure and creative transcendence are both possible. . . .

Sapiential thinking has, as another of its characteristics, the capacity to bridge the cognitive gap between our minds and the realm of the transcendent and the unknown, so that without 'understanding' what lies beyond the limit of human vision, we nevertheless enter into an intuitive affinity with it. . . . Religious wisdoms often claim not only to teach us truths that are beyond rational knowledge but also to *initiate* us into higher states of awareness. . . . Christian wisdom is essentially theological, Christological, and mystical. It implies a deepening of Christian faith to the point where faith becomes an experiential awareness of the realities and values of man's life in Christ and "in the Spirit."⁸⁴

In another essay written a year earlier on symbolism, Merton maintained that divine wisdom "does not exclude knowledge of objects. It gives a new dimension to science. What would our world of science be, if only we had wisdom?"⁸⁵ His point is similar to one earlier made by a poet Merton sometimes quoted, W. H. Auden: "The truths arrived at in different fields cannot ultimately conflict."⁸⁶ Similarly, to the extent that various types of wisdom contain truths, they cannot either.

Finally, in his last year before his tragic death in Bangkok, we see him once again dealing with wisdom in his *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and in his *Faith and Violence*. In the first book he includes material on the famous Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, whom he first met in 1964, but with whom he had communicated since 1959, when he also sent to him the manuscript of his book *Wisdom in the Desert*. In a chapter on "Transcendent Experience" in his 1968 *Zen* book, Merton refers to this type of experience as "the illumination of wisdom (*Sapientia*, *Sophia*, *Prajna*)," and indicates the similarity between *Sophia* and the Buddhist concept of *Prajna*.⁸⁷

In his *Faith and Violence*, Merton is mainly concerned with the two nouns in his title. He states, for example, that "the theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them. A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution. In any case, it is a theology of *resistance*, a refusal of the evil that reduces a brother to homicidal desperation." But he also has this to say:

⁸⁴ Ibid., 98-101. I am indebted to Pramuk's *Sophia*, 102-06, for emphasizing the significance of this essay for understanding Merton's view of wisdom and how it is related to his appreciation of the emphasis on Sophia by Russian religious philosophers beginning with Soloviev.

⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (San Diego: Harvest Book, 2002), 68.

⁸⁶ See my "W. H. Auden's Wisdom, Faith, and Humor," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WHAudensWisdomFaithandHumor.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 72.

I believe the reason for the inner confusion of Western man is that our technological society has no longer any place in it for wisdom that seeks truth for its own sake, that seeks the fullness of being, that seeks to rest in an intuition of the very ground of all being. Without wisdom, the apparent opposition of action and contemplation, of work and rest, of involvement and detachment, can never be resolved. Ancient and traditional societies, whether of Asia or of the West, always specifically recognized “the way” of the wise, the way of spiritual discipline in which there was at once wisdom and method, and by which, whether in art, in philosophy, in religion, or in the monastic life, some men would attain to the inner meaning of being, they would experience this meaning for all their brothers, they would so to speak bring together in themselves the divisions or complications that confused the life of their fellows. By healing the divisions in themselves they would help heal the divisions of the whole world. They would realize in themselves that unity which is at the same time the highest action and the purest rest, true knowledge and selfless love, a knowledge beyond knowledge in emptiness and unknowing; a willing beyond will in apparent non-activity. They would attain to the highest striving in the absence of striving and of contention.⁸⁸

The Question of Religious Wisdom: The Russians, Day and Merton

Although some atheists might contend that “religious wisdom” is an oxymoron, Day and Merton obviously disagreed. Simply put, they believed their religion encouraged love and love was the highest wisdom value.⁸⁹ There is also little doubt that the two American Catholics appreciated the wisdom of Russian writers from Dostoevsky to Solzhenitsyn because of its grappling with issues that some might call “religious.” But as Merton pointed out in his essay on Faulkner and wisdom, the word “religious” as applied to literature often leads to confusion, thus his inclination to speak of literature that reflected wisdom values rather than “religious” ones.

Wisdom Values and the Russians

One wisdom scholar has written that “values are at the heart of the matter [of wisdom]” and enumerated various wisdom-associated values. He also noted that “research reveals a strong correlation between psychological/spiritual development and wisdom” and that some research indicates that “meditation has been shown to be the most powerful single tool for advanced inner development.”⁹⁰

What Day and Merton most cherished about the Russians they read were wisdom values like love, compassion, and humility that were also taught by the great religions. We have already seen how Day placed love first among her values and that it was Soloviev’s *The Meaning of Love* that she emphasized most among his works. It was also this work, with its message of regenerating the world with love and participating “in the mystery of the divine wisdom,” that Merton saw most reflected in Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, whose “great theme” was “Love and Life (reduced to one and the same thing).”

Day loved the humility displayed by such characters as Dostoevsky’s “Idiot” (Prince Myshkin) and Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Merton praised the humility of both

⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 9, 217-18.

⁸⁹ I have dealt with the relationship of wisdom and faith in my “Wisdom, Humor, and Faith: A Historical View, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomHumorFaith.pdf>.

⁹⁰ Copthorne Macdonald, “Centrality of Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/HOE/HeavenEssay-Macdonald.html>, and “Values that Various People Have Associated with Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.

Pasternak and his hero Zhivago and wrote in an essay on “Humility and Despair” that “it is almost impossible to overestimate the value of true humility and its power in the spiritual life. . . . Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul.”⁹¹

Wisdom is also about integrating into one’s life what one scholar has called “the three great value spheres” of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.”⁹² Soloviev said about Dostoevsky, “In his convictions he never separated truth from good and beauty. . . . And he was right, because these three live only in their unity. The good, taken separately from truth and beauty, is only an indistinct feeling, a powerless upwelling; truth taken abstractly is an empty word; and beauty without truth and the good is an idol.”⁹³

Besides emphasizing doing good, Day and Merton were truth seekers and had a great appreciation of beauty. As already noted, one of the things Day admired about Gandhi was his emphasis on truth. Merton wrote that “life is, or should be, nothing but a struggle to seek truth,” and observed about Camus “that the whole truth of Albert Camus is centered upon the idea of *telling the truth*.”⁹⁴ Truth, of course, is a complex idea, meaning different things to different people. Day and Merton thought that Jesus Christ represented the highest truth, whereas a non-believer like Camus could not agree. Believers of various religions thought that faith was necessary to arrive at the acme of truth, but non-believers rejected such faith as an appropriate path to it—but more about faith, truth, and wisdom later in this essay.

We have already seen that one of Day’s favorite Dostoevsky quotes was that “beauty will save the world” and that she was “profoundly attentive to beauty.” In his October 1958 letter to Pasternak, Merton told him, “All through the book [*Doctor Zhivago*] great waves of beauty break over the reader like waves of a newly discovered sea.” Like Pasternak, Merton possessed a poet’s special sensitivity to beauty. In the 1950s he wrote, “We ought to be alive enough to reality to see beauty all around us. Beauty is simply reality itself, perceived in a special way that gives it a resplendent value of its own.”⁹⁵ By the end of that decade, as already noted, he saw, “the beauty of all creation” as a reflection of Sophia.

Day and Merton: Some Similarities and Differences

Although they valued many of the same Russian authors and writings from Dostoevsky, Soloviev, and Pasternak to the anonymous *Russian Pilgrim*, their different backgrounds, personalities, vocations, and perhaps even genders, help explain some of their different enthusiasms. But their differences complement rather than conflict with each other. Soloviev wrote that the “most immediate task of love is . . . to create a true [and higher] human being as a free unity of the male and female principle.”⁹⁶ And it is a strange coincidence that the two friends who admired Soloviev’s words on love but never met face-to-face, the female Day and the male Merton, complemented each other so well in together representing a fuller form of love and wisdom.

⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Paperback, 1972), 181.

⁹² Copthorne Macdonald, “The Integral Vision: A Brief Introduction,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/integralintro.html>.

⁹³ *Heart of Reality*, 16; see also “Von Balthasar on Soloviev: The Meaning of Dostoevsky’s ‘Beauty Will Save the World,’” at <http://mindyourmaker.wordpress.com/2007/10/18/balthasar-on-soloviev-the-meaning-of-dostoevskys-beauty-will-save-the-world/>.

⁹⁴ Merton, *Conjectures*, 184; *Literary Essays*, 274.

⁹⁵ Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 89; *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1957), 52.

⁹⁶ *Heart of Reality*, 102.

In her youth, Day had been close to anarchist and pacifist circles and always considered herself a non-violent anarchist. Thus, the anarchist writings of Kropotkin and Tolstoy, as well as the latter's pacifism, had more meaning for her than they did for Merton despite his sympathies with many of Day's views.

As compared to the contemplative monk Merton, she was also the more hands-on dispenser of love and charity, dealing on a daily basis with the down-and-out rejects of society from alcoholics to people with mental problems. In a column in 1942, responding to a journalist who asserted that her Catholic Workers were pacifist sentimentalists and afraid of suffering, she responded:

But let those who talk of softness, of sentimentality, come to live with us in cold, unheated houses in the slums. Let them come to live with the criminal, the unbalanced, the drunken, the degraded, the pervert. (It is not decent poor, it is not the decent sinner who was the recipient of Christ's love.) Let them live with rats, with vermin, bedbugs, roaches, lice (I could describe the several kinds of body lice).

Let their flesh be mortified by cold, by dirt, by vermin; let their eyes be mortified by the sight of bodily excretions, diseased limbs, eyes, noses, mouths.

Let their noses be mortified by the smells of sewage, decay and rotten flesh. Yes, and the smell of the sweat, blood and tears spoken of so blithely by Mr. Churchill, and so widely and bravely quoted by comfortable people.

Let their ears be mortified by harsh and screaming voices, by the constant coming and going of people living herded together with no privacy. (There is no privacy in tenements just as there is none in concentration camps.)

Let their taste be mortified by the constant eating of insufficient food cooked in huge quantities for hundreds of people, the coarser foods, the cheaper foods, so that there will be enough to go around; and the smell of such cooking is often foul.

She then quoted the words of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*—"Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." Later in the same article she quotes a long passage from the same Zossima in order to underline the importance of love and humility.⁹⁷

Her work also drew her more to Chekhov, the doctor-writer, whom she praised for his dedication to work and to serving others including the sick and the imprisoned. His *Ward Six*, dealing with a mental patient, had a meaning for her that it did not have for the more cerebral contemplative monk, and sometime hermit, Merton. Although Day read and admired medieval mystics like Sts. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Merton was more of a mystic himself and delved deeper into mysticism including the mystical Sophia ideas of Soloviev and Bulgakov.

But Merton recognized that wisdom encompassed both the speculative and practical, the head and the heart, contemplation and action and that "unless one 'lives' it, one cannot 'have' it." In recognizing both aspects of wisdom, Merton's view was somewhat akin to that of Aristotle who defined two types of wisdom, theoretical and practical. One wisdom scholar has written, "People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God." Another scholar, writing on the wisdom of England's most famous writer, stated "wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head," with "a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness."⁹⁸ And just as

⁹⁷ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=390>.

⁹⁸ Robert Sternberg, "It's Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>; Alan Nordstrom, "Shakespeare's Take on Human Wisdom,"

Day admired Merton primarily for his spiritual wisdom, he admired her for her many concrete acts of compassion.

Although Day and Merton both possessed some practical abilities, especially Day with her running of the CW movement, they were more idealistic, more visionary, than pragmatic in their approach to politics. The same was true for the political thinking of the Russians they admired except for Chekhov—the poet W. H. Auden once said that “the best Russian writer is Chekhov because he is the only one who has the least bit of common sense.”⁹⁹ Martin Buber’s *Paths in Utopia*, which contained a chapter on Kropotkin and contended that utopian socialism could succeed, was one of Day’s favorite books, and she quoted from it as early as 1950.

For most of his adult life, Soloviev advocated a free theocracy which could help usher in the Kingdom of God on earth. In this theocracy, there would be a role for the prophetic function along with ones for Church and State, but “the prophet was a free agent, controlled neither by the hierarchy nor by State officials.”¹⁰⁰ The German Max Weber, about a decade younger than Soloviev, also perceived a prophetic role and wrote about “prophetic charisma,” that can challenge an increasingly rationalized and bureaucratic state. Writers like Soloviev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were often viewed as prophets of their time. One of the chief biographies of Berdyaev (by Donald Lowrie) is entitled *Rebellious Prophet*. Day and Merton identified more with the Biblical and later prophets than with contemporary politicians. Day noted that Peter Maurin, whom she thought of as her mentor, “tried to deal with problems in the spirit of ‘the Prophets of Israel.’”¹⁰¹

Merton has often been referred to as “a prophet.” And he wrote extensively on the prophetic function. In his 1960 collection, *Disputed Questions*, he devoted one section of his long essay on “The Primitive Carmelite Ideal” to “The Prophetic Spirit.” Prepared by “prayer, contemplation and solitude,” true prophets, he thought, advocated “the destruction of the inequalities and oppressions dividing rich and poor; conversion to justice and equity.” In 1968, just months before his death, he gave a talk to a group of contemplative nuns at his Kentucky monastery on “Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation.” In it he said:

The great problem we're up against now is that we live in a society that incorporates dissent into it. In other words, the thesis behind this position is that we're living in a totalitarian society. It's not fascist in a political sense, but in the way that it's economically organized. It's organized for profit and for marketing. In that machinery there's no real freedom. You're free to choose gimmicks, your brand of TV, your make of new car. But you're not free not to have a car. In other words, life is really determined for everybody. . . .

. . . This is the system that calls for some kind of prophetic response.

What are we going to do? What is the prophetic person going to do? . . .

One of the central issues in the prophetic life is that a person rocks the boat, not by telling slaves to be free, but by telling people who think they're free that they're slaves. . . .

at <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>. For a good philosophical overview of wisdom, including Aristotle’s distinction between two types of it, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wisdom>.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Ivan Bunin, *About Chekhov: The Unfinished Symphony* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xvii.

¹⁰⁰ Nicolas Zernov, *Three Russian Prophets: Khomiakov, Dostoevsky, Soloviev*, 3d ed. (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1973), 142.

¹⁰¹ Note the title of Zernov’s volume in the above footnote; on Dostoevsky as a prophet, see also Joseph Frank’s final volume of his magisterial biography, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); see also “Nicholas Berdyaev, Prophet for the Catholic Worker Movement,” at <http://www.cjd.org/paper/roots/rmateri.html> and Day on Maurin, at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=256>.

If we're going to live up to our prophetic vocation, we have to realize that, whether we're revolutionary or not, we have to be radical enough to dissent from what is basically a totalitarian society. And we're in it. It's not a society that's coming, it is here."¹⁰²

Day and Merton in the Footsteps of the Ecumenical Soloviev

Visionaries and prophets, however, are sometimes dogmatic, as both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy often were. Once, with his older friend Tolstoy in mind, Chekhov wrote, "All the great sages are as despotic as generals And so to the devil with the philosophy of all the great ones of this world!"¹⁰³ Moreover, Dostoevsky was sometimes xenophobic, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic. Day and Merton generally chose to ignore such shortcomings of the great Russian writers, but in their openness to other viewpoints they were much more like Soloviev. Not only was he "a prophet of ecumenism" and Russia's most outspoken Christian defender of the Jews, but also an outstanding defender of religious and ethnic tolerance (another important wisdom trait) and a believer in cooperation with Russia's secular liberals in order to further the cause of social justice in Tsarist Russia.¹⁰⁴

Although profoundly devout Catholic traditionalist in many ways, Day and Merton (primarily in the last decade of his life) were also very open to dialogue with those of other faiths, and even with non-believers. And they understood that the true test of one's spirituality was not what religion one professed, or even if one professed one at all, but how one acted, whether or not one manifested love and sought social justice and peace. At times they sounded very much like Soloviev. He stated, for example, that the so-called "Jewish problem" was primarily a Christian problem. Day and Merton were also strong critics of anti-Semitism and racism generally, with Merton writing that "the Negro problem is really a *White* problem."¹⁰⁵

Day had a Jewish college friend named Rayna Prohme, who later became a communist and died in Moscow. Day greatly admired her love of truth, compassion, and commitment to justice, qualities which Day believed never left her. In Day's first autobiographical account, she pays tribute to her and applies to her Jacques Maritain's words that "it follows from the idea of Catholicity that every just man of non-Christian denomination belongs to the invisible unity of the Church and on this ground only has a title to salvation." Day then concludes, "So reading, my heart is comforted about Rayna, for most assuredly she loved truth and justice." Day felt the same way about Chekhov, a man who rejected traditional religions, but whom Day greatly admired for his compassion and other virtues. In 1966, in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote that "there is a presence of Christ to the unbeliever," and this "*is perhaps the deepest, most cogent mystery of our time.*"¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² On Merton as a prophet, see, e. g. "Thomas Merton: A Prophet For The 21st Century," at <http://www.mertoncenter.org/ITMS/Seasonal/1995PresidentialAddress.pdf>; Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 171, 173; block quote from his *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 129-30, 133.

¹⁰³ Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 203.

¹⁰⁴ I dealt at length with all these aspects of Soloviev in my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "Vladimir Soloviev and the Russophiles" (Georgetown University, 1968), and with the Jews specifically in my "Vladimir Soloviev and the Jews," at <http://www.american-buddha.com/lit.soloviev.2.htm>. At this site there is also a link to a valuable article on Soloviev by Judith Deutsch Kornblatt.

¹⁰⁵ "Letters to a White Liberal," in *Seeds of Destruction*, 46. For Merton and Judaism, see Edward K. Kaplan, *Merton & Judaism: Holiness in Words: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003).

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=205>; Merton, *Conjectures*, 326.

Day and Merton both thought very highly of the professed non-believer Camus. Day sometimes quoted or paraphrased his words. In a 1948 column, for example, she wrote “There is a character in *The Plague*, by Albert Camus, who says that he is tired of hearing about men dying for an idea. He would like to hear about a man dying for love for a change. He goes on to say that men have forgotten how to love, that all they seem to be thinking of these days is learning how to kill. Man, he says, seems to have lost the capacity for love.” In September 1961 she wrote in her diary this Camus quote: “Like many men today, I am tired of criticism, of disparagement, of spitefulness. . . . It is essential to condemn what must be condemned. . . . On the other hand, one should praise at length what still deserves to be praised.”¹⁰⁷ After moving into new CW apartments in New York, Day noted in mid 1968 that Camus sayings were among those which hung on the wall. Between 1966 and 1968 Merton wrote seven essays on this French writer about whom he said in one essay, “By reason of his personal integrity, his genius, his eloquence, and his own record in protest and resistance, Camus still speaks to our world with resounding authority.” This essay, “Camus and the Church,” was first published in Day’s *Catholic Worker* (December 1966), and she thanked Merton for his “wonderful article.”¹⁰⁸

As might be expected from two people who admired the non-believing Camus, as well as the ecumenical Hindu Gandhi, Day and Merton both welcomed the more ecumenical spirit displayed at Vatican II in the early 1960s. Near its end in late 1965, Merton wrote, “I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. . . . If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic.”¹⁰⁹ During his last decade he expressed admiration for many Protestant theologians (especially for Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, but in other places also for Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich). He also greatly admired the thinking of the Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel, who corresponded with him and visited him at Gethsemani in 1964, the same year that Merton met with Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki. During the 1960s Merton also corresponded and/or met with other Jews and people of other faiths. In Merton’s correspondence of the 1960s, for example, we also find letters to Muslims—Merton was especially interested and knowledgeable about the mystical Islamic Sufism.¹¹⁰ In 1968, on his trip to Asia, he had fruitful meetings with the Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama.

Both Day and Merton came to realize, as Harold Bloom has observed, that “Christians who believe, Muslims who submit, Jews who trust—all in or to God’s will—have their own

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=470>; Day, *Diaries*, 317-18; for the interview in which Camus spoke these words, see “The Wager of Our Generation,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 237-48, with quoted words on p. 239.

¹⁰⁸ The essay is reprinted in Merton, *Literary Essays*; for Day’s letter of January 29, 1967, see her *All the Way to Heaven*, 329-30.

¹⁰⁹ *Conjectures*, 144.

¹¹⁰ The religious and global variety of individuals with whom Merton corresponded is truly amazing as a quick perusal of his letters in such collections as *Hidden Ground* and *Courage for Truth* will illustrate. In the first collection, 657-58, a list of correspondents categorizes them according to the many varied religious beliefs and other areas of interest (like racism) of the recipients of his letters; in the second collection there are, for example, more than 80 pages of Merton letters to the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz and the Nicaraguan poet (and later priest) Ernesto Cardenal, who studied under Merton at Gethsemani in the late 1950s. By the 1960s Merton was quite knowledgeable about Latin America.

criteria for wisdom, yet each needs to realize those norms individually if the words of God are to enlighten or comfort.”¹¹¹

In his verse cycle *The Geography of Lograire*, which Merton prepared shortly before his death, we see that he did not limit his ecumenical spirit to just those of the major religions, for portions of the cycle display a great sympathy for the beliefs and practices of so-called “primitive cultures.”

Faith, Contemplation, Catholicism, Radicalism, Wisdom, Folly, and Love

The wisdom that Day and Merton perceived among the works of Russian writers and thinkers was not “Catholic wisdom”; the wisdom they appreciated in such men as Gandhi was not “Christian wisdom”; and the wisdom they found in writers like Camus was not even that of “religious” persons.¹¹² Yet, as much as Merton believed that “Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom” and as much as both Day and Merton valued Gandhi and Camus, both American Catholics believed that faith, and more specifically their Catholic faith, provided special advantages in the seeking of truth and wisdom.

In embracing faith, they joined with numerous others in the twentieth century who thought similarly and rejected the idea that relying on reason alone while rejecting faith could bring a higher truth and wisdom.¹¹³ Peter Maurin, Day’s mentor in many ways, expressed a view she shared when he wrote: “To guide himself man has not only reason but also faith. Faith is not opposed to reason, it is above reason. The use of reason leads to faith, but reason cannot understand all the faith. . . . To use reason is to philosophize and philosophy is the handmaid of faith. Some truths we get through reason and some truths we get through faith.”¹¹⁴

More of a philosopher than Day, Merton wrote extensively on the relationship of faith, knowledge, and wisdom, and some of these thoughts of the late 1960s have already been presented. In addition, in a 1951 work on St. John of the Cross, in words similar to Maurin’s, he wrote: “Reason is in fact the path to faith, and faith takes over when reason can say no more. It is absolutely impossible for a man to live without some kind of faith.” And later on, “Saint John of the Cross admits, of course, that faith is never contrary to reason. . . . Consequently, not only has reason something to do in the supernatural life, but God has ordained that we cannot normally arrive at sanctity without making use of reason. . . . Reason, acting in the service of faith, must question and evaluate and pass judgment on all our most intimate and spiritual aspirations.”¹¹⁵

A decade later he wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, “Faith is what opens to us this higher realm of unity, of strength, of light, of sophianic love where there is no longer the limited and fragmentary light provided by rational principles, but where the Truth is One and Undivided and takes all to itself in the wholeness of *Sapientia*, or *Sophia*. When St. Paul said that Love was

¹¹¹ *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 1-2.

¹¹² D’Herbigny, 24-27, maintained that Soloviev had, like Newman, converted to Catholicism, but most scholars maintain that he was not a “convert,” merely an ecumenical thinker with many positive feelings toward Catholicism.

¹¹³ I have dealt with the similar thinking of others on reason and faith in other essays; see, e.g., those on W. H. Auden and E. F. Schumacher, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WHAudensWisdomFaithandHumor.pdf> and <http://www.wisdompage.com/SchumacherEssay.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ From Maurin’s essay “On Personalism,” at http://www.easyessays.org/on_personalism.html.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Ascent to Truth* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1976), 22-23, 112-14.

the fulfillment of the Law and that Love had delivered man from the Law, he meant that by the Spirit of Christ we were incorporated into Christ, Himself the ‘power and wisdom of God.’”¹¹⁶

In this same work, however, he indicated that contemplation took one to an even higher state than faith and reason combined. “Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source.

Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond both reason and beyond simple faith. For contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete.”¹¹⁷

Merton realized that such contemplation was not unique to Christianity. The great Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki, whom Merton praised and corresponded with, gives us some sense of this when he writes of the Zen concept of satori. “Satori may be defined as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind. Or we may say that with satori our entire surroundings are viewed from quite an unexpected angle of perception. Whatever this is, the world for those who have gained a satori is no more the old world as it used to be; even with all its flowing streams and burning fires, it is never the same one again.”¹¹⁸

And while seeing positive aspects in other religions, both Day and Merton realized that the Catholic Church had often acted unwisely and that many Catholics, including members of the hierarchy, continued to do so in the twentieth century. For example, in a 1949 column Day wrote:

They point out the scandals in the Church, the mistakes in history, the bad Popes, the Inquisition, the lining up of the Church with temporal power, the concordats, the expediency, the diplomacy, and so on and so on.

Right under one's nose there is always plenty to complain of. Churches, schools, monasteries being built while the municipal lodging house is packed with mothers and children separated from husbands and fathers because of lack of housing; a spreading unemployment; race prejudice amongst Catholics, and priests and sisters, too; anti-Semitism—oh, yes, there is plenty of scandal.¹¹⁹

Similarly, Merton mentioned “what is most questionable and indeed scandalous in the history of the Church: Inquisition, persecution, intolerance, Papal power, clerical influence, alliance with worldly power, love of wealth and pomp, etc. This is a picture of the Church which has become a scandal.”¹²⁰

Both Day and Merton were generally critical of U. S. capitalism and Catholic support of government military policies. (Day was even opposed to U. S. involvement in World War II, and Merton, who coincidentally became a monk just days after Pearl Harbor, had previously only registered to serve as a non-combatant medic.) Their criticism often brought down upon them hostile reactions from U. S. Catholics who thought them unpatriotic, and both Day and Merton

¹¹⁶ Merton, *New Seeds*, 141.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹⁸ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Random House, 1996), 98-99.

¹¹⁹ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=497>.

¹²⁰ Merton, *Conjectures*, 313.

sometimes displeased church authorities. On one occasion, Day supported gravediggers who struck against the trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, the most prominent of whom was Cardinal Spellman, whom Day wrote was "ill-advised."¹²¹

Despite their insistence on their freedom to criticize in the economic, social, and political realms, Day and Merton adhered not only to their Catholicism but valued its spiritual guidance, even to the point of stressing the importance of obedience to properly exercised church authority. In her December 1965 column she brought up and clarified her "often quoted remark that if the Cardinal [Spellman] asked me to stop my writing on war, I would obey." Although she believed that a person "must follow his conscience regardless of others," she also stressed the importance of obedience, partly because she had "faith that God will right all mistakes."¹²²

In a chapter on "Freedom under Obedience" in his *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton wrote, "The most dangerous man in the world is the contemplative who is guided by nobody. He trusts his own visions. He obeys the attractions of an interior voice but will not listen to other men." Later in the 1960s, while realizing that "all the higher religions have in common" the "aspiration to spiritual, interior, and personal freedom," he wrote, "Since I am a Catholic, I believe, of course, that my Church guarantees for me the highest spiritual freedom. I would not be a Catholic if I did not believe this. I would not be a Catholic if the Church were merely an organization, a collective institution, with rules and laws demanding external conformity from its members. I see the laws of the Church, and all the various ways in which she exercises her teaching authority and her jurisdiction, as subordinate to the Holy Spirit and to the law of love."¹²³ After his death, Day quoted a 1965 letter from him in her December 1968 column: "I have had enough experience in 24 years of monastic life to know that even if certain measures of superiors may be a little unfair, one never loses anything by obeying, quite the contrary. And God sometimes reserves special gifts and an extra fruitfulness for us, something we could not have gained without this sacrifice."¹²⁴

Such willingness by Day (a self-proclaimed anarchist) and Merton to subject themselves to what they considered legitimate church authority may seem surprising, and they were sometimes criticized for it by 1960s radicals who nevertheless valued their political stances. Canadian anarchist and writer George Woodcock, for example, who noted that Merton "took his vow of obedience seriously," thought that Merton's passages in *New Seeds of Contemplation* that "sought to justify authority and dogma in the Church, are those which seem most intellectually indigestible." On the other hand, Woodcock also observed that Merton "had a libertarian streak in his nature" that often led him to evade and circumvent censorious prohibitions.¹²⁵

Both Day and Merton had given much thought to "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In it Dostoevsky depicted a fictional head of the sixteenth-century Spanish Catholic Inquisition criticizing Jesus (who miraculously had come back to earth) for giving people freedom and for not realizing they wanted happiness not freedom. The Inquisitor insists that "men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand [freedom], which they fear and dread--for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human

¹²¹ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=493>.

¹²² <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=248>; see also a 1966 article by Day on obedience at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=562>.

¹²³ Merton, *New Seeds*, 194-95; *Conjectures*, 89.

¹²⁴ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=901>; as sometimes happened, Day's quote is not exactly word for word, but accurately renders the substance of the quoted material; cf. Merton's original letter in *Hidden Ground*, 150.

¹²⁵ Woodcock, 17, 19, 95-96.

society than freedom.” The Inquisitor “claims it as a merit for himself and his Church that at last they have vanquished freedom and have done so to make men happy.”

In Day’s February 1938 column she listed this Dostoevsky chapter, along with Maritain’s *Freedom in the Modern World* and several other books, as readings she recommended. In her *House of Hospitality* (1939) she mentioned the chapter again, wrote that she was trying to get her Catholic Workers to take on more personal responsibility and freedom, but lamented “Freedom--how men hate it and chafe under it, how unhappy they are with it.”¹²⁶ In one of his 1958 letters to Pasternak, after commenting on how *Doctor Zhivago* and Soloviev’s *Meaning of Love* both remind us of the importance of transformative love, Merton wrote, “I need not tell you that I also am one who has tried to learn deeply from Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, and I am passionately convinced that this is the most important of all lessons of our time.” In a December 1961 letter to Erich Fromm, who had written the insightful *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Merton wrote, “If only Christians had valued the freedom of the sons of God that was given them. They preferred safety and the Grand Inquisitor.”¹²⁷

Thus, although Day and Merton realized that the Catholic Church sometimes had emphasized authority more than freedom, they thought the two could be reconciled and stood squarely against any Inquisitor-like authority that would deny the freedom they believed Jesus Christ represented.

Besides their own personal psychology and experiences which gave Catholicism special meaning to them, Day and Merton remained faithful Catholics because they believed their religion could be interpreted in a way that was in keeping with their radical desires to transform society, to make it more Christ-like. Day remembered that her mentor, Peter Muarin said, “We must be Catholic Radicals, we must get down to the roots. That is what radicalism is—the word means getting down to the roots,” and she agreed. In a February 1975 column, written when she was in her late seventies, she stated, “There is nothing so radical, or subversive as Christianity.”¹²⁸

In his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which contained the first piece Merton wrote for *The Catholic Worker* (“The Root of War Is Fear”), he stated in the chapter “Tradition and Revolution” that “the biggest paradox about the Church is that she is at the same time essentially traditional and essentially revolutionary. . . . because Christian tradition, unlike all others, is a living and perpetual revolution.” Then, in words that must have appealed deeply to Day, who seemed to be a living embodiment of them, he added that

this tradition must always be a revolution because by its very nature it denies the values and standards to which human passion is so powerfully attached. To those who love money and pleasure and reputation and power this tradition says: “Be poor, go down into the far end of society, take the last place among men, live with those who are despised, love other men and serve them instead of making them serve you. Do not fight them when they push you around, but pray for those that hurt you. Do not look for pleasure, but turn away from things that satisfy your senses and your mind and look for God in hunger and thirst and darkness, through deserts of the spirit in which it seems to be madness to travel. Take upon yourself the

¹²⁶ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=145;>
[http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=444.](http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=444)

¹²⁷ Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 90; *Hidden Ground*, 317; the letter to Fromm is also available at maryknoll.easycgi.com/chapters/1-57075-662-7.pdf. I have dealt with the topic of modern freedom, including the insights of Dostoevsky and Fromm, in *An Age of Progress?*, Ch. 5.

¹²⁸ <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=256;>
[http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=547.](http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=547)

burden of Christ's Cross, that is, Christ's humility and poverty and obedience and renunciation, and you will find peace for your souls.

This is the most complete revolution that has ever been preached; in fact, it is the only true revolution, because all the others demand the extermination of somebody else.¹²⁹

Although Day and Merton combined their Catholic radicalism with a justification of Catholic authority and dogma, what they most valued about their faith was its long history of trying, however imperfectly, to keep the message of Jesus Christ alive. For they shared the belief of many other Christians, regardless of how ecumenical they might be, that this Godman offered Christians something unique among world religions.

The two converts also valued highly Mary, the mother of Jesus; Catholic philosophers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas of Aquinas, and Maritain; other Catholic saints like Benedict (Day was a lay oblate of St. Benedict), Francis of Assisi, Therese of Lisieux (about whom Day wrote a biography), and the mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross; the efforts of the popes, especially of John XXIII and his encyclical on peace, *Pacem in Terris* (1963); and Catholic liturgy and the sacraments.

As a priest, as well as a monk, the last two decades of his life, Merton celebrated the Catholic Mass almost every day his health permitted. Both he and Day, who attended Mass as often as she could, loved that service as well as many other aspects of Catholic liturgy. Their love of the Mass was tied up with their belief in what it represented—a reenactment of the Last Supper and of their most cherished belief that Jesus Christ suffered and died on the Cross in a supreme act of love in order to redeem mankind. According to the sixteenth-century Council of Trent at the Last Supper Jesus “offered up to God the Father His own body and blood under the species of bread and wine; and, under the symbols of those same things, He delivered (His own body and blood) to be received by His apostles, whom He then constituted priests of the New Testament; and by those words, Do this in commemoration of me, He commanded them and their successors in the priesthood, to offer (them).”¹³⁰

Their appreciation of the Mass and Christ’s sacrifice indicated why they thought Christianity offered to them the highest wisdom, but a wisdom that seemed folly to some. In his 1955 book *No Man Is an Island*, Merton wrote: “The word of the Cross is foolishness, says St. Paul, to them that perish (I Corinthians 1:18).” In 1962, he added a variation of this when writing of the crucifixion: “The wisdom of God became folly to them.” And in one of his last works he observed that “in the first two chapters of the first Epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul distinguishes between two kinds of wisdom: one which consists in the knowledge of words and statements, a rational, dialectical wisdom, and another which is at once a matter of paradox and of experience, and goes beyond the reach of reason. To attain to this spiritual wisdom, one must first be liberated from servile dependence on the ‘wisdom, of speech.’”¹³¹

The words of St. Paul in these two chapters of his first Epistle to the Corinthians became the basis for a tradition of “holy fools for Christ.” It was this tradition that Merton referred to in a 1958 letter when he joked, “Maybe I have a calling to that peculiarly Russian form of sanctity—*yurodivetsvo*—to be a fool for Christ.” One such Russian “holy fool” was St. Basil after whom

¹²⁹ *New Seeds*, 142, 143-44.

¹³⁰ <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct22.html>.

¹³¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1957), 91; *New Seeds*, 62; *Zen and the Birds*, 55.

the famous sixteenth-century Moscow cathedral was named. Although such “fools” were most prominent in Russia, they also appeared in other areas, including Western Europe.¹³²

Day valued the “holy fool” tradition in Russian Orthodoxy and literature, citing (in a 1974 column) Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* as a prime example. She thought of the prince as a “truly Christ-like figure.” What most distinguished him was humility, a virtue Dostoevsky often emphasized. In her columns she noted that such saints as Francis of Assisi and Ignatius Loyola (founder of the Jesuits) were regarded as holy fools, and she often referred to herself and her Catholic Workers as “holy fools in the eyes of their friends and readers.” In 1952, for example, in a column about struggling for social and racial justice, she ended it saying, “If we are afraid, we must pray not to be afraid, to be fools for Christ. Love includes justice.” Five years later in writing about the CW annual pacifist protest over a mandatory New York civil defense drill, she stated “We may be ignored as crackpots, but we have to reconcile ourselves to being a ‘spectacle to the world, to angels and to men,’ —‘to being fools for Christ.’” In a 1966 column, she wrote, “It is good to be considered a fool for Christ, as St. Paul said, remembering always the folly of the Cross.” In her diary during February 1970 she recorded reading Harvey Cox’s *Feast of Fools*, which described and reflected upon a medieval feast that celebrated the paradoxical relationship of folly and wisdom.¹³³

The ability of both Day and Merton to see themselves as appearing foolish at times speaks to their humility and sense of humor, both helpful wisdom traits. Jim Forest, who knew both of them well, has commented on the sense of humor that both of his friends possessed, Day even known to tell a bawdy joke at times.¹³⁴ Another Day biographer has written of her “well-developed sense of the comic, which permeated much of her writing,” and that “even in the most depressing and difficult situations, Day’s sense of humor was acute.”¹³⁵

But, of course, Merton and Day paradoxically thought that being “a fool for Christ,” was the highest wisdom. As Merton indicated the “wisdom of God,” which is folly to men, is different than “rational, dialectical wisdom.” It is “a matter of paradox and of experience, and goes beyond the reach of reason.” In the writings of his last decade, Merton often referred to this higher wisdom as Sophia or sometimes to the “wisdom of love.” Some non-religious writers, like Camus, had characters display such loving wisdom, as Merton thought Maria in the play *Le Malentendu* did, or Rieux’s mother in the novel *The Plague*. About her Merton wrote, “This is the true role of woman in Camus’ world: she is there to embody wisdom and love because she is capable of a dimension of understanding that too easily escapes the logic-machine which is the active mind of man.”¹³⁶ But it was primarily in mystics, East and West, and in the Russian religious philosophers where Merton found such higher wisdom.

¹³² John Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). I have dealt briefly with the holy fool tradition in “Wisdom, Humor, and Faith: A Historical View,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomHumorFaith.pdf>.

¹³³ Day in <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=540>;

<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=635>;

<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=724>;

<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=840>; Day, *Diaries*, 473.

¹³⁴ For more on humor and wisdom, see my essay at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomHumorFaith.pdf>. For Jim Forest on Day and Merton, see his two biographies, *Love Is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 151, and *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 162, 209, 244.

¹³⁵ Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1984), 75.

¹³⁶ *Hidden Ground*, 209, 283.

In a letter to Merton in 1959, the Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki wrote, “God wanted to know Himself, hence the creation.” Merton seized upon the idea and responded, “You touch upon a most interesting theological idea that has been developed by some Russian Orthodox thinkers.” He mentioned specifically Bulgakov and Berdyaev and then added that “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.” Both Day and Merton were familiar with the emphasis on kenosis in Russian thought, having read Fedotov’s collection *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, first published in 1950, with many of the translations coming from Day’s friend Helene Iswolsky. In his Preface, Fedotov indicated that the Russian emphasis on kenosis, which imitated Christ in “His self-humiliation and His voluntary, sacrificial death,” went back to the earliest medieval Russian saints.¹³⁷

A year after his letter to Suzuki Merton put “kenosis at the very center of Christian mysticism, theology, and, to be sure, Christian anthropology.” In his journal he wrote: “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. . . . 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.”¹³⁸

This emphasis on kenosis, on loving sacrifice for others, fit in well with Soloviev’s ideas of Sophia and godmanhood; with the Catholicism of Day and Merton; with their appreciation for the medieval classic *The Imitation of Christ* and for the lives of many saints; with their stress on love as being the most important wisdom value; and with Merton’s understanding of Zen Buddhism. Upon parting with Merton after their 1964 meeting, Zen scholar Suzuki said to him “The most important thing is love.”¹³⁹

The appreciation of Day and Merton for Russian writers and thinkers was primarily because they found love in their works. We have already quoted Day’s words that that “these three men [Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Soloviev] wrote of the struggle of man towards God and to all of them the golden key which opened the doors of prisons and led out of darkness was the key of love.” And we have seen that Merton thought that Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* was primarily about love and reflected the influence of Soloviev’s *Meaning of Love*. Christopher Pramuk’s book *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* has demonstrated how important the concept of Sophia (Divine Wisdom), developed by Soloviev and his followers, was to Merton, that it was the “golden thread” that held his outreach to others in the 1960s together. But Sophia was not only Wisdom and “the hidden Christ,” but love. As Merton’s prose poem “Hagia Sophia” emphasizes:

Sophia is God’s sharing of Himself with creatures. His outpouring, and the Love by which He is given, and known, held and loved.

She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight. In her they prosper. In her they glorify God. In her they rejoice to reflect Him. In her they are united with him. She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites them.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ G. P. Fedotov, ed. *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), xiii.

¹³⁸ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 169, quotes the journal entry that I have taken directly from *A Search for Solitude*, 381.

¹³⁹ Quoted in Pramuk, *Sophia*, 164.

¹⁴⁰ *Merton Reader*, 510; also available at <http://campus.udayton.edu/marty/resources/poetry/merton01.html#sophia>.