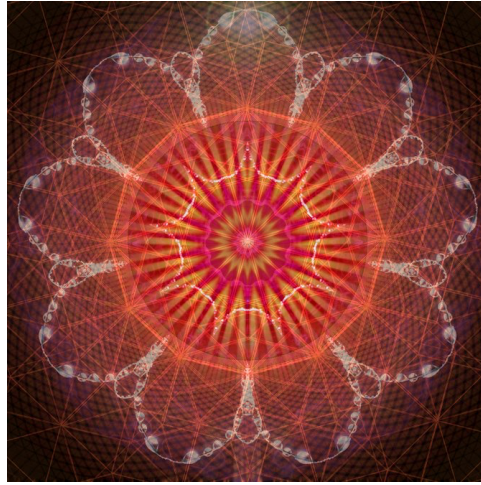


Fall 2020, Volume 16, Number 1



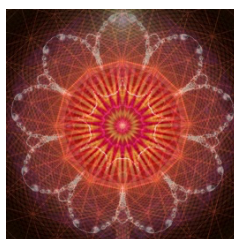
The Esoteric Quarterly

An independent publication dedicated to the trans-disciplinary investigation of the esoteric spiritual tradition.

**Esoteric philosophy and its applications
to individual and group service and
the expansion of human consciousness.**



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The Esoteric Quarterly

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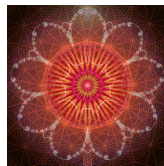
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The mission of the *Esoteric Quarterly* is to provide a forum for the exploration of esoteric philosophy and its applications. Full-length articles and student papers are solicited pertaining to both eastern and western esoteric traditions. We also encourage feedback from readers. Comments of general interest will be published as Letters to the Editor. All communications should be sent to: editor@esotericquarterly.com.

Emerging Frequencies: The Rise of the Feminine, and the New World Religion.

The monotheistic religions claim that God is an intangible spirit, existing outside of biological gender. Yet, based on passages such as the biblical verse from Genesis (1:26), which states that “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created him,” or the misguided belief that the Qur’an is inherently patriarchal, many male dominated societies and political and religious leaders insisted on either depicting God as a masculine figure or referring to God in terms such as He, King, or Father. Thus the feminine was disempowered and excluded. Veneration of female goddesses came to be seen as heretical, and their prominent role as Mother Goddesses and “supreme creators” was primarily obliterated.

Although the feminine role has long been obscured under the dense cloak of patriarchal trappings, the feminine frequency has gradually begun to re-emerge. Two of the authors in this issue take up this theme by exploring aspects of the divine feminine in the Abrahamic faiths. A third author considers the emergence of the new world religious movements.

But as we do in each issue, we begin with an esoteric astrological commentary from Maureen Richmond. In this article, the author concentrates on the immense occult significance of Betelgeuse. Her rich and comprehensive investigation draws upon specific passages from the work of Alice A. Bailey, in addition to numerous clues uncovered in these same writings on Orion. As such, the reader is provided with a wealth of information ranging from Betelgeuse’s relationship to the One About Whom Naught May Be Said, the Third Ray of Active Intelligence, the Hierarchy and the New Group of World Servers, as well as the great star’s profoundly important connections to the Third Cosmic Path, the Buddhas of Activity, and the Path of Training for a Planetary Logos.

Our next offering is from Irina Kuzminsky, who examines Ibn ‘Arabi’s transformative experience of the feminine element as expressed in his scholarly writings and poetic works. This learned and inspired article focuses on the great Sufi Master’s encounter with Lady Nizam, the woman who served as the sophianic revelation of love, knowledge, and beauty. The article places a particular emphasis on Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Interpreter of Desires* (Tarjumān al-ashwāq), a collection of mystical odes dedicated to Nizam depicting the circular journey wherein the lover turns around the axis of divine Beauty. It is within this context that the author explores what was an entirely new “feminine dimension” in Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical philosophy and its relation to Beauty as a Path to God. The article also includes a section on poetry as the language of veiling and unveiling.

John Nash continues on a parallel track with an article on the feminine face of divinity in Judaism and Christianity. Nash takes the reader on a fascinating tour of the goddesses of antiquity, notions of the feminine in the Kabbalah, and perceptions of Sophia and Mary in the Orthodox and Christian traditions. The article represents a timely and most welcome effort directed toward the reclamation of the sacred feminine by addressing the gender gap in our characterization of God in two of the major Western religions. Nash’s article not only helps to “satisfy the hunger for a glimpse of the Feminine Face of God that has persisted through the ages,” it also points to the broader implications of the re-emergence of the feminine frequency in the world.

Kim Rogers investigates the loss of familiar social institutions and networks which have traditionally supported the collective identity of the community. He examines the alienation, disillusionment, loss of identity, and erosion of social cohesion that results. The loss of social anchors and shared values has also prompted

the search for a new meaning of life and, the rise of new “religious” movements,” which are peripheral to pre-existing religions. Although some of these religious movements are of a questionable nature, nearly all of them have their roots in ancient philosophical traditions.

In addition to our full-length features, this issue includes a short paper from Vijay Srinath Kanchi. In this paper, *Krishna, the Sneak Thief*, the author explores the symbolic meaning of one of Krishna’s childish pranks with its inspiring message to spiritual aspirants and aspiring yogi’s.

Our *Poem of the Quarter*— “The Hour,”—is from a collection of poems titled *Beautiful Unity*, by the Russian polymath, Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947). Although Roerich is perhaps best known as a painter, he was also an archaeologist, theosophist, and philosopher as well as a writer and poet. The beauty and elevation of his writings and poems, many of which have been unavailable for decades, have led him to be described as “the master of the singing word.” In this poem, Roerich beckons us to awaken, to pay heed to the dawning hour, and to prepare ourselves for the stony path that leads to the Abode of Fire.

The Italian artist, Stefania Santarcangelo, contributes a series of pictures based on the Jungian theory of the 12 Archetypes. Santarcangelo’s archetypes, all of whom have a timeless feminine character, are inner guides exemplifying universal patterns of behavior “that aid the quest for wholeness and fulfillment in a fragmented inner life.” The artworks featured here are the result of her interest in spiritual alchemy and quest for personal growth. Their intent is to “take the observer by the hand towards hidden places of her soul.” Each piece is the product of the interaction between painting, engraving, digital art and photography on metal. For further information on the artist and her hauntingly beautiful work visit: <https://www.stefaniasantarcangelo.com/>.

Also included in this issue are two book reviews. The first review is for *Freemasonry: A Philosophical Investigation* by Dr. Giuliano De

Bernardo that explains Masonry in terms of a philosophical anthropology. Also reviewed is a book dedicated to the *Initiate of the Aquarian Age*, by Dr. Joseph B. Majdalani, which lays emphasis on the future development of the human race.

Donna M. Brown
Editor-in-Chief

Publication Policies

Articles are selected for publication in the *Esoteric Quarterly* because we believe they represent a sincere search for truth, support the service mission to which we aspire, and/or contribute to the expansion of human consciousness.

Publication of an article does not necessarily imply that the Editorial Board agrees with the views expressed. Nor do we have the means to verify all facts stated in published articles.

We encourage critical thinking and analysis from a wide range of perspectives and traditions. We discourage dogmatism or any view that characterizes any tradition as having greater truth than a competing system.

Neither will we allow our journal to be used as a platform for attacks on individuals, groups, institutions, or nations. This policy applies to articles and features as well as to letters to the editor. In turn, we understand that the author of an article may not necessarily agree with the views, attitudes, or values expressed by a referenced source. Indeed, serious scholarship sometimes requires reference to work that an author finds abhorrent. We will not reject an article for publication simply on the grounds that it contains a reference to an objectionable source.

An issue of concern in all online journals is potential volatility of content. Conceivably, articles could be modified after the publication date because authors changed their minds about what had been written. Accordingly, we wish to make our policy clear: We reserve the right to correct minor typographical errors, but we will not make any substantive alteration to an article after it “goes to press.”

Poem of the Quarter

“The Hour,” from Beautiful Unity
by Nicholas Roerich

Awaken, O friend.
A message has come.
Ended, thy rest.
Now I have learned where is guarded
One of the Sacred Signs.
Think of the joy if
One sign we shall find
Before sunrise, we shall have to go.
At night we must all prepare.
Look at the night sky ...
It is beautiful as never before;
I do not remember
Such another.
Only yesterday
Cassiopeia was sad and misty,
Aldebaran twinkled fearfully
And Venus did not appear.
And now they are all ablaze.
Orion and Arcturus are shining.
Far behind Altair
New starry signs
Are gleaming and the mistiness
Of the constellations is clear and transparent.

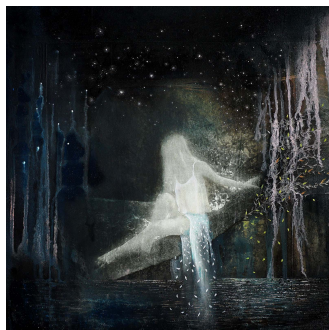
Dost thou not see
The path to that
Which tomorrow we shall find?
The starry masses have awakened.
Take thy fortune.
The armour we shall not need.
The shoes put tightly on,
Tightly girdle thyself,
Our path will be stony.
The East is aflame.
For us
Is the hour.

Pictures of the Quarter

12 Archetypes, by Stefania Santarcangelo



The Innocent



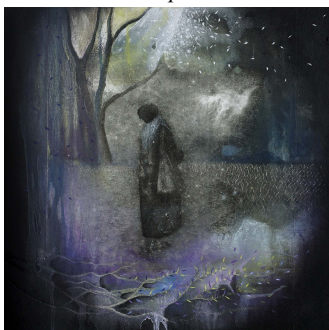
The Orphan



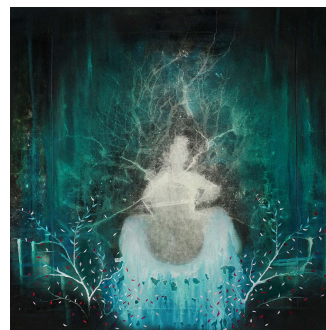
The Warrior



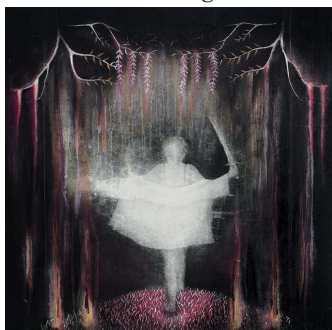
The Caregiver



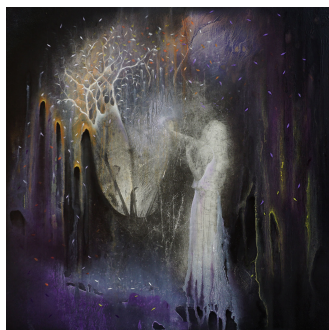
The Seeker



The Lover



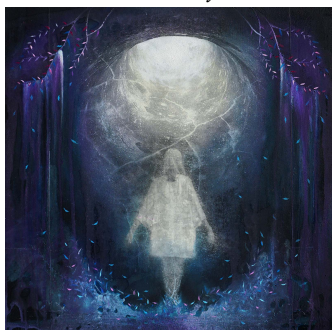
The Destroyer



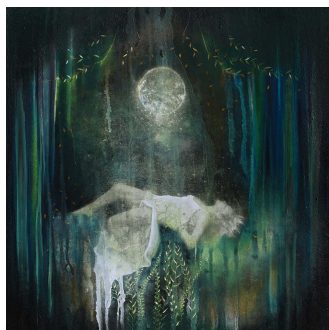
The Creator



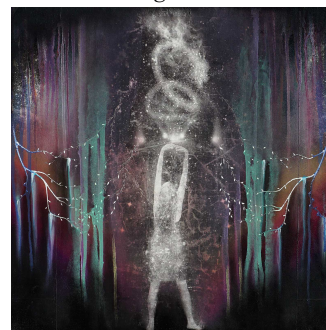
The Magician



The Sage



The Ruler



The Fool

Quotes of the Quarter

Man is a microcosm, or a little world, because he is an extract from all the stars and planets of the whole firmament, from the earth and the elements; and so he is their quintessence.

Paracelsus, *The Hermetic And Alchemical*, trans: Arthur Edward Waite (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 1991), 205

One star shone forth within the dark blue vault of heaven. Then another and still another could be seen until around the star were many shining points. The circle of the stars revolved and kept its place and darkness was around on every hand. Each star within its tiny orbit kept its place and slow revolved. Its contacts with the circle's edge proved adequate.... 'There is but one great circle,' came a voice, 'not many little spheres. Some stars are small and time must feed their flame. Some stars are suns and shed their light on every hand. Seek out a sun and feed its life. Shed forth your rays and live.'

Djwhal Khul, *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol I (New York: Lucis Trust, 1944), 151.

There is this peculiarity about the pleasure derived from the beautiful, that when raised to the highest pitch it sharpens into pain, acute and exquisite--pain which is itself a delight, produced by the strain of the soul to grasp and assimilate the perfect.

Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Origin and Development of Religious Belief* (Charleston, NC: Nabu Press, 2012), 412.

The spirit in man has been created in accordance with the image of beauty, so that whenever it either hears or sees anything beautiful, it may have a propensity towards it, and seek for communion with it.

Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness* [1873], trans. Harold A. Homes,

<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/ghazali-the-alchemy-of-happiness>.

The idea of beauty is the fundamental idea of everything. In the world we see only distortions of the fundamental idea, but art, by imagination, may lift itself to the height of this idea. Art is therefore akin to creation.

Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (trans. Maude Alymer (1899) reprint 1996: Hackett Publishing Co, 1897), Chapter III, 27.

The Beautiful is a manifestation of secret laws of nature, which, without its presence, would never have been revealed.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe* (reprint, 1999, London: ENG: Penguin Classics, 1833), 487.

The feminine has deep understanding of the power of matter. Women carry the instinctual knowing of the divine substance in matter and of how to bring this substance into life, because this knowledge is fundamental in the process of giving birth, in bringing a soul into human form. Now this wisdom is needed for the regeneration of the earth, for the earth's awakening.

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *Awakening the World: A Global Dimension to Spiritual Practice* (Salisbury, UK: The Golden Sufi Center, 2006), 66

The feminine surpasses the formal, the finite, the outward; it is synonymous with indetermination, illimitation, mystery, and thus evokes the "Spirit which giveth life" in relation to the "letter which killeth." That is to say that femininity in the superior sense comprises a liquefying, interiorizing, liberating power: it liberates from sterile hardness, from the dispersing outwardness of limiting and compressing forms.

Frithjof Schuon, *The Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, IN: WorldWisdom Inc., 1991), 40-41.

She is so bright and glorious that you cannot look at her face or her garments for the splendor with which she shines. For she is terrible with the terror of the avenging lightning, and gentle with the goodness of the bright sun; and both her terror and her gentleness are incomprehensible to humans.... But she is with everyone and in everyone, and so beautiful is her secret that no person can know the sweetness with which she sustains people, and spares them in inscrutable mercy.

Hildegard von Bingen, *Hildegard von Bingen: Scivias* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 364.

The larger reality of the cosmos need not be confined to the empirical sciences only. The process of cosmos is all-embracing, and has a spiritual in addition to a physical dimension, by recognizing and celebrating the world's evolutionary self-creation. Religions could promote this process of recognition in each individual.... They could celebrate the evolution of the noosphere on Earth as the next, and especially significant, phase in the world's self-creation.... the self-creating universe is our larger self—our primary sacred community.

Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc. 1996), 90.

Spirituality as a form of consciousness constructs the world as a systemic whole, where different parts are interconnected. Thus, at the heart of spirituality lies systems thinking in one form or other. Systems thinking is a general view concerning the nature of reality. It sees the world as composed of systems, and all particular entities populating the reality as linked with other entities.

Matti Kemppainen, *Intentional Systems Theory as a Conceptual Framework for Religious Studies* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

The emergence of lawful order in a world of chance and chaos is a natural and rationally tractable phenomenon. Throughout the sciences... there is emerging a common recognition that a universe of chance and chaos is not unruly (anarchic) but merely complex, exhibiting through its natural operation the emergence of higher-order lawfulness.

Nicholas Rescher, *Complexity: A Philosophical Overview* (New Brunswick, CA: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 206.

Differences of opinion among the doctors of the law, are a blessing from God, it is said in Islam. Why? Because the light of the spiritual miracles that move the heart is inexhaustible.

Our soul is multiform in its simplicity. God is One; and every truth that comes from above, Whatever be its form, belongs to God. If God did not wish to do well in a variety of hearts here below, there would be no religions.

Frithjof Schuon, "The Ambiguity of Exotericism," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1983, World Wisdom, Inc.).

Earnest for truth, I thought on the religions. They are, I found, one root with many a branch. Therefore, impose on no man a religion, lest it should bar him from the firm-set-root. Let the root claim him, a root where in all heights and all meanings are made clear, for him to grasp.

Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, from the "*Diwan al-Hallaj*," trans. Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems* (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 2004, 34).

In any given moment we have two options: to step forward into growth or to step back into safety. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again.

Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1966).

What a man takes in by contemplation, that he pours out in love.

Meister Eckhart

Mary: Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess



John F. Nash

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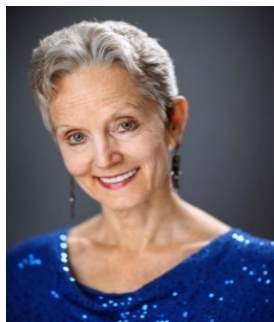
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Introduction

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 - 2. Mary According to Anne Catherine Emmerich**
 - 3. Mary in Early Christian Writings**
 - 4. Marian Doctrine and Beyond**
 - 5. Marian Devotion and Intercession**
 - 6. Mary Reveals Herself to the World**
 - 7. Mary in Esoteric Teachings**
 - 8. Mary: Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess**
- Epilogue**

This book is about Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is Mary's story, gleaned from scripture, early Christian writings, Christian doctrine and devotional practices, modern esoteric teachings, and information from visions, apparitions, and other contacts. In a few cases we have Mary's own words. Material from these diverse sources coalesces into a remarkably coherent account of Mary's life in Palestine, her role in the Redemption, her present position, and her ongoing ministry.

"So who was/is Mary? Our story has taken us on a journey from her Palestinian lifetime to the present and beyond. We discovered that the historical Mary was a strong, assertive woman who carried on Christ's ministry after Pentecost, was acclaimed as the High Priestess of the emerging Eucharistic liturgy, and attained the fifth initiation in a female body. We learned that, after her death, Mary became Queen of the Angels and now holds the exalted office of Mother of the World. We listened to the testimonies of people to whom she has communicated directly. We have learned of her message of peace; her concern for human suffering, particularly of women and children; and her special concern for birth processes in the human and animal kingdoms."



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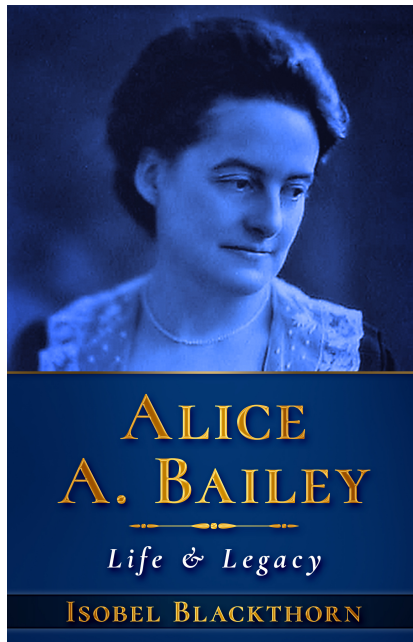
"Maureen's distillations and interpretations of esoteric material rate as
scholarly, yet are still easily comprehensible." ~ Ann Frazier West, Ed. D.,
Nashville, TN

For all services, please contact Maureen Temple Richmond, M.A.
starsong1208@gmail.com or (919) 308 - 9241.

Alice A. Bailey

Life and Legacy

By Isobel Blackthorn



"Isobel Blackthorn's thorough research and compelling style present the polarity of experiences of Alice Bailey: admiration and antagonism, leadership and service, devotion and betrayal, and the accumulation of wisdom that underpins, without acknowledgement, much of our modern belief systems. Lovers of enlightenment and esoteric philosophy will treasure this book." - award-winning writer and editor Veronica Schwarz

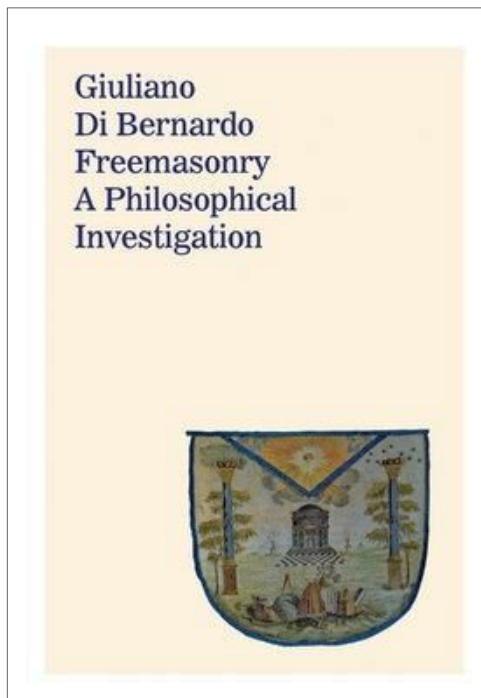
*Visit Isobel Blackthorn at <https://isobelblackthorn.com/>
Isobel Blackthorn holds a PhD from the University of Western
Sydney for her comprehensive study of the Bailey texts.*



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Freemasonry: A Philosophical Investigation

By Giuliano Di Bernardo



The aim of this book is to identify a stable and unitary Masonic thought. As such, this book provides an initial contribution to the philosophical interpretation of Freemasonry and its image of man. Such a theoretical reconstruction is particularly relevant at this time in history. Alongside the desire to discover the origins of Masonic thought, there is a need to ensure that it retains a precise framework, so that it might be known by present and future generations and not be confused with other systems having nothing to do with Masonic ideals.

One of the great strengths of this book is that complex arguments are broken down into logical, manageable sections, each of which is presented in a specific and well-considered order allowing the reader to follow the author's trains of thought clearly. In addition, the consistency with which terminology is explained and then applied aids the non-specialist in grasping the flow of the argument.

This book should prove informative and engaging to any reader with an interest in Freemasonry. – Alison P. Deadman



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Betelgeuse: Septenary Clairvoyance from the Cosmic Solar Plexus

Maureen Temple Richmond

Abstract

As one of the nine stars mentioned specifically by the Tibetan Master in his dictations to Alice Bailey, Betelgeuse is a celestial factor of abiding interest and curiosity to the esoteric community. In this study, Betelgeuse is considered from the angles of observational astronomy, esotericism, and mythology. Drawing upon specific passages from the writings of Alice Bailey, this study demonstrates that Betelgeuse finds place within the solar plexus of The One About Whom Naught May Be Said, affects the New Group of World Servers and the senior members of Hierarchy, is the source for the Third Cosmic Path or The Path of Training for Planetary Logoi, transmits cosmic vision, deva hearing, psychic correlation, and septenary clairvoyance, is profoundly connected with the Buddhas of Activity, and distributes its energies through the constellation and sign of Sagittarius. Hints of the importance of Betelgeuse, this study confirms, are found in the reverence with which its home constellation of Orion was held in ancient times, during which Orion was home to the heroic Hunter of Greek myth and the sacred Osiris of Egyptian religion. Students of esoteric cosmology and astrology will find in this study the key points made by the Tibetan regarding Betelgeuse, as well as a synthesis of viewpoints indicating that Betelgeuse as the cosmic solar plexus functions as a source of greatly enhanced cosmic sensitivity and perception.

Betelgeuse in Observational Astronomy

Enthusiasts of the night sky love learning the major and obvious constellations. These big-figure items hovering in the vast stretches of night sky make it possible to visually navigate the celestial sphere, an essential skill in sky orientation. Of all the largest and most readily

recognizable constellations in the night sky that help humans make sense of the heavens, Orion rates as prime. Perched high in the southern night sky during the northern hemisphere's winter, and higher yet in the northern sky during the southern hemisphere's summer, Orion presents a commanding visual presence that draws all eyes unto itself. There, minding its own business in a corner location, sits the red star Betelgeuse.

One of the nine stars specifically discussed by the Tibetan in the now-classic esoteric writings of twentieth-century Anglo-American metaphysical author Alice Bailey, the noticeable star Betelgeuse is known to astronomers as Alpha Orionis. A highly-evolved and dramatically variable star in the constellation Orion, Betelgeuse is, despite its designation as Alpha Orionis, not always the brightest star in that grouping. That distinction sometimes goes to Rigel, designated as Beta Orionis.¹ Yet Betelgeuse is a stand-out among stars all the same. Classed by astronomy as a red supergiant far along in stellar evolution, massive Betelgeuse as one of the largest stars is plainly visible even without binoculars. The body of the star itself has a radius 887 to 955 times that of our Sun. Astronomers estimate that if Betelgeuse were placed at the

About the Author

Maureen Temple Richmond is a lifelong astrologer and esotericist known for her scholarly study titled *Sirius*, a comprehensive examination of the teaching on that great star as revealed in the works of Alice Bailey. Author of numerous essays, poetry, and fiction, Richmond holds a M.A. in English and Creative Writing from SNHU, and is currently working on a Ph.D. program in Heritage Studies at Arkansas State University where she now makes her home. A counseling astrologer, Richmond advises Anglophone clients around the world. She can be reached at: star-song1208@gmail.com.

center of our solar system, its body would extend most certainly to the orbit of Mars, if not to that of Jupiter. As is evident, Betelgeuse is a giant collection of light, eight thousand or more times as luminous as the Sun, our local star.² Astronomers suspect that Betelgeuse may have been a binary (if not a triple or quadruple) star arrangement only a few hundred thousand years ago; they hypothesize that Betelgeuse engulfed its stellar companions, thus swelling its mass.³

Indeed, Betelgeuse is huge, but that is not the only factor making this star astronomically notable. What additionally marks Betelgeuse for special status is pronounced alteration in brightness. In fact, Betelgeuse brightness rating varies rather markedly, making the starshine of Betelgeuse at times rival that of Vega and Capella, the fifth and sixth brightest stars in the night sky. At other times it dims fainter than that of Deneb and Mimosa, the nineteenth and twentieth brightest stars in the night sky. Twenty-first century observations of Betelgeuse have suggested that this star expresses two periodicities in the alternation of its brightness, one of nearly 388 days and another of approximately 2050 days. The exact cause of this dual period of variability remains under consideration. Astronomers think that the variable and alternating brightness of the star Betelgeuse was known even in antiquity. But the first scientific account of it in western civilization was recorded in 1836 by English astronomer John Herschel, who reported significant variations Betelgeuse brightness in the mid-1800s. Similar periods of change were noted in the succeeding centuries, including a dramatic period of dimming in 2020.

Situated at an approximate distance of 640 to 724 light-years from Earth and having undergone its earliest conception point about 10 million years ago, Betelgeuse is estimated to be a relatively young star only 8 to 8.5 million years old, making it a youngster amongst stars which frequently live to be 1 to 10 billion years of age. Yet the youth of this star belies its age in experience, for Betelgeuse is understood by astronomy to be a massive star that has evolved at a blistering pace and is already approaching the end of its life cycle. Astronomers expect

Betelgeuse to explode into a supernova at some point in the next million years, the near future in astronomical terms. Astronomy believes that, like all red giants erupting into supernovae, when Betelgeuse bursts beyond its current boundaries, it will release vast quantities of raw elements which will generate a plethora of newly-born stars.⁴

Betelgeuse in Esotericism

Certainly, Betelgeuse evidences sufficient characteristics to rate as a distinguished celestial character on its astronomical merits alone. However, within the field of esoteric studies, something further singles out Betelgeuse from the other members of the Heavenly Host. According to the twentieth-century dispensation of the Ageless Wisdom, as transmitted by the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul through Alice Bailey, Betelgeuse is worthy of special attention. The reason is simple but profound: Betelgeuse is unique because it finds place within one of the seven chakram (or centers) in a great cosmic Existence. There, the star Betelgeuse fulfills a special function. This fact is revealed by the Tibetan's discussion of Betelgeuse as the source for one of the Seven Cosmic Paths,⁵ all of which paths lead to centers in the body of the inconceivably immense celestial life referred to in the Bailey presentation of the Ageless Wisdom as The One About Whom Naught May Be Said.⁶ Additionally, the Tibetan distinguishes Betelgeuse from many other of the Starry Host by placing it not just generally somewhere in the body of a greater life, but in a specific chakra or center within The One About Whom Naught May Be Said. In fact, it is the solar plexus center of this great cosmic entity in which the Tibetan has said that Betelgeuse resides.⁷ Given the peculiar functions of the solar plexus in any entity, this statement might reveal much. Yet, the Tibetan hedged or qualified his statement somewhat in this regard, saying of Betelgeuse that "This name is a blind."⁸ Though this statement surely casts an aura of doubt over the reliability of all information given by the Tibetan Master about Betelgeuse, the situation is not as hopeless as it might seem, for the term *occult blind* does not necessarily imply nonsense.

It might be said that an occult blind is constituted of an element or factor which stands for or represents another. In a way, the blind stands in front of and blocks the view of the “real thing,” which is hidden behind it. This being the case, it is highly possible that the name Betelgeuse is a blind only because it actually refers to or stands for the entire constellation in which this star is found. If this hypothesis proves true, then the cosmic solar plexus center referred to in this connection must include the entire constellation of Orion, and not merely the star Betelgeuse. As a result, the real cosmic solar plexus center to which Betelgeuse belongs may be the constellation Orion, the Hunter, the core and heart of the night sky mythology created by western civilization in the northern hemisphere.

The constellation Orion thus forms the context for the star Betelgeuse. As all lovers of the night sky know, Orion is a central and dramatic constellation seen during the winter months from the northern hemisphere, and the summer months in the southern hemisphere. During the months Orion is visible, Betelgeuse is seen located in the right shoulder area of the upraised right arm of the great hunter figure, Orion himself. From this placement in the anatomy of that great sky man, this star was long ago saddled with a homely name signifying its connection with the hunter’s anatomy. As it turns out, the word Betelgeuse is a corruption of an Arabic word meaning *The Armpit of the Central One*, a reference to the location of Betelgeuse in the underarm or general shoulder area of this large and obvious constellation that so dominates the sky at certain seasons and hours of the night.⁹ Betelgeuse has been called by other names indicative of its placement, such as *The Shoulder*, *The Arm*, and *The Right Hand*, and by yet others apparently unrelated to its position in the body of Orion, called by names such as *The Roarer* and *The Announcer*.¹⁰

Yet, as descriptive and imagistic as these names for Betelgeuse might be, none seems to address the esoteric promise of this star. Be that as it may, the esoteric doctrine holds that Betelgeuse is worthy of attention. In fact, Betelgeuse was pointed out by the Tibetan as one of several distant suns that affect our planet rather forcefully and directly.¹¹ A dramatic instance of influence

emanating from Betelgeuse occurred in the early twentieth century, when according to the Tibetan, certain waves of cosmic energy related to this star impinged upon our planet and thereby effected a change of consciousness.¹² In the early twentieth century, just as the emanations of Betelgeuse interacted with earth consciousness, Alice Bailey was hard at work taking dictation from the Tibetan for her seminal works, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, *Letters on Occult Meditation*, and the redoubtable *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, books that radically expanded the outlooks of generations of esoteric students and which ultimately contributed to the rise of the New Age Movement, evidence sufficient to many of a sudden acceleration of consciousness. These leaps of consciousness were developments that transformed religious and spiritual understandings worldwide, reaching out to touch the entire family of Humanity. Perhaps this is just to what the Tibetan referred when he stated that influence from Betelgeuse spurred a great expansion of consciousness on Earth in the early twentieth century, ultimately affecting all of Humanity.

According to the Tibetan, Betelgeuse not only has a generalized effect upon all of Humanity but also acts in particular upon two small and specific subgroupings of Humanity—the New Group of World Servers and senior disciples of Hierarchy. According to the Tibetan Master, individuals within these two groups experience the activation of the heart center when touched by influence from the star Betelgeuse.¹³ Since any heart center implies a Second Ray characteristic, it would appear that Betelgeuse’s effect upon the heart centers of dedicated servers includes a Second Ray component. Support for such a notion may be found in the Tibetan’s statement that Betelgeuse is a system of “the second order,” just as our solar system is one of the fourth-order.¹⁴ The fourth-order position of our solar system entails a definite correspondence to Fourth Ray qualities; thus, so must the second-order position of Betelgeuse entail correspondence to Ray Two qualities. Surely this ray correlation for Betelgeuse reveals something of its nature, but as shall be seen, it hardly exhausts the nature of influence from Betelgeuse as described by the Tibetan.

Betelgeuse and the Third Cosmic Path

Perhaps one of the most revealing perspectives on the nature of Betelgeuse can be found in the Tibetan's discussion of this star as the source of the Third Cosmic Path, the Path of Training for Planetary Logoi.¹⁵ However, since the Tibetan warned that the name Betelgeuse is a blind,¹⁶ it must be borne in mind that just as Aldebaran might be understood in some contexts to stand for the entire constellation of Taurus, Betelgeuse's name may be intended to evoke the entirety of the constellation in which it is found. Thus, all that the Tibetan stated about Betelgeuse may actually be descriptive of Orion, which entire star grouping may be the real source of the Third Cosmic Path. Even so, much may be learned about the star Betelgeuse from all that the Tibetan said about the Third Cosmic Path.

The Cosmic Paths, in general, are seven methods of evolution and service available to initiates of the Sixth Degree¹⁷ and beyond. Each of these Seven Paths functions ultimately as a path of return¹⁸ to the Central Spiritual Sun,¹⁹ leading on its way through one or other of the seven star groupings which make up the seven centers in the body of the Cosmic Logos,²⁰ The One About Whom Naught May Be Said. Inflow of energy from this Great Cosmic Logos was said by the Tibetan to literally create or make up the Seven Cosmic Paths.²¹ Thus, these Seven Cosmic Paths are immense streams of energies along which units of evolution may pass in their eonic journeys toward reunion with the center of all that is. On their ways, they pass to the centers of the Cosmic Logos by following one of the Seven Cosmic Paths.

On these Seven Paths, the characteristic method of progress is constituted of identification with the spiritual incentive that lies behind all subjective phenomena.²² As the Tibetan put it, "...the pulsating dynamic vibration which is the producing cause of both the subjective life and its qualitative form...becomes the goal of...endeavor...upon one of the seven Paths...."²³ These Paths are trodden or followed by initiates so advanced that they are, as the Tibetan described, passing out of the realm of substantial

forms altogether and into the realm of pure energy.²⁴ It is entities such as these who can appreciate the "spiritual incentive" or Divine Will that lies behind every type of manifested appearance, upon whatever plane such may make itself known. Training for this endeavor is carried out, according to the Tibetan Master, upon the higher planes of our solar system, these being the buddhic, atmic, monadic, and logoiic planes.²⁵ Thus, as is evident, only those advanced initiates who can function fully on these planes are qualified for such training.

As remote as such endeavors may seem from everyday existence on the physical plane, in fact, the Seven Cosmic Paths remain relevant for all Humanity. New information released toward the end of the Tibetan's work with Alice Bailey indicated that Humanity had already given sign that it contains potential to evolve along any of the current Seven Cosmic Paths (of which there may prove ultimately to be nine at some later point in systemic unfoldment),²⁶ no matter how divorced from such exalted realities current human evolution may seem. Thus, the Seven Cosmic Paths generally present avenues toward and into infinity for all who would tread them.

Although these Seven Cosmic Paths obviously and dramatically verge away from particularity and toward universality, each nonetheless embodies a particular cosmic skill or facility. The Cosmic Path associated with Betelgeuse is no different in this regard. It is called *The Path of Training for Planetary Logoi*,²⁷ and in this name, much is implied. Indeed, this path is trodden by advanced initiates who will in another solar system veritably become Planetary Logoi themselves,²⁸ taking up the work of the seven Planetary Logoi and that of their assistants²⁹ in the chains and globes of which any scheme is formed, in this manner becoming the guiding intelligences of the seven schemes of which any solar system is composed. In this role, they will do what all Planetary Logoi do: receive and distribute the Will of some Solar Logos. The capacity to sense and pass along the intended purpose of a Solar Logos is the cosmic skill learned on this the Third Cosmic Path, the Path of Training for Planetary Logoi.

In the words of the Tibetan, when the adepts of the Third Cosmic Path attain their objectives and become Planetary Logoi themselves, they will be "...concerned with the registration of the Purpose and expressed Will of some solar Logos," and with "the...impartation of that Will...to all the forms..." in the planetary scheme through which they will function at that time.³⁰ Therefore, the key skill needed by the adepts progressing along this line is, according to the Tibetan Master, a highly developed capacity for impression.³¹ This impression has naught to do with discerning the status or experience of individual units such as human beings, but instead has to do with registering the Will from above and the conditions and responses of whole kingdoms and collectives representing major portions of planetary life.³²

The registration of such impressions involves the development of sensory capability sufficient to the job at hand. Thus, the attributes or abilities garnered on this path have to do with sensing the condition of collective lives in the solar system and even beyond; hence these extended sensory capacities were characterized by the Tibetan as cosmic vision, deva hearing, and psychic correlation, as well as cosmic etheric vision and septenary clairvoyance.³³ All these terms describe new ranges of sensory capacity developed by the adept of the Third Cosmic Path, who is on the way to becoming the informing intelligence of a planetary scheme. Ultimately, adepts on this path develop a form of clairvoyance that extends to all the seven solar systems of which our Sun is one,³⁴ or in other words, to the centers in the body of the Cosmic Logos. This is the "septenary clairvoyance" referred to above. It is an ability to know the condition of the other centers in the body of the Cosmic Logos.

Betelgeuse is unique because it finds place within one of the seven chakram... in a great cosmic Existence. There, the star Betelgeuse fulfills a special function... as the source of one of the Seven Cosmic Paths, all of which paths lead to centers in the body of the inconceivably immense celestial Life referred to in the Bailey presentation of the Ageless Wisdom as The One about Whom Naught May Be said.

Of course, Betelgeuse itself is such a center (or contained in such a center). Recall that Betelgeuse was identified by the Tibetan as the solar plexus center of the Cosmic Logos.³⁵ As the solar plexus of the Cosmic Logos, this star (or its home constellation, Orion) functions as the "source of conscious sensation" for the Cosmic Logos,³⁶ much as the solar plexus center does for the human being.

Just as the individual's solar plexus registers surrounding conditions in the human world, so Betelgeuse (and perhaps Orion) works in the same way, except at a much more complex level of organization and upon a far higher turn of the spiral. While the individual solar plexus registers emotion and atmosphere in the Human Kingdom, Betelgeuse registers the

nature of certain conditions within the body of the Cosmic Logos.

As is clear, here is a territory that deals with phenomena and its registration, rather than its complete absence. This involvement with phenomena and its registration constitutes one of the characteristics distinguishing the Third Cosmic Path (and the training emanating from Betelgeuse) from the other Cosmic Paths and their sources. Yet, all the Cosmic Paths feature the attainment of spiritual identification with the cause of all phenomena, rather than with the phenomena themselves. This is true of the Third Cosmic Path, but not exclusively so, for as the Tibetan has revealed, the training given upon this path requires that certain faculties of sense perception be retained, while spiritual identification with that which is beyond sense perception is also developed.³⁷

Because of this deliberate engagement with levels of phenomena and their perception, the Tibetan Master referred to adepts of the Third Cosmic Path as *Lords of Cosmic Maya*. Again,

according to the Tibetan, these *Lords of Cosmic Maya* deal in the relation of the knower to the known,³⁸ an intricate philosophical and occult matter familiar to students of Eastern metaphysics. Thus, the relationship of the knower to the known, together with its implications, concerns the adepts of the Third Cosmic Path, who scrutinize the various degrees of maya (or the many material sheaths through which Spirit works) by way of “spiritual vision and hearing,” thus discerning the exact relationship existing between the Self and Not-Self.³⁹

In short, it might respectfully be tendered that the adepts of the Third Cosmic Path are given to the detection of that which constitutes a faithful reflection of the Self within in all forms, as opposed to that which does not. Their attention to the details of manifestation is evident in the occult symbol given by the Tibetan for this Cosmic Path: a cross formed of alternating bands of colored light⁴⁰ representing all the Seven Rays in the lengthwise arm, the transverse arm being filled with twelve additional subtle gradations of colored light not yet known on the physical plane. The entire cross appears as before a circular radiance of what may be royal blue, and features an indigo (or deep purplish-blue) five-pointed star at the juncture of the two arms of the cross. Surmounting the whole arrangement appears a phrase in the secret initiatory language of Senzar, written in characters of golden light.

It is said that this complex symbol represents the method of evolution followed upon this path—that of “prismatic identification,” or identification with all the variations of light and color to be seen in manifested creation. As is apparent, the role of color in the training for the Third Cosmic Path is alluded to in full within this symbol (which can be seen on higher planes by those prepared), and if the various colors of light are understood as references to rates of vibration, sound may be implied as well. Thus, it may be said that the entire assemblage restates in visual form the fact that, upon this Path, the adept receives an intensive training that covers color, sound, and the entire nature of duality which makes objectivity possible.⁴¹

Such is the initiatory wisdom connected with the influence of the star Betelgeuse, which, as is now apparent, in esotericism is something far greater than simply a portion of the classical mythology associated with Orion. Instead, Betelgeuse proves itself to be a majestic cosmic guru, teaching those that would be Planetary Logoi of the necessary skills for that position. It would seem that upon the Path of Training for Planetary Logoi, it is necessary to learn how to read all the possible energy characteristics and qualities that can arise from the multitudinous combinations of ray energies and their derivatives. This is undoubtedly necessitated by the fact that those in training to become Planetary Logoi must prepare themselves for the day when it is Their particular responsibility to hold and maintain a specific ray frequency or vibration during a vast period of time, over and against the coming and going of innumerable lesser cyclic ray influences arising within Their bodies of manifestation. Such a task will require a complete and perfect ability to detect and distinguish the various rays, their color sheaths or rates of vibration, and the sounds made by their presences.

Tutelage in these matters and more comes to adepts of the Third Cosmic Path not only through Betelgeuse, but also through esoteric agencies associated with both our own planet and that of others. For example, adepts training on the Third Cosmic Path receive instruction from three channels associated with Earth: 1) the Hierarchical department of the Mahachohan, 2) three exalted entities associated with Shamballa whom the Tibetan termed the Buddhas of Activity, and 3) the representative of our Planetary Logos, Sanat Kumara Himself.⁴² Beyond that point, this line of training ushers the adept to the planet Venus,⁴³ where progress is further advanced. Ultimately, Masters evolving on this path bring their training to perfection by assuming the role and function of Buddhas of Activity in some planetary scheme,⁴⁴ this or another. Thus, the adept of the Cosmic Path to Betelgeuse receives an ongoing initiation into the mysteries of advanced existence.

The Role of the Buddhas of Activity on the Cosmic Path to Betelgeuse

As is apparent, the role of the Buddhas of Activity in producing Masters on the Third Cosmic Path is critical, for adepts of this path must first be instructed by Them and then assume Their functions before becoming Planetary Logoi themselves. Thus, it is only appropriate to ask who and what these Buddhas of Activity may be, as presented in the Tibetan Master's revelation of the Ageless Wisdom.

According to the works of Alice Bailey and the Tibetan, Buddhas of Activity can be found in all the schemes of the solar system, for the term by which they are called is a generic one referring to a particular role or function in regard to the relationship between Solar and Planetary Logoi. On our planet, the current Buddhas of Activity are three of the 107 Kumaras who came from the Venus scheme at the individualization crisis 18 ½ million years ago.⁴⁵ In fact, according to the Tibetan, these three exalted entities hail ultimately from farther away than simply another scheme in our solar system, having their root origin in yet another solar system altogether.⁴⁶ Now acting as advisors to Sanat Kumara,⁴⁷ who is currently functioning one evolutionary step ahead of them,⁴⁸ the Buddhas of Activity hold in mind the purpose for which our globe exists,⁴⁹ which purpose is of course derived from the intended place of our globe, chain, and scheme within the body of the Solar Logos.

Thus, the Buddhas of Activity connected to our globe concern themselves with preserving the telepathic impression emanating from the Solar Logos, ensuring that this impression is duly imparted to the planetary situation. This is the function of Buddhas of Activity on all globes in all schemes, for the Buddhas of Activity link Solar Will with Logoic Activity. In this sense, They are assistants to both the Solar and Planetary Logoi. This is why their tutelage is relevant for those who would become Planetary Logoi Themselves. It might be said that the Buddhas of Activity are mentors to the young Planetary Logoi in the making, much as the dukes and barons of yore, though not kings themselves,

were nonetheless recruited to train the up-and-coming young kings of the medieval era. Knowing the ropes, they were in the best position to advise and instruct future kings. The Buddhas of Activity are agents of the same type. They understand the telepathic matrix of both the solar system and the planetary scheme.

In fact, the Buddhas of Activity attached to our planet are particularly suited to the task of instructing the young, up-and-coming Planetary Logoi, having themselves served as Planetary Logoi in a previous solar system.⁵⁰ This is perhaps an unusual state of affairs, since the Tibetan has stated that those in training for the status of Planetary Logoi normally conclude their apprenticeships as Buddhas of Activity before going on to the next stage as Planetary Logoi. However, our Buddhas of Activity have been there and come back again, bringing with them their experience as Logoi of three planetary schemes in which the mind principle reached its highest stage of development in the previous solar system. Now They function for Sanat Kumara as do the three levels of mind known to the student of the esoteric occult doctrine—as concrete or lower mind, the soul or son of mind, and the higher or abstract mind.⁵¹ This They do, of course, on an immensely higher turn of the spiral, yet the correspondence pertains.

Since attainment to the status of a Buddha of Activity normally constitutes the stage from which adepts on this path graduate to the level of Planetary Logoi, it would seem that the nature of the Buddhas of Activity encapsulates the essence of the Third Cosmic Path, which as stated earlier, is constituted of energy flowing from the star Betelgeuse (and perhaps its home constellation as well). Thus, both the Third Cosmic Path and the Buddhas of Activity reveal something about the nature of the cosmic solar plexus center and the great star Betelgeuse in the constellation of Orion. Each therefore deserves consideration

As the Tibetan Master has revealed, the Third Cosmic Path or Path to Betelgeuse concerns itself with the development of a broad range of vastly enhanced perceptual skills: cosmic vision, deva hearing, and septenary clairvoyance. These skills must be mastered by those on the

path of becoming Planetary Logoi before assuming a telepathic capacity appropriate to the Logos of a planetary scheme. It is entirely possible that Betelgeuse (or Orion) itself imparts precisely these abilities. Perhaps this is why the Tibetan referred to Betelgeuse as the source of “conscious sensation” in the cosmic body Logoi. The term “Conscious sensation” in this context might imply the capacity to sense the psychic and material environment in which a Planetary Logos lives. Applying this notion in simplest terms, it might be said that Betelgeuse and Orion may well impart vastly enhanced perceptual ability not only to the greatly advanced adepts following the Third Cosmic Path, but also in lesser measure to the more modest yet striving seekers following the path of discipleship and initiation while in embodiment as humans here on this planet.

What kind of enhanced perceptual ability this may be can perhaps be gleaned from a portrait of the Buddhas of Activity and how they function in regard to our globe. The picture presented by the Tibetan in this regard is complex, suggesting that the Buddhas of Activity fulfill many roles and functions. Theirs is not a simple task.

At one level, the Buddhas of Activity associated with our planet concern Themselves with rational response in matter, for according to the Tibetan, They “...embody within themselves the essence of the Ray of Active Intelligence...,”⁵² which fact surely accounts for the name by which They are called. As is axiomatic in esoteric studies, the Third Ray is equivalent to the Third Aspect of Deity, the distinguishing characteristic of which is its direct link with the material forms of creation and the power of matter to respond in meaningful manner, in contrast to the other two Aspects, which concern life and consciousness. Arrangements of matter in space and time are the purview of the Third Ray. It is in this Third Ray capacity that the Buddhas of Activity on our planet function when they manage various Third Ray phenomena, including electricity⁵³ and devic activity,⁵⁴ according to the Tibetan. Even so, this group of three exalted entities also contains within itself a synthesis of all the Three Aspects of Deity, representing life or will, love or wisdom, and

creative intelligence or creation,⁵⁵ and therefore being triple in essence, as are all things, according to the Ageless Wisdom. So, although the Buddhas of Activity are characterized as those who manage certain forms of electrical phenomena (or material appearance) on our planet, they are also representative of will and consciousness.

The fact that the group is made up of three figures or faces is also significant in another way. It is said that the three Buddhas of Activity together constitute a triangle which is to the Planetary Logos what the Spiritual Triad is to the personality.⁵⁶ From this vantage point high in the planetary Antahkarana, the Buddhas of Activity fulfill a special function. They capture inspiration from on high and pass it to the levels found below. In this sense, it is the work of the Buddhas of Activity to be, as the Tibetan stated it, “...impressed by the Will of God as it energizes the entire planetary life.”⁵⁷ Thus, the Buddhas of Activity form a triangle reflecting the Three Aspects of Deity at a high level within our planetary life.

This high level is, in fact, right at the top of our planetary manifestation, for the Buddhas of Activity are associated with the head center of our planet. According to the Tibetan, the Buddhas of Activity are members of the Great Council at Shamballa,⁵⁸ sharing from that point in the general work undertaken by Sanat Kumara, particularly His reception of cosmic intention emanating from the star Sirius,⁵⁹ which star is the parent system of our Solar Logos,⁶⁰ and hence higher even than the One who drives our systemic life. The Buddhas of Activity thus function to help Sanat Kumara connect with high levels of being and purpose coming in from what are even to Him fairly distant sources. In this, the function of the Buddhas of Activity as a spiritual triad for Sanat Kumara is made evident.

In just exactly what phenomenal form these three Buddhas of Activity exist, the Tibetan has not specified. However, he certainly made Their function clear enough. They are closer to Sanat Kumara in function than any other known entities, being his very mind, his helpers, and creative agents.⁶¹ They are, as the Tibetan

Master stated, the prime agents who take the Will from on high made into Sanat Kumara's Will and then impress that Will upon a group of Sixth and Seventh degree initiates⁶² called the Nirmanakayas⁶³ who bridge between Shamballa and Hierarchy.⁶⁴ As a result, this Will coming from Sanat Kumara and passing through the three Buddhas of Activity is likewise impressed upon the three great departments of our Planetary Hierarchy, represented by the Manu, the Christ, and the Mahachohan.⁶⁵ Thus, the Buddhas of Activity are centrally instrumental in moving the Will from Shamballa to Hierarchy, which is to say, from the planetary head center to the planetary heart center. Again, this function is suggestive of the spiritual triad in the human individual, since the spiritual triad in the human receives impression from the monad and in turn, imparts that impression to the mental body for conscious recognition by the personality. Thus, the Buddhas of Activity may be thought of in somewhat the same manner. In short, they are the spiritual triad of the Planetary Logos.

From Their vantage points high in the planetary Antahkarana, the Buddhas of Activity are in touch with a number of distant energy sources, some of a fairly surprising nature. That the Buddhas of Activity possess such distant celestial connections surely serves to substantiate the statement that the function of these entities is complex. Three such connections were identified by the Tibetan. They are as follows:

First, the Buddhas of Activity maintain telepathic contact with certain of the sacred planets,⁶⁶ the planet Saturn having been specified by the Tibetan as one of these.⁶⁷ Since the visible planet Saturn is given as the fourth globe of the third chain in our planetary scheme,⁶⁸ this would mean that the Buddhas of Activity on our planet are in communication with other chains and globes in our planetary scheme, not with just our own chain (which is enumerated as the fourth in the Tibetan's presentation). Extrapolating and generalizing from this information, it is thus possible to say that part of the function of the Buddhas of Activity on any globe is the maintenance of communication with the globes of other chains. Certainly, this seems true of the Buddhas of Activity associated with our globe

or planet,⁶⁹ for they are in communication with the sacred planets, all of which except Mercury are in different chains than is our planet.⁷⁰

Next, the Buddhas of Activity associated with our planet participate in the consciousness dynamics resulting from a planetary triangle made of Earth and two other planets,⁷¹ one of which may well be Saturn, as identified above, and possibly Venus the other.⁷² The resulting impressions received by the Buddhas of Activity are then distributed to Hierarchy.⁷³

Finally, the Buddhas of Activity on our planet reach far beyond the confines of our planetary scheme and even our solar system to function as a bridge in consciousness linking our planet with our Solar Logos and the informing life of the constellation Libra.⁷⁴ Thus, They hold down one point of a cosmic triangle constituted on the other two points of our Solar Logos on one hand, and the collective life of numerous Solar Logoi making up the constellation Libra on the other. In this, and the previous functions, the Buddhas of Activity can be seen relating to several different evolutionary orders of magnitude all at one time. As stated before, Theirs is not a simple task.

Not only are the Buddhas of Activity engaged with varying evolutionary orders to the upside of the evolutionary arc, but also are they linked quite fundamentally with equally varying orders on the portion of the evolutionary arc which is downline to Their positions in the scheme of things. For example, the Buddhas of Activity are involved in facilitating the transfer of souls from other planetary schemes onto our globe, when such is required by the over-arching Plan.⁷⁵ They likewise have a profound relationship to the Kingdom of Souls existing on this planet, for it has now been revealed that the Buddhas of Activity were highly instrumental in bringing about the crisis of individualization eighteen and a half million years ago,⁷⁶ which crisis (among other things) brought into being the Kingdom of Souls on our planet.

In this regard, the Tibetan Master stated, "It is these three Buddhas who were instrumental in the...process of implementing the mental process upon our planet, and who—through their creative meditation—brought our planet, the

Earth, and the planet Venus into direct alignment.”⁷⁷ Here is the connection with Venus symbolism (whether that be construed as the scheme, chain, or globe of that name) so frequently mentioned in the esoteric lore concerning that key event of 18 ½ million years ago called the “individualization crisis” by the Tibetan.

It was during the 18 ½ million year ago event that several related events transpired; our Planetary Logos took an initiation, Hierarchy was established on Earth, and animal men were given the spark of mind by the Lords of the Flame. Surely, if ever there was a turning point in the evolution of a globe, this was it, and the Buddhas of Activity were right there, intimately involved in it all. Note that their function in this momentous happening required that they bridge a gap between another planet (a higher order of being) and animal men as they existed at that time (a very much lower order of being). Here is a good example of the complex interactions characteristic of the role played by the Buddhas of Activity.

Here on our planet, the Buddhas of Activity remain relevant to processes occurring on this globe. According to the Tibetan, They have a special connection with certain of the race periods, these being the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Races,⁷⁸ or the races during which manas is perfected that it may provide a basis for the subsequent flowering of the intuition in races Six and Seven. This linkage of the Buddhas of Activity with the manasic race periods echoes Their involvement with the establishment of mind on this planet during the individualization crisis, and the general Third Ray characteristic for which They are known, since the Third Ray is the ray of manas, as the Tibetan made clear in *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*.⁷⁹

Thus, it should be borne in mind that the Buddhas of Activity are fundamentally involved with the furtherance of manas, which is to say, the Ray of Active Intelligence (itself containing the four rays of attribute), whether this occurs in the form of those things which transpire during a race period or those things which concern the Planetary Logos in His grasp of cosmic intention. Here again is encountered the profound

complexity inherent in the role of the Buddhas of Activity, surely a rich training ground for those who pass their way.

In yet another facet of Their responsibilities, the Buddhas of Activity associated with our planet bring Their enormous perspectives to bear upon matters which even affect the individual striving disciple, for as the Tibetan has revealed, these great entities who truly have their minds in the stars also turn their gazes toward specific human individuals and groups. This they do when They perform certain important functions during the rites of initiation administered by Hierarchy.⁸⁰

Thus, as is apparent, the Buddhas of Activity carry on multiple duties, tasks, and functions, spanning a broad range of contacts. These functions include the reception of impression from Sirius and the congeries of Solar Logoi to be found in the constellation of Libra, telepathic communication with other planetary schemes in our solar system, converse with other chains in our scheme, projection of impression to the Nirmanakayas, the Manu, the Christ, and the Mahachohan, influence upon and supervision of race periods, and even performance of certain duties at the initiation ceremonies of individuals and groups on this our globe. In this multifaceted set of skills and function, the Buddhas of Activity seem to cover nearly all the possibilities. And, it is in their deep footprints which adepts following the Third Cosmic Path must learn to tread, for the Buddhas of Activity help train those who would become Planetary Logoi.

The Tibetan’s Use of the Term “Buddhas of Activity”

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated what the Tibetan had in mind when, in dictation to Alice Bailey, he used the term “Buddhas of Activity.” However, this term has a history of which it is well to be informed. In this regard there are two main issues of relevance. The first concerns the use of this term in conventional Buddhism and its subsequent use in the Theosophical movement. The second concerns an apparently alternative meaning for this term used by the Tibetan himself.

The entire matter is conditioned by the fact that Djwhal Khul was a Tibetan adept, likely steeped in all the religions and philosophies of Asia, but especially that of the Tibetan Buddhists of the Himalayan region. Certainly, it would have been natural for him to select terms from this tradition, with which he was undoubtedly familiar, when attempting to embody an abstruse metaphysical idea in suitable language, especially if his intention were to reveal the previously guarded and inner teaching regarding particulars veiled by certain esoteric Buddhist concepts. Such considerations must always be held in mind when analyzing the Tibetan's use of language and terms.

Early in his dictations to Bailey, the Tibetan indicated that the Buddhas of Activity are also referred to by another term as well—as Pratyeka Buddhas.⁸¹ Oddly, Pratyeka Buddha is a term used by certain sects of conventional Buddhist philosophy to describe a limited degree of spiritual advancement in which an individual discovers truth without having been led by a teacher or teaching, and hence fails to pass along the boon of spiritual instruction to others.⁸² Blavatsky understood the term in a closely related sense, describing the Pratyeka Buddha in her *Theosophical Glossary* as a degree of attainment recognized only by the Yogacharya school of philosophy, a degree in which an individual of great spiritual discipline manages to extract himself from the snares of material existence, but lacks the generosity of heart to labor after the same advantage for others.⁸³ Both definitions hinge on the connotation of the Sanskrit word, pratyeka, which means “for oneself alone,”⁸⁴ featuring a solitary seeker bent on personal but not collective liberation.

As is clear, in neither the conventional Buddhist definition of the term nor the Theosophical usage is there reflected the grand scope of consciousness and endeavor associated by the

Betelgeuse confers dramatic expansions of perceptual ability, expansions of the Third Ray ability to perceive the environment. The environment concerned here, however, is the entirety of the solar system, for... the Third Cosmic Path, climaxes in the development of septenary clairvoyance, an ability to register spiritual conditions in all seven schemes of the solar system.

Tibetan with the term “Buddhas of Activity” in *Initiation, Human and Solar, A Treatise on Cosmic Fire, Discipleship in the New Age, and The Rays and the Initiations*. Thus, it would appear that the main sense in which the Tibetan used this term is not at all consistent with the way in which the term “Pratyeka Buddha” had been used in the past.

To make matters even more complex, there exists at least one passage in the Bailey material in which the Tibetan himself apparently used an alternative meaning for the term *Buddhas of Activity*. In the version of the *Stanzas of Dzyan* which appears in the first few pages of *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, this term appears in *Stanza IX*, written in lower case,

and discussed in proximity to “lords of love” and “lords of power.”⁸⁵ The stanza under consideration concerns an episode in distant systemic history when “thirty thousand million” units of evolution refused to immerse themselves in form. The story related in the stanza ends at some point in the future when this situation shall have been corrected and “buddhas of activity” (also referred to as “buddhas of creation” here) shall have been joined by lords of love and lords of power in a final perfected statement of manifestation. There are two hints in this passage which serve to reveal what may be the proper interpretation of its rather obscure contents.

First, there is the reference to thirty thousand million units. This phraseology immediately brings to mind the passage in which the Tibetan specified the number of monads evolving within our planetary scheme.⁸⁶ There, he stated that our planetary scheme contains approximately 35 thousand million monads of love, 20 thousand million monads of activity, and 5 thousand million monads of power. The total comes to about 60 thousand million human monads, as he said. To speak of so many “thousand million” is a round-about way to say so

many billion of this or that, but that is a secondary point. The main issue is the similar formula in which the numbers are given in the *Cosmic Fire* passage and the passage from *Stanza IX*. This similarity suggests that *Stanza IX* concerns the same matter as does the other passage – in other words, human monads. About half of those 60 thousand million human monads would easily make the 30 thousand million rebellious units around whom the story of the stanza revolves.

If this is the case, then in this particular usage, the term “buddhas of activity” means human monads on the Third Ray, the Ray of Activity of or Active Intelligence, and not just three of the original 107 Kumaras who accompanied Sanat Kumara when He first arrived on this planet. In this sense, “buddhas of activity” may be used in the *Stanzas* in a more liberal sense, meaning “spiritual units colored by the Ray of Active Intelligence, and possessing capacity for complete spiritual perfection,” i.e., *Buddhas*, or potentially enlightened ones. Thus, the reader must be alert to the various ways in which such terms may be used.

Note as well that *Stanza IX* contains a reference to “buddhas of creation.” Here is the second hint. The word “creation” is associated with the Third Logos and the Third Ray, the only factors in the Divine Triplicity which enter into the material process, according to the esoteric occult doctrine. Thus, “buddhas of creation” can only be units colored by the Third Ray; hence, quite likely Third Ray monads.

Indeed, the Tibetan used terminology linked with the Third Ray in yet another related passage in *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, but this time in reference to the three Buddhas of Activity (that is, the three Kumaras closely associated with Sanat Kumara), calling them the “Buddhas of Action.”⁸⁷ Here he has substituted “action” for “activity.” Surely this only very slight change is nothing but a variation on a theme, but one worth noting, for it does point out the various uses of language of which an astute student of the Ageless Wisdom must be aware. Action is one of the characteristics of the Third Logos. Thus, Buddhas of Activity are Buddhas of Action, as well.

However, none of this linguistic hairsplitting disturbs the fundamental nature of the esoteric teaching concerning the function of the three Kumaras found in the Council Chamber at Shamballa and the equivalents of Whom, throughout the solar system, instruct adepts in the attainment of cosmic vision, deva hearing, and septenary clairvoyance on the Path of Training for Planetary Logoi. These, it might be said, are the representatives of the great star Betelgeuse and its starry home in Orion, for it is energy emitted by this center in a greater Logos which constitutes the Third Cosmic Path, the path upon which the Council Chamber Buddhas of Activity and their counterparts on other globes play such a vital role. What all this implies for the nature of the Third Cosmic Path and therefore for Betelgeuse, its source, is of the essence. It would appear that Betelgeuse, and perhaps its entire home constellation of Orion, is the root inspiration for substantive expansions of consciousness and perception required in the making of a Planetary Logos.

Sagittarius as the Astrological Intermediary of Betelgeuse

According to the Tibetan, the influence of Betelgeuse (and perhaps therefore that of Orion as well) finds its way into our solar system through the sign Sagittarius.⁸⁸ As all students of astrological symbolism know, the glyph for Sagittarius features an arrow in flight. Interestingly, an arrow design is easily perceived in the stars of the Great Hunter constellation, Orion, in which Betelgeuse is situated. This visual similarity may be suggestive of the esoteric link between these factors. However, it should be noted that Betelgeuse and Orion are not at all in the same part of the sky as is the location of the sign of Sagittarius in the ecliptic, for the Great Hunter and his starry components lie on the approximately opposite side of the celestial sphere from the portion of the ecliptic called Sagittarius. So, there is no literal or spatial identity between Betelgeuse, Orion, and Sagittarius—only a thematic one, based perhaps on similarities of energy quality. However, there might be said to exist a line-of-sight relationship between Betelgeuse on one side of the celestial sphere and Sagittarius on the other, for

when Earth can see Betelgeuse as a night star, an imaginary line drawn from Betelgeuse to Earth and through the Sun would point in the direction of Sagittarius. Thus, though Betelgeuse and Sagittarius are not on the same side of the celestial sphere as viewed from Earth, they do sit in approximate axial alignment. This spatial alignment may form some significant portion of the reason why Betelgeuse acts through Sagittarius, though the Tibetan did not offer this explanation.

All the same, according to the esoteric astrological doctrine, it is through the sign of Sagittarius that pour the influences of Betelgeuse (and perhaps those of Orion). From Betelgeuse and into Sagittarius flow the great energies that foster the massive expansions of consciousness required for the development of Planetary Logoi status. Expansion of consciousness is certainly one of the key themes of Sagittarius, a sign symbolized esoterically by the mounted archer shooting an arrow of intellectual inquiry at a distant and unseen target, only to pursue his quarry of knowledge and understanding unto the vanishing horizon. Truly, the archer of Sagittarius mounted on a powerful steed signifies the capacity to cover vast territories of thought and action, yet another reason Sagittarius might be associated with the expansion of consciousness theme embedded in Betelgeuse. Further, the exoteric ruler of Sagittarius is Jupiter, the largest planet in the solar system and hence the very epitome of extensive territory and even of cosmic levels of expansion. Here is an additional connection to the expansion of consciousness themes associated with Betelgeuse through the nature of the Third Cosmic Path. The similarity of themes between the Sagittarian expansion of consciousness and that associated with the Path to Betelgeuse is indeed striking, suggesting that the linkage of Sagittarius and Betelgeuse makes plain good sense. As a result, esoteric consideration of the Sagittarius influence should always include the realization that it may well carry all that Betelgeuse (and possibly Orion) ultimately promise in the way of cosmic vision, deva hearing, and septenary clairvoyance,⁸⁹ though such higher gifts fail of even partial realization by those unprepared.

Obviously, arriving at such elevated attainments entails a long evolutionary journey, for which the traveling sign of Sagittarius is perhaps an apt metaphor. Diverse evolutionary experiences will be necessitated, and diversity is surely the province of the Third Ray. This is the ray distributed by Earth, the esoteric ruler of Sagittarius, a fact which again points to the variety of skills and capabilities represented by the Buddhas of Activity as mentors for those in training on the Cosmic Path to Betelgeuse. The Third Ray is also pre-eminently associated with the Buddhas of Activity, Who light the way on the Cosmic Path that leads back to Betelgeuse, and Who call mightily upon the full implications of the Ray of Active Intelligence in their supervision of manasic development during long evolutionary cycles.

As has been shown, under the aegis of Sagittarius and its Third Ray esoteric ruler, an expanded territory of diverse experience is available to both the advanced adept and the average seeker. It would thus appear that not only Sagittarian expansion themes, but also Third Ray influences and qualities cluster around much with which the influence of Betelgeuse is linked. This is not to say that the energies emitted by Betelgeuse are exclusively of a Third Ray character, but it does point strongly in the direction of the Ray of Active Intelligence as a significant contributor to the influence imparted by this stellar entity, and perhaps that of the entire constellation in which it is embedded.

Betelgeuse and Orion in World in Myth and Legend

The star Betelgeuse forms part of the hunter figure perceived by ancient peoples in the constellation Orion; thus, the hunting theme dominates classical western mythological stories associated with this region of the sky. These stories deal with conflict, aggression, competition, sexual adventures, terrifying beasts, marauders, and the gory details of slaughter.⁹⁰ Not much in these western astronomical myths concerning Betelgeuse corresponds in any recognizable way to the esoteric lore connected with this star, except for one fact—Orion's massive

frame and his reputation as a giant amongst the gods of the night sky. According to H.P. Blavatsky, this aspect of the Orion myth is in fact, a remnant of truth concerning the vastly larger human beings and other entities who once stalked the Earth during previous races.⁹¹

Ancient Egypt also saw Orion as a great man in the sky, but in Egyptian conceptualization, Orion was not an only marginally respectable roughneck, but rather the deific figure of sacred Osiris,⁹² archetype of resurrection and eternal life. It was unto Osiris, located in Orion, that rose the ascending soul of the dead king in the stellar religion of Egypt.⁹³ It was so because the whole region of Orion (including nearby Sirius) constituted what the religion of ancient Egypt called the “Duat,”⁹⁴ an especially significant portion of the sky said to contain the gate into immortal existence. It was to the Duat that all attention was directed, for it constituted the target toward which the liberated soul of the deceased one was to wing its determined way in resolute and confident pursuit of eternal life. The striking parallel between a spiritual journey to Orion on the one hand, and the Third Cosmic Path, which leads to Betelgeuse in that same general region on the other, is hard to ignore. As in the cases of many other celestial factors, ancient Egyptian religion seems to furnish the nuts and bolts to support the Tibetan’s key contention that there is more real esoteric truth in aspects of astronomical myth than has hitherto been thought. Where the ancient Egyptian religion perceived a path to immortality and eternal union with Spirit through specific stars, the esoteric teaching identifies a path leading to Higher Evolution, also through specific stars. Betelgeuse in Orion figures importantly to both.

Conclusion

As a prominent star in a highly noticeable constellation, the star Betelgeuse has captured the attention of Humanity since classical times. In fact, as one of the fastest evolving stars known to contemporary science, Betelgeuse is a red giant variable star with a surprising astronomical history. Located prominently in the well-known constellation Orion, Betelgeuse is also connected with the mythological, religious, and spiritual themes associated with this star by

the ancient civilizations of Greece and Egypt. To the Greeks, Orion was a mighty hunter, while to the Egyptians, he was the embodiment of sacred Osiris. In both cases, the star Betelgeuse figured prominently, and in esotericism may occultly represent the entirety of Orion, the constellation in which it is found.

For students of the Alice Bailey writings, the star Betelgeuse rates as important because the Tibetan Master mentioned it specifically and by name in a few key passages. In fact, the Tibetan singled Betelgeuse out, identifying it as the solar plexus center in *The One About Whom Naught May Be Said*. Although little specific information regarding the star Betelgeuse and its psychospiritual effect on humans was actually given in the Tibetan’s revelation of the Ageless Wisdom, certain understandings about the nature of this star within the cosmology of the Bailey writings might be inferred from the discussions in which mention of this star is primarily embedded. These discussions occur in the Tibetan’s explanation of the Third Cosmic Path, the Path to Betelgeuse. Thus, the best path to knowing Betelgeuse seems to be the cultivation of familiarity with the nature of the Third Cosmic Path.

The Third Cosmic Path is the Path of Training for Planetary Logoi. Overseen by the Buddhas of Activity who are strongly representative of the Third Ray, this path features development of consciousness in a unique way that focuses on the Third Ray theme of perception. Further, all that is said by the Tibetan Master about the Third Cosmic Path and its features constitute hints as to the nature of Betelgeuse. Even though Betelgeuse is said to dwell in the cosmic solar plexus, it appears to be filled with an abundance of Third Ray correspondences. This fact does not, however, necessarily exclude the possible presence of a Sixth Ray component such as would normally be expected with a correspondence to the solar plexus center. At any rate, the Third Ray is in some contexts associated by the Tibetan with instinct,⁹⁵ which characteristic emanates most decidedly from the solar plexus center in the animal kingdom. And so, it is not unthinkable that the Third Ray may find a home in the solar plexus center of a Greater Logoi Being, just as is implied by its

position as the source and destination of the Third Cosmic Path.

In keeping with this Third Ray stimulus and as suggested by the nature of the skills attained by those on the Third Cosmic Path, it might be tendered that Betelgeuse confers dramatic expansions of perceptual ability, these being extensions of the Third Ray ability to perceive the environment. The environment concerned here, however, is the entirety of the solar system, for as has been discussed, the Third Cosmic Path climaxes in the development of *septenary clairvoyance*, an ability to register spiritual conditions in all seven schemes of the solar system. It is this level of sentient response to surrounding life which Betelgeuse must therefore represent from its place as “the source of conscious sensation” in the body of the One About Whom Naught May Be Said. It is even possible that this is true of the entire constellation of Orion, which star grouping Betelgeuse might be said to represent in the current revelation of the esoteric astrological and occult doctrine.

Further, the Tibetan’s revelations about the Buddhas of Activity may offer insight into the nature of Betelgeuse and its occult influence. In this regard, it is important to consider the fact that the Buddhas of Activity not only train those on the way to becoming Planetary Logoi, but also intimately assist our existing Planetary Logos, as represented by Sanat Kumara. In that role, the Buddhas of Activity receive the Will Aspect emanating from Sirius and Our Solar Logos as it comes through Sanat Kumara. The Buddhas of Activity then telepathically impress that Will on a group of high initiates called the Nirmanakayas, who bridge between Shamballa and Hierarchy. Bridging from one location to another seems to be a special function of the

Buddhas of Activity, who also link our planet with several of the sacred planets in our system, and with the stars in the constellation of Libra. Thus, if the Buddhas of Activity are any indication about the nature of Betelgeuse, then Betelgeuse fulfills a number of functions, just as do the Buddhas of Activity. Additionally, it is well to know that the Tibetan used the term Buddhas of Activity in his own unique way, to be distinguished from the use of the same and related terms in comparative religion.

Finally, the influence of Betelgeuse is transmitted astrologically through the constellation and sign of Sagittarius. Although neither the constellation nor the sign Sagittarius is located in the same vicinity of the celestial sphere as are Betelgeuse and Orion, the constellation and sign of Sagittarius can be considered to sit on an axis of alignment with Betelgeuse. Further, Sagittarius is certainly thematically appropriate as an astrological intermediary for Betelgeuse, given the Third Ray esoteric ruler of the sign Sagittarius and the themes of expansion associated with that sign.

Thus, based on the Tibetan Master’s revelations regarding The Path of Training for Planetary Logoi, it appears that the star Betelgeuse located in and representing Orion is a key stellar entity, fulfilling the function of a solar plexus within the body of The One About Whom Naught May Be Said, imparting powers of vastly enhanced cosmic sensitivity and perception to advancing initiates, inspiring the work of the Buddhas of Activity in the Great Council of Shamballa, and pouring forth consciousness-expanding streams of energy into our planetary life through the agency of Sagittarius. There’s a thought to remember while gazing up at the twinkling red giant.

¹ Julius D. W. Staal, *The New Patterns in the Sky* (Roanoke, VA: McDonald and Woodward Publishing Co., 1996), 2, 72.

² Ibid., 62.

³ R.H. Allen, *Star Names, Their Lore and Meaning* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 312. “Forming Betelgeuse from a Stellar Merger,” *Nova*, American Astronomical Society, [https://aanova.org/2020/06/22/featured-image-](https://aanova.org/2020/06/22/featured-image-forming-betelgeuse-from-a-stellar-merger/)

[forming-betelgeuse-from-a-stellar-merger/](https://aanova.org/2020/06/22/featured-image-forming-betelgeuse-from-a-stellar-merger/) (accessed August 12, 2020).

⁴ “Hubble Finds That Betelgeuse’s Mysterious Dimming Is Due to a Traumatic Outburst,” *Hubblesite*, <https://hubblesite.org/contents/news-releases/2020/news-2020-44> (accessed August 13, 2020). “Betelgeuse,” *Star Facts*, <https://www.star-facts.com/betelgeuse/> (accessed August 12, 2020).

- 5 Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (reprint, 1979; New York: Lucis Trust, 1951), 1255. Here Betelgeuse is given as the source for the Third Cosmic Path, the Path of Training for Planetary Logoi.
- 6 Ibid., 1242.
- 7 Ibid., 1253.
- 8 Ibid., 1255.
- 9 Allen, *Star Names, Their Lore and Meaning*, 310.
- 10 Ibid., 310 – 311.
- 11 Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Astrology* (reprint, 1979; New York: Lucis Trust, 1951), 15.
- 12 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1255.
- 13 Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology II* (reprint, 1970; New York: Lucis Trust, 1942), 721.
- 14 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1255.
- 15 Ibid., 1255, 1257; Alice A. Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations* (reprint, 1988; New York: Lucis Trust, 1960), 427.
- 16 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1255.
- 17 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 410. This, the Sixth Initiation, is the point at which the advanced initiate decides or settles upon one of the Seven Cosmic Paths to tread from that point forward, and hence this initiation is referred to as the Initiation of Decision.

However, as many careful readers of the Bailey writings will note, The Initiation of Decision was indeed presented in the Tibetan's earlier dictations to Alice Bailey as the Fifth Initiation. For example, see Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1241. Many years later, the Tibetan indicated that evolutionary advances had led to the designation of the Sixth Initiation as that of the Decision (*The Rays and the Initiations*, 410), and the Fifth as that of the Revelation (*The Rays and the Initiations*, 643).

According to the Tibetan as quoted in *The Rays and Initiations*, 424, at what is now considered the Fifth Initiation, "...a revelation of the true united goal of the seven Paths and likewise a vision of their varying intermediate, individual goals" is accorded; hence the moniker, "The Revelation." The nature of the Seven Cosmic Paths is unveiled at this point, and again according to the Tibetan, it is at this point that the initiate gains the first vision of the "door" through which one must pass to gain entry to the Seven Cosmic Paths. See *The Rays and the Initiations*, 391, on this point.

Consequently, the effort to discern the nature of the Seven Cosmic Paths occupies the attention of the initiate between the Fifth and Sixth

Initiations (the Revelation and Decision Initiations, respectively), and so the existence of the Seven Cosmic Paths most certainly constitutes a major factor for the Initiate of the Fifth Degree, according to the Tibetan as quoted in *The Rays and the Initiations*, 391.

Nonetheless, the final choice of cosmic path is now made at the Sixth Initiation, which is therefore called the Initiation of Decision.

- 18 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 404.
- 19 Ibid., 391.
- 20 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1242.
- 21 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 423.
- 22 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1236, 1253.
- 23 Ibid., 1241.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 391.
- 26 Ibid., 412.
- 27 Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (reprint, 1979; New York: Lucis Trust, 1951), 187; *The Rays and the Initiations*, 405.
- 28 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 407.
- 29 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1254.
- 30 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 406.
- 31 Ibid., 407.
- 32 Ibid., 406.
- 33 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1258; *The Rays and the Initiations*, 427.
- 34 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1257.
- 35 This fact can be discerned by putting together information on 1253 and 1257 of *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, on which pages (respectively) the Tibetan identified the source of the Third Cosmic Path as the solar plexus center of the Cosmic Logos, and then the source of the Third Cosmic Path as the star Betelgeuse. Therefore, the source of the Third Cosmic Path is Betelgeuse (or the constellation in which it is found), which star (or constellation) must therefore function as the solar plexus of the Cosmic Logos.
- 36 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1253.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., 1254.
- 40 Ibid., 1256 – 1258.
- 41 Ibid., 1256.
- 42 Ibid., 1255 – 1256. Identification of Sanat Kumara as the personality expression of our Planetary Logos is given on 652 of *The Rays and the Initiations*. Since personality is in general associated with the Third Aspect, this may in part, explain why our planet is frequently said to distribute the Third Ray.
- 43 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 405.
- 44 Ibid., 407.

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- 45 Ibid., 267.
 46 Ibid.
 47 Ibid.
 48 Ibid., 268.
 49 Ibid., 267.
 50 Ibid.
 51 Ibid., 267 – 268.
 52 Alice A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age II* (reprint, 1983; New York: Lucis Trust, 1955), 200.
 53 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 873. This is not only true of all three Buddhas of Activity in a general sense, but of one of them in a very particular sense. See *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 74. There the Tibetan mentioned that one of the Buddhas of Activity adjusts the working of the Third Ray in its manifestation as the fire of matter.
 54 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 180.
 55 Alice A. Bailey, *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle* (reprint, 1978; New York: Lucis Trust, 1950), 185; *The Rays and the Initiations*, 407.
 56 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 257, 273.
 57 Bailey, *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*, 45.
 58 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 206.
 59 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 130. For an exhaustive study of the nature of cosmic intention expressing through the star Sirius, see M. Temple Richmond, *Sirius*.
 60 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 570. See also *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 844, and *The Rays and the Initiations*, 687, for further information. For an exhaustive treatment detailing the role of Sirius in the occult cosmology, see *Sirius*, by M. Temple Richmond.
 61 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 587.
 62 Ibid., 735.
 63 Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age II*, 210. The word *Nirmanakaya* is of Sanskrit origin. According to Lama Anagarika Govinda in his *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (213, 222), *nirmanakaya* is a term used by the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism to signify the physical vehicle of an enlightened one (or Buddha), in contradistinction to the dharma-kaya, which is the universal aspect of an enlightened one, and the sambhogakaya, which is the spiritual or ideal nature of an enlightened one on the plane of inner vision. This triple structure might be found to conform more or less to the monad, soul, and personality in the esoteric occult vocabulary, with the dharma-kaya corresponding to the monad, the sambhogakaya the soul, and the nirmanakaya, the personality.

Theosophist Geoffrey Barborka gives the literal translation of the word *nirmanakaya* in his *Glossary of Sanskrit Terms* (46) as “the body which is builded; hence, the vehicle that is maintained by one who has renounced Nirvana; therefore, a Buddha of Compassion.” Blavatsky’s entry on *nirmanakaya* in the *Theosophical Glossary* (231) gives in a similar vein an extensive treatment of this term, designed to dispel what she saw as the numerous misconceptions concerning its definition, which she also gave as an enlightened one who has relinquished the invitation to eternal bliss in favor of remaining in contact with embodied beings to help them toward spiritual liberation. Following upon Blavatsky, her fellow Theosophist William Q. Judge also used the term *nirmanakaya*, but in yet even another sense, as reported in Volume X, Number 1 (January 2004) of *Theosophical History: A Quarterly Journal of Research*, 13. For Judge, the *nirmanakaya* was an astral form used by a deceased adept for the helping of Humanity, particularly in the promotion of Blavatskian Theosophy. This definition would appear to differ significantly from the standard Buddhist usage, which equates the *nirmanakaya* with the physical vehicle of an enlightened one, for Judge equated it with the astral vehicle, or at least whatever was meant by that term in his day, which is not necessarily what today’s student of the Alice Bailey writings understands by the word *astral*. All this serves to greatly complicate the matter of this word *nirmanakaya*.

As is apparent, the term *nirmanakaya* has been used and defined differently in various contexts. It would appear that the Tibetan had a particular definition in mind for this term, by which he specifically meant members of Hierarchy of the Sixth and Seventh initiatory degrees in regard to the matters discussed above, but also members of the Eighth and Ninth initiatory degrees in regard to mediation between our planet and the planet Venus, as stated in *The Rays and the Initiations*, 735. This definition does not necessarily exclude the other meanings used in Buddhist philosophy and their echoes or variations in Theosophical terminology, but the reader should be mindful when encountering this term in contexts other than the Bailey writings. The “*nirmanakaya*” spoken of there may not refer to the Hierarchical offices specified by the Tibetan under this word. As ever, the Tibetan’s use of language is special, perhaps reflecting an inner and Hierarchical tradition that has always

existed, far pre-dating the appearance of similar terms in subsequent religions and philosophies.

64 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 734.

65 Bailey, *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*, 119 – 120.

66 Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (reprint, 1979; New York: Lucis Trust, 1951), 40.

67 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 269.

68 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 373; *Esoteric Astrology*, 693.

69 Here the words “globe” and “planet” are interchangeable.

70 Mercury is given as the fifth globe in the fourth chain on 373 of *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, and so it may be in the same chain as is the Earth, given in the same tabulation as the fourth globe in the fourth chain.

71 Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 43.

72 That Venus is the third planet in this triangle is speculatively offered, following upon p. 200 in *Discipleship in the New Age II*, in which passage the Tibetan indicated a particular link between the Buddhas of Activity and the planet Venus.

73 Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 43.

74 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 267.

75 Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 40.

76 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 268.

77 Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age II*, 200.

78 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 272.

79 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 336.

80 Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 108, 158.

81 *Ibid.*, 38 – 39.

82 John R. Hinnells, ed., *A New Dictionary of Religions* (reprint, 1998; Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 1984), 366.

83 H.P. Blavatsky, *Theosophical Glossary* (reprint, 2005; London: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1892), 261.

84 Geoffrey A. Barborka, *Glossary of Sanskrit Terms*, 52.

85 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 26.

86 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 579. See also *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1093.

87 *Ibid.*, 874.

88 Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, 1255; *The Rays and the Initiations*, 427. In both of these citations, the Tibetan specified the sign, not the constellation of Sagittarius, so in this case, he was referring to the 30-degree division of the ecliptic identified as the sign of Sagittarius.

89 Here indeed is what might be considered the higher component of the prophetic and visionary abilities frequently attributed to the influence of Sagittarius.

90 Staal, *The New Patterns in the Sky*, 61 – 72.

91 H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine II* (reprint, 1974; Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1988), 277.

92 Staal, *The New Patterns in the Sky*, 64. Recent research has re-confirmed this. See Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery* (New York: Broadway Books, 1995).

93 See Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery*; Robert Bauval and Graham Hancock, *The Message of the Sphinx* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

94 Bauval and Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery*, 116; Bauval and Hancock, *The Message of the Sphinx*, 139, 232.

95 Bailey, *Esoteric Psychology I* (reprint, 1990; New York: Lucis Trust, 1962), 422.

Nizām, Ibn ‘Arabī and the Importance of Beauty as a Path to God

Irina Kuzminsky

“Beauty is the reflection of reality in the mirror of illusion.”¹ Ibn ‘Arabī

“Love Beauty: it is the shadow of God on the universe.”² Gabriela Mistral

Abstract

This study offers a meditation on the role of Beauty on the Way as a path of Return to God in the work and thought of the Sufi scholar, poet and mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī, with specific reference to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* or *The Interpreter of Desires*, his collection of love poetry dedicated to the Lady Nizām. Ibn ‘Arabī’s intensely transformative relationship with Nizām is explored in the context of relations between Sufi men and women, and likewise of Ibn ‘Arabī’s own multifaceted relationships with women, encompassing his radical understanding of the genders and the role of women in general, in whom, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Divine is to be most perfectly witnessed. Commencing with an exploration of the significance of Beauty, this study explores the relationship with Nizām in its wider social and religious context, and the poems of the *Tarjumān*, to conclude with Ibn ‘Arabī’s belief in the significance of sacred poetry for the mystic as a way of “saying the unsayable.”

* * *

Praise be to God whose actions are beautiful,

‘the Beautiful (jamīl) who loves beauty (al-jamāl),’

who created the world in the most perfect form and adorned it ...

Ibn ‘Arabī, the *khutba* or introductory prayer from the First Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*³

Beauty

I paint my eyes to enhance your beauty
Yea, to enhance your beauty I paint my eyes.

* * *

Beauty is nought if It leads not beyond.

* * *

Help me to bear the beauty which others perceive.

Beauty which I don’t possess - yet others’ perception

Perceives it seeing their own hearts’ desire.⁴

In Italian, there is a concept that affirms the importance of beauty, both inner and outer, as a form of self-respect and respect of others—it is the concept of “la bella figura,” and it is by no means as superficial as it might at first appear. A deep philosophy underpins this valuing of beauty and the beautiful, a beauty which is both the result of inner harmony and gives rise to harmony, harmony between self and surroundings, harmony in appearance, actions, speech and thought. An aspiration to embody “la bella figura” is an aspiration for self-improvement and self-refinement, it is a display of self-respect and a manifestation of respect for and trust in the greater Harmony of the Universe of which we are all parts. As such,

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ultimately, Beauty becomes an indicator of that greater Harmony which is of God.⁵

“God (Allāh) is beautiful and loves beauty” states a well-known and accepted ḥadīth, in the face of puritanical fundamentalist attempts to excise beauty from Islam. In fact, there are those Muslims who say that Beauty is at the essence of their faith and its “highest expression,”⁶ and that Islam is surrender to the Beauty of Allāh. Allāh is said to describe Himself to humanity through His Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names,⁷ and beauty is revealed in creation to evoke love, the prime mover or cause of creation. Hence, to be the best Muslim would be to express that beauty in yourself and in your life. For the Sufi philosopher, mystic, and poet, Ibn ‘Arabī, also known as Shaykh al-Akbar or the Greatest Master, the seeker’s ability to witness the beauty of the Divine Essence becomes a sign of spiritual refinement along the Way.

In common with other Islamic thinkers, Ibn ‘Arabī divides the Divine Names or Attributes into two principal types, attributes of beauty (*jamāl*) and attributes of majesty and power (*jalāl*). Of the two, it is the attributes of beauty that Ibn ‘Arabī prioritizes most consistently. Indeed, the importance of Beauty to Ibn ‘Arabī as a way to God can scarcely be overstated. As Jane Clark points out: “Ibn ‘Arabī was one of the greatest exponents within the Islamic tradition of the idea that beauty, and the beauty of God, the One Reality, has a central place in both the cosmos and in the realization of human potential.”⁸ It was the Desire of the One to see His Beauty manifested in form that led to the Creation, Ibn ‘Arabī states. Expanding on this thought, he writes in the *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings* or *The Meccan Revelations*):

When God made the cosmos manifest, it was in itself His place of self-revelation, so He saw nothing within it but His own beauty (*jamāl*), and He loved the beauty. Thus, the cosmos is God’s beauty, and He is both the beautiful (*al-jamīl*) and the lover of beauty (*al-muḥibbu li-l-jamīl*). Anyone who loves the cosmos in this regard has loved it with God’s love, and has loved nothing but God’s beauty, for the beauty of a work of art is not

ascribed to itself; it is ascribed to the one who made it.⁹

At the same time, as Cyrus Zargar points out,¹⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī equally sees beauty as awesome and terrifying, calling it *jalāl al-jamāl* or the “majesty of beauty,” thus seamlessly bringing the two principal types of Divine Attributes together in a concept of beauty which possesses might and dominance.¹¹

There has been a lot written about beauty of late in the West, particularly in the context of modern Western art movements, and much of it has been disparaging. Somehow, the maxim that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” has been twisted and co-opted into a justification of classifying the ugly, which is of necessity inharmonious, as beautiful. Indeed, the maxim itself is far more profound than is usually given credit for, as the eye as the organ of perception requires its own purification if it is to be able to perceive beauty in all of its manifestations. It is true that the harmonious and purified eye will be capable of perceiving the underlying foundational beauty in everything, but that is a level of development and refinement of the ego open to the very few.

For Ibn ‘Arabī the beauty and harmony of the things of this world were a way of coming to perceive the Beauty and Greater Harmony of their Creator.¹² For him also, this ability to pass through the veils of outward appearances to witness the purity of the essential Beauty of things or people is attained only through the purification of the self and one’s organs of perception. Thus this perception or revelation was not open to everyone. Those who are not sufficiently purified or refined are in danger from the dazzling glamour of outward appearances. However, when the veils are lifted and the real Divine Beauty underlying them is revealed, the mystic or the gnostic (the knower) may attain the state of mystical Union even through the contemplation of such outward appearances because his eye is pure.

Just as the concept of “la bella figura,” though not limited to women, is primarily embodied by them, so is Beauty perceived as primarily a feminine virtue or attribute. This has been questioned and denigrated of late, but that is largely

through a confusion of meaning, equating beauty with a superficial veneer of outward appearances and neglecting its deeper attributes of both inner and outer harmony. Women, in particular, have rebelled against confinement to what they started to see as a demeaning role, while at the same time paradoxically increasing a search for outer adornments, such as an unrealizable fashionable shape, facial features, skin, and the like. It is as though the further away human beings move from a real appreciation of beauty, the more desperately we try to chase an illusory semblance of it, a chimera. We try to find it in its most superficial trappings, while neglecting the true Harmony which should be our quest.

To be a carrier of the Beautiful is to have the power to bring others closer to both perceiving and manifesting a harmonious Universe. It is to be a carrier of the Image of the Divine Feminine. It is not a power to be taken lightly or to be used unconsciously. It is surely of this Beauty that Dostoevsky spoke when he made his famous pronouncement that “Beauty will save the world.”

One of the historical figures who have come down to us as an embodiment of that Beauty and its power is the Lady Nizām bint Makīn al-Dīn, as perceived through the eyes of the Sufi mystic, poet and scholar, Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī. Nizām’s beauty, both physical and spiritual, continued to both torment and inspire Ibn ‘Arabī throughout the years of his long life.

Ibn ‘Arabī and Nizām

Because as for me, I see a being
Whose beauty increases,
Brilliant and superb
At every one of our meetings.
One does not escape an ecstasy
That exists in kinship
With beauty that continues to intensify
To the point of perfect harmony.¹³
“She is the object of my Quest and my
hope, the Virgin Most Pure.”¹⁴

Nizām bint Makīn al-Dīn who inspired the poetry of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-*

ashwāq, was a young Persian Sufi woman residing at the time in Mecca. Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240) had arrived in Mecca in 1202 hoping to study with the shaykha, Fakhr al-Nisā’ bint Rustam, who was the expert in traditional Islamic scholarship in Mecca. However, she turned him down as a potential student, pleading her advanced years as an excuse. This prominent shaykha and scholar was Nizām’s aunt. However, she did authorize her brother, Nizām’s father, to write a certificate of authorization for Ibn ‘Arabī to transmit all the ḥadīth she had taught. Nizām’s father, Makīn al-Dīn Abi Shaja’ Zāhir ibn Rustam al-Isfahani, was himself a shaykh of high standing and a distinguished scholar in Mecca.

Mecca was to prove a pivotal point in Ibn ‘Arabī’s intellectual and spiritual growth. Apart from the fateful meeting with Nizām and the poetry that flowed from it, it was in Mecca that Ibn ‘Arabī started on what would become his magnum opus which took him thirty years to complete—*The Meccan Openings (Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)*.

Nizām made an indelible impression on Ibn ‘Arabī, who describes two types of interaction with her in the Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*. One occurred when he was circumambulating the Ka’ba and, moved to ecstasy, recited one of his poems aloud, only to feel a light touch on his shoulder, and find a young woman reproving him for his words as being unworthy of a Sufi master. Here she appears as an otherworldly figure, a Byzantine princess, and a teacher and spiritual master herself. At other times she appears as a flesh and blood young Persian woman whom Ibn ‘Arabī meets in her father’s house, and who is exceptional for her beauty, her wisdom and her general charisma.

In fact, although the otherworldly young woman from the second part of the Preface is assumed by most scholars to be Nizām, it is possible to question this¹⁵ as she remains unnamed, describing herself only as *qurrat al’ayn* (the freshness of the eye).¹⁶ However, Ibn ‘Arabī does explicitly state: “Whenever I mention a name in this book I always allude to her [i.e., Nizām], and whenever I mourn over an abode I mean her abode.”¹⁷ Here I shall follow the

majority of scholars in equating this unnamed mysterious woman with Nizām, albeit in an apotheosis which reveals her essence as an embodiment of divine Wisdom or Sophia. In the meeting at the Ka'ba, she acts as a spiritual master, criticizing Ibn 'Arabī for allowing rational doubt to intrude on his mystical insight, which is, of course, the province of Sophia, for it is sapiential wisdom which unveils direct experiential knowledge. Ibn 'Arabī's moment of doubt seems atypical of the master, for despite being a jurist, philosopher and theologian, he claims most often to have acquired his knowledge through "openings," that is, theophanies or visions, which open the heart to the wisdom and gnostic knowledge being unveiled, bypassing and surpassing the mind and the intellect in their moment of revelation. The meeting with Nizām at the Ka'ba is the occasion of just such a theophany.

But who is Nizām herself in all of this? We see her through the eyes of Ibn 'Arabī, but she has left no writings and no record, at least none that have survived. Is she primarily a literary trope, an embodiment of Sophia, an idealized portrayal of the Feminine who becomes the male poet's guide, inspiration and light in the manner of Dante's Beatrice, Cavalcanti's Lady or Petrarch's Laura?¹⁸ While Nizām does share aspects with these human exemplars of the Feminine, above all she comes across as a very real young woman of flesh and blood with whom Ibn 'Arabī forms a deeply passionate and spiritually intense relationship.

Here she is as described by Ibn 'Arabī in his original Preface to the *Tarjumān*. She was

riveting to gaze upon. She adorned the assemblies, delighting whoever was addressing the gathering, and confounding her peers [with her beauty and her intellect] ... She was named "*Ayn al-shams wa-l-bahā*"—the source of the sun and the glory [in other translations "the Eye of the Sun and of Beauty"]—one of the women who are learned and who serve God, who are dervishes and ascetics; the shaykha of the two sanctuaries (Mecca and Medina) and the culture of the greatest sacred land (Mecca). She was bewitching in her looks, 'Irāqī in her culture. If she talked at length, she could

outstay anyone; if she spoke concisely she did it in incomparable style; and if she spoke eloquently, she was lucid ...¹⁹

We see here a young woman who is clearly comfortable and visible in mixed company, and is not veiled, neither her face nor her discourse nor her thoughts. At the Ka'ba she does not hesitate to reprimand and admonish the older famous shaykh, speaking as his spiritual master or superior. She possesses understanding, learning, spirituality, and inner and outer beauty.

Ibn 'Arabī does not hesitate to mention her physicality and the impact it produced:

If not for the paltry souls who are ever ready for scandal and predisposed to malice, I should comment here on the beauties of her body as well as her soul, which was a garden of generosity.

He speaks further of her "unwavering friendship," "grace of mind" and "modesty of bearing," continuing "she is the object of my Quest and my hope, the Virgin Most Pure."²⁰

She is "a sun amongst the knowers and a garden amongst the cultured; a sealed flask and the central pearl of a perfectly strung necklace; the unique one of her time and the most precious thing of her age..."²¹

For a start, Nizām challenges many of our preconceptions about the role and standing of women in Islamic societies at the time, as does Ibn 'Arabī himself, who was never slow to pay homage to his female spiritual teachers, nor to acknowledge his many female disciples as fully-fledged aspirants on the Sufi path. However, his relationship with Nizām, while not so unusual for him given his many associations with women, is different. It goes both further and deeper until, in the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* or *The Interpreter of Desires*, the volume of sixty-one poems dedicated to her (the number is not definitively fixed, in some versions being given as sixty or as sixty-two), she appears as the fervently desired Beloved who also leads Ibn 'Arabī on a mystical quest for God as the Divine Feminine. However, in contrast to Beatrice or Laura, Nizām comes across not only as an embodiment of Sophia, but very much as a sensual and spirited young woman.

In fact, Nizām exhibits a remarkable degree of both social and spiritual freedom that is suggestive of the freedom other accomplished Sufi women would have enjoyed, as it is highly improbable that Nizām's position, while perhaps unusual, would have been totally exceptional for her time. We know of Sufi women who lived independently and traveled in pursuit of knowledge, often in the company of unrelated male Sufis, and we know of female Sufi teachers who took on both male and female disciples.²² Through Nizām it is possible to see the relative freedom and independence accorded to some Sufi women, even if these women were likely to be exceptional in some way, such as intellectual learning, or spiritual attainment. Through their unconventional lives they demonstrate in a real way the Sufi maxim that it is the state of the soul that is the primary defining value of a human being.

A composite picture emerges of a young woman unveiled but modest, comfortable and confident in mixed company and in sustaining friendships with unrelated men. Nizām's physical beauty is clearly visible, yet it does not define her. She is eloquent, unmarried, and uninhibited, and not constrained by gender or age in terms of her spiritual attainment, or in her relationship with the celebrated shaykh. In her independence, her self-assuredness, and assertiveness, as well as in her spiritual stature, she is reminiscent of Mary Magdalene in the gnostic gospels, although, unlike Mary, we do not witness her being put down or questioned by powerful men. Nor do we see her leading congregations like Mary, although her eloquent speech could point to a skill in preaching and giving commentaries on sacred teachings. It appears that her sexual propriety did come in for questioning through her friendship with Ibn 'Arabī, whose own morality and sexual propriety in relation to her were likewise questioned. Unlike Mary Magdalene though, she has never been maligned as a prostitute. Still, the parallels between the two women are interesting in terms of a certain model of female spiritual attainment and such a woman's relationship to a male spiritual master.

Even so, Nizām remains a tantalizing presence. Who was she in her own mind and being? Not from the perspective of a man writing

predominantly for himself and for other men but in and for herself? We have no self-representation by Nizām, only one mediated through the subjectivity of Ibn 'Arabī. How do we fill the gaps? That is a question that has come to the forefront among feminist scholars, struggling to fill the lacunae of our recorded human history in a way that does not exclude half of humanity. Hints and omissions leave clues for a creative reconstruction, and that is what we are faced with also in the character of Nizām.²³

What was it like for Nizām to be that Mirror, to be that Muse? We may never know. Yet, this is what inspired *Circling the Centre - Conversations with Nizām*, a series of seven dialogues between Nizām and Ibn 'Arabī, a work of "creative imagination" in the fullest sense of that term. Nizām speaks in this work:

She: Speak to me of the Lover

No -

Be the Lover

The Beloved seeks -

Your words then

Shall be - Fire

Lighting Fire

Beyond words and

Beyond

Silence.

[...]

She: There is but this,

A perfume which you may distil

And make forever present to yourself

Thus present through all time.

[...]

He and *She:*

I am caught in the semblance of grace

- too many the veils between us

I am caught unravelling in time

- too clinging your fear

I am caught still searching for your embrace

- too obstinate your sense of separation

I am caught in the net of mercy...

- what is its face?²⁴

To turn to Nizām as she is perceived by Ibn ‘Arabī, her name already reveals her essence, for the meaning of Nizām is Harmony, harmonious order, artful arrangement, perfected harmony, or, also, the stringing of pearls in a necklace.²⁵ The Pythagoreans saw this harmony or perfect harmonious order as intrinsic to the cosmos, and for Ibn ‘Arabī too, the created universe was orderly and harmonious. Nizām both reflects and encapsulates that harmonious order. There is a further meaning of n/z/m, the root of the name Nizām, which is to compose poetry, *naẓm* being verse.²⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī plays with all the overlapping meanings of this root, stringing words together into the harmonious order of a necklace of verses which he then presents to Nizām.

The Beauty of Nizām

She is one of the girls with swelling breasts
who guard their honour, tender, virgin and
beautiful,

Full moons over branches: they fear no
waning.

In a garden of my body’s country is a dove
perched on a *bān* bough,

Dying of desire, melting with passion, be-
cause that which befell me hath befallen
her.²⁷

It has already been seen how Ibn ‘Arabī celebrates and affirms Nizām’s physical beauty alongside her spiritual and intellectual attainments, and the poems themselves provide further explicitly erotic examples of this. Ibn ‘Arabī does not shy away from praising and describing Nizām’s very physical and sensuous beauty in lines such as the following from poem 46 with its explicitly erotic imagery: “A sweet-lipped girl, dark-lipped, honeyed where she is kissed” or “girls with large breasts, virginally bashful, playfully passionate.”²⁸

At no time does he condemn Nizām’s beauty, or the beauty of women in general, as a source of temptation for the male or a cipher for the evils of the material world. Indeed, beauty, and specifically Nizām’s beauty, is celebrated as a gift of God and valued in the poems for its ability to awaken an all-consuming longing and desire, which become the longing of the Lover for the

Beloved who is none other than God. Nizām’s beauty is a mirror of God’s ultimate Beauty, and it is her degree of refinement that makes it possible for the Divine Attributes, such as Beauty, to be revealed through her. Both Nizām’s physical beauty and her spiritual beauty are valued as indications of the degree of spiritual ascendancy she has attained. As such, she models the degree of perfection every human being should aspire to. Ibn ‘Arabī’s naming of her as the “Virgin Most Pure” gives an extra indication of the spiritual stature he ascribed to her, as this was a phrase used to refer to Mary the Mother of Jesus (the Virgin Mary), who is highly esteemed in Islam. And it was also possibly a way for Ibn ‘Arabī to deflect criticism from Nizām by stressing her purity and her virginity.

Criticism of Ibn ‘Arabī and Nizām

Dark moon rising

Spilling ecstasy and grief

Mirrored - I am

- in you

Seeking the mirror of Love

I am bound

To seek it - here -

- in You.²⁹

Even Ibn ‘Arabī, the Greatest Master, did not escape criticism and accusations of immorality and even heresy from the puritanical Muslims of his day. The *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, his exultant ode to Nizām, to Beauty, to Love, to the all-engulfing quest for the Beloved, and to God in a feminine form, provoked a disapproval which persists in certain Islamic circles. Indeed, the questioning of Ibn ‘Arabī’s orthodoxy has been widespread over the centuries, with some regarding him as the greatest Sufi master and Islamic scholar, and others accusing him of heresy.³⁰ As recently as 1979, members of the People’s Assembly (Egypt’s Lower House) attempted to officially ban Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings in Egypt, effectively branding him a heretic.³¹ They failed, but, infidel or saint, the controversy around him continues into the present day in certain circles, and the *Tarjumān* plays its own role in it. Ibn ‘Arabī was suspected of

immorality and sexual impropriety in his relationship with Nizām, and the accusations were sufficiently serious to force him to write a second Preface and Commentary to the *Tarjumān*, explaining and justifying his poetry in great detail. Ibn ‘Arabī explains the reasons behind his Commentary quite clearly: apparently, it was being put around that what he had said about the poems expressing divine knowledge and “esoteric ideas and realities” was not true and merely a cover-up for the erotic poetry.³²

Despite Ibn ‘Arabī’s detailed and extensive self-defense, the controversy still simmers today. In a recent article, “Did Ibn al-‘Arabī marry Nizām?,” the author goes to great lengths to defend both Nizām’s honor and Ibn ‘Arabī by claiming that he clearly must have married her and interpreting the meeting at the Ka’ba with the mysterious “princess of the Greeks” as a marriage proposal. Only thus could her behavior and her free speech be excused, and the poetry not incur censure.³³

Interestingly, there is another revelatory episode Ibn ‘Arabī experienced at the Ka’ba, albeit with a young man,³⁴ or the “Young Man” (fatā). Ibn ‘Arabī had already encountered this “Young Man” previously in Andalusia, as a poem from the *Dīwān* states, followed by another initiatory encounter related at the beginning of the *Book of the Nocturnal Journey*. At the Ka’ba, Ibn ‘Arabī encounters him again and writes at length about the meeting, stating that the “reality of his beauty was unveiled for me and I was overwhelmed by love,” a statement that points again to the importance of Beauty in the mystic’s quest according to Ibn ‘Arabī. The “Young Man” does not speak in words, only in signs and symbols, so Ibn ‘Arabī becomes his “interpreter” (similar to a “*tarjumān*”), explaining that what he had communicated was “I am Knowledge, the Known, and the Knower, I am Sapience, the Sapiential Work, and the Sage.” Allegedly, the *Meccan Openings* came from these silent Sophianic revelations, although in this encounter, Sapientia takes on embodiment as a young man who is seen to belong to the Imaginal Realm. The encounter at the Ka’ba with Nizām holds similar overtones except that here it is a real woman playing the part of Divine Wisdom.

Ibn ‘Arabī was comfortable amongst women—his relationships with the women in his family, his female masters, and his female disciples and peers all bear witness to this. Unlike many of his contemporaries, also in the Sufi community, Ibn ‘Arabī did not see women as an impediment or a threat to the spiritual life of male seekers. Rather, he famously claimed that God is most perfectly witnessed in women.³⁵ His position, however, would not have been the most widespread, as even amongst the Sufis, many saw women as the embodiment of a dangerously disruptive sexuality for men and society at large. Sufi women were not infrequently accused of sexual misconduct, a tried and tested way of bringing down a woman’s status and discrediting her, with Mary Magdalene from a different tradition being one of the more famous examples and victims of such libel.

However, even given Ibn ‘Arabī’s relatively radical attitude towards women, the relationship with Nizām, enigmatic and intense, went further in many ways. While inspiring an absolute Love and lasting friendship on every level, Ibn ‘Arabī and Nizām also modeled a unique relationship which was not a marriage, nor a sexual liaison, but, rather, a profound friendship which was spiritually transformative, at least for him, and, most probably, for her. This is of necessity conjecture, but given the paucity of women’s voices which have come down to us, such conjectures are needed. So, what of Nizām? We cannot know for sure, but nor is there any record of a marriage. Sa’diyya Shaikh conjectures convincingly that she never married: “Nizām also independently embodies a different model: from all accounts, she remained single and was clearly a highly spiritually attained individual, as were Rābi’a and other celibate Sufi women and men.”³⁶

It is highly significant that of all his works, Ibn ‘Arabī left the recitation of only the *Tarjumān* exclusively to himself, not entrusting it to anyone from among his students. This was certainly the case towards the end of his life when he had established a school in Damascus to pass on his legacy. The *Tarjumān* was by all accounts read regularly during the school’s assemblies, and it was “the *Tarjumān* which Ibn ‘Arabī, of all his

works, chose to recite in person, rather than having one of his students recite it.”³⁷

Women, Mysticism, Immanence and Transcendence

The Mirror mirroring

The universe’s reach

God mirroring Him/Self

Her/Self

Discovering Self - in you.³⁸

The debate that plays out in the criticism of the *Tarjumān* is, at its most profound level, a debate about the transcendence and immanence of the Godhead. Patriarchal religions, or patriarchal interpretations of religion, tend to emphasize the “terrible” awe-inducing or *jalālī* qualities of the Godhead, such as unknowability, majesty, and power. God is the beyond of the beyond, utterly transcendent and unreachable. God’s Immanence, by contrast, is more often associated with the Feminine Aspect of the Godhead (examples from Hinduism and Judaism are Parashakti and the Shekhinah) and with qualities such as love, beauty, and mercy (*jamālī* qualities), whereas God’s Transcendence and *jalālī* qualities are traditionally seen as a Masculine Aspect.

The denigration of women and the feminine is usually accompanied by a mistrustful attitude towards God’s immanence mirrored in Creation, an attitude which also tends to downplay the Divine qualities of mercy and love—even though God speaks for instance in the ḥadīth on Mercy: “Verily My Mercy precedes My Wrath.”³⁹ For Ibn ‘Arabī, these qualities of love and mercy are precisely the most important ones for human beings to aspire to.

The appreciation of God’s Immanence is most often associated with faiths that honor a Feminine Divine principle, either as primary, or as coequal with the Masculine Divine principle. Tantrism and Tantric Buddhism are striking examples of a faith and worldview in which the world and its creatures, and women in particular, are honored, while God is worshipped also as Mother. Women themselves can function as

spiritual guides in these traditions and as mirrors or embodiments of the Divine attributes on earth. A relationship with a woman can serve as a spiritual initiation in itself, although many Tantrics, for instance, in Tibetan *vajrayana*, considered this quite a perilous practice and a degree of initiation only open to those (men) who had already attained an elevated stage of spiritual refinement and mastery.⁴⁰

In a like fashion, Ibn ‘Arabī states that “the male disciple should not have friendships with women until he reaches a particular state of spiritual maturity, at which point his soul becomes ‘feminine’ in its receptivity to the Divine,”⁴¹ thereby affirming the view that such teachings and insights should be limited to those who had already attained a high degree of spiritual refinement. Essentially, this would equate to a spiritual and intellectual Sufī elite. At that stage, there can be love without sexual or social impropriety, and Nizām and Ibn ‘Arabī (and probably other Sufis of both genders) would most likely have seen their relationships in these terms. Ibn ‘Arabī himself asserts that he had reached a spiritual degree not attained by any of his peers, namely the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood.

That is not to say, however, that sexual love and union was something that Ibn ‘Arabī denigrated or even disapproved of on the spiritual path. There is what might loosely be called a Tantric slant in Ibn ‘Arabī’s appraisal of love as a pathway to the knowledge of God. For him, as in Tantra, sexual union, given the right degrees of purification, refinement, and proper understanding, could lead to spiritual epiphanies, as it imitates God’s relationship with Man. Ibn ‘Arabī states explicitly that the *qutb* or highest in the hierarchy of saints, the Axis, loves women and often engages in sexual intercourse, not for procreation but solely for pleasure.⁴² The *qutb* is also said to love beauty as it mirrors the Beauty of the Divine. Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement that God could be most profoundly and perfectly witnessed in women is a great affirmation not only of women, but of human love.⁴³

The poems of the *Tarjumān* are both a great outpouring of love and an ode to that witnessing of the core of love being the core of God. In

Woman, in this case Nizām, divine reality can be unveiled.

Ibn ‘Arabī frequently refers to a particular *ḥadīth* in his writings: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known so I created the world that I might be known.”⁴⁴ From this it follows that the reason for the existence of creation is divine desire (a concept again similar to Tantra). Thus, God is seen to be both eternally hidden and radically other in the Divine Essence, and self-revealing through the Divine Names and Attributes (or Energies in the Christian tradition of Gregory of Palamas). Hence, God is always unveiling and always veiled, a realization attested to in every mystical tradition. This “becoming” in the sense of self-revelation, as distinct to “being,” is the traditional province of the Divine Feminine face of God and Its immanence in the world. Through Its agency it is possible to witness the Hidden Treasure self-revealing in the mirror of the world. It goes without saying that a full revelation of the Divine Essence is by definition impossible and would mean annihilation for anything created—no man, no human being, may gaze on Isis Unveiled and live, to refer to a different tradition. The Ultimate Source must always be concealed by veils, veils of darkness, veils of light. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes, if God were to remove His 70,000 veils of darkness and of light the revelation of His Face would mean our destruction, our incineration as separate entities in the pure fire of His Gaze.⁴⁵ The Source Itself is absolute Unity, so of necessity, all multiplicity would be annihilated in that Unity. No separate forms could exist. Nevertheless, all separate forms derive their Being from this Essence. For God desires to be known, and the Divine Names are traces of that desire. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the Desire of God for His creature is what causes that creature to desire God, become a “desirer” or lover of God in turn, leading eventually to *fanā* or annihilation in the Divine.

Ibn ‘Arabī struggles to say the Unsayable, clothe the paradox of existence and non-existence in language, and explain how it is that the universe as being different from God is an illusion, and yet, it is neither other than God, nor is it God. As he writes in the *Futūḥāt*, these are truths that can only be understood by the heart,

which can reconcile all opposites within itself: “The universe is neither pure Being nor pure nothingness. It is total magic: it makes you think that it is God and it is not God; it makes you think that it is creation and it is not creation, for in every respect it is neither this nor that.” (*Futūḥāt*, IV, 151)⁴⁶

This is subtly but profoundly different from pantheism which simplistically asserts that everything is God; but nor does it create a chasm between spirit and matter, the existence of the cosmos and the existence of God. The universe is both illusory and non-illusory, both and at the same time. Ibn ‘Arabī, like the Tantrics, endorses a return to God not through escaping the world but by returning to God through God, that is, through God’s Names and Attributes as manifested in the world, pouring into the world in an act of self-revelation, as expressed in the *ḥadīth*: “I was a Hidden treasure and I loved to be known.” But, equally, one can only recognize the God he or she can contain, and thus, for all of us, this has to be the “God created by beliefs.”⁴⁷

The one who is refined or purified—we might call such a one enlightened in contemporary parlance—is capable of witnessing the immanence of God to the extent of their own “refinement” or enlightenment. Ibn ‘Arabī maintains, “He whom God has illuminated sees Him in all things.”⁴⁸ In a similar vein, St Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833), a beloved Russian saint and sage who had many visions of the Mother of God, addressed his disciple Motovilov consistently as “your Godliness,” having become capable of seeing the Divine spark in all. The Qur’ān itself states unequivocally: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (Qur’ān 2:115) In short, while the Divine Essence is beyond any form or image, the Divine Energies (Attributes, Names) may be witnessed in the world of forms. This is a concept common to the great faiths of humanity—Gregory of Palamas speaks of the essence and energies of God, Hinduism, to give another example, of the eternally unknowable Brahman and the Parashakti who awakens and embodies the creative energies of God in an outworking of the Divine Essence. And Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of the Essence of God, *al-dhāt*, as the Void, and of God’s Names and

Attributes as God's self-revelation. In a like manner, Ibn 'Arabī's concept of the Breath of God generating words which constitute the universe—"The universe is nothing more than His words"⁴⁹—shows a deep affinity to St John's Word or Logos and Kali's Necklace of Letters. It also follows that if the universe is a divine manifestation, all of it—matter, the body included, must be "good" in the sense of Genesis where "God saw that it was good." And hence women, associated with the embodiment of birth, are also "good."

For Ibn 'Arabī, the archetypal complete human being, the original Adam or *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, is like a polished mirror of all the Divine Names, the most perfect embodiment of the desire of the Divine to be known. This archetypal human ensouls the universe, imbuing consciousness into the cosmos. And human beings, as they strive for that original completion, aspire once again to embody the fullness of the Divine Attributes in a journey of Return from multiplicity back to the One.

This original Adam is reminiscent of Jesus's concept of the "Anthropos" or the "Single One" in the Gospel of Thomas, a word signifying the perfected and completed human being, regardless of gender. It is not for nothing that of all the Prophets, Jesus was the one Ibn 'Arabī felt the closest affinity to, calling Him his first teacher and the master through whom he returned to God.⁵⁰

Ibn 'Arabī categorically states that there is no gender differentiation in the human potential for attaining the perfection and completeness of the original Adam. Men and women are seen to be equally capable of the necessary spiritual refinement to embody this state. In fact, for Ibn 'Arabī this is a crucial and distinguishing aspect of the Islamic view of human nature, namely that all are capable of perfecting, and that women have identical spiritual potential to men.⁵¹

In her book, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, Sa'diyya Shaikh speaks eloquently of the "egalitarian ethical call of Islam,"⁵² reminding the reader that Allāh as the Godhead is radically free of anthropomorphism, and hence of gender

and of duality. Ibn 'Arabī, both in his life and writings, demonstrated how very seriously he took these, for him, core concepts of Islam, stressing the equal capacity and potentiality of all human beings for knowledge and spirituality, irrespective of any outer characteristics such as gender. Nor did Ibn 'Arabī shy away from the social, religious or ritual implications of this core belief of radical egalitarianism, such as affirming that women could equally well lead mixed congregations in prayer, deliver sermons, and be Imams.⁵³ Once again, this is an affirmation of how the inner state of the human being is the primary determinant of worth for the Sufī, not gender or any other outward characteristic, while attaining the spiritual stations is a result of growth in refinement and grace.

This is not to say that Ibn 'Arabī was unambiguously "feminist" in any current sense. He was both patriarchal and radically egalitarian, and, whatever his critics might say, he was always completely affirmative of Islam's core teachings. He was, of course, historically situated in his time and wrote predominantly, if not exclusively, for an audience of other men. At times, his pronouncements seem to endorse the patriarchal and even misogynist values and attitudes prevalent in his time. And yet, by means of subtle interpretative shifts, he constantly unsays and deconstructs such attitudes, to the extent that *al-dhāt*, the very Essence of God, has primacy at the ultimate level of the Godhead, and *al-dhāt*, the Divine Essence and the highest level of contemplation, is recognized by Ibn 'Arabī as being the Feminine Face of the Divine.⁵⁴ At the human level, at times, male superiority is endorsed, at times female, at times a radical spiritual equality between the sexes is posited. Ultimately, Ibn 'Arabī values receptivity and servanthood as the keys to spiritual completion,⁵⁵ both of which tend to be exhibited, even if only out of necessity, more frequently by women than by men who can become ego-driven in their assumed superiority (unlike, as Ibn 'Arabī points out, the humility of Muhammad). Thus the inversion is completed and complete.

Female Teachers, Female Disciples

Ibn 'Arabī's relationship with Nizām, while unique in its depth and intensity, was not unusual or abnormal for him. As pointed out already, he enjoyed multilayered relationships with women, whether members of his family,⁵⁶ his female disciples, or his female teachers.

In the Sufism espoused by Ibn 'Arabī, it is the state of a person's soul that gives that person value, and that necessarily transcends any other factors. All the same his position was certainly unusual in his own time, given the widely disseminated view of "female deficiency" which most subscribed to, based on the story of Eve's derivation from Adam's "crooked rib." Ibn 'Arabī accepts this biblical story from Genesis (taken on in a modified form by Islam) but manages to subvert it: 1) by saying that the original Adam or perfect human (anthropos) was neither male nor female but combined all human possibilities, and 2) by presenting the creation of Eve story in such a way as to show that woman was God's "choicest" creation, the "choicest part" (*naqāwa*) of the human condition.⁵⁷

Another way in which Ibn 'Arabī deconstructs the whole notion of male superiority is through linking masculine and feminine modes of behavior not to males and females but to active and receptive modes of being which either sex may assume according to the particular circumstance.

At the same time, Ibn 'Arabī is wont to use the term "manliness" (*rujūliyya*) or "being a real man" as an equivalent for spiritual realization in either a woman or a man. In this he was in accord not only with his contemporaries, but also with the Gnostics and philosophers of over one thousand years before him. Thus, Fāṭima of Nishapur, a ninth-century Sufi shaykha and saint, famous as a teacher also of male Sufis, was called not just the "one true woman" (by Bāyazīd Bistāmī) but also "a true man hidden in women's clothing." In a like manner, Attar includes the great Sufi female saint Rābi'a in the "ranks of men." Attar writes further: "When a woman becomes a man in the path of God she is a man and one can no longer call her a woman."⁵⁸ In line with this, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is considered by Ibn 'Arabī to have been the first "man" to enter paradise. And Fakhr al-Nisā', Nizām's learned aunt, whose

name literally means the "glory of women," is apostrophized by Ibn 'Arabī in the Preface to the *Tarjumān* as "rather 'the glory of men and learned people.'"⁵⁹

The valorization of the term "male" or "man" as a way of acknowledging spiritual stature goes back centuries before the establishment of Islam and is grounded at least partly in Aristotle's dualistic opposition between spirit versus matter, equated with male versus female, as well as in a Manichaean type of Gnosticism. The gnostic Gospel of Thomas concludes with the disputed logion 114, which reads, referring to Mary Magdalene:

Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom."⁶⁰

"Becoming male" meant transforming the perishable into the imperishable, it was a statement of liberation. This transformation, according to writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus Zostrianos, and the author of the First Apocalypse of James, was something that all people must make, whatever their biological gender. Spiritually advanced women were thus considered to have acquired "male" status and "become males" in essence. Both Jesus and later Ibn 'Arabī were operating in a patriarchal context, so in such a context, this use of "male" was actually a way of subverting biological gender and allowing biological women access to full humanness.

In Thomas and in these other writers, "maleness" clearly refers to a degree of spiritual mastery rarely attained by women or men. According to such a definition, there are very few real "men" in existence. However, it is also undeniable that, just as during Jesus' time, centuries later, male disciples (and men in general) were often reluctant to accept women masters. And, of course, accusations of sexual impropriety were often leveled at Sufi women—the most common way throughout history to tarnish a woman's reputation and discredit her intellectual, political, or spiritual achievements.

However, it is also true that relationships between Sufi men and women could be much more egalitarian than in the broader society, and this in itself would have formed a precedent and a context for Ibn 'Arabī's and Nizām's relationship. There seem to have been few barriers to male/female interactions in the religious and social Sufi circles Ibn 'Arabī mixed in, in which women were often prominent.

Ibn 'Arabī claims that at the outset of his spiritual path, women were abhorrent to him. It was a hatred of women that he felt bad about, which was contrary to Muhammad's teachings, so he prayed to be freed of his aversion. After eighteen years, he says, God answered his prayers and made women loveable to him, and with this conversion he also felt that he had acquired the responsibility to defend women's rights. It is difficult, though, to take his alleged hatred at face value, given that in his youth, Ibn 'Arabī had traveled throughout Andalusia seeking out teachers and had become the disciple of two women teachers whom he revered as exhibiting both *jamāli* and *jalāli* qualities (beauty and power). It seems more likely that it was sexuality and woman as a sexual being that had caused his "aversion."

Undeniably, Ibn 'Arabī was influenced in his view of women by his interactions with his female peers and later, his female disciples, but probably, first and foremost, by the female masters he studied under.⁶¹ The first of these adepts was Yasmīna Umm al-Fuqarā', a miracle worker then in her eighties. Ibn 'Arabī writes of her:

... I have never met one like her with respect to the control she had over her soul. In her spiritual activities and communications, she was among the greatest. She had a strong and pure heart, a noble spiritual power, and a fine discrimination ..., also stating that he saw her "perform many wonders."⁶²

He also spent two years serving Fāṭima of Cordoba (Fāṭima bint Ibn al-Muthannā), then in her nineties, who named herself his "spiritual mother" and the "light of his earthly mother," while he called her "a mercy to the world."⁶³ He emphasizes her remarkable youthfulness alongside her spiritual influence and power, writing:

I waited on her with all my soul for many years; at that time she was ninety-five years of age. The delicacy and freshness of her visage, however, made me ashamed to look at her. Most people who saw her thought she was fourteen years old.⁶⁴

Ibn 'Arabī asserts that Fāṭima had been given "the power of the Qur'ānic chapter *Al-Fātiḥa* [The Opening] and was able to wield its power in any situation."⁶⁵

Ibn 'Arabī also admired women from among his peers, such as the slave girl of Qāsim, or Zaynab al-Qal'iyya, a companion to many prominent male Sufis, and described by Ibn 'Arabī as "one of the most intelligent people of her time."⁶⁶

Significantly, out of the fourteen named disciples Ibn 'Arabī says he invested with the *khirqā* or Sufi cloak, thirteen were women. Like *shakṭipāt* or the transmission of the power of the lineage by an Indian guru, this initiation linked the disciple into a Sufi transmission lineage that was seen to go back to the Prophet. The bestowal of the *khirqā* produces a binding relationship between master and disciple with obligations on both sides. In the poems addressed to his female disciples and initiates (found at the beginning of his *Dīwān*) Ibn 'Arabī gives fulsome praise to many of them (with the exception of Zumurrud, who abandoned the Path) and is clearly pleased with their spiritual progress and the results of his mentoring.⁶⁷

From these poems, and from others addressed to female beloveds,⁶⁸ we can see that the poetry written to Nizām, while exceptional in some ways, was not unique in Ibn 'Arabī's output in the fact of its being addressed to a woman. What stands out in all of these poems is that despite the "maleness" these women are said to assume on the Path there is no denigration or downplaying of their womanhood. On the contrary, their beauty is celebrated in young and old, just as Nizām's beauty and sexuality are celebrated. Simultaneously though, these women are never made into objects of the male gaze on account of their physical presence. Nor is there a sense of mistrust and revulsion towards women as the embodiment of a socially dangerous sexuality that leads "pure" men astray. In fact, there is a sense of these women being valued *as women*,

in the fullness of their physical and spiritual beauty; there is never a sense of them trying to become men, and this is despite Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of the term *rijāl* (men) for female aspirants.⁶⁹

Another thing that is striking about Ibn ‘Arabī’s attitude to women—and hence also to Nizām—is his refusal to fall into the virgin/whore dichotomy. The women he knows and interacts with are not perceived as sexual temptresses, but nor are they sexless saints either. Women are neither condemned and damned to everlasting servitude for their role in the Fall, nor are they idealized as unattainable paragons in the manner of Dante’s Beatrice, Petrarch’s Laura, or Cavalcanti’s Lady. The carnal and the spiritual are not opposed but enhance each other, mirroring the way all opposites may be seen to resolve in God.

Despite his earlier “hatred,” sex is clearly not, for Ibn ‘Arabī, a challenge or an obstacle to spiritual life. The body and sexuality are intrinsic to spirituality, and the soul loves the body for giving it a house to live in. In fact, marriage is a path to spiritual realization, while sex (in the best Tantric tradition) is sacred—not carnal, not abusive but, in the total annihilation or *fanā* brought about by desire, it is itself a road to the spiritual realization of unity, again a Tantric tenet. In some ways Ibn ‘Arabī can be said to have gone further than many Tantric paths which put contingencies around the sexual act and who it is to be performed with—often a low caste woman to accentuate its socially transgressive nature. There is no valorization of marriage as such in Tantra either, although the partnership between an adept and a consort could be an enduring and equal one. The right-handed Tantric path, on the other hand, is keen to move all the transgressive rituals of the five M’s⁷⁰ (including sexuality) from the physical to the mental sphere, in effect negating the participation of the body in the spiritual quest and overturning the whole non-dualist philosophy of Tantra with its core vision of spirit interpenetrating matter and bringing it to ever-increasing levels of refinement and subtlety. So, while Ibn ‘Arabī’s affirmation of the dissolution of the self in the sexual act as a mystical transformative experience is not unique to him, in many ways he goes further and links up to the ancient traditions of

vamayana (the left-handed or literally the “women’s path”) underlying Tantra, in his valuing of women and the feminine principle, and in the high value he attaches to sexuality in marriage which is idealized as a spiritual partnership leading to the growth and refinement of both partners.

It is worth pointing out that this exalted view of sexuality was not common or usual then, nor is it common or usual today. All too often, sexuality is degraded or coerced, its true meaning obliterated or buried.

Nevertheless, Ibn ‘Arabī appears to have seen sexuality and specifically the sexual act itself as reflective of God’s creative essence. Intercourse is seen to be at “the root of all things.”⁷¹ The non-existent and the virtual potentiality comes into being through the mutual desire and embrace of the two aspects of the Godhead, which then gives birth or existence (being) to a new thing, or “child.” All of this is reminiscent of the play between Shiva and Shakti in the Indian Shaivite and Shakta traditions. To digress momentarily, just imagine if the creation of every new thing in the universe were to be seen as the result of an act of divine love ever renewed, just as every moment is ever new and ever renewed. And imagine if human beings were to understand their role in the universe as those whose consciousness ensouls it and interprets it, giving it meaning and substantial form. And if they were to understand that the level of their consciousness directly impacts upon everything in the created cosmos for they are the microcosm of the all ... Just imagine. All these are among the core insights of Ibn ‘Arabī.

According to Sachiko Murata, there is a lost book by Ibn ‘Arabī entitled “*The Book on the Sexual Act That Pervades all Atoms*.”⁷² What becomes apparent from this is that Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of sexuality extended to the creation of the physical world down to its smallest constituents. He furnishes yet another example of how mystics could indeed see into the heart of matter and the physical processes of the world, a reason why many of their insights are now being validated by science, albeit couched in a scientific, mathematical language rather than the mystic’s visionary poetic speech.

Parallels between the Gospel of Thomas and Ibn ‘Arabī

There are some interesting parallels with the Gospel of Thomas in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, beyond that of the “Single” one, who in Ibn ‘Arabī’s language is *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the original Adam, essentially the human archetype or the blueprint for the human being. There is also the already mentioned logion 114 in which Mary Magdalene is said to be “made male” in her journey towards spiritual perfection. Female aspirants on the Sufi path were also praised for their “maleness.”

On another occasion, Ibn ‘Arabī writes that when one uses the body to serve God, that body itself becomes transformed and filled by God’s presence, permeated by God.⁷³ This reads as an explanation of Jesus’ somewhat enigmatic saying in the Gospel of Thomas (logion 22), which combines both this idea and the perfection of the *anthropos* or original Adam created in the Image of God:

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].”⁷⁴

This brings to mind a ḥadīth describing the relationship of God to the one He loves with the following words: “I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he seizes, his foot with which he walks.”⁷⁵ Here the transformation demanded by Jesus is complete, to the extent that, as Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328) famously proclaimed:

The eye with which I see God and the eye with which God sees me is the same eye.⁷⁶

Not unlike Meister Eckhart, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that the one who sees through God, sees God through God.⁷⁷

The Eye which sees
The eye with which I see merge

Merge

Into one seeing

Which will pass through me⁷⁸

As already stated, Ibn ‘Arabī felt particularly close to Jesus, a great Prophet in Islam, had numerous encounters with him, and considered himself to be guided by him, so these parallels are by no means farfetched. Nizām herself is said to be a “daughter of Rūm,” a word used at the time to signify Byzantine Christians. She is presented as an exemplar of Christianity in a “pure” Islamic interpretation, while the *Tarjumān* itself contains many references to Christianity.

Ibn ‘Arabī and the Divine Feminine

*I was a Hidden Treasure; I loved to be known.
Hence I created the world so that I would be known.* Ḥadīth

Like many others who are open to both the masculine and feminine aspects of God (*jalālī* and *jamālī* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Islamic language), Ibn ‘Arabī, like Jesus, does not denigrate the body or embodiment. On the contrary, human beings are seen to be superior in status to the disembodied angels precisely because of embodiment—the marriage of spirit and body. It is this that makes the human being the most complete manifestation of the Divine. Thus, the dualistic idea of spirit and intellect being higher and superior and body and matter being lower and inferior is subverted, given that it is embodiment that gives the human being an exalted status in creation.

Ibn ‘Arabī goes even further along this path, for if the human being is the epitome of creation, woman (who is the agent of that embodiment) is the epitome or “choicest part” (*naqāwa*) of humanity.⁷⁹ In her is distilled the refinement of which humanity is capable, which, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is the measure of a person’s worth. Woman “activates the self-awareness of humanity”⁸⁰ and participates in the process of the desire of the non-existing entities in God to come into existence.⁸¹ The story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib becomes deconstructed and inverted in Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation as

proof of the additional care taken by God over the fashioning of woman, an extra refinement as compared to the fashioning of man.

The essence of God for Ibn ‘Arabī is to be found in the receptive feminine matrix (*al-dhāt*) which unites active and passive principles and gives rise to all of creation. All opposites combine in this matrix of God which is the limitless source of potential creativity. Mursid F.A. Ali ElSenossi gives the definition of *al-dhāt* in *The Language of the Future: Sufi Terminology* as: “(Dhat),” The Essence. This is Allāh in Himself without regard to His creations, His Attributes or His Names. The Essence is beyond knowledge or conceptualization. Allāh warns us of this aspect of Himself. The Essence is Absolute Blindness, the Hidden of the Hidden, the Unknown of the Unknown. This is the World of Absolute Non-manifestation.”⁸² In common with many traditions, Ibn ‘Arabī sees this Essence as Feminine, the Face of God as the Dark Mother, hidden and forever Unknown, containing all the essences of the possible in its luminous darkness.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, as for mystics in general, Reality is both either/or and both/and, and these contradictions coalesce and are resolved in God. Thus men and women are both different and the same. The majestic (*jalālī*) and beautiful (*jamālī*) attributes of God are combined within God, but just like dominance and receptivity, these attributes are interchangeable between the two genders, depending on the situation and the role played by the woman or man. This is because the original Adam or *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, combined in him or herself all the attributes and qualities as the most perfect mirror of the Divine, and since there was no distinction of gender in Adam as the human archetype, this original “completeness” is equally accessible to men and women.

For Ibn ‘Arabī the beauty and harmony of the things of this world were a way of coming to perceive the Beauty and Greater Harmony of their Creator.... this ability to pass through the veils of outward appearances to witness the purity of the essential Beauty of things or of people is attained only through the purification of the self and of one’s organs of perception.

The original Adam, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, is the human archetype, single and complete, the “Single” One in the language of the Gospel of Thomas, and a mirror of all the Divine Attributes. However, in our gendered world, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, God is to be most perfectly witnessed in woman. Woman is the microcosmic reflection of the Divine Feminine, allowing the divine feminine matrix to manifest in its most perfect creativity.⁸³ She is both created and creator, both receptive and active. Through her all of humanity is born.⁸⁴

Furthermore, the One needed Otherness and separation to know Its Self—but the Other is nothing but Self. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “Since [God] breathed His spirit into man, he is yearning in reality only for himself.”⁸⁵ Thus, desire between man and woman is sanctified, for its blueprint is to be found in God. Human desire and love mirror the divine desire and love between God and humanity, just as witnessing human beauty is a way of witnessing divine beauty. The Beloved in Sufi poetry is always ambiguous for he or she is always both the human beloved and the divine beloved; beauty manifest in the human form, and the Source of Beauty Itself. The image of Nizām in the *Tarjumān* follows the same blueprint. A ḥadīth verifies that God has created Adam according to his form.⁸⁶ Human form mirrors the divine form: hence human beauty is beautiful because of its resemblance to the Divine. It could be said that the whole philosophy of Sufi love poetry is based on perceiving human beauty as being of divine origin and hence a way for the gnostic to perceive the Divine. This is clearly perceptible in the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz to take the best-known examples of those who professed the “religion of Love.”

Witnessing—whether the witnessing of beauty or of creation per se—is not only integral to the

human being's ability to approach the Divine; it is also integral to the existence of existence itself, which would have no existence without there being one to witness it. Something that is a potentiality in the Divine is granted existence and being when it is seen—if that gaze is averted it ceases to exist. Ibn 'Arabī puts this realization as follows: "the Highest Panoramas, with respect to their being panoramas, have no existence except insofar as they have one to view them."⁸⁷ As consciousness is present and withdrawn, the seen flashes in and out of existence, an ancient mystical insight paralleled by the speculations of the new physics which posits this blinking in and out of existence of the tiniest building blocks of matter. This centrality of the witness or the perceiver is something the new physics is exploring in experiments such as the observer effect in quantum mechanics. Scientists still disagree on how to interpret this and other experiments. However, some, such as the theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler, tout the possibility that this is a "participatory universe" which we have participated in bringing into being. Thus, it may be possible to say that the consciousness of the observer impacts that which is observed—or even that which exists.⁸⁸ In the mystical tradition, a similar concept extends further into a spiritual dimension, affirming that the level of consciousness of the observer impacts on the nature of what is perceived. Thus the perception of the gnostic will allow him or her to receive more and in a more profound manner from what is being perceived. In this tradition, to the profane gaze, all is profane, while to the gnostic all is illuminated and divine. Or, as Ibn 'Arabī puts it, everywhere the gnostic or the mystic turns, there is the face of God.⁸⁹ In all of this, the perception and refinement of the perceiver are paramount.

The pure are hard pressed to perceive what is impure

For in their observation alchemy is found
Transforming objects of perception through
their gaze
For is it not said that these two -
The gaze and what is gazed upon -
Are One?

What is perceived cannot exist without the
organ of perception

And just as atoms can't decide if they are
waves

(we must decide for them instead)

So does the Light which looks through
guileless eyes

Cleanse and transform what its ray
touches.⁹⁰

A distinctive feature of Ibn 'Arabī's style as a writer and thinker is fluidity. Nothing is allowed to be fixed but is subject to constant change. Concepts flow in and out of each other. The Beloved is Divine and human, never completely one or the other. Ideas and statements are deconstructed and reflect off each other. Immanence exists alongside transcendence, and at the same time as it, both within the inner heart and beyond the beyond of all limits and all comprehension. We think a text affirms one thing only to see, in Ibn 'Arabī's brilliant interpretation, that it can mean something quite different or even opposite (as for example in the rib creation story of Eve). This fluidity of language and thought trying to describe the indescribable, that which is in constant motion and flux, is a hallmark of mystical experience which inevitably brings the gnostic closer to the Feminine Face of God.

You see

I am seen

You know

I am known

Source is reflected

In skyclad awareness

Your world

Unfolds

In Me.⁹¹

Nizām, Ibn 'Arabī and the Tarjumān

So, what of the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* specifically? And Ibn 'Arabī's poetry in general? Not for nothing were the poems of the *Tarjumān* the only texts that Ibn 'Arabī allegedly

insisted on reciting himself in his sessions with his disciples and students. This, in itself, is a testimony of its personal significance to him.

In the poems of the *Tarjumān*, the Beloved (Nizām) comes across as a real personage, a dream image, a mirage always just out of reach yet constantly leading the poet onwards in his quest to reach her and to join her caravan. She is absent and present at once, more present in her absence than many in their presence. She is both cruel and merciful, challenging the poet to understand and realize her constant presence in his inner heart. She is addressed as “she,” “he” or “they” (feminine plural), yet mostly as “she.”⁹² She is Divine and human, both the human beloved and the Divine Beloved, who the poet sees in and through her face. And yet it is unequivocally Nizām who is the subject, the Beloved. Ibn ‘Arabī makes that clear in his original Preface when he writes: “Whatever name I mention in this work, it is to her that I am alluding. Whatever the house whose elegy I sing, it is her house I am thinking.”⁹³

So that there can be no mistake, Ibn ‘Arabī alludes to Nizām’s name in many different ways in the poems, for example, making use of the fact that *Nizām* (or *naẓm*) also means verse or poetry, the root *n-ẓ-m* meaning to compose poetry⁹⁴ as well as being related to structuring and organizing. Thus, the poet’s statement that she is the central pearl in a beautifully strung and ordered necklace brings to the fore her central sunlike presence in the *Tarjumān*, one that brings harmony and order, or the harmonious arrangement of poetic form, to the passionate outpouring of the poetry. She is, as Ibn ‘Arabī writes in the Preface, “*Ayn al-shams wa-l-bahā*—‘the source of the sun and the glory’”⁹⁵—in effect the Sun around which the pilgrimage of the poems revolves.

Indeed, one of the structuring principles of the *Tarjumān* is the imagery of the pilgrimage of the Hajj with its stations. Examples of this include the frequent mentions of the stoning ground where pilgrims stone the devil, or the prayers made by pilgrims at the four corners of the Ka’ba. Beyond that and on a deeper level, however, is the circling motion of the poems themselves in their journey around the

Beloved/Sun, echoing the circling of the pilgrims around the Black Stone. The journeying of the *Tarjumān* never has an arrival point; like the circle, it is endless, and each point on the circle can equally well be a point of departure or a point of temporary arrival. The journeying into the beloved is infinite as is the journey into the infiniteness of God who forever remains beyond any limits of knowing. The theme of Circling is paramount—circling the Sun, circling the central jewel of the necklace, circling the Ka’ba, which is both physical and represents, for the Sufi, the inner spiritual Heart—and the Beloved herself is the focal point of all this circling. Her magnetic force keeps the Lover in his orbit and forever guides and incites his journeying.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, “the truth speaks in circles.”⁹⁶ His thought is circular because he sees reality to be circular—a circle which has no beginning and no end.

Not long after, Rumi (1207-73) was to experience his more famous awakening in the presence of Shams i-Tabrīzi, who became Rumi’s human-divine Beloved, the human face of the Divine, and the Sun around which Rumi’s life and poetry were to ceaselessly rotate. Rumi echoed this perpetual circling in the physical dimension by setting up a pole around which he rotated in ecstatic dance and spontaneous poetic inspiration, a dance which has passed into the ritual of the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi order, who seek the state of Union and of self-annihilation through their dance.

The constant motion of their circling echoes Ibn ‘Arabī’s realization that the Divine Feminine is never fixed or static. Rather, its characteristics are fluidity and change, for it itself is both in and provokes perpetual movement, as the poems of the *Tarjumān* portray. The theophanies of the poems never repeat themselves but are constantly renewed, just as nothing is ever repeated in existence, for God is unlimited.

Nizām’s journeying away from the poet is also a well-established trope of Classical Arabic poetry, specifically, the classical form known as *qaṣīda*, in which the beloved is seen to depart at the start of the poem and the lover then describes his journeying after her, trying to catch

up with her caravan, stopping at her campsites, searching for traces of her passage, led on by these traces across the desert as though following a mirage. The poems of the *Tarjumān* follow this conceit except that there is no return for the lover-poet to his point of departure, his tribe. The *qaṣīda* has a strict and elaborate rhyming and metrical structure: verses have the same length and meter throughout the poem and are divided into two hemistichs, the second of which ends in a rhyme which is the same throughout the poem. The images used come from a stock reservoir, so the virtuosity of the poet is demonstrated in handling these constraints of strict rhyme scheme, formal structure and defined themes and images, not by finding or creating new or original ones. The subject matter is also traditional: scenes from Bedouin life, caravans crossing the desert, oases with their welcome shade, camels, traces of encampments, night journeys, the moon and stars, clouds, flowers, the sun, wind, lightning, thunder. This Bedouin style of poetry was apparently quite archaic even at the time of the writing of the *Tarjumān*, and it is almost as if Ibn ‘Arabī revels in the limitations it imposes as he creates the container through which to express the quest of the Lover for the Beloved.⁹⁷

Nizām’s “absent presence” is constantly evoked in the poems of the *Tarjumān* in many different ways. A central conceit Ibn ‘Arabī plays with is the proximity between Nizām and *naẓm* (poetry). Given that poetry (*naẓm*) is itself a harmoniously ordered and beautiful language, Nizām (in all the meanings inscribed in her name) is ever-present in her own beauty in the poetry and in the beauty and harmonious arrangement of the poems themselves. She is thus integral to it on every level.

There are allusions to Nizām’s name scattered throughout the *Tarjumān*. For instance, in the last line of poem 46, Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of “the order of togetherness” (*Nizām al-shaml*), poem 29 (14) states, “She is our principle of Harmony,” while poem 55 ends with the words “perfect harmony (Nizām).” In poem 20, translated beautifully by Zargar, “My malady comes from the one with malady in her eyelids,” there are more lines which unambiguously point to the very human Nizām as the beloved:

Long has been my yearning for that young
one versed in prose
and in verse, with her own pulpit, and with
clarity of expression,
from the daughters of kings from the land
of Persia,
from the most glorious of cities: from Isfahan.

She is the daughter of ‘Iraq, the daughter of
my imam;

I am her contrasting opposite: a Yemeni
son.

Have you ever seen, oh my masters, or ever
heard

of two contrasting opposites undergoing
combination?

If you could only see us in Ramah offering
back and forth

winecups of love-longing without the use of
fingers,

when love-longing between us drives to
further chatter,

sweet and heart-arousing, but without the
use of tongue,

then you would see that in which reason be-
comes lost ...⁹⁸

The “young one” versed in prose and in verse, who is eloquent in preaching and expressing herself with clarity, and who hails from Isfahan in Persia and is the daughter of the imam Abu Shuja’ Zāhir Ibn Rustam al-Isfahani is unambiguously Nizām.

She: See you these fingers?

They touch yours already

Despite the chasm of space.

For space itself is not an emptiness

It trembles in this cup

It touches wine

And touches us

Caressing...⁹⁹

Speaking more generally, Nizām is clearly the sun around which all the poems—and the lover—revolve, the central jewel of a harmoniously strung poetic necklace which she herself

ornaments, and is the cause of, and which she receives as a gift and a homage. Her qualities are those Ibn ‘Arabī cherishes most dearly in a human being—refinement, beauty, grace, subtlety, culture, learning. She is the Harmony the poetry aspires to create with its own harmonious words; she is the light that lightens East and West and enlightens the lover as she speaks in poem 4 (6): “Isn’t it enough for him that I am forever in his heart? Isn’t it? Isn’t it?”¹⁰⁰—reminding the Lover that the One desired is beyond form, although the Beloved may take on a temporary form as and where and when She pleases.

In keeping with the reconciliation of all opposites, Nizām’s beauty and presence, though forever physically absent, are supremely present. They define and circumscribe the universe of the lover, being the object of his quest, the substance of the quest itself, its stations which he comes to through following in her footsteps, and the dynamic movement of the quest which is the journey into her.

In accordance with Ibn ‘Arabī’s contention that God is best witnessed in women, Nizām is the reflection in the microcosm of the Divine Feminine, to the extent that at times she merges in it, her individual self being annihilated in it. Her constant motion is like that of the Spirit in the Christian tradition which blows (“listeth”) where it will (and which, for some Christian exegeses, is the Feminine face of the Christian Trinity). Like It, Nizām is never fixed in a location or a station, but is always in dynamic motion, transforming herself and transforming her lover, undoing certainties, unsaying definitions and creeds, never still, never possessed, bringing all opposites together, as in poem 31 (11):

My night is made luminous
At the sight of her face.
My day darkens
Hidden beneath her hair.

Or poem 39 (7):

Her shining visage - sun
Her long hair - night
Sun and night reunited!¹⁰¹

The Beloved is continually changing in these poems, to the extent of shifting gender and number, and the Lover’s heart and intellect must constantly change to keep pace. She is both beyond everything and within everything, and in this, analogous to the Divine. The Lover seeks annihilation in her. Hers is the state of the ultimate release and realization, not holding on to anything, no certainty, no single form, but surrendered to all forms and to the dynamism of change, in short, the state to which all mystics aspire to —“Let go and let God.” And in these transformations of the Beloved is implicit the state described by the verse from the Qur’ān: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (Qur’ān 2:115) No one form of the Beloved is fixed, no one form is stable, and the heart must encompass them all. This realization that the true object of desire is beyond form and within the heart is essentially the lesson of Nizām as an embodiment of the Divine Feminine, whether in her own right, or as the “daughter of Rūm” who appears in the second part of the Preface to the *Tarjumān*.

While he is circumambulating the Ka’ba, Ibn ‘Arabī relates that he was inspired to recite a poem, given here in Zargar’s translation:

If only I knew whether they were cognizant
of the heart that remains within their possession.
And my heart - if it could somehow just apprehend
the mountain-pass which they traversed.
Do you suppose they made it safely?
Or do you suppose that they have perished?
The lords of love-longing are perplexed
in love-longing and are near inescapably entangled.¹⁰²

As he was speaking these lines out loud, Ibn ‘Arabī avers he felt a touch “softer than silk” on his back. What follows is an intervention and a revelation which apparently inspires the outpouring of the *Tarjumān* poems. It could even be said that the *Tarjumān* is an exposition of the teaching given to Ibn ‘Arabī by this “daughter of Rūm” whom he encountered at the Ka’ba.

As already stated, there is some doubt around the “reality” of this meeting, as there are questions relating to the identity of the woman. Most commentators presume this encounter took place during Ibn ‘Arabī’s second visit to Mecca in 1214, some twelve years after his first visit in 1202 when he stayed for three years and first met Niẓām. However, this is only an assumption, as Ibn ‘Arabī does not specify the timing of the encounter. Nor is it clear whether this encounter formed part of the original Preface (called Preface 1 by Jane Clark)¹⁰³ or was a later insertion. Nicholson, the original translator of the *Tarjumān* into English, believed that the preface he translated was put together from two different prefaces written by Ibn ‘Arabī at different times, but their exact content has proved difficult to ascertain. As Clark writes, concluding her exhaustive study of the Preface:

The exact details of how it was written — whether it is, as Nicholson suggested, really two prefaces written at different times, or whether it is a single preface of which the first part was omitted at certain times because of its controversial nature—may never be known.¹⁰⁴

It could perhaps even be conjectured that this may have been the first meeting with Niẓām, whether real or imaginal, as Ibn ‘Arabī writes of this mysterious woman: “I knew her after that and came to know her well.”¹⁰⁵ This different chronology cannot be excluded, as it is unlikely that the seed for the composition of the poems was not planted during Ibn ‘Arabī’s first visit to Mecca. What is known is that the compromising references to Niẓām from the original Preface were omitted soon after Ibn ‘Arabī wrote his nearly line by line Commentary to the poems, and that these passages were probably not reinstated until after his death. The replacement of the very human Niẓām of the First Preface by the etherealized figure of the “daughter of Rūm” could equally well have been another attempt to protect Niẓām and himself from censure.

Ibn ‘Arabī continues relating the encounter:

I felt nothing more than a single touch between my shoulders by a hand lighter than silk. I turned round and there I was with a

young girl, one of the daughters of Rūm. I had never seen anyone more beautiful than her in the face or more pleasant in speech, more gracious in manners, more subtle in meaning, more delicate in allusions, more astute in conversation. She surpassed [all] the people of her time in grace and culture, in beauty and knowledge.¹⁰⁶

This transfigured ethereal figure, endowed with gnosis (knowledge) and beauty, who names herself simply *qurrat al-‘ayn* (“freshness of the eye”), turns out to be a stern taskmaster as she takes apart every line of Ibn ‘Arabī’s poem and reproves him for his deficient understanding of the Real and of Love, unworthy of a Sufi master on the Path. For instance, here is her commentary on the lines:

And my heart - if it could somehow just apprehend

the mountain-pass which they traversed.

“Sir, the ‘mountain-pass’ is that which is between the innermost heart and the inner heart, and it is that which prevents it from knowing. So how can someone like you hope for something which it is not possible to attain?”¹⁰⁷

Here is another of her responses:

“I am amazed to hear such a thing from you, you who are the gnostic of your time! [...] What I desire is real awareness made known by non-existence, and the Path which consists of speaking truthfully.”¹⁰⁸

And to the final lines:

The lords of love-longing are perplexed in love-longing and are near inescapably entangled.

She replies:

“How amazing! How can the one who is madly in love have anything left by which he could be perplexed, when the very nature of love is that it is all-encompassing [...] So where is the perplexity, and who is the one who remains here to be perplexed?”¹⁰⁹

In each case, the mysterious girl points him towards *al-dhāt*, the feminine essence of the

Divine, which is forever dark and unknowable, the latent power of the hidden, luminously dark Truth.

Although, as mentioned, there is some debate as to her identity, the mere fact of her presence in the preface to a series of poems directly inspired by Nizām and in which everything, as Ibn ‘Arabī affirms, speaks of her, points to Nizām as the human embodiment of this figure. That said, it is also true in some sense that this etherealized figure is equally a human woman, and a figure from the imaginal world, where tabus on touch between the sexes do not exist, unlike in traditional Islam where such contact as she made would have been forbidden. She is also, as Ralph Austin points out, an image of Knowledge¹¹⁰ and a manifestation of Holy Wisdom—Hagia Sophia. This might explain her curious denomination as a “daughter of Rūm,” as Rūm at the time was used to refer to the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantium, the heart of the Eastern Orthodox Christian church. And the heart of Constantinople was the magnificent Greek basilica of Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom. Given Ibn ‘Arabī’s allegiance to Jesus and his stated profession that the Real was too vast to be limited to any one form of belief but could be worshipped in every form, this link to the Divine Sophia through the figure of Nizām is not at all unlikely. In the poems themselves, Nizām is, by turns, Persian, Arabic, and Greek—and, like the Divine Sophia or Wisdom, beyond the constraint of any one religion or any one form, as poem 2 makes clear:

She is a bishopess, one of the daughters of Rome, unadorned: thou sees in her a radiant Goodness.

Wild is she, none can make her his friend; she has gotten in her solitary chamber a mausoleum for remembrance.

She has baffled everyone who is learned in our religion, every student of the Psalms of David, every Jewish doctor, and every Christian priest.

If with a gesture she demands the Gospel, thou wouldst deem us to be priests and patriarchs and deacons.¹¹¹

She appears equally as a beautiful sensuous woman whose presence always eludes the poet,

as multiple and as one, as feminine and as masculine, and as a face of the Divine Feminine itself, dark and hidden, wild and never possessed or contained in any one form or image. This is the Black Goddess (Black in Her unknowability and Her wisdom) with her “black tresses,” resident in the “black centre (pupil) of the eye,”¹¹² a “hidden pearl beneath her black hair” (poem 48), and when she lets down her hair, the night appears, black, dense, opaque and impenetrable (poem 30). This is Shakti, who is perpetually becoming and in Her Becoming moves Shiva into Being; this is the latent brooding vastness and void of Aditi or *al-dhāt*, the Divine Essence Itself from which all that is latent actualizes and emerges into form.

One of Ibn ‘Arabī’s central tenets was that nothing could fully express the Reality of God. The other is that this Reality is constantly changing, mutating, and calling in different ways to the human heart. Hence the famous verses from poem 11:

My heart has become the receptacle of every form:

It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols, and the pilgrim’s Ka’ba,

And the tables of the Torah and the Book of the Qur’ān.

I follow the religion of love: whatever way Love’s camels take,

That is my religion and my faith.¹¹³

And hence our transformations into priests or rabbis or deacons, all at Her command, as in poem 2.

In the *Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī ties the form and nature of the divine revelation to the one receiving it, for if Divine Revelation can be described as colorless absolute light, the receiver is a prism which of necessity endows that light with colors. He writes: “If the believer understood the meaning of the saying ‘the color of water is the color of the receptacle,’ he would admit the validity of all beliefs and he would recognize God in every form and every object of faith.”¹¹⁴

She: Yet – there is just One Power
In all its aspects.
Just as the Nameless may be named a
hundred ways
Yet remain Nameless
Just so this Power appears in different
colours like a rainbow.
Yet what would happen if the colours of
the rainbow coalesced
And showed themselves as One?
For Light is one
Is that not so?¹¹⁵

Jonathan Black writes,

we may know the constant changing of the Absolute and the changing of the world by scanning our own hearts. If we see with our inner eye how our own heart in all its myriad states and dimensions is mutating, transforming and evolving at every fleeing moment, then we may also begin to understand the operations of the divine.¹¹⁶

Our heart is constantly changing, traversing Stations in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufi language, ever receptive to different divine influences and different divine Names, ever metamorphosing. This journey through the heart’s inner landscapes in pursuit of the caravan of the Beloved is the journeying the *Tarjumān* offers us a record of. A journey through the imaginal world, the *mundus imaginalis*, accessed by what Henry Corbin called the “creative imagination” or what Jung also called “lucid dreaming.”

Nor is there any contradiction for Nizām to be both real and imaginal in the world of the journey of the *Tarjumān*, itself an imaginal realm which bridges our reality and Reality itself. Her lesson at the Ka’ba is that presence and absence are one and the same in the highest form of love where the Beloved merges into the Lover’s heart, leaving no one to be perplexed, having been annihilated in Love. And Ibn ‘Arabī writes in poem 4: “Isn’t it enough for him that I am present forever in his heart? Isn’t it? Isn’t it?” Furthermore, it is she, Nizām, who is the guide, the interpreter, the “*tarjumān*” in this world, and on this journey. It is she who provokes the poet into taking this journey, spurs him into activity

through her ceaseless motion, is the initiatrix on the quest, and the guide through the landscapes of desire—a very Tantric concept. She veils and unveils as she will, revealing the face of the Real as and when She chooses in an illumination of lightning, stars, moon, and sun — all images of light or “enlightenment.”¹¹⁷

She guides the poet through a desire so pure and unadulterated that it is a great and incandescent fire that can light our own pure desire for the Real in which the physical and the spiritual meld into each other. Flesh and spirit are both needed in this call of the true self to us, for formlessness and form are both part of the mystery, and for Ibn ‘Arabī Nizām is the carrier of this form. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “Contemplation of God without formal support is not possible ... Since therefore, some form of support is necessary, the best and most perfect kind is the contemplation of God in women.”¹¹⁸ Rumi’s immortal lines come to mind here:

Woman is a beam of the divine light
She is not the being whom sensual desire
takes as its object.
She is Creator, it should be said.
She is not a creature.¹¹⁹

The realization of the *Tarjumān*, the realization granted to Ibn ‘Arabī by Nizām and by his love for her, is a vision of the Feminine Face of God. This journey into the Divine is endless; it is a journey of the Return. As with the Return to and into God, there is never an ultimate point of arrival—there is always further to go.

Yet the Journey is one endorsed by God Himself, for, as Allāh says and Ibn ‘Arabī is so fond of quoting: “I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known.”

Nizām becomes an Image of the “hidden treasure,” mirroring God’s desire to be recognized, to be seen by His creation.

She: Yes – God
The Unknown yearning to
be known
The Uncreated longing
for creation
The Treasure thirsting

for discovery
 The Merciful, Compassionate and Loving
 searching for the Lovers
 [...]

 Your eyes, your eyes,
 They must awaken.¹²⁰

The Beloved is seeking us all to be Lovers.

It is scarcely surprising that Ibn ‘Arabī should have run into trouble for his valorization of the Divine Feminine and for his refusal to separate out the sensual and the spiritual. The accusations of sexual impropriety and of harboring an erotic love for Nizām forced him into writing the second Preface, an apologia of sorts, in which he is at pains to remove all such suspicion from himself and from Nizām, and in which the mysterious daughter of Byzantium replaces the Persian Nizām. As stated, the dedication to Nizām was omitted from the second Preface, and Ibn ‘Arabī went on to provide lengthy and virtually line by line commentaries on the allegorical and metaphysical meanings of the poems for those who had little idea of gnosis or of mystical experience. There is a clear attempt to deflect criticism through spelling things out in detail. Arguably, though, these commentaries are nowhere near as powerful as the poetry itself. Poetry thrives on paradox and on saying the unsayable—and, then again, unsaying the sayable. So, the commentaries that seek to explain it often suck the lifeblood out of it, leaving husks where before were colors, juices, textures, and all the flesh and ambivalence of poetic words. For poetic language, poetry can combine and convey both the flesh and the spirit in its music, its sounds, and its message. But Ibn ‘Arabī knew that. He also knew, doubtless, that the commentaries would help these poems, so precious to him, to survive.

The Tarjumān and the Purpose of Poetry

- a language of veiling and unveiling

Ibn ‘Arabī was, first and foremost, a mystic following the path of gnosis, direct knowledge experienced in the heart, and poetry has long been the favored language of many mystics. For the great Sufi poets such as Rumi

and Hafiz, poetry is an expression of their journey into God, and Ibn ‘Arabī was of the same lineage, seeing poetry both as a way of accessing spiritual realities and of conveying something of their essence to others. He inspired Persian poets and mystics such as Jami, ‘Irāqī, and Shabistari.¹²¹ Like many other mystics, Ibn ‘Arabī resorted to poetry to give utterance to his most profound—and esoteric—realizations, precisely because of its veiled and allusive character. Ibn ‘Arabī’s voluminous writings, both in poetry and prose, attempt to convey something of what he directly experienced, and which he knew to be ultimately beyond verbal expression. Hence his skill in “unsaying,” or in deconstructing, to use modern parlance, what he writes. Yet poetry occupied a privileged position for him, as it could hint at and occasionally even unveil a glimpse of this Reality to those who were sufficiently receptive and refined, as he explicitly stated Nizām to be in the first Preface to the *Tarjumān*:

In the verses I have composed for the present book, I never cease to allude to the divine inspirations, the spiritual visitations, the correspondences with the world of angelic intelligences, in this I conformed to my usual manner of thinking in symbols: this [...] because this young girl knew perfectly what I was alluding to.¹²²

The closing poem of the Prologue to Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Dīwān* begins with the following lines:

In our poetry, there is no padding
 nor are there any redundant words.
 Under every word that it contains
 is abundant meaning.
 Not many people know it
 and those who know it are few.
 The one who is inspired
 will understand what I say.
 Phrases of it are for one group
 and sections are for other groups ...¹²³

Nizām is clearly of that number of the few who knew and understood.

Like many genuine poets, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the process of writing poetry as a state in which he is overtaken by inspiration, an inspiration

which appears to come from without, and which then dictates to him the words he is to set down. "All that I put down in my books is not the result of thinking or discursive reasoning. It is communicated to me through the breathing of the angel of revelation in my heart," he writes.¹²⁴ Indeed, many poets intuit that the poem provides the initial revelation which the poet will then work to explain and understand—a process which can unfold over many years.

In the lengthy Prologue to the *Dīwān al-ma'ārif al-ilāhiyya wal-latā'if al-rūhiyya* (*The Dīwān of divine knowledges and spiritual subtleties*), Ibn 'Arabī relates three visions which were instrumental in bringing about his own prolific poetic output. Claude Addas discusses all three and the Prologue in "The Ship of Stone,"¹²⁵ a work scarcely surpassed for its insights into the nature and purpose of true poetry as conceived by Ibn 'Arabī. The third and last vision is perhaps the most famous. In it, Ibn 'Arabī describes how he was called to "utter poetry" when he saw an angel in a dream who brought him a "piece of white light, like a fragment of the sun's light." He is told it is the "*Sūrat al-Shu'arā'* (the Sura of the Poets)" which he swallows and then feels growing within him like a hair, which then becomes an animal growing from his mouth, whose head "reached the two horizons, that of the East and that of the West." Ibn 'Arabī continues, "Then I came back to myself and I uttered poetry without any process of reflection or thought. Since that time, this inspiration has never ceased..."¹²⁶ Through this vision, Ibn 'Arabī realizes that his poetry is divinely inspired and that it will convey an esoteric and initiatory message to the "saints (*awliyā'*) of the two horizons," East and West, that is, those pure enough and sufficiently advanced to understand its deeper meaning. The

God is always unveiling and always veiled, a realization attested to in every mystical tradition. This "becoming" in the sense of self-revelation, as distinct to "being," is the traditional province of the Divine Feminine face of God and Its immanence in the world. Her constant motion is like that of the Spirit in the Christian tradition which blows ("listeth") where it will (and which, for some Christian exegetes, is the Feminine face of the Christian Trinity).

26th Sura of the Qur'ān is called "The Poets" (there are 114 Suras in all), and it is this Sura that Ibn 'Arabī swallows in his lucid dream, thus linking his poetic inspiration directly to the divine inspiration of the Qur'ān.

Poetry, according to Ibn 'Arabī, is of supreme importance for the "saints" (*awliyā'*) as a means of expression because it can veil certain truths from the eyes of the impure or the insufficiently refined, and thus protect these truths (and, one might add, the truthsayers), and, conversely, it can reveal these same truths to those with "ears to hear." As Claude Addas writes:

Fundamentally ambivalent, poetic language, more than any other form of expression, offers indispensable guarantees of inviolability;

only pure souls can successfully decipher the enigmas and symbols which make up its substance.¹²⁷

Poetry is thus quintessentially a language of veiling and unveiling, and there is a sense in which it could be seen to be associated with women, or more precisely, with the feminine modality, whereas prose, with its emphasis on clear expression, could be associated with men, or the masculine modality. Ibn 'Arabī wrote a great deal of poetry alongside his prose. It is a mark of his style that he inserts poetry into prose texts such as the *Futūḥāt*, which, according to Roger Deladrière, contains over 7000 lines of verse woven into the text, the poems standing side by side with the prose.¹²⁸ It is there to provide deeper insights for those who have "eyes to see, ears to hear."

With its musical and rhythmic structures, poetry is uniquely positioned in the eyes of Ibn 'Arabī to reflect and reveal the order and structure of the universe through its own structure and form. For him, the universe is indisputably based on a

harmonious ordering based on number, a concept traceable to the Pythagoreans. Thus, it is based on the sacred science of numbers (which includes what we know as astrology), which is then reflected in the sacred science of letters (also known as gematria, in which numerical values are assigned to letters, also employed by the Hebrews, Greeks and early Christian writers). This sacred science conceals the secrets of the universe within it to await discovery by those who know how to read it. Moreover, poetry, particularly classical Arabic poetry and the rules governing it, is seen by Ibn ‘Arabī to reflect this same order and structure. As Addas writes: “Ibn ‘Arabī sets out to prove that the rules upon which Arabic poetry is based come forth from Divine Wisdom, and that they are ubiquitous in Creation.” Furthermore, and to make his thought even clearer, “God constructed the universe ... according to the same principles as those that form the framework of ... the verses of a poem.”¹²⁹

Even human actions are recorded as “a melody in double or triple time” in the second of Ibn ‘Arabī’s visions or lucid dreams relating to his initiation into poetry.¹³⁰ The implication is that all in life is harmoniously ordered and poetry, being itself a harmonious ordering of words, is best suited to portray this. Furthermore, for its readers and hearers, poetry opens a path into the imaginal worlds, acting both as a guide itself (or *tarjumān*) into their realities and as a vessel for gnosis.

After Ibn ‘Arabī wrote his second Preface and Commentary to the *Tarjumān* prescribing metaphysical meanings to the poems, it became acceptable to take him at his word and add the *Tarjumān* into the canon of his writings on the basis that the poems are, primarily, a form of metaphysical speculation. Of course, this bypasses the whole rich ambiguity and scintillating wealth of associations of poetic expression, chosen by mystics precisely because it can say so much more and on so many more levels than prose. However, the poetry itself still remains for all those *awliyā’* capable of reading it and experiencing its deepest teachings.

Like the *Tarjumān*, the ecstatic and erotic poetry of the *Song of Songs* has occupied a

marginal position in the canon, being thought of as somewhat suspect and dangerous, with its inclusion needing to be justified. As the Talmud states, the *Song of Songs* was going to be expelled from the canon because it “renders the hands unclean.” But Rabbi Akiva (50-135 AD) disputed this, famously declaring that “the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”¹³¹ Ever since, the *Song of Songs* has been the subject of numerous interpretations that attempt to explain away its erotic element by interpreting its sensual love poetry as God’s love for Israel or that of Christ for His Church. At the same time, the *Song of Songs* has also provoked some of the most inspired commentaries and responses, such as the words of Rabbi Akiva, or the sermons of St Bernard of Clairvaux. The Kabbalist Joseph of Hamadan saw the masculine and feminine faces of the Divine in the Lovers of the *Song of Songs*, while in our current time, the erotic sensuality of the work is being reclaimed with the Song being associated with the Seal of Solomon, the sacred six-pointed star where the downward-pointing triangle symbolizes the Divine Feminine and the upward-pointing triangle represents the Divine Masculine, uniting in perfect harmony.

Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabī set great store by the *Tarjumān* and treated it differently from his other poetry.¹³² Most importantly, the poems of the *Tarjumān* have survived, with their message of love, beauty, perplexity and astonishment, and a journey that never ceases, a circling journey which has no end—like the pilgrim’s circumambulation of the Ka’ba. The paradoxes of the poetry match the paradoxes of the Divine before which reason and rationality must flounder. Indeed, “perplexity,” the perplexity of the poet and our own perplexity, is the correct response to the unfathomable Reality of the Divine expressed in the paradoxical “I am” statements of texts such as Krishna’s “I am” revelation to Arjuna on the battlefield in the Bhagavad Gītā, the pronouncements of the female speaker in *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, or Jesus’ statements in the “Hymn of the Dance” in the *Acts of John*. Hence, Ibn ‘Arabī’s constant unsaying and

deconstruction of what is written and said. In the end, “Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allāh.” (Qur’ān 2:115)

The Divine speaks to us directly in the following lines by Ibn ‘Arabī from his *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt* (*Book of Theophanies*), translated in the form of a poem by Henry Corbin in his magisterial opus, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*. It speaks to us in the manner of the monologues just alluded to. It speaks to us through a Feminine Face, with strong overtones of the words of Jesus, Ibn ‘Arabī’s beloved Prophet and “first master on the Way,”¹³³ particularly those uttered by Him in the course of the Last Supper, according to the Gospel of John:

Listen, O dearly beloved!
I am the reality of the world, the centre of
the circumference,
I am the parts and the whole.
I am the will established between Heaven
and Earth,
I have created perception in you only in order to be
the object of my perception.
If then you perceive me, you perceive yourself.
But you cannot perceive me through yourself,
It is through my eyes that you see me and
see yourself,
Through your eyes you cannot see me.
Dearly beloved!
I have called you so often and you have not
heard me
I have shown myself to you so often and
you have not seen me.
I have made myself fragrance so often, and
you have not smelled me.
Savourous food, and you have not tasted me.
Why can you not reach me through the object
you touch
Or breathe me through sweet perfumes?
Why do you not see me? Why do you not
hear me?

Why? Why? Why?

[...]

For you I am preferable to all other good
things,

I am Beauty. I am Grace.

Love me, love me alone.

Love yourself in me, in me alone.

[...]

Others love you for their own sakes,

I love you for yourself.

And you, you flee from me.

Dearly beloved!

[...]

I am nearer to you than yourself,

Than your soul, than your breath.

[...]

Be mine, be for me as you are in me.¹³⁴

Virtually every mystic comes to know the Feminine Face of God in the end. Ibn ‘Arabī is no exception—except that he seems to have intuited it almost from the start.

The *Tarjumān* is a long, neverending quest, a journey of the Return. As with the Return to and into God, there is never an ultimate point of arrival—there is always further to go.

Epilogue

He: She was
mysteriously veiled
She was
the magnet for my eyes
She was
a woman
and
the magnet for my soul

She: I was
mysteriously called
I was
the space where his eyes learned to see
I was
a woman.

... *All paths are circular* ...
Ibn ‘Arabī¹³⁵

- ¹ Quoted in *The Burning Heart*, “Dante and Islam, Eros Sublimated, the mundus imaginalis of Dante’s Divine Comedy, and Ibn ‘Arabī’s Tarjumān al-ashwāq”; *Kone, Krusos, Kronos*. Online at: <https://konekrusoskronos.wordpress.com/2013/04/24/eros-sublimated-the-mundus-imaginalis-of-dantes-divine-comedy-and-ibn-arabis-Tarjumān-al-ashwaq/> (accessed June 2, 2020).
- ² Gabriela Mistral, online at: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/543840-love-beauty-it-is-the-shadow-of-god-on-the> (accessed, June 2, 2020).
- ³ Trans. Jane Clark, in Jane Clark, “Mystical Perception and Beauty: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Preface to *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* / Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society; Editor Stephen Hirtenstein, Vol.55 (2014): 33-62, 42.
- ⁴ From “Your Beauty,” in: Irina Kuzminsky, *Dancing with Dark Goddesses* (Bath: Awen, 2009), 74-75.
- ⁵ I am using God as the term to address the Divine, despite the fact that for some, God has become a value-ridden and even restrictive term, restrictive in terms of gender, and in terms of adherence to a particular religion. I trust that readers will understand that God is being used in a totally inclusive way throughout.
- ⁶ For instance, see Mahmoud Mostafa in “What if Allāh is Beautiful and Loves Beauty?” who reminds his reader of the beauty of the word, the beauty of art, the beauty of music, which are all intrinsic to a rich Islamic tradition of the beautiful. Online at: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingtradition/2019/07/what-if-Allāh-is-beautiful-and-loves-beauty/> (accessed June 3, 2020).
- ⁷ “The Beautiful Names of Allāh” (SWT). Online at: <https://www.researchgate.net/> (accessed June 4, 2020).
- ⁸ Clark, “Mystical Perception,” 45.
- ⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* II. 345, trans. Clark, in “Mystical Perception,” 46.
- ¹⁰ Cyrus A. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love and the Human Form in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘Irāqī* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 124.
- ¹¹ Dostoyevsky also intuited this when he wrote: “Beauty is not only a mysterious thing, it is a terrible, frightening thing.” Cited by Jonathan Black, in Jonathan Black, *The Sacred History* (London: Quercus, 2013), 133.
- ¹² This harmony can itself be seen to be the basis for the perennial appeal of the greatest of classical music, poetry, dance, or art in which the eyes and ears perceive traces of a harmony which opens our consciousness and hearts to mindful perception and a glimpse of a harmonious state of being, at harmony and peace with ourselves, with the world and with others.
- ¹³ Poem 55 (3-4), from the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. in *Perfect Harmony: Sufi Poetry of Ibn ‘Arabī*. Calligraphy by Hassan Massoudy (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).
- ¹⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, from the Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. in Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 136-138.
- ¹⁵ See, for instance, Clark, “Mystical Perception and Beauty,” 57.
- ¹⁶ This is reminiscent of the ḥadīth in which Muhammad states that three things in this world were made dear to him, women, perfume, and the freshness of the eyes in prayer.
- ¹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, in R.A. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān al-ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1911, 1978). Online at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/taa/index.htm> (accessed June 3, 2020).
- ¹⁸ A culmination of this archetype was to come in Vladimir Solovyov’s three visionary encounters with the Divine Sophia herself, described in his poem *Tri svidaniya* or “Three Encounters” or “Three Rendezvous” (1898).
- ¹⁹ Jane Clark’s new provisional translation of the Preface, in Jane Clark, “The Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*,” available on the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society website: <https://www.ibnarabisociety.org>, and also at: <https://academia.edu> (accessed June 6, 2020).
- ²⁰ From the Preface to the *Tarjumān*, in Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 136-138.
- ²¹ Clark, “The Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*.”
- ²² For an in depth discussion of this, see Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabī, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 49-56.
- ²³ Such questions have inspired large amounts of my own poetry, including longer narrative poems such as *Heloise Speaks* and *In Memory of Her: The Woman Who Knew the All*.

- 24 Extracts from: Irina Kuzminsky, *Circling the Centre: Conversations with Nizām* (unpublished manuscript). I will use occasional quotes from this work to help fill the gaps and offer Nizām and others similar to her a voice.
- 25 See Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies from Ibn 'Arabī and New Poems*, (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 32, 148.
- 26 See Clark, "Mystical Perception," 54.
- 27 Poem 49 (2-5), *Tarjumān*, trans. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, 136.
- 28 From Poem 46, *Tarjumān*, trans. Zargar, in Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 123.
- 29 From Irina Kuzminsky, "Mirroring," unpublished manuscript.
- 30 On the controversy, see Claude Addas, *The Voyage of No Return*, trans. David Streight, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2000) 125-7, and Chapter 1, "Should Ibn 'Arabī Be Burned?," *passim*. Also, A.E. Affifi, "Ibn 'Arabī," Chapter 20 in *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Vol.1, Book 3), particularly the subsection "Controversy about His Orthodoxy." Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/sw/node/39536> (accessed June 12, 2020).
- 31 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 18.
- 32 See full translation in Clark, "Mystical Perception," 36; also, in Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 121: "[his disciples] had heard one of the jurists of Aleppo deny that this [collection of poems] resulted from divine secrets and that the Shaykh dissimulates so that [the poetic collection] is ascribed to propriety and religion." *Dhakhā'ir*, 4.
- 33 Mohamed Haj Yusef, "Did Ibn 'Arabī marry Nizām?" Online at: http://www.ibnalarabi.com/English/20_his_wife_nizam.php (accessed May 14, 2020).
- 34 Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, I, pp.47-51; in Addas, *The Voyage of No Return*, 75.
- 35 See a commentary on this famous quote in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 174.
- 36 Ibid., 194.
- 37 Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 37, see also fn. 9, 47.
- 38 Kuzminsky, from "Mirroring."
- 39 See Sahih al-Bukhari 3022, Sahih Muslim 2751, Online at: <https://abuminaelias.com> (accessed June 15, 2020).
- 40 For a discussion of the important role of women in Tantric Buddhism, see Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

- 41 Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, 2:192, quoted in Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience: Critically (En)gendering the Study of Islam." *Journal for Islamic Studies* 33:14-47, (2013): 40; and also, in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 126.
- 42 Ibn al-'Arabī, Muhyi 'l-Din. *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. 4 vols. Beirut: Dar Sadir. 2:573-574; quoted in Sayyid Ahmed Amiruddin, "Mysticism and Women According to Ibn Arabi." Online at: <https://sayyidamiruddin.com/women/> (accessed June 14, 2020).
- 43 See Ibn 'Arabī, *Bezels of Wisdom (Fusūs al-Hikam)*, Chapter 27 on Muhammad. One of the first translations into English was by R.W.J. Austin (with a Preface by Titus Burckhardt), *Bezels of Wisdom* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980).
- 44 See, for a discussion, Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 70.
- 45 Ibn 'Arabī, Commentary on poem 25, v.6 of the *Tarjumān*. Trans. Maurice Gloton, in Maurice Gloton, *L'interprète des désirs* (Albin Michel: 1996, 2012), 325. The saying of the "70,000 veils" is the ḥadīth: "God has seventy thousand veils of light and darkness; if He were to remove them, the radiant splendours of His Face would burn up whoever (or 'whatever creature') was reached by His Gaze." Quoted online at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashf> (accessed June 16, 2020).
- 46 Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, IV, 151, quoted by Addas, *The Voyage of No Return*, 83.
- 47 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fusūs al-hikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*, I, 121, quoted by Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 98.
- 48 *Futūḥāt* III, 247, in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 55.
- 49 *Fut.*, I, 366, in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 95.
- 50 *Fut.*, III, 341: "He [Jesus] is my first master on the Way; it is in his hands that I was converted. He watches over me at all hours, not leaving me for even a second." Quoted in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 25.
- 51 See on this subject, Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 9; see also Souad Hakim, "Ibn 'Arabī's Twofold Perception of Woman: Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society* 31 (2002): 1-9. Online at: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/woman-as-human-being-and-cosmic-principle-souad-hakim/> (accessed June 29, 2020).
- 52 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 27.
- 53 For a discussion of how women and men have equal capacity in society and law for Ibn 'Arabī, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 82, 84. In

- general, for an unsurpassed exposition of the complexity of Ibn 'Arabī's views on men and women and his skill in deconstruction and 'un-saying' see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, *passim*.
- 54 See, Ibn 'Arabī, *Bezels of Wisdom*, (trans. Austin), Chapter 27 on Muhammad, 214-226; see fn. 12 in Jane Clark, "The Image of the Beloved: Vision and Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī's Interpreter of Desires (*Tarjumān al-ashwāq*)," paper delivered at the conference "Symbol and Creative Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī," University of Murcia, Spain, 8-9 March 2013, 7. Online at: <https://www.academia.edu/37785534/> (accessed July 4, 2020).
- 55 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 74.
- 56 Ibn 'Arabī had at least two wives, Maryam and Fāṭima, one other who died, and at least one biological daughter, Zaynab, who also died young and for whom he wrote a great elegy.
- 57 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 193.
- 58 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 52-53.
- 59 See Clark's translation, in Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān al'ashwāq*."
- 60 Logion 114, trans. Marvin Meyer, in Marvin Meyer with Harold Bloom, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 63.
- 61 For an in-depth account of Ibn 'Arabī's relationships with these female masters and the debt he owed them, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 100 *et al*; and Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 32-33. See also, for Ibn 'Arabī's own descriptions of these relationships, Ibn 'Arabī, *Sufis of Andalusia: The Rūḥ al-quḍs and Al-Durrat al-fākhira*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (Roxburgh: Beshara, 1988), 142-146.
- 62 *Sufis of Andalusia*, 142, 143; quoted in Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 32.
- 63 As Shaikh points out, this is an implicit comparison to Muhammad, described in the Qur'ān as "the Mercy to the Worlds"; Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 33, fn 44.
- 64 See this quote in https://sufi-wiki.com/Fatima_of_Cordoba (accessed June 25, 2020).
- 65 *Sufis of Andalusia*, 143-5; quoted in Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 33. The "Opening" is literally the First Chapter or opening of the Qur'ān and Fāṭima was given its power to wield in any way she wished and thus produce miracles. Ibn Arabī The preface to the *Tarjumān al'ashwāq*."
- witnessed her ability to create a three-dimensional ethereal image of the *Fāṭiḥa* which then carried out what she had prayed for.
- 66 For more on these and other women as described by Ibn 'Arabī, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 101; Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 34.
- 67 Shaikh has translated several of these initiation poems for the first time in Shaikh, "Appendix: Selected Poems from the *Dīwān* Ibn 'Arabī." In Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 229-32.
- 68 Such as the poems to Safiya, Zaynab, Firdaws, Mah-buland. For a comprehensive discussion of Ibn 'Arabī's *Dīwān*, see Julian Cook and Stephen Hirtenstein, "The Great *Dīwān* and its offspring: The collection and dispersion of Ibn 'Arabī's poetry", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society*, Vol.52 (2012): 33-75.
- 69 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 218.
- 70 The Five M's, *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (cereal), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse), are considered transgressive from the standpoint of Brahmanical Hinduism with its strict codes of vegetarianism, abstinence and caste divisions. Tantra, on the other hand, affirms that everything, even the ritually impure, can be a path to God, radically affirming Divine Immanence alongside Transcendence, and using the charge of transgression to bring the Tantric closer to a direct experience of Reality.
- 71 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 122.
- 72 Quoted in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 123. See Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) Chapter 6, 171-202, for translations of passages by Ibn 'Arabī on the cosmological significance of sexual intercourse.
- 73 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 134. Also, Ibn 'Arabī writes: "The action, though it is God's, becomes manifest only by our hands." Cited in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 179.
- 74 *Gospel of Thomas*, logion 22, trans. Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer. Online at: <http://ww3.haverford.edu/reli-gion/courses/122b/GThomas2translations.htm> (accessed July 27, 2020). Similarly, logion 106 reads: "When you make two into one, you will become children of Adam."
- 75 *Fath al-Bari* 11:34041, ḥadīth 6502.
- 76 Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons, Sermon IV: True Hearing* (London: Aeterna Press, 2015).

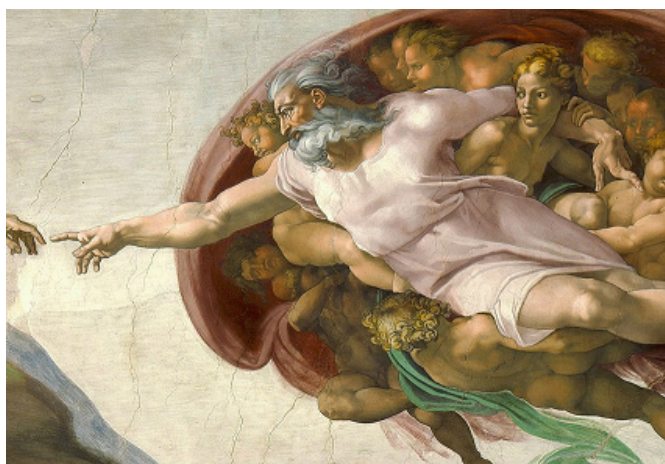
77 *Futūḥāt* IV, 30; cited in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 98.
 78 Kuzminsky, from "Mirroring."
 79 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 158, 193.
 80 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 171.
 81 Ibid., 279.
 82 Murshid F.A. Ali ElSenossi in "The Language of the Future: Sufi Terminology". Online at: <http://www.almirajsuficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/299> (August 2, 2020).
 83 For more on this subject, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 178-9.
 84 But what of woman herself? If man most perfectly witnesses God in woman how does she most perfectly witness God? Ibn 'Arabī's answer seems to be that she witnesses God in all of creation.
 85 Cited in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 165.
 86 See Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 133, fn 35.
 87 Ibn 'Arabī, *Dhakhā'ir al-Aqlaq*, ed. Muhammad al-Kurdī (Cairo, 1968) 9, quoted by Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 139.
 88 For a quick overview of this area, see <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170215-the-strange-link-between-the-human-mind-and-quantum-physics> (accessed July 30, 2020).
 89 *Dhakhā'ir*, 26-27, quoted in Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 150.
 90 Irina Kuzminsky, "The pure are ...," in *Esoteric Quarterly*, Fall (2012), 8.
 91 Irina Kuzminsky, "You see," unpublished MS.
 92 As Clark says, a majority of the *Tarjumān* poems, 49 out of 61, have a female Beloved. See Jane Clark, "The Image of the Beloved."
 93 In Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138.
 94 Clark, "Mystical Perception," 54.
 95 *Tarjumān*, quoted by Clark, "Mystical Perception," 53.
 96 I have taken the phrase from the book by Mano Warren, *The Truth Sings in Circles* (London: Athena Press, 2005), a study of the Black Madonna.
 97 It is not my intention to situate the poems of the *Tarjumān* (which are *qaṣīda*) within the traditions of classical Arabic poetry. Michael Sells has done splendid work there and I would refer the reader to his *Stations of Desire*, and also to Maurice Gloton, *L'interprète des désirs*.
 98 Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 141-2.
 99 Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*.
 100 From Poem 4 (6) trans. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 150, as follows:

"She said, 'Doesn't it suffice him, concerning me, that with his heart he witnesses me in every single moment? Doesn't it? Doesn't it?"
 101 Trans. Irina Kuzminsky after the French versions by Gloton, *L'interprète des désirs*, 413, 445.
 102 Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 138-139.
 103 See Clark's study of the Preface(s), Clark, "Mystical Perception."
 104 Clark, "Mystical Perception," 43-44.
 105 Ibn Arabī, "Preface to the *Tarjumān*," in Clark, "The Image of the Beloved."
 106 Trans. Clark, in Clark, "Mystical Perception," 56; also, Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 7.
 107 Trans. Clark, in Clark, "Mystical Perception," 59; also, Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 7-8.
 108 In Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 149.
 109 Trans. Clark, in Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 8-9.
 110 Ralph Austin, "The Lady Nizam - an Image of Love and Knowledge," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society*, Vol. viii (1988): 35-48. Online at: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-lady-nizam-ralph-austin/> (accessed August 3, 2020).
 111 Poem 2 (6-9), trans. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, 60.
 112 Preface to the *Tarjumān*, in Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 3.
 113 Poem 11 (13-15), trans. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, 67.
 114 Quoted online at: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/introduction-muhyiddin-ibn-arabi/> (accessed August 4, 2020). The saying Ibn 'Arabī uses is by Junayd.
 115 Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*. These intermittent quotations are a way of reinstating Nizām's missing voice to the dialogue.
 116 Black, *The Sacred History*, 229.
 117 Images of light are scattered throughout the poems, as examples: "radiance of the sun," 57, "She smiled, showing her side teeth," 59, "lightning" in the East and the West, 14, at night she is like the sun illuminating the dark, 39, and numerous others.
 118 *Bezels of Wisdom*, 275, 27th Chapter, quoted in Austin, "The Lady Nizam," 5, fn 34.
 119 Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book I, v.2437 (ed. and trans. R.A. Nicholson; Leiden, NLD: Brill, 1925).
 120 Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*.
 121 See Affifi, "Ibn 'Arabī" Chapter 20, 6.
 122 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138.

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- ¹²³ Quoted in Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān,” 46.
- ¹²⁴ Quoted by Affīfī, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” Chapter 20, 4; who quoted it from Sha’rani, Yawaqit, 24
- ¹²⁵ Claude Addas, “The Ship of Stone,” in *The Journey of the Heart*, J. Mercer (ed.) (Oxford: 1996), 5-24. Special issue of the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* Vol.XIX (1996).
- ¹²⁶ Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān,” 33.
- ¹²⁷ Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 107.
- ¹²⁸ <https://ibnarabisociety.org/poetry-poems/> (accessed August 17, 2020). Also, as Jane Clark points out, “the tendency to jump between prose and poetry/*inshā’* is a very distinctive feature of his writing in the early and middle periods.” See Clark, “Mystical Perception”, 42.
- ¹²⁹ Addas, “The Ship of Stone.”
- ¹³⁰ As quoted by Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān”, 39-40. This vision takes place during Ibn ‘Arabī’s marriage with the stars in heaven (astrology) and the letters of the alphabet (sacred science of letters). See also Addas, “The Ship of Stone”.
- ¹³¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Yadayim* 73a; quoted in Rabbi Robert Teixeira, “The Song of Songs Seder: A Night of Sacred Sexuality, 4/11/2014. Online at: <https://the-shalomcenter.org>.
- ¹³² For more on this, see Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān”, 70.
- ¹³³ *Fut.*, III, 341: cited in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 25.
- ¹³⁴ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 174-175. This is not a poem in the Arabic, but part of a chapter from the *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt*. However, this translation by Corbin is justly famous.
- ¹³⁵ Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*.

The Feminine Face of God in Judaism and Christianity

John F. Nash



Michelangelo, "The Creation of Adam" (c.1511)

Summary

Judaism and Christianity officially proclaim a masculine Deity. Yet notions of a Feminine Face of God can be discerned from the dawn of biblical Judaism to modern esoteric Christianity. Typically such notions arose on the fringes of religious orthodoxy, though in a few cases, they were endorsed by religious leaders. The Feminine Face of God can be seen in goddesses that are categorically distinct from humanity, in at least one historical figure, and in the corporate body of Jews or Christians.

This article examines evidence of the Feminine Face of God in biblical and later Judaism; in the Kabbalah; and in Gnostic, mainstream and esoteric Christianity. Emphasis is given to two individualities who serve as particularly clear expressions of divinity: Sophia and Mary. Among much else, the article offers insights into the enigmatic relationship between Sophia and Mary.

Introduction

In Genesis 1, "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... male and female created he them."¹ The first reference to humanity in the Bible also makes an important statement about God: if human sexual polarity reflects the divine image and likeness, then God must also be both male and female. Notwithstanding that bold affirmation in their joint

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creation story, institutional Judaism and Christianity projected only masculine attributes onto their deity.

Consequently, it may seem challenging to look for signs of a Feminine Face of God in the two world religions. Yet, throughout Judeo-Christian history, people yearned for a *goddess*—and in multiple contexts found one. Attempts were made to suppress that yearning, or to channel it into less threatening forms, like the corporate body of believers. But a more substantial and personal goddess kept coming back, showing how deep the hunger ran, and continues to run.

Belief in a Feminine Face of God has sometimes been most prevalent among the masses; at other times it involved sophisticated individuals and groups. Important insights were shared by prominent Gnostics and Jewish Kabbalists; by Christians like Hildegard of Bingen, Jakob Böhme, and Sergei Bulgakov; and by twentieth-century Theosophists. Finally, we have the work of modern scholars searching for evidence of the Feminine Face of God in scripture and other ancient texts.

Gods and Goddesses of Antiquity

The feminist movement of the 1970s and '80s popularized the belief that, in prehistory, the Great Goddess reigned supreme in a peaceful, matriarchal society. The Goddess was identified with both the Earth and motherhood. Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor claimed that goddess worship emerged naturally from the child-mother relationship. "The first love-object for both women and men," they noted, "is the mother." Sjöö and Mor added: "In matriarchal society ... there is a close identification with the collective group of mothers, with Mother Earth, and with the Cosmic Mother."² The goddess religion focused on the seasons of the year, and on the lunar cycle, with its associations with the menstrual cycle.³ Allegedly the goddess culture ended when invading Indo-European tribes from Central Asia imposed a warlike patriarchy.⁴

Over time the scenario lost some of its credibility. Among other considerations, the matriarchal society must have been limited in geographical extent; it could not, for example, have

included Central Asia. But the Indo-Europeans did introduce male warrior gods, like Indra, Yahweh, Ares, Mars, and Odin. Those deities represented physical strength and prowess in battle, to which men were said to aspire and on which their own, their family's and their tribe's survival depended.

Even in increasingly male-dominated pantheons, some powerful goddesses held their own. A few reigned alone, like the Hindu Ushas, goddess of the dawn; the Greek Athena; and the Roman Cybele, known as *Magna Mater* ("Great Mother"). The Celtic Danu and the Aztec Coatlicue were the mothers of male gods. Others were consorts of male gods; all three persons of the Hindu *trimurti* had consorts. In Egypt, Osiris and Isis were not only husband and wife but also siblings. Isis was revered as a mother goddess, and artwork of her holding her son Horus provided a prototype for the Christian Madonna and Child.

Of particular relevance to the present study is the ancient Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna. Inanna was known as the "Lady of Heaven," or "Queen of Heaven," and was associated with the planet Venus and the eight-pointed star.⁵ Later, Inanna was worshipped by the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians under the name Ishtar. Inanna probably inspired the Chaldean-Hebrew goddess Asherah. Inanna had a sister, Ereshkigal, "Queen of the Underworld," whose characteristics were the polar opposites of Inanna's. Today we might suggest that Ereshkigal represented Inanna's shadow side.

The Burney Relief is often said to depict Inanna or Ereshkigal.⁶ The terracotta relief, dated between 1800 and 1750 BCE, shows a nude, female figure with wings, bird's talons instead of feet, and dewclaws on her lower legs. Her raised hands hold "rod and ring" symbols that customarily represented sacrificial offerings. She is flanked by owls and perched on the backs of two lions. Traces of pigment suggest that her body was once painted red, and the background black; hence the modern name "Queen of the Night."⁷

The figure in the Burney Relief is not immediately threatening; the face and body are attractive, and her hairstyle, headdress, and jewelry

suggest high social status. But detractors could have seized upon the combination of wings and clawed feet to demonize her as a bird of prey, a bloodthirsty seductress. She may lie behind the evil Lilith of Judaic tradition. Significantly, one of her possible points of origin was Abraham's homeland, Ur.

What Does the Feminine Face Mean?

What precisely do we mean by the Feminine Face of God? In antiquity, people may have perceived it in the Moon, the sea, a forest, or the wind; or in a quality like fertility, nurturing or compassion. Perhaps the element or quality suggested femaleness, or female attributes were projected onto it. Over time it acquired a name and became a personage, an object of worship, a goddess. Sophia evolved from the quality of wisdom.

A goddess might be created solely by storytellers, eventually to take a prominent place in a culture's mythology. Or a particular culture might honor a human woman and raise her to the level of a deity; Mary was raised to divine, or near-divine, status. She brought her femaleness and attributes with her, though new attributes were projected onto her too.

Goddesses are created or discovered, and in every case we can detect human aspiration or need. Both in prehistory and throughout Judeo-Christian history people have yearned for a divine queen and/or mother, and their yearnings generally have been rewarded. However, this does not necessarily mean that goddesses—and gods—are mere figments of primitive imagination. Divinity also seeks to reveal itself, and deities may emerge from the intersection of human aspiration and divine revelation. Human aspiration may create a form into which divine essence can flow; the more noble the form the more fully the divine essence can ensoul it. Esoteric and some Christian teachings describe ways in which human beings can evolve sufficiently to serve as forms for divine ensoulment.

Esoteric teachings also speak of a feminine Principle that precedes, underlies or conditions the manifestations of deities, or logoi, from the unmanifest Godhead. At the other end of the conceptual spectrum, some modern “post-

religious” writers reduce the Feminine Face of God to a mere slogan or symbol of women's revolt against patriarchy.

In this study we shall observe the development of manifestations of the Feminine in diverse cultures, over a period of four millennia. At the same time, we shall gain a better understanding of what we mean by the Feminine Face of God.

The Feminine Face in Judaism

Moses proclaimed that Yahweh (Hebrew: *Yhvh*) was the one true God. Yahweh was a tribal warrior god, and the Jewish people projected unmistakably masculine qualities onto him. He led them in battle against their many enemies, including the inhabitants of the lands they conquered and occupied.

Yet the Feminine Face of God can be discerned in a number of forms in Judaism. Some of them had pre-Judaic roots. Some have strong roots in scripture, while others were later creations, projected back onto scripture; one later creation was projected back onto the very first chapter of the Bible. Some found their way into medieval and modern Judaism, into the Kabbalah, or into Christianity.

Asherah

The mother goddess Asherah was worshipped in various parts of the Middle East. She and her consort El, or El Shaddai (“the High God”) allegedly gave birth to a pantheon of gods, from seventy to eighty-eight in number.⁸ Asherah was also a goddess of the trees or the groves, and her cult symbol was a stylistic tree: a wooden post.

Abraham and his wife (and half-sister) Sarah, then known as Abram and Sarai, were told by God to leave their home in Ur of the Chaldees and journey to the Land of Canaan. Abraham's God was El, and he brought El and Asherah with him to Canaan.

We read in *Genesis* that “the Lord” gave Abram the new name Abraham and told him: “I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.”⁹ Thus was born the Jewish nation. But “the Lord” was not El but Yahweh.¹⁰ Abraham may have lived

early in the second millennium BCE, but the Hebrew Bible is no older than the sixth century BCE, and by that time El had been replaced by, or transformed into, Yahweh.

While El may have survived under a new name, the prophets and priests found no place for Asherah in their vision of Judaism. But it seems that she continued to find a place in the hearts of ordinary people. Worship of Asherah continued below the surface of mainstream Judaism. Asherah may be related to the Semitic mother-goddess Ashtoreth, or Astarte, who also appears in the Old Testament.¹¹

Asherah appears some forty times in the Hebrew Bible. The same word was used for the goddess and for one of her sacred trees, groves, or ritual posts; and since Hebrew has no capitals, distinguishing between them is not always easy. But at least five instances can be identified where the context indicates a reference to the goddess.¹² Even then, most translators still hesitated to name her, instead rendering *asherah* as “the grove” or another cult symbol, or retaining the Hebrew word uncapitalized. Two examples from the King James Bible are: “Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal ... and the prophets of the groves [prophets of Asherah]”; “And he set a graven image of the grove [image of Asherah].”¹³

The prophets and temple priests regarded the worship of Asherah as idolatrous. By then El had been forgotten, and Asherah was defamed by associating her with foreign gods like Baal. In *Judges* Yahweh commanded Gideon to “cut down the grove [*asherah*],” next to an altar of Baal, and to “offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood.”¹⁴ Gideon had to destroy the shrine in the night to evade the people’s wrath. Similarly, in *2 Chronicles* Asa, king of Judah, found favor with God when he “took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high places, and brake down the images, and cut down the groves [*asherim*].”¹⁵ (Like the goddess, *asherah* is grammatically feminine, but the plural took the masculine form *asherim*). The “high places,” mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible, seem to have been sacred mounds where Asherah and other deities were worshipped.

Asherah seems to have been primarily a deity of the household, and her devotees were predominantly women, even royal women. Thus, in *1 Kings*, we read that Asa deposed Maachah, the queen mother, on grounds of idolatry and burned her statue of Asherah.¹⁶

In *2 Kings* 23 King Josiah ordered Hilkiah the high priest to destroy cult objects, including *asherim*, in multiple locations.¹⁷ The text also mentions that “women ... wove hangings for the grove [*asherah*]” and complains about “the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had builded for Ashtoreth.”¹⁸

In *Jeremiah* we find: “The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven.”¹⁹ In a later chapter, Jeremiah lamented the change in Israel’s fortunes “when we burned incense to the queen of heaven, and poured out drink offerings unto her, did we make her cakes to worship her, and pour out drink offerings unto her, without our men?”²⁰ The “queen of heaven” is not identified, but most likely she was Asherah, or even Inanna. This reference is especially important. First, we find again the heavy involvement of women. Either Asherah really was a “woman’s” goddess, or the prophets were indirectly blaming women for Israel’s travails. Second, the sacrificial offering of cakes foreshadowed the Eucharist. We shall see that a cult of women made sacrificial offerings of cakes to Mary in early Christianity, nearly a millennium later.

The frequency with which priests and prophets spoke out against the cult of Asherah testifies to its broad extent and endurance. Some scholars have detected signs that Asherah survived in popular Judaic devotion until late biblical times, possibly as Yahweh’s consort.²¹ Meanwhile, some of Asherah’s maternal duties were reassigned to Yahweh himself; for example: “Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?”²² Efforts were being made to soften Yahweh’s warrior image.

Lilith

Lilith appears once in the Hebrew Bible, in *Isaiah*. But at least until recently, translators referred to her indirectly, using terms like “the screech owl,” “the night creature,” or “the night.” For example, the King James Bible renders the verse: “The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and ... the screech owl [Lilith] also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest.”²³

Lilith appears by name in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in a passage that *Isaiah* may have inspired: “I, the Instructor, proclaim His glorious splendor so as to frighten and to terrify all the spirits of the destroying angels, spirits of the bastards, demons, Lilith, howlers, and (desert dwellers) ... and those which fall upon men without warning to lead them astray.”²⁴ Lilith is also mentioned by name in the Babylonian Talmud, written between the third and fifth century CE. Five such references are harshly critical. Lilith is described as a demoness who killed her own children and might kill or maim the children of others.

The most influential contribution to Lilith’s story appears in an anonymous eighth-or-tenth century text known as the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. Suspected by some scholars as being satirical, the text claims that Lilith was Adam’s first wife. The claim exploited a possible time interval between *Genesis* 1:27, when God created “them” male and female, and *Genesis* 2:22, which specifically mentions the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib.

Lilith allegedly refused to submit to Adam, claiming that they were created equal. They quarreled, after which Lilith “uttered God’s ineffable name and flew away into the air.”²⁵ Three angels were dispatched to bring her back to Eden, but she refused:

“Leave me alone! I was only created in order to sicken babies: if they are boys, from birth to day eight I will have power over them; if they are girls, from birth to day twenty.” ... She swore to them [the angels] in the name of the living God that whenever she would see them or their names or their images on an amulet, she would not overpower that

baby, and she accepted that a hundred of her children would die every day.²⁶

Thus, Lilith became the “screech owl,” the evil Goddess of the Night, who preyed upon newborn infants.

The thirteenth-century Spanish rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen linked Lilith with Samael, the satanic personage of Talmudic and post-Talmudic Jewish tradition. He declared that the “evil Samael and wicked Lilith are like a sexual pair who, by means of an intermediary, receive an evil and wicked emanation from one and emanate to the other.” Their offspring is “a great defiled serpent ... a blind prince.” Rabbi Isaac warned: “If he were created whole in the fullness of his emanation he would have destroyed the world in an instant.”²⁷ Suggestions that the serpent in *Genesis* 3 was Lilith herself are supported by an early fourteenth-century French illustration showing the serpent with the head of a woman.²⁸

Lilith may not always have been an evil goddess. As noted earlier, she may have been a derivative of Inanna, her sister Ereshkigal, or the personage in the Burney Relief. During the early biblical period, she may have been defamed to stamp out worship of a deity who was competing too successfully for the hearts and minds of Jewish people. The weight of calumnies heaped on her may have been a measure of her popularity.

Whatever her origins, Lilith reigned supreme as the vilest and most feared female deity of Jewish tradition. In the Middle Ages, Jewish babies wore amulets, and families buried incantation bowls to ward off Lilith’s wrath. The circumcision of boys after eight days, and the *zeved habat*, or naming ceremony, for girls, evidently put infants beyond danger.²⁹ Lilith amulets are advertised for sale to this day.

Chokmah

If Asherah’s support came primarily from ordinary people, Chokmah’s came from an intelligent elite. From humble beginnings as an abstraction, she went on to become the powerful Sophia of Hellenic Judaism, the Kabbalah, Gnostic and mainstream Christianity, and

feminist theology. Interestingly, too, Chokmah/Sophia was promoted enthusiastically by men.

In about the tenth century BCE, King Solomon asked God for wisdom (Hebrew: *chokmah*), and *1 Kings* 4 records God's response:

God gave Solomon wisdom (*chokmah*) and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt.... And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.³⁰

Whether Solomon understood the grammatically feminine *chokmah* to mean anything more than the quality of being wise is unclear. But certainly, he had a reverence for the feminine: "[H]e had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines,"³¹ and he did not disdain the adoration of the Queen of Sheba. More significantly, as we have seen, he built a temple to Asherah/Ashtoreth.

By the late biblical period, Chokmah had become personified; she became an *entity*, a divine feminine individuality. English translations render her as "Wisdom," capitalized, and use the feminine pronoun. Chokmah made several appearances in scripture. In *Proverbs*, she boldly declared:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth.... Then I was by him, as one brought up with him [Hebrew: *aman*]; and I was daily his delight [*riri*] rejoicing always before him."³²

Some translations—including Martin Luther's—render *aman* as "master worker" or "architect," while others suggest "trusted confidante," even "darling." *Riri* generally means "object of delight, desire or pleasure." In the very next chapter of *Proverbs* Chokmah invited

the townspeople to a proto-Eucharist: "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled."³³

The personified Chokmah is conspicuous in the Old Testament Apocrypha. The latter books, written after about 200 BCE, were excluded from the Hebrew canon but included in the Greek Septuagint.³⁴ For example, Chokmah is described in the *Wisdom of Solomon* as

the breath of the power of God ... a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty ... the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness.... For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it.³⁵

In the next chapter, the Lord declared: "I loved her, and sought her out from my youth, I desired to make her my spouse, and I was a lover of her beauty."³⁶

Chokmah seems to have been Yahweh's consort. Michelangelo's painting, *The Creation of Adam* (c.1508–1512), shows God with his arm around a young woman (see the detail at the beginning of this article). Who could that be but Chokmah?³⁷ Even more importantly, Chokmah was with Yahweh at the creation of the world—and not just in a passive role. As "master worker" and "architect," she was co-creator.

The personified Chokmah appeared relatively late in the biblical literature. Several explanations can be offered of her origins. She may have entered Judaic consciousness during the Babylonian Exile, when Jews came into contact with various Middle Eastern goddesses. Alternatively, her lineage may extend back within Israel to Asherah. In *Ecclesiasticus*, Chokmah not only repeated the claim: "He [the Creator of all things] created me from the beginning before the world,"³⁸ she also declared her affinity for trees:

I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus, and as a cypress tree upon the mountains of Hermon. I was exalted like a palm tree in Engaddi, and as a rose plant in Jericho, as a fair olive tree in a pleasant field, and grew up as a plane tree by the water.... As the turpentine

tree I stretched out my branches, and my branches are the branches of honor and grace.”³⁹

Chokmah even identified herself as a mother figure: “I am the mother of fair love, and fear, and knowledge, and holy hope: I therefore, being eternal, am given to all my children which are named of him.”⁴⁰ *Ecclesiasticus*, also known as *Sirach*, was written in Hebrew in Palestine around 180–175 BCE.

The *Wisdom of Solomon* was written in Greek, probably in the first century BCE, and there we see Chokmah assuming her Greek identity, Sophia. *Sophia* is the direct Greek translation of *Chokmah*. By that time, the Septuagint was more than a century old, and Hellenic Jews already knew Chokmah/Sophia by her Greek name.

Chokmah/Sophia’s emergence during Judaism’s Hellenic period might suggest that she was of Greek origin. Plato famously proclaimed *philo sophia* (“I love wisdom”)! thereby coining the word *philosophy*. But there is no evidence that he was thinking of a particular woman or goddess. While the Greeks did personify wisdom as the Lady Sophia, historians do not believe that she was ever worshipped. Athena was the traditional goddess of wisdom in classical Greece. One challenge to this historical opinion is cited later in the article, when we take up Sophia’s story again.

On the other hand, the Septuagint was written in Alexandria, suggesting that Chokmah/Sophia’s origins might lie among Egyptian goddesses. Isis would be a leading candidate, and esotericists and others have devoted much attention to her as an expression of the Feminine Aspect of Deity.

Chokmah/Sophia continued to attract attention in Hellenic Judaism in the first century CE.⁴¹ Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, referred to Sophia as the “Daughter of God.”⁴² Elsewhere, he reaffirmed Sophia’s role in the creation: “[T]he Creator of the universe is also the father of his creation; and... the mother was the knowledge of the Creator.”⁴³ Philo continued:

[T]his knowledge having received the seed of God, when the day of her travail arrived, brought forth her only and well-beloved son ... this world. Accordingly Wisdom [Sophia] [speaks] of herself in this manner: “God created me as the first of his works, and before the beginning of time did he establish me.” For it was necessary that all the things which came under the head of the creation must be younger than the mother and nurse of the whole universe.⁴⁴

“Mother and nurse of the whole universe” makes an interesting contrast with “master worker” and “architect.” Philo was fascinated by the concept of the Logos, which had evolved from Plato through the Stoics. He saw the Logos as a god-man, the intermediary between the Divine and the human; his writings probably influenced the author of the fourth gospel. But Philo wrestled with issue of how the Logos related to Sophia; perhaps they were one and the same.⁴⁵ The equation of Sophia with the Logos would influence early mainstream Christianity.

Other Manifestations

Three other divine feminine manifestations should be mentioned: the *ruach ha-kodesh*, or holy spirit; the *shekinah*, the indwelling glory of God; and the *bat tzion*, or “Daughter of Zion.” Personalized—and capitalized—the Shekinah and the Holy Spirit would go on to play major roles in Judaism and Christianity, respectively. The *bat tzion* was an example of corporate personalization.

The grammatically feminine *ruach* (“breath,” “wind,” “spirit”) appears 378 times in the Hebrew Bible. For example, we find: “[B]ehold, I ... bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life [*ruach*] ... and every thing that is in the earth shall die.”⁴⁶ And “Then the Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord came upon Jephthah.”⁴⁷ Sometimes *ruach* could simply denote a mood or disposition: “Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit [*ruach*].”⁴⁸

The more significant *ruach ha-kodesh* (“holy spirit,” “holy breath,” even “holy wind”) appears three times. For example: “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit [*ruach ha-kodesh*] from me.”⁴⁹ *Ruach ha-kodesh* was a divine force or activity, not a personage, but it was destined to be personified and to play a major role in Christianity.

During the Rabbinic period, following the destruction of the temple, references were made to the *shekinah*, the feminine indwelling glory of God, contrasting with but also complementing *kavod*, the masculine transcendent glory. *Shekinah* was derived from the root verb *shakan* (“to dwell or abide”), which had much deeper roots in Judaism. *Shakan* denoted the divine immanence: God’s abiding presence in sacred locations like the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies, or Mount Sinai. In *Exodus*, for example, we read: “[T]he glory of the Lord abode [*shakan*] upon mount Sinai.”⁵⁰ And in *Isaiah*: “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth [*shakan*] eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell [*shakan*] in the high and holy place.”⁵¹

The *Shekinah* eventually became personified and attracted attention through the Middle Ages and into the modern period. The eleventh-century Talmudic scholar, Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona, made an interesting statement that referred both to a personified *Ruach ha-Kodesh* and to the *Shekinah*:

When the thought arose in God of creating a world, He first created the Holy Spirit to be a sign of his divinity.... And He created the image of the Throne of His Glory... which is a radiant brilliance and a great light that shines upon all His other creatures. And that great light is called the Glory of our God.... And the Sages call this great light *Shekinah*.⁵²

Polish Rabbi Avraham Heshel (c.1745–1825) also expressed his reverence for the *Shekinah* as the revealed glory of God: “When [God] desired to reveal the glory of His kingship and power in the lower worlds, He first caused His light to bring forth the upper worlds.... From there, He continued step by step.... This continued until His Light reached the level that we call the *Shekinah*.”⁵³

In addition to her place in mainstream Judaism, we shall see that the *Shekinah* featured prominently in the Kabbalah.

The Jewish nation was often personified as a female figure. The term “Daughter of Zion” (*bat tzion*) appears multiple times in the Old Testament. Variants are “Daughter of Jerusalem,” “Daughter of Judah,” and even “Daughter of Babylon.” The collective female figure was sometimes represented as the bride of Yahweh.

In *Zephaniah*, we find: “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.”⁵⁴ In *Isaiah* “virgin” is added: “This is the word which the Lord hath spoken concerning him; the virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee.”⁵⁵ In *Amos* and in *Jeremiah*, we find “Virgin of Israel,” for example, “Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.”⁵⁶ Israel is God’s chosen one, the virgin betrothed to Yahweh, needing protection lest she go astray or be ravished by enemies.

The *Song of Solomon*, or *Canticle of Canticles*, included in the canonical Hebrew Bible, is of uncertain intent and origin. Structured as a dialogue between two lovers, it resembles the erotic mystical poetry found elsewhere in the Middle East and which reached its peak in Sufism. A representative passage, in which the male character extols his lover’s virtues, is as follows:

Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.... Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense. Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.... How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!⁵⁷

Mainstream Judaic tradition identified the female character in the *Song of Solomon* as the

Jewish people, and the male character as God. But one could easily envision the dialogue taking place between a male devotee and his female divine Beloved.⁵⁸

The female personification of the Jewish nation may have been a strategy to provide an acceptable substitute for worship of more tangible goddesses. We shall see that a similar strategy was adopted in Christianity to channel hunger for a goddess into a more acceptable form.

The Feminine Face in the Kabbalah

The Kabbalah, an esoteric branch of Judaism, developed from origins in the rabbinic schools established after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. It is a broad field that includes the ecstatic Kabbalah; the practical Kabbalah; the Hermetic, or “Christian,” Kabbalah; and the modern Kabbalah that emerged in the nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Our present focus is on the Judaic *theoretical Kabbalah*.

Two “golden ages” can be identified in the development of the theoretical Kabbalah. One spanned the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when three classical texts were published in southwest Europe. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (“Book of Creation”) and the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (“Brilliance”) were published in Provence, and the monumental *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“Book of Splendor”) in Castile. The other golden age was in sixteenth-century Palestine, with the work of Moses Cordovero (1522–1570), Isaac Luria (1534–1572), Chaim Vital (1543–1620), and others. The scholars of the Safed school built upon the classical texts to produce the theoretical Kabbalah as we know it today.

Sephiroth and Worlds

Kabbalistic doctrine asserts that the transcendent Godhead, or *Ain Soph*, manifests, or reveals itself, through ten *sephiroth* and four “worlds.”⁶⁰ The *sephiroth* (Hebrew singular: *sephirah*, “number”) are: *Kether*, *Chokmah*, *Binah*, *Chesed*, *Geburah*, *Tifareth*, *Netzach*, *Hod*, *Yesod*, and *Malkuth*.⁶¹ The *sephiroth* can be conceptualized as divine manifestations, hypostases, perhaps even logoi; as stages in the divine emanation; or as the vessels into which the

emanations flow.⁶² The divine light descends from *Kether* to *Malkuth*, cascading like water from one sephirothic vessel to the next. At each stage the light encounters denser levels of reality, until in *Malkuth* it reaches our everyday physical level.

Kether, *Chokmah*, and *Binah* form a trinity. In the Tree of Life, the schematic diagram of the sephiroth, *Chokmah* lies atop the Pillar of Mercy, *Kether* on the Middle Pillar, and *Binah* on the Pillar of Severity.⁶³

Kether (“the Crown”) is considered androgynous or presexual, while *Chokmah* and *Binah* form a gender polarity. *Chokmah* and *Binah* (“Wisdom and Understanding”) appear in combination many times in the Hebrew Bible. But *Chokmah*—in an odd transformation from its biblical form—is envisioned as the primeval masculine force: the archetypal Father. *Binah* becomes the primeval feminine vessel which captures that force: the archetypal Mother. Notwithstanding the names attached to them, *Chokmah* and *Binah* form a polarity comparable to that of the Logos and Sophia in Gnosticism. *Malkuth*, the lowest sephirah, is also considered feminine, establishing a relationship with *Binah*. An alternative name for *Malkuth* is the *Shekinah*, the indwelling glory of God.

How *Chokmah* lost her traditional feminine form to become the primeval masculine force in the Kabbalah is unclear. However, the author of the *Zohar* suggested that the word *chokmah* can be divided into two root words: *koach* (“potential”) and *ma* (“what is”).⁶⁴ Thus *chokmah* could be interpreted as “the potential of what is,” or “the potential to be.” Certainly, the personified *Chokmah* showed remarkable potential to evolve over a period of three millennia.

Two other pairs of sephiroth also form polarities: *Chesed* and *Geburah* (“Mercy and Severity”), and *Netzach* and *Hod* (“Victory and Splendor”). The Pillars of Mercy and Severity take their names from *Chesed* and *Geburah*, respectively. The lower polarities are less gender-based than the *Chokmah*–*Binah* polarity is; but the whole Pillar of Severity, linking *Binah*, *Geburah*, and *Hod*, is often considered feminine.

In addition to the sephiroth, the *Zohar* identified four levels of reality, or “worlds” (*olamin*; singular *olam*): *Atziluth*, *Briah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Assiah*. Just as the divine light descends through the sephiroth from Kether to Malkuth, it also descends through the worlds, from *Atziluth*, the archetypal World of Emanation, to *Assiah*, the human World of Action. Cordovero explained: “[E]manation (*Atziluth*) comes from the Emanator, creation (*Briah*) from emanation, formation (*Yetzirah*) from creation, and action (*Assiah*) from formation.”⁶⁵ *Briah* is considered feminine, complementing the masculine *Atziluth*. According to one interpretation, all ten sephiroth exist in each of the four worlds.

Kabbalistic thought, as it emerged from the *Zohar* and the Safed school, produced a creation story. In the beginning, the story recounts, there was nothing but the Ain Soph—eternal, infinite, and self-sufficient. Then, the Divine decided to manifest or reveal itself, and the universe was produced by a process of emanation, or outpouring, of the divine light.⁶⁶

The divine light flowed into the sephirothic vessels in the highest world of *Atziluth*, but they were not strong enough to withstand the impact. The upper three sefirot were damaged but survived; the lower seven did not: “All seven [lower] vessels shattered and collapsed, for they were not able to contain the light.”⁶⁷ The shattering of the vessels was a catastrophe of cosmic proportions. Much of the divine light was withdrawn into the Ain Soph, while the shards from the broken forms fell into the lower realms to form the *kliphoth* (singular: *kliphah*, “husk” or “shell”).⁶⁸ Separated from the Creator, the *kliphoth* constituted the seeds of evil. In some versions of the creation story Lilith appears as an embodiment of the *kliphoth*.⁶⁹

God had to reconstruct the sefirot. The cosmic catastrophe was followed by the “repairing of the world.”⁷⁰ Chaim Vital explained: “[I]t arose in His will to recreate all these worlds so they could bear the light.... As a result, the lights returned more concealed; thus these worlds were sustained and enabled to contain the light.”⁷¹

The Shekinah

The Shekinah is mentioned in the *Sepher ha-Bahir*, published in the twelfth century, but

possibly containing material as old as the second century CE. After quoting from *Isaiah*: “The whole earth is full of his glory”⁷² its author went on to speak of the indwelling divine glory thus: “This is like a royal princess who came from a far place. People did not know her origin, but they saw that she was a woman of valor, beautiful and refined in all her ways. They said, ‘She certainly originates from the side of light, for she illuminates the world through her deeds.’”⁷³

The Shekinah is mentioned more than 1,000 times in the *Zohar*.⁷⁴ The *Zohar* asserts that “Malkuth is a body to the Shekinah.”⁷⁵ As noted, “Shekinah” is often considered an alternative name for Malkuth. The feminine gender of the lowest sephirah is not surprising when we recognize that it receives the divine force from all higher sephiroth; receptivity is a primary feminine archetype. The Shekinah of Malkuth is the “lower Shekinah,” contrasting with, yet connected to, the transcendental, “supernal Shekinah” of Binah.⁷⁶ In her entirety, the Shekinah serves as a channel of feminine divinity—of divine glory—reaching from the very highest level of reality to the plane of earthly existence.

A common theme in Kabbalistic teaching was the Shekinah’s role during the Jews’ exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. According to the *Zohar*: “When the children of Israel were in exile ... the Shekinah was in exile with them.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere we find: “the angels escorted the Shekinah to Babylon, sat there and wept with Israel”—a reference to *Psalms* 137:1-2.

The Shekinah is referred to in the *Zohar* as the “Mother of Israel.”⁷⁸ As the Jews of Safed looked back over history, they began to weave the Shekinah into their own stories of diaspora and suffering. The Shekinah wandered with them and shared their suffering; but she also expressed the Jewish people’s unbreakable link with God and served as the guarantor of the Covenant.

As the story of creation and redemption gathered momentum, the Shekinah’s exile was associated with the shattering of the vessels. Just as the vessels had been shattered and must be restored, the Shekinah was lost and must be found. She was a bride, defiled before her

wedding, and her grieving bridegroom awaited her. She must be adorned once more in her finery and brought to the wedding.⁷⁹ The Shekinah's bridegroom was "the Holy One," son of Chokmah and Binah and identified with Tiphareth.⁸⁰ Significantly, in the Christian Kabbalah, Tiphareth is identified with Christ the Son of God.

The *Zohar* urged "we should to make a beautiful canopy with beautiful decorations to invite the Supernal Bride, who is the Shekinah."⁸¹ Cordovero's mentor, Solomon Alkabetz, encouraged Jews to "go forth to welcome the Sabbath Queen."⁸² Every Sabbath becomes an opportunity for the wedding. Significantly, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, and the Shekinah/Malkuth is the seventh lower sephirah.

The Feminine Face in Christianity

Christianity embraced the patriarchal monotheism of Judaism. But it also absorbed Greek theological themes which produced the doctrine of the Trinity. The question then arose whether the Trinity might incorporate some expression of the Feminine Face of God.

The Father and Son were readily identified as the first two *hypostases* (Greek singular: *hypostasis*, or "person") of the Trinity, but it was not immediately clear who should be the third. Asherah was ruled out, given her condemnation by the prophets and her association, real or imagined, with Baal. And the Shekinah lacked direct scriptural roots.

Chokmah/Sophia was a strong candidate; she had a rich scriptural pedigree and was already believed to be Yahweh's consort. Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (d.183), who coined the term "Trinity," suggested that the three persons should be *Theos*, *Logos* and *Sophia*.⁸³ His successor, Paul of Samosata (200–275), agreed. A feminine Third Person of the Trinity could serve as God the Mother; and the divine Father and Mother together could beget the Son.

Instead, the nascent church chose *ruach ha-kodesh*, whose Greek form was *pneuma hagion* (literally "holy wind" or "holy spirit"). That

choice presented two major challenges. One was to personify what, in Judaism, had been simply a divine force or activity; the other was to assign a gender and role to that person.

Pneuma Hagion ("Holy Spirit," or "Holy Ghost"), or simply *Pneuma* ("Spirit"), appears some ninety times in the New Testament, implying that personification had already taken place. In a few cases, the words are attributed to Jesus himself, as in *John* 14:26. But Jesus spoke Aramaic, a variant of Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek between 70 and 110 CE, and the earliest manuscript fragments date from the late second century. We do not know whether Jesus personified *ruach ha-kodesh*, or even whether the original authors of the New Testament books personified its Greek equivalent.

Personification may have crept in over a period of centuries, as manuscripts were copied and re-copied in an environment of developing Trinitarian doctrine.⁸⁴ The results were not always consistent. *John* records Christ's promise to send a personalized "Comforter [*Parakletos*], which is the Holy Ghost [*Pneuma*], whom the Father will send in my name."⁸⁵ Yet in *Acts*, the Paraclete arrived in impersonal form: "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" and "cloven tongues like as of fire."⁸⁶ Interestingly, the word translated therein as "wind" was not even *pneuma* but *pnoe*.⁸⁷

Then there was the issue of gender. *Ruach ha-kodesh* was at least grammatically feminine and could, upon personification, have become a divine mother. Unfortunately, *Pneuma Hagion* was neuter, and its Latin equivalent *Spiritus Sanctus* masculine. The result was a Trinity without any trace of femininity, grammatical or otherwise, and the church fathers seemed comfortable with that outcome.

The development of Trinitarian doctrine formally ended with the First Council of Constantinople in 381. The council affirmed that God the Son was "begotten of the Father before all worlds" but did not give him a mother. Separately it affirmed belief "in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified."⁸⁸ To this day

theologians struggle to explain the precise nature and function of the Holy Spirit.

Not everyone saw the matter as settled. In the sixth or seventh century “Mariamite” sects in Arabia allegedly believed in a trinity of God, Jesus, and Mary. Muhammad may have come into contact with them, leading to a rebuke in the *Qur'an*: “And beware the Day when Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people: Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?’”⁸⁹

Attempts were made to project feminine qualities onto Christ or even God the Father. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) prayed to Christ: “like a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.”⁹⁰ Anchorite Julian of Norwich (1342–c.1416) famously proclaimed: “[A]s truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.”⁹¹ We recall that late-biblical Judaism tried to project feminine qualities onto Yahweh.

Renaissance physician and alchemist Paracelsus (c.1493–1541) suggested that the First Person of the Trinity was actually a male–female duality: “God made from himself from his person a woman.” But this was no ordinary woman, she was a goddess (German: *ein Göttin*), “a Queen.” In turn the Son and Holy Spirit proceeded from this divine duality: “[T]he Son is born of two persons, namely from God and the goddess, the Holy Spirit from God the Father and from the Son.”⁹² The most recent attempts to add a female element to the Trinity involved Sophia, and we shall discuss them later in the article.

A more cautious approach was to leave the Trinity intact and simply recast the Third Person as feminine. A twelfth-century fresco of the Trinity in the Chapel of St James, Urschalling, Upper Bavaria, depicts the Holy Spirit as female. In our own time, Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) boldly identified the Holy Spirit as a feminine aspect of Deity:

It is in the Holy Spirit that the feminine aspect of the Godhead can be most clearly seen. She is the Shakti, the power, immanent in all creation, the receptive power of the Godhead. The world comes forth from the

Father, the eternal Ground of Being, in his Word.... In him the ideas and archetypes of all created beings are hidden, he is the exemplar of all creation. But it is the Spirit who conceives these “ideas” in her maternal womb and brings them forth in creation. She is the Great Mother ... who nourishes the seeds of all beings and makes them grow. Still more, she is the mothering Spirit in humankind, who receives the Word, the Wisdom of God, in her heart, of whom in the Christian tradition Mary is the figure, receiving the Word of God in her heart and bringing him forth in his earthly manifestation.⁹³

Griffiths, a British-born Benedictine monk, settled in India and adopted the life of a Swami; his work showed the potential for incorporating South Asian religious concepts into Christian teachings.⁹⁴ Ingeniously, he managed to identify the Holy Spirit as the Divine Mother without needing to reorder the persons of the Trinity to “Father, Mother, Son.” Bede also related the Mother directly to Mary, “receiving the Word of God in her heart.”

Christianity came closest to unveiling the Feminine Face of God in its devotion to Sophia and Mary. We now turn our attention to these two important personages.

Sophia

Christ made one reference to Sophia: “[W]isdom is justified of all her children.”⁹⁵ The feminine pronoun seems to confirm that he was using the name in the tradition of Chokmah/Sophia. Also, that was one of the rare instances in antiquity in which Sophia was assigned a maternal role, more specific than serving as co-creator of the world. Subsequently, Sophia acquired great importance in Gnosticism, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and elsewhere.

Sophia in Gnosticism

Sophia was greatly revered among Gnostic Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era.⁹⁶ Like Philo, Gnostics affirmed Sophia’s status as a divine personage and her role in creation. The author of *Eugnostos the Blessed*, one of the Nag Hammadi texts, called her “Mother of the Universe, whom some call ‘Love.’”⁹⁷ She

is also mentioned in the *Book of Enoch* (1 *Enoch*) and the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* (2 *Enoch*).⁹⁸

The prominent Gnostic Basilides (d.140 CE) rejected Philo's conflation of Sophia and the Logos. Rather, he proposed that the masculine Logos and the feminine Sophia were paired in a gender polarity residing in the *Pleroma*, or heaven world.⁹⁹ Basilides identified the Logos with Christ, as the fourth gospel does.

The *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* presents a creation story in which God proclaimed: "On the sixth day I ordered My Wisdom [Sophia] to make man of seven substances... and I made [Sophia] a ruler to rule upon the earth, and to have My wisdom."¹⁰⁰ According to 1 *Enoch*, Sophia sought "to make her dwelling among the children of men;" but, rejected by sinful humanity, she "found no dwelling-place" and "returned to her place and took her seat among the angels."¹⁰¹ The Sophia of 1 *Enoch* may have been able to return to "her place" by choice, but in other accounts Sophia fell from grace and was rescued only after much suffering.

The most elaborate account of Sophia's fall and rescue is found in the *Pistis Sophia*, a text conventionally dated to the third or fourth century.¹⁰² According to the *Pistis*, Sophia fell into the depths and was held captive for a long time, tormented by evil spirits or *archons*. They stripped away her power and light, whereupon Sophia cried out for help, but "my voice did not penetrate the darkness. And I looked to the height, so that the Light in which I had believed might help me."¹⁰³ Sophia's plight eventually came to the notice of Christ, and after much effort the archangels Michael and Gabriel escorted her back to the *Pleroma*. There "she rejoiced with a great joy." "I will give thanks to thee, O Light," she exclaimed, "for thou art a Savior.... I will speak this song of praise to the Light, for he has saved me from the height and depth of the chaos; and from the eons of the archons of the sphere."¹⁰⁴

In the *Pistis Sophia*, the story of Sophia's fall from grace and subsequent rescue emerges from a long series of allegorical dialogues between the risen Jesus and his disciples. Mary

Magdalene featured prominently in the dialogues, and a strong connection seemed to exist between her and Sophia.¹⁰⁵ Sophia's fall and rescue may have formed a prototype for the exile and rescue of the Shekinah in Kabbalistic teachings.

Gnostic Christianity thrived for some three centuries before succumbing to its own organizational weaknesses and relentless repression by the mainstream church. Neo-Gnostic sects preserved some of its fundamental teachings throughout the centuries, but Sophia never regained the position she enjoyed in the Gnosticism of the early centuries.

Sophia in Western Christianity

Philo's conflation of the Logos and Sophia influenced mainstream western Christianity. Church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) argued that references to Chokmah/Sophia in the Wisdom literature of the Pentateuch were actually prophecies pertaining to Christ and the church. An example was the verse in *Proverbs* 9: "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars."¹⁰⁶ "Here," Augustine declared, "we perceive that the Wisdom of God [Sophia], that is, the Word [Logos] co-eternal with the Father, hath builded Him an house, even a human body in the virgin womb, and hath subjoined the Church to it as members to a head."¹⁰⁷ The seven pillars were the seven churches of *Revelation*, or seven churches of Asia Minor.

Yet, in another instance, Augustine spoke of Sophia in her traditional feminine form. She served as co-creator and might even be eternal: "Wisdom [Sophia] by whom all these things are made, and what have been, and what shall be.... [S]he is not made, but is ... and so shall she be ever."¹⁰⁸ Augustine even shared his experience when reflecting on her: "[W]hile we were discoursing and panting after her, we slightly touched on her with the whole effort of our heart; and we sighed, and there we leave bound the first fruits of the Spirit."¹⁰⁹

In the Middle Ages, abbess and mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) wrote several poems on Sophia, whom she referred to by her

Latin name *Sapientia*. One of the poems includes the following:

O power of Wisdom [Sapientia]!
You encompassed the cosmos,
encircling and embracing all
in one living orbit
with your three wings:
one soars on high,
one distills the earth's essence,
and the third hovers everywhere.
Praise to you Wisdom, fitting praise!¹¹⁰

Elsewhere Hildegard wrote:

She is Divine Wisdom. She watches over all people and all things in heaven and on earth, being of such radiance and brightness that, for the measureless splendor that shines in Her, you cannot gaze on Her face or on the garments She wears. For She is awesome in terror as the Thunderer's lightening, and gentle in goodness as the sunshine. Hence, in Her terror and Her gentleness, She is incomprehensible to mortals, because of the dread radiance of divinity in Her face and the brightness that dwells in Her as the robe of Her beauty. She is like the Sun, which none can contemplate in its blazing face or in the glorious garment of its rays. For She is with all and in all, and of beauty so great in Her mystery that no one could know how sweetly She bears with people, and with what unfathomable mercy She spares them.¹¹¹

Whereas Philo and Basilides saw a polarity between the Logos and Sophia, Hildegard saw a close relationship between Sophia/Sapientia and *Caritas* (Latin: "Love"); indeed she regarded *Caritas* as *Sapientia*'s "alter ego."¹¹² Hildegard's perception of a union between love and wisdom anticipated by nearly a millennium the emergence of "Love-Wisdom" as the descriptor of the Second Aspect of Deity in trans-Himalayan teachings.¹¹³

Lutheran mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) spoke of Sophia, using her Greek name.¹¹⁴ Echoing a theory usually attributed to Aristophanes, Böhme asserted

that Adam initially was androgynous and virginal. That virginity was embodied in Sophia: "not a female, but a chasteness and purity without a blemish."¹¹⁵ Adam lost his primeval virginity through the fall, and Sophia's place was taken by his earthly companion Eve. Here Sophia seems to be a positive version of Lilith!

After the fall, Böhme declared, man remained in an incomplete state, yearning for his primeval wholeness. But the solution did lay not in withdrawal into ascetic celibacy, as the church urged. Rather, it lay in a spiritual reunion of the masculine and feminine; through woman man could once again find his primeval Sophia.¹¹⁶ The masculine-feminine tension might be the source of much suffering, but it provided an environment in which our spiritual potential could be realized.

Like Basilides, more than a millennium earlier, Böhme explored the notion of a Logos–Sophia polarity. He identified Sophia with the Trinity but saw a special relationship between her and Christ: "[T]he Virgin, the divine Wisdom, has given me her promise not to leave me in any misery; she will come to help me in the Son of Wisdom."¹¹⁷

Böhme was denounced by Lutheran Church authorities. Nevertheless, he influenced the English mystic Jane Ward Lead (1624–1704), who experienced visions over a period of sixteen years. In one of them a female figure told her:

Behold I am God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, whom thou hast been enquiring after; I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as Rebecca was unto Jacob, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again.... Now consider of my Saying till I return to thee again."¹¹⁸

In a later vision, the same figure told Lead: “[B]e watchful, and to thy Mother Wisdom’s Counsel give good heed, and thou shalt greatly prosper, and succeed the Prophets and Apostles to perfect what was left behind, for completing as to Christ the Fullness of God’s great Mystery.” Unfortunately, Lead did not describe the female figure she saw. Lead considered herself a “Bride of Christ” and went on to cofound the Philadelphian Society of London, which served as conservator of her diaries.

Sophia in Eastern Orthodox Christianity

In the eastern churches, the title *Hagia Sophia* (“Holy Wisdom”) was first masculinized and applied to Christ. Sophia eventually recovered her femininity to become an object of popular devotion, particularly in the Russian Orthodox Church. But her identity remained ill-defined. She became conflated with a mysterious St Sophia of Rome who, along with her three daughters Faith, Hope, and Love, allegedly was martyred under the Emperor Hadrian (r.117–138).¹¹⁹ Historians have had difficulty locating this latter Sophia and suggest that she may have been legendary rather than real. Be that as it may, Russian Orthodoxy portrays the composite “St Sophia” as a figure transcending ordinary saints.

Numerous churches are dedicated to St. Sophia, and she is the subject of many icons.¹²⁰ The Russian Orthodox liturgy for the feast of the Dormition of Mary, August 15, includes a reference to an icon of Sophia: “Let us behold the miraculous icon of the Wisdom of God.... I dare to sing in praise of the Patroness of the World, the most innocent Bride and Virgin... Sophia,

the Wisdom of God.”¹²¹ The reference to Sophia on a Marian feast is one of many instances in which the two personages seem to be conflated.

Sophia attracted the attention of several Russian Orthodox writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Philosopher and poet Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), whose work was influenced by Böhme, had three visions of Sophia, the first when he was nine years old. He wrote a poem many years later recalling the experience: “Blue all around. Blue within my soul. Blue pierced with shafts of gold. In your hand a flower from other realms. You stood with radiant smile, Nodded to me and hidden in the mist.”¹²²

This description sounds very much like an apparition of Mary, and perhaps he also conflated the two. In his second encounter, the now-adult Solovyov saw Sophia

again in blue and gold: “Her face shone before me. But Her face alone. And that instant was a long happiness.”¹²³ In the third encounter he awoke from sleep “To a scent of roses from air and earth... I saw all and all was one. One alone in the image of female beauty.”¹²⁴ Solovyov’s poetry blended his devotion to Sophia with sentiments of unrequited love, some of it recalling the songs of the medieval troubadours or Dante’s yearning for Beatrice.

Solovyov leaned toward Gnosticism in regarding Sophia as the feminine complement of the masculine Logos. Together, he believed, they comprised the overshadowing cosmic Christ. Russian theologian and scientist Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) was more cautious, hesitating to place Sophia on the same level as Christ. He saw Sophia as the Bride of the Logos; she represented God’s love for his creation, even providing the channel through which creation was accomplished. But that ability was not hers by right: “One in God, she is multiple in

Both in prehistory and throughout Judeo-Christian history people have yearned for a divine queen and/or mother, and their yearnings generally have been rewarded. However, this does not necessarily mean that goddesses—and gods—are mere figments of primitive imagination. Divinity also seeks to reveal itself, and deities may emerge from the intersection of human aspiration and divine revelation.

creation and is perceived in creation in her concrete appearances as the ideal person of man, as his Guardian Angel.”¹²⁵

Early twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theologians came closest, in Christianity, to conscripting a divine feminine personage to represent the corporate body of believers. They identified Sophia with the *Ekklesia*—not the church we actually know but an idealization of Christianity, a kind of Platonic Form. Florensky described the *Ekklesia* as “the unifying, preexistent, heavenly, mystical form,” contrasted with the “historical church” that evolved over the centuries.

Russian Orthodox priest Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) wrote: “The Church in the world is Sophia in process of becoming, according to the double impulse of creation and deification.” He added:

The Church is... not only the body of Christ, but also the temple of the Holy Ghost... [T]he conjoint revelation of the Son and the Spirit in the Church... is effected by the two-fold mission of the two divine persons from the Father to the world. This is what makes the Church the revelation, in terms of created Wisdom, of the divine.¹²⁶

Bulgakov’s reference to “deification” of the church must be understood in terms of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.¹²⁷ Theosis, the spiritual goal of the great saints, is a process of enlightenment that enables the soul to “partake of the divine nature.”¹²⁸ Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor is regarded as the supreme example. Theosis normally is considered an individual goal. But Bulgakov envisioned the whole *Ekklesia*, even the whole of humanity, achieving theosis. That collective theosis would be the final manifestation of Sophia.

Bulgakov also took an interest in an individualized Sophia. He saw a close association between her and the Glory of God, perhaps establishing a link with the Shekinah of Judaic tradition. Sophia, he argued, “is the glory of God and either expression could be used indiscriminately of divine revelation within the Godhead, for they both refer to the same divine essence.”¹²⁹ Commenting on the passage in

Proverbs in which *Chokmah*/Sophia was with God “from the beginning,” Bulgakov identified her as the “prototype of creation.”¹³⁰ Correspondingly, he saw creation—and particularly humanity—as the “creaturely Sophia,” the actualization of that prototype.¹³¹

Florensky took on the difficult task of trying to relate Sophia to the Trinity, without displacing the Holy Spirit. He identified Sophia as a “non-consubstantial” fourth person of the Trinity, suggesting that she “enters into the interior of the Trinity, and enters into communion with Divine Love.”¹³² He added:

From the point of view of the Hypostasis of the Father, Sophia is the ideal *substance*, or ground of creation.... From the point of view of the ... Word, Sophia is the *reason* of creation.... From the point of view of the... Spirit, Sophia represents the *spirituality* of creation, its holiness, purity, and immaculateness, i.e., its beauty.¹³³

Needless to say, church authorities reacted negatively to Florensky’s suggestion of a fourth person of the “Trinity,” but he was executed in a Soviet purge before they could silence him.

Bulgakov initially held views similar to Florensky’s on Sophia’s relationship to the Trinity. He fled to the West to escape political repression, thereby also avoiding censure by the Russian church. However, the Orthodox Church in France forced him to retreat to a position that Sophia is the “nonhypostatic essence” of God. Since all three hypostases share the divine essence, Sophia is neither a fourth hypostasis nor an expression of any one of them to the exclusion of the others.¹³⁴ Bulgakov acknowledged distinct manifestations of Sophia through the three Trinitarian persons, however. Her expression through the Son and Holy Spirit is “immediate,” while the “relation of Sophia to the Father is mediated through his relation to the other hypostases.”¹³⁵ Interestingly, Bulgakov saw Sophia as the mediator between God and the world, arguing that “the hypostasis of the Logos cannot provide such a unifying principle.”¹³⁶

Other Perspectives on Sophia

Historians do not believe that Sophia was worshipped in classical Greece. Nevertheless,

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), founder of the Anthroposophical Society, projected Sophia back into ancient Greece, as an embodiment of the consciousness of the time:

[T]he Greeks confronted Sophia, or Wisdom, as a being, so to speak, whom they could encounter standing before them in a particular place. Two beings then—Sophia and the Greek—faced each other, as if Sophia were a definite objective entity, to be looked at, with all the objectivity of the Greek's way of seeing.¹³⁷

Elsewhere Steiner suggested that Sophia was the “esoteric name” of Mary the mother of Jesus.¹³⁸ In another work, he declared that, in Egyptian mystery initiations, the “astral body was called “Virgin,” or “the Virgin Sophia.”¹³⁹

Robert Powell, who followed in the Anthroposophical tradition, speculated that Sophia incarnated along with Christ: “She is truly represented on the one hand in the figure of the Virgin Mary, and on the other hand by Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha who were close companions of Jesus.”¹⁴⁰ The reference to Mary Magdalene is interesting, considering her appearance in the *Pistis Sophia*. Powell went on to explain: “[T]he Virgin Mary [is] a complete embodiment of Divine Sophia on a spiritual level, with Mary Magdalene on the soul level, and with Martha on the bodily level.”¹⁴¹ From Powell's perspective, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an *avatara* of Sophia. Avatars will be discussed later in the article.

Sophia has attracted much attention among modern feminist theologians seeking a goddess to serve western religion. In their view, she has returned from obscurity to champion women's empowerment. Some writers offer a history of Sophia, as we have done here. But in almost every case the outcome has been to turn her from an entity into an impersonal presence, even an abstraction. Susanne Schaup expressed it well:

Her return has no traffic with theological hairsplitting. Whether created or uncreated, emanation or hypostasis, helpmate of creation or divine creatrix, projection of Jesus or the Virgin Mary or the Church—these intellectual differentiations and theological

niceties have lost all meaning. The deeply ambiguous terminology concerning the nature of her divinity is of no interest any more. Sophia is here, a fully empowered presence.¹⁴²

No longer a being who could appear to Hildegard, Jane Lead, or Florensky, Sophia has become something resembling the Hebrew *ruach ha-kodesh*—perhaps to await re-personification as a future Holy Spirit.

Mary

Mary is unique among the personages discussed, insofar as she was, most probably, an historical person. But within three centuries of her death she had attained divine or near-divine status. How Mary acquired that status so rapidly is unclear, but the primary impulse may have come from ordinary people.¹⁴³ Theological opinion may have reacted to, rather than led, popular devotion. When it did, the result was to declare Mary close to, but not quite, divine. Esoteric teachings subsequently confirmed her deification, establishing that Mary was either a divine *avatara* or had progressed on the initiatory path to the point where she could serve as an expression of the Divine Feminine.

Mary in Scripture

The New Testament provides few details of Mary's life in Palestine. She is mentioned by name twelve times in *Luke*, five times in *Matthew*, once in *Mark* and once in *Acts*. *John* does not name Mary, though it describes three incidents in which she was involved. The epistles never mention her.¹⁴⁴

Yet Mary, more than any other individual, spanned Judaism and Christianity. She was born and raised according to Jewish tradition, and fulfilled Judaic prophecy by giving birth to the Messiah. Christianity was established in the name of her son and, within 400 years, became the official religion of the Roman Empire; today it claims two billion members.

What little attention Mary receives in the New Testament focuses almost entirely on her role in the Incarnation. In *Luke*, we find the story of the Annunciation, in which the Archangel Gabriel said:

Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.... [T]hou hast found favor with God.... The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.¹⁴⁵

Matthew draws upon *Isaiah* 7:14 to declare: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.”¹⁴⁶ The assertion that Mary was a virgin was based on a selective interpretation of the Hebrew word *almah* which could also mean simply “a young woman.”

Mary raised Jesus to manhood and saw him take up his ministry. Scripture places Mary at the crucifixion but does not record that she saw the risen Christ.¹⁴⁷ It concedes, however, that she was present when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles at Pentecost.¹⁴⁸

Separate from the biographical narrative, *Revelation* speaks of “a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”¹⁴⁹ The woman was in childbirth, threatened by “a great red dragon” bent on devouring her child. But the child, “who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron,” was taken up to the throne of God, and the woman was given the wings of an eagle and flew to safety in the wilderness.¹⁵⁰ The dragon was driven out of heaven by Michael and “and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵¹

The woman clearly had celestial status, but *Revelation* does not identify her. By the fourth century Christian writers were associating her with Mary, and in due course the text would be cited as scriptural support for her glorification as Queen of Heaven. Yet the reference to “the remnant of her seed” might suggest that the woman originally was intended to represent the Jewish people.¹⁵² Or she might have been Chokmah/Sophia.

Extracanonical texts from the same general period describe Mary’s life in greater detail. The *Infancy Gospel of James*, which dates from

about 145 CE, describes her conception, birth, and childhood. Further emphasizing her Jewish roots, it asserts that Mary was presented to the temple at three years of age, to be raised as a temple virgin.¹⁵³ The *Gospel of Bartholomew*, whose date is more uncertain, suggests that she played a leadership role among Jesus’ disciples after his death.¹⁵⁴

Mary in the Early Church

Mary may have been venerated by the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem, but the community did not survive the destruction of the city by Roman forces in 70 CE. A few comments were made by theologians in the second century CE; church fathers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, portrayed Mary as the Second Eve.¹⁵⁵ By the mid-third century, a sufficiently sophisticated Mariology existed to inspire an intercessory prayer in which Mary is addressed as *Theotokos*, or “Mother of God.”¹⁵⁶ Mary’s intercessory role is also hinted at in a hymn written by Ephrem the Syrian (306–373), where we detect tension between a judgmental God and a merciful Mary, recalling the Chesed–Geburah polarity in the Kabbalah.¹⁵⁷

Epiphanius of Salamis (c.315–403) condemned a sect, “brought to Arabia from Thrace and upper Scythia.” On certain days of the year, he alleged, the sect’s priestesses performed a kind of eucharistic ritual in which small loaves or cakes (Greek: *kollyris*) were sacrificed to Mary. Appropriately, he called them the *Collyridians*.¹⁵⁸ No other writer mentioned the Collyridians, and historians are unsure whether they really existed. They could probably be relegated to a footnote in history were it not that their customs closely mirrored those of the cult condemned by Jeremiah. In both cases, the cults were comprised, or at least led, by women. Within a few centuries of Epiphanius’ comments, Mary acquired the title of “Queen of Heaven,” which appears in *Jeremiah* and may have referred to Asherah, Ashtoreth or Inanna.

Nobody would suggest that the Collyridians were part of an unbroken lineage dating back one thousand years to the time of Jeremiah. But the two groups may have been linked by ongoing patterns of ritual involving the sacrifice of cakes to a goddess. And it is entirely possible

that, with the spread of Christianity, members of certain goddess cults preserved their liturgical customs and simply allowed Mary to take the place of their former patrons. Thrace and upper Scythia were Celtic lands with a rich history of goddesses.¹⁵⁹ Epiphanius wrote in the late fourth century, and if, as he claimed, the Collyridians migrated all the way to Arabia, the sect may have been active in their original homelands a century or more earlier.

Beginning at the end of the fourth century, a vast literature appeared—in languages ranging from Irish to Greek, to Ethiopic, to Old Georgian—offering a wealth of information on Mary's earthly life and death. It claims, for example, that Mary had an ecstatic experience at the foot of the cross,¹⁶⁰ and another on the night of the resurrection in which she saw the risen Christ:

Christ Himself, when He rose from the dead and appeared to her and the other women at the tomb mounted on the chariot of the Father of the Universe, cried out, saying ... "All Paradise rejoiceth in thee. I say unto thee, O My Mother, He who loveth thee loveth Life. Hail, thou who didst sustain the Life of the Universe in thy womb! I will give My peace, which I have received from My Holy Father, to My disciples, and to every one who shall believe in My Name and in Mary."¹⁶¹

The literature also asserts that Mary engaged in an active post-Pentecost ministry and played a leadership role in first-century Christianity: counseling Jesus' disciples, baptizing converts, healing the sick, and performing sacred ritual.¹⁶²

Further testimony of Mary's role in the nascent church is provided by artwork from the fourth century until well into the second millennium. When depicted in the company of others, like Jesus' disciples, Mary occupies the central position, or is portrayed larger than them. She looks directly at the viewer, hands raised in blessing. Surviving images, some in the most important centers of Christian authority, like Rome, Ravenna, and Constantinople, show Mary in clerical robes.¹⁶³ She is even shown wearing the attire of a bishop, or vested to celebrate the Eucharist.¹⁶⁴

Texts collectively referred to as the "Dormition literature," from the Latin *dormire* "to sleep," describe the circumstances of Mary's death. Allegedly, as Mary neared the end of her earthly life, the disciples—alive and deceased—were miraculously summoned to her bedside to receive her last blessing. Then Christ himself came and carried her soul to paradise:

[T]he Lord held forth his right hand, blessed his mother and said to her: "Let your heart rejoice and be glad, O Mary blessed among women, for every grace and gift has been given to you by my heavenly Father, and every soul that calls on your name with holiness will not be put to shame but will find mercy and comfort both in this life and in the age to come. You, however, come forth to the eternal dwelling places, to unending peace and joy, to the treasure houses of my Father, so that you will see my glory and rejoice by the grace of the Holy Spirit."¹⁶⁵

The disciples laid Mary's body in the tomb. Three days later, according to one source, they opened the tomb to find it empty:

[W]hen they opened it, they did not find the glorious body of the holy mother of Christ, for it had been translated wherever her son and God wished.... They found only the burial wrappings and the shroud in which they had laid her to rest ... the body of the immaculate Virgin was not there ... it had been raised up to her son and God.¹⁶⁶

The *Transitus Mariae*, a text dating from about 500 CE, describes Mary's assumption into "the heavenly Jerusalem." The celestial city had twelve gates, named for the twelve apostles, and attended by cherubim and seraphim. "[A]t the outer gate," we read, "all the prophets were standing and singing praises with their harps; Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and David the Psalmist. And they worshipped before the King ... and before his Mother."¹⁶⁷ As she progressed through the gates Mary was worshipped by angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim—and also by thunder, lightning and fire.¹⁶⁸

Much of this literature from the fifth century onward attributed its records to earlier sources, sometimes to named persons, though we

suspect the liberal use of pseudepigraphy. Assessing the factual status of the content is not easy, but the remarkable degree of coherence among texts from across the Christian world testifies that Christian communities at great distances from one another were familiar with, and interacted with, a well-developed narrative of Mary's life and death. The communities also shared ecstatic visions of Mary's ascent into heaven and the reception she received there. Words like "worship" were not used lightly—and testify to the level of Marian devotion that was developing.

Marian Doctrine and Devotion

The term *Mariology*, the branch of theology concerned with Mary, was coined in the nineteenth century. But the theological study of Mary began with the comments of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the second century, and became an established part of institutional Christianity in the fourth century.

The First Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) decreed that Mary was a virgin when she conceived and gave birth to Jesus. They left open the question of whether she remained a virgin. Subsequent discussion included the issue of whether Jesus had siblings, as three scriptural passages might suggest.¹⁶⁹ No subsequent council issued a decree binding on the whole of Christianity, but the preponderance of opinion is that Mary was "ever virgin," and the "siblings" were either cousins or Joseph's children from a previous marriage.

In 431 CE, the Council of Ephesus decreed that Mary was the *Theotokos* (Greek: "God-bearer" or "Birthgiver to God"). We have seen that the term was used as early as the third century, but its implications remained unclear until a theological debate—tinged by politics—arose between Cyril (c.378–444), Patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius (c.386–450), Archbishop of Constantinople. The theological issue was whether the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ were joined in an *hypostatic union*, or union within a single *hypostasis*, or "person." Cyril believed that they were, and in consequence, Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, must be the *Theotokos*. Nestorius believed that Mary only gave birth to Jesus in his human nature.

The Council of Ephesus was convened to resolve the matter. It sided with Cyril, and Nestorius was deposed and sent into exile.

Mary officially became *Theotokos*, a term used to this day in the Eastern churches. In the West, it was translated into the Latin *Mater Dei*, and eventually into "Mother of God." The Ephesus decree came closest to acknowledging the divinity of Mary. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Mary could be the mother of God without herself being divine. Yet, the church stopped short of drawing that conclusion; the decree's full implications were never explored.

The Council of Ephesus was held on the site of a temple of Artemis, and according to legend, a crowd gathered outside the building, during the proceedings, chanting "give us back our goddess!" Clearly, the bishops complied. Aside from their theological accomplishment, they satisfied people's long-felt hunger for a Feminine Face of God in Christianity. The masses now had permission to trade their pagan goddesses, as the Collyridians may have done two centuries earlier, for Mary.¹⁷⁰

Mary acquired titles, like Queen of Heaven and Star of the Sea, previously bestowed on pre-Christian goddesses. In the eleventh century, Peter of Damascus affirmed: "All generations proclaim you [Mary] blessed as the only Mother of God, more honored than the cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the seraphim."¹⁷¹ A century later, Hildegard affirmed: "Mary, you are the bright matter through which the Word breathed all the virtues forth, as once he led forth, in the primal matter of the world, the whole of creation."¹⁷²

Marian devotion reached its high-water mark in the thirteenth century. Churches and cathedrals were dedicated to Mary. People prayed to her. Hymns were sung, music composed, and artwork created in her honor. Mary's shrines became favored pilgrimage destinations, some the sites of reported apparitions.¹⁷³ England became known as "Mary's Dowry." Marian icons graced the churches of the East. Fifteenth-century mystic Thomas à Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*, urged people to bow at the name of Mary, as well as of Jesus.¹⁷⁴

Officially Mary was just less than a goddess; she was still a creature, but one in a category distinct from all other creatures. The Second Council of Constantinople (787) affirmed that Mary was “higher than every creature whether visible or invisible.”¹⁷⁵ It also created a special level of reverence for her. Termed *hyperdulia* (literally, “above the level shown by slaves to their masters”), it was distinguished from *dulia*, owed to ordinary saints, and from *latría* (“service” or “worship”), owed to Christ and God.

One of the clearest expositions of Mary’s official status was offered by the Spanish abbess María de Ágreda (1602–1665). In her *Mystical City of God*, published posthumously, she identified six “instants” in the manifestation of God. The first three were concerned with the manifestation of the Trinity. The fourth instant brought forth “the Mother of the Divine Word incarnate”:

Thus, before all other creatures, was She conceived in the divine mind, in such manner and such state as befitted and became the dignity, excellence and gifts of the humanity of her most holy Son. To Her flowed over, at once and immediately, the river of the Divinity and its attributes with all its impetuosity, in as far as a mere creature is capable and as is due to the dignity of the Mother of God.¹⁷⁶

The fifth instant brought forth the angels, and the sixth, humanity. Abbess Maria emphasized that “this most holy and pure Creature,” Mary, was “formed and conceived in the divine mind from the beginning and before all the ages.”¹⁷⁷ This statement is so similar to *Proverbs* 8:22–23 to suggest another conflation of Mary with Chokmah/Sophia. The statement is also notable because it affirms the preexistence of Mary’s soul: that is, its existence before the conception of her physical body. The church has never ruled definitively against belief in the preexistence of human souls, but Thomas Aquinas’ opposition to such belief is generally regarded as definitive.

The ecumenical councils not only propelled Mary toward deification, they also shaped what kind of goddess she would become. They did so, not so much by what they said about Mary

herself, but by what they said about Christ. The Nicene Creed, product of the First Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, affirmed that Jesus Christ was “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.”¹⁷⁸ That statement may have rebutted the Arian heresy, which claimed that Christ was created in time, but it meant nothing to ordinary Christians. Rather, it turned the Jesus who walked the backroads of Galilee, chose simple fishermen for his disciples, talked to the woman at the well, and laid his hands on little children into a theological abstraction.

Deprived of the Jesus people thought they knew, people turned to Mary. Cyril was the first to speak for them. In his homily to the Council of Ephesus, he declared: “[I]t is you [Mary] through whom the Holy Trinity is glorified and adored throughout the earth; through whom the heavens exult; through whom the angels and archangels rejoice.”¹⁷⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), renowned for the great volume of his Marian devotional works, commented: “So great a Mediator is Christ that we need another to mediate between Him and us.”¹⁸⁰ As noted, Sergei Bulgakov made a similar claim about Sophia eight centuries later.

Like God himself, Mary was both transcendent and immanent. She might be a goddess, but she was also accessible, compassionate, and sympathetic to human weakness. Christ had died for our sins and would return to “sit upon the throne of his glory,”¹⁸¹ but Mary was our mother now. She was on the people’s side and could protect them from an angry God—as well as from other hostile powers. To quote a modern writer:

For the people of the Middle Ages, devotion to the Blessed Virgin offered an experience of a female figure intrinsically related to God, along with an experience of the power of love to blot away sin and the power of mercy to ameliorate deserved justice, experiences that were not otherwise readily available in the situation of the times.¹⁸²

Not only was Mary sympathetic to those who prayed to her, she was believed to have a measure of power over Christ to grant favors to those

who sought her intercession. The Second Council of Constantinople affirmed those who “with sincere faith seek her [Mary’s] intercessions” can have “confidence in her access to our God, since she bare him.”¹⁸³ Appeal was made to *Luke 2:51* to argue that Jesus was still in some way obedient to his mother. It was also noted that Mary had persuaded Jesus to perform his first miracle.

More than a millennium after the Collyridians, people in the Scottish highlands baked barley cakes, or *bannocks*, for Mary’s feast on August 15. The man of the house handed out portions of the bannock to family and neighbors, while all sang the hymn *Iolach Mhoire Mháthair* (Gaelic: “The Paean of Mary Mother”):

On the feast day of Mary the fragrant,
Mother of the Shepherd of the flocks, I cut
me a handful of new corn, I dried it gently in
the sun.... I toasted it to a fire of rowan, And
I shared it round my people.... In the name
of Mary Mother, Who promised to preserve
me.... In peace, in flocks, In righteousness of
heart.¹⁸⁴

The custom may have developed from the Celtic tradition of “Beltane cakes,”¹⁸⁵ and we note that the pagan festival of Beltane evolved into May Day, or “Mary’s Day.” Jeremiah, who condemned a cake ritual in his own time, would immediately have recognized the maypole as Asherah’s cult symbol. It is also worth noting that the Collyridians may have been ethnic Celts.

Marian devotion was never universally embraced. A few individuals treated her with indifference, even outright disrespect. As early as the eighth century, the Byzantine emperor Constantine V declared: “When she bore Christ within her womb, Mary was like a purse filled with gold. But after giving birth, she was no more than the empty purse.”¹⁸⁶ Others used even less complimentary metaphors.

The Reformation took its toll. Marian devotion continued in the Roman and Orthodox churches. And Martin Luther and Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli retained their personal devotion to Mary. But elsewhere in western Christianity, a shadow fell across the Feminine

Face of God. Later generations of Lutherans, as well as Calvinists, and most Anglicans sought to strip away all beliefs and practices that lacked direct scriptural support. Marian devotion and intercession were stigmatized as “Mariolatry.” Mary also became a casualty of anti-Roman sentiment. Today, most Protestants simply ignore Mary—except at Christmas, when she appears as a plaster figure in the manger scene.

Mary in Modern Christianity

The Church of Rome defined two Marian dogmas in recent centuries: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The former, affirming that Mary was conceived without original sin, received tangential support from the *In-fancy Gospel of James*, which asserts that her conception was the result of divine intervention because of her mother Hannah’s age. Various scriptural passages were also cited as prophetic, such as: “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.”¹⁸⁷ The church never commented on whether other imagery from the *Song of Solomon* might be applicable to Mary.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was fashioned primarily by theological speculation, beginning with the work of the ninth-century Paschasius Radbertus and the eleventh-century Anselm of Canterbury.¹⁸⁸ Pope Pius IX finally decreed in 1854 that: “the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ ... was preserved free from all stain of original sin.”¹⁸⁹

The assertion that Mary was conceived without original sin, in anticipation of her giving birth to the Redeemer, raises questions concerning her free will at the time of the Annunciation. If Mary had said “no,” would she still have been conceived without sin? Was the Immaculate Conception somehow retroactive? Or had Mary, in some way, already made the decision before she was conceived, in which case her consent at the Annunciation was just a formality? Not necessarily; even if Mary was “formed and conceived in the divine mind from the beginning and before all the ages,” her consent might still have been necessary at the personal-ity level.

The doctrine of the Assumption—the assertion that Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven—received limited support from the Dormition literature, though the texts do not all agree that her body vanished from the tomb, and still fewer assert that her body and soul were united and taken up to heaven. The impulse to declare the dogma came primarily from popular piety; people wanted to spare Mary the ignominy of death. In response, Pope Pius XII decreed in 1950 that “the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”¹⁹⁰ The Eastern Orthodox churches continue to follow the narrative that Mary died a natural death, but allow their members to believe in the Assumption according to personal judgment.

Theological speculation on other matters continues, with the potential for new dogmatic decrees. In 1894 Pope Leo XIII mused: “The recourse we have to Mary in prayer follows upon the office she continuously fills by the side of the throne of God as Mediatrix of Divine grace; being by worthiness and by merit most acceptable to Him, and, therefore, surpassing in power all the angels and saints in Heaven.”¹⁹¹ Leo went on to call Mary “our co-Redemptrix.” A campaign developed during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II (r. 1978–2005) pressing for a decree asserting that Mary is “Co-Redemptrix with Christ, Mediatrix of all Graces, and Advocate of Humanity.” John Paul is believed to have supported the initiative, but no action was taken.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) put the brakes on traditional veneration of Mary. It spoke of her with “affection and piety as a most beloved mother,” and approved of “the liturgical cult of the Blessed Virgin,” but it also warned of “Marian excess” that might impede ecumenical outreach to other western denominations.¹⁹² The council exhorted “theologians and preachers of the divine word to abstain zealously both from all gross exaggerations as well as from petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the Mother of God.” “Let them,” it continued, “assiduously keep away from whatever, either by word or deed, could lead separated brethren or any other into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church,”

adding that “true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity.”¹⁹³

Neither the council nor its spokesman, Pope Paul VI, cited examples of what might lead separated brethren into error, or might constitute gross exaggerations, sterile affection, or vain credulity. But numerous statues and pictures were removed from Roman Catholic churches or moved to less conspicuous locations.¹⁹⁴ Marian devotional practices were curtailed. Ironically, the new policy came at the very time when many Anglicans, Lutherans, and others were paying new attention to Mary and incorporating Marian devotions into their own religious practices.

Another irony came twelve years after Vatican II with the election of John Paul II, one of the most pro-Marian popes in recent times. In 1987 John Paul echoed the thoughts of María de Ágreda, writing that Mary was “present even ‘before the creation of the world,’ as the one whom the Father ‘has chosen’ as Mother of his Son.”¹⁹⁵ The statement raised eyebrows because not everyone, even in his own communion, agreed that Mary was predestined to be the mother of Jesus. Separately, the statement bears such a close resemblance to *Proverbs* 8:22-23 to suggest yet another conflation between Mary and Sophia.

Praying before an icon in Rome, three years later, John Paul declared: “You [Mary] who serve as Mother of the whole family of the children of God, obtain for the Church that, enriched by the Holy Spirit with the fullness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts, she [the Church] may continue with constancy towards the future.”¹⁹⁶ His words came close to embracing the concept of Mary as World Mother. As noted earlier, Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths referred to the Holy Spirit as “the Great Mother” and identified Mary as her earthly “figure” or representative.

Although the highest honors were conferred on Mary, from the Renaissance onward she was portrayed in devotional artwork with head covered, eyes lowered in humility, and hands clasped in prayer: the epitome of obedient, self-sacrificial piety. Because of that submissive

demeanor, Mary was rejected by feminist theologians seeking a role model for empowered women. As Susanne Schaup wrote: “The figure of Mary, the blessed virgin and obedient servant of God, however gracious and comforting she may appear to many has become a problem. Women are no longer willing to identify with Mary’s disembodied humanity.”¹⁹⁷

Schaup may not have realized that other scholars were examining the ancient texts and artifacts, mentioned earlier, that reveal a very different picture.¹⁹⁸ They found that much of the literature describing Mary’s post-Pentecostal ministry had been suppressed or redacted over time to diminish her importance. Artwork showing her priestly activity had been defaced, covered over, or explained away; a common explanation was that the figure in the images was not Mary but represented the church.¹⁹⁹

Rediscovery of the early portrayal of Mary led Ally Kateusz to declare that Mary’s true story “has long been repressed.”²⁰⁰ She and other scholars concluded that the self-sacrificial image was the church’s own creation, designed to inspire female subordination. By contrast, the real Mary was an assertive woman, exercising leadership responsibility in first-century Christianity—one with whom Schaup’s modern women might readily identify.

Mary in Esoteric Teachings

Mary was essentially ignored in the western esoteric tradition until the late nineteenth century. The first esotericist to take an active interest was Anna Kingsford (1846–1888), a Hermeticist, Theosophist, and Roman Catholic.²⁰¹ She was also a feminist, and in her view Mary, would play a role in a new world order in which women would have political power:

For the woman is the crown of man, and the final manifestation of humanity. She is the nearest to the throne of God, when she shall be revealed. But the creation of woman is not yet complete: but it shall be complete in the time which is at hand. All things are thine, O Mother of God: all things are thine, O Thou who risest from the sea; and Thou shalt have dominion over all the worlds.²⁰²

Kingsford influenced Annie Besant (1847–1933), whose landmark book *Esoteric Christianity or the Lesser Mysteries* (1901/1905) launched the Christianization movement within the Theosophical Society; hitherto the society had leaned heavily toward the religions of South Asia. Besant identified Mary with the World Mother,²⁰³ an individuality with a long tradition in Hinduism and who would feature in Theosophical writings over the next several decades. Helena Roerich (1879–1955) also wrote extensively about the World Mother, but not in a Christian context.

Theosophists conceptualized the World Mother as a divine entity who had sent a sequence of *avataras* (using that form to denote the feminine) to Earth. Kuan Yin and Isis were such avatars, and Mary might be one too. As the Christianization movement gathered momentum in the 1920s and beyond, Besant and fellow Theosophists Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934) and Geoffrey Hodson (1886–1983) became convinced that Mary was the latest and most important of the avatars. Besant saw Mary as a mother to every child being born:

Hers is the tender mercy that presides at the birth of every child, whatever the rank or place of the mother. The sacredness of Motherhood brings Her beside the bed of suffering. Her compassion and Her tenderness, Her all-embracing Motherhood, know no differences of caste, color or rank. All, to Her, are Her children—the tenderest of all human movements and, because the most compassionate, the greatest power in the civilization.²⁰⁴

Hodson eventually took a different perspective, viewing the World Mother as an office in the Planetary Hierarchy: “That Official is the World Mother for a planet and a period.... There is such a Being, there is such an official.”²⁰⁵ Hodson added: “Mary the mother of Jesus now holds that Office, as Isis held it in earlier days.”²⁰⁶ Other mother-goddesses may have held the office before Isis.

Hodson also focused attention on Mary’s earthly life in Palestine. He declared that Mary

attained the fifth initiation during that lifetime, overcoming unusual challenges to do so:

Having been ... the Mother of Jesus in the reality of His appearance amongst men and His attainment of Adeptship whilst using that body, She did Herself attain to Adeptship, took the Fifth Initiation in the Egyptian Mysteries, having also been trained in their Chaldean form, as a woman, meaning in a female body. The tests were very severe in those days, especially for beginners, even for males, but She passed through them all successfully, almost overriding them as it were, instead of being subjected to them. She was then one of earth's Adepts.²⁰⁷

Hodson did not comment on when Mary might have attained the fourth initiation. But her participation in the Crucifixion, and the ecstatic experience she allegedly had there, point to that time. It would not be unusual for an individual to attain two major initiations in the same lifetime. Mary probably came into her Palestinian lifetime as a third-degree initiate, primed over the course of several lifetimes to serve as the mother of Jesus.

That possibility that Mary “came up through the ranks of humanity” does not disqualify her from being considered an avatara. Esotericist Alice Bailey (1880–1949) defined an avatar as:

a Being Who—having first developed His Own nature, human and divine, and then transcended it—is capable of reflecting some cosmic Principle or divine quality and energy which will produce the desired effect upon humanity, evoking a reaction, producing a needed stimulation and, as it is esoterically called, “leading to the rending of a veil and the permeation of light.”²⁰⁸

She added: “The response or reaction of humanity ... establishes in due time the recognition of something transcendent, something to be desired and striven for, something which indicates a vision which is first a possibility and later an achievement.”²⁰⁹

Mary's mission to serve as the mother of Jesus reflected “divine quality and energy.” Few would question that her mission “produced the

desired effect upon humanity,” rent a veil and permeated light, and evoked “the recognition of something transcendent ... a possibility and later an achievement.” In due course she developed and transcended her human nature in attaining adeptship; she also demonstrated her ability to reflect the cosmic Principle of motherhood in her role as World Mother.

In addition to serving as the World Mother, Mary serves—apparently in more than a devotional sense—as Queen of the Angels. As early as 1928, Theosophist Charles Leadbeater declared that, at the end of that life, Mary made the rare transition from the human kingdom to the deva evolution: “finding the seven paths open before her, she [Mary] chose to enter the glorious Deva evolution and was received into it with great honor and distinction.”²¹⁰ Corinne Helene, whose background lay in Rosicrucianism as well as Theosophy, concurred: “Upon the completion of her earth mission, the holy Virgin was lifted out of the human stream and translated into the angelic evolution.”²¹¹ In 1975, Hodson affirmed Mary's transition, stating that, after her death, she “left the human kingdom altogether and entered the Angelic Hierarchy, being naturally moved to do so, knowing that with Her nature She could best help onward the evolution of human beings and animals as a Member of the Angelic Hosts.”²¹²

Hodson reflected on the feminine archetype, “the Eternal Woman,” which he asserted is a Cosmic Principle. All women have the potential to develop a relationship with that Principle, but in Mary the relationship is fully realized:

In the holder of the divine Office of World Mother, a conscious union occurs between the archetypal woman fully manifest in the woman Adept and the cosmic principle of womanhood. This constitutes a descent, fiery, pentecostal, of the Eternal Woman into its own purified and exalted superhuman manifestation in time and space.²¹³

Precisely what qualities does the feminine archetype represent? The author of the *Song of Solomon* sought answers in erotic poetry. Institutional Christianity suggested immaculate virginity. Jungian psychologists speak of seven

forms: the maiden, mother, queen, huntress, wise woman, mystic, and lover.²¹⁴ Hodson chose the ideals of compassion, graciousness, “joyous radiant girlhood” and “transforming motherhood.”²¹⁵

Hodson described Mary as an “Embodiment on earth of the Feminine Aspect of the Deity ... in whom all the highest qualities of womanhood and motherhood shine forth in their fullest perfection.”²¹⁶ Anglo-Indian scholar and mystic Andrew Harvey affirmed that Mary serves as “the bridge between heaven and earth, between the human and the divine worlds.”²¹⁷ Bede Griffiths declared that the Holy Spirit “is the mothering Spirit in humankind ... receiving the Word of God in her heart and bringing him forth in his earthly manifestation.”²¹⁸

Nearly a century before Hodson shared his insights, Helena Blavatsky drew upon the Shakti tradition of Hinduism to assert that the first manifestation of the Godhead is the “Celestial Virgin,” “the immaculate Virgin-Mother, who is overshadowed, not impregnated, by the Universal Mystery [the Godhead].”²¹⁹ Elsewhere, Blavatsky declared: “The first emanation becomes the immaculate Mother from whom proceed all the gods, or the anthropomorphized creative forces.”²²⁰ Blavatsky was referring to a cosmic Feminine Principle, but the correspondences were obvious, leading to the conclusion that Mary, hailed as the Virgin Mother of our age, is an expression of that mighty principle or entity.

Contrasting with the Theosophists’ confident portrayal of the World Mother, Alice Bailey offered a more sobering message. Writing for the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul, Bailey dismissed notions of a World Mother as purely symbolic, adding:

Such an individual has never existed in our particular planetary life, though the avatars of a previous solar system, expressing itself through planetary life, always took this form. But not in this solar system.... This symbolism has come down from the far-off period of the Matriarchate, which had a religion that recalled the ancient ways of the earlier system and in which period of time

Lilith symbolized the World Mother, until Eve took her place.²²¹

Bailey’s comments might not apply to the World Mother viewed as an office or position. But reconciling her understanding with that of the Theosophists remains an outstanding challenge. Meanwhile, the references to Lilith and Eve are interesting in light of the discussion earlier in this article.

Esotericists recognize that the intense devotion bestowed on Mary throughout the centuries has created a powerful thoughtform. Many people who believe they are communicating with Mary are probably interacting with the thoughtform. A similar situation exists with respect to Jesus and the Christ. We do not know how prominent members of the Planetary Hierarchy deal with the problem, but it does seem possible that they can make use of the thoughtforms in some way to further their work.

An interesting comment with potential relevance to that issue appears in a work attributed to Hermeticist and one-time student of Rudolf Steiner’s, Valentin Tomberg: “One meets the Blessed Virgin inevitably when one attains a certain intensity of spiritual aspiration, when this aspiration is authentic and pure.” In order to pass through the “sphere of mirages” or the “zone of illusion”—presumably the astral plane—one requires the protection of the Mantle of the Holy Theotokos.²²² This is a reference to a tradition in the Eastern Orthodox churches in which Mary is revered as the protectress of the Byzantine and Slavic people. The work’s author goes on to anticipate a new feast in the liturgical calendar: “the festival of coronation of the Virgin on earth.” “For then,” he says, “the principle of opposition will be replaced on earth by that of collaboration.... And intellectuality will then bow before Wisdom (SOPHIA) and will unite with her.”²²³

Synthesis and Conclusions

Judeo-Christianity assigned masculine attributes to its Deity, but hunger for a glimpse of the Feminine Face of God persisted throughout the ages. A succession of divine and semi-divine personages emerged, often sharing similar

characteristics and serving similar human needs. Conspicuous needs were for a divine mother and a queen. Interestingly, where institutional Judaism and Christianity tolerated such personages they usually imposed virginity on them.

The Old Testament prophets constantly railed against the worship of “foreign” goddesses, including Asherah, consort of Abraham’s god El Shadai. Asherah and her Sumerian forerunner Inanna were both revered as “Queen of Heaven.” The wrath unleashed by the Jewish leaders against Asherah and the frequent destruction of her sacred symbols suggest that she had a large, loyal following. Jeremiah identified women, including some of high social status, as Asherah’s principal devotees and blamed their “idolatry” for his nation’s misfortunes.

Judaism created the evil Lilith, “the Screech Owl” and “Goddess of the Night,” and eventually identified her as Adam’s rebellious first wife. Long feared as the slayer of infants, Lilith has more recently become an object of fascination. Some modern writers have portrayed her as an embodiment of the shadow, “unredeemed,” side of the female psyche, even as an early champion of women’s rights. To quote one writer: “Lilith is a younger aspect of the Goddess and does not have to wrest the power of the word from the father Gods. She already knows it.”²²⁴

Chokmah may have roots extending back to King Solomon. But more likely, she was personified during Judaism’s Hellenic period, possibly taking Asherah’s place but also absorbing characteristics of Egyptian or Greek goddesses. Chokmah was hailed as a divine being, co-creator, and Yahweh’s consort. In her Hebrew form, she went on to play a major role in the Kabbalah; in her Greek form, Sophia, she would play a significant role in Gnostic and

mainstream Christianity. Interestingly, she would be masculinized at times in both forms.

The Judaic theoretical Kabbalah incorporated some of the feminine personages of biblical Judaism into its cosmological schema. It transformed Chokmah into the primeval masculine archetype and restored gender polarity by identifying Binah (“Understanding”) as the feminine archetype. The Kabbalah provided a clear picture of gender emerging from an androgynous divine ancestor. It also gave prominence to the Shekinah, the indwelling glory of God discussed in rabbinic Judaism. A creation story depicts Shekinah/Malkuth as a lost bride who must be found and reunited with the Holy One.

Today there is growing awareness of the Feminine Face as expressed by Sophia and Mary, either separately or understood as a single entity. The “return of Sophia” and what seems to be Mary’s initiative to reveal herself are seen as consequences of, but also as driving forces behind, the empowerment of women.

Sophia attracted much attention in Gnosticism. In the epic *Pistis Sophia* she fell into the abyss and was rescued after much effort by Christ and his archangels. Sophia’s fall—echoing the words of *Revelation*: “Babylon the great is fallen”²²⁵—suggests a sexist agenda. Significantly, Mary Magdalene, whom mainstream Christianity would associate with the “woman in the city” of *Luke 7:37*, was allied with her. Both may have been cast as “second Eves,” without the favorable contrast implied when Justin Martyr bestowed the same title on Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Sophia was a strong candidate for Third Person of the Christian Trinity. Instead the church chose the *ruach ha-kodesh*, or holy spirit, which had been an impersonal force or activity in biblical Judaism. In addition to hypostasizing the Holy Spirit, the church erased her gender to create a Trinity without a feminine element.

Sophia continued to be revered in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, though she was never clearly defined. The late nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in “Sophiology” among leading theologians in the Russian Orthodox Church. Ecclesiastical authorities supported the

use of Sophia as a metaphor for the universal church but rejected speculation on Sophia's place in, or relationship to, the Trinity. Nevertheless, efforts to restore the Third Person to a feminine form may finally be bearing fruit. We may even discover that ruach ha-kodesh and Chokmah/Sophia were one and the same.

Sophia caught the attention of feminist theologians looking for a goddess, but their efforts have not clarified who or what Sophia is. By nature the Feminine may resist rigid dogmatic definition, but we are mental beings and we insist on some understanding of the Divine. At the least we need to know whether Sophia exists beyond human aspiration. In many feminist writings she seems to have degenerated into a metaphor for female spirituality—as though that were categorically different from male spirituality.

Mary was an historical figure, raised to near-divine status in Christianity. The historical Mary received limited but significant attention in the New Testament. Then, after being largely ignored for three centuries, she became the focus of a vast biographical literature, formulation of doctrine, and most importantly, devotion by the masses of the faithful. Literature and related artwork retroactively depicted Mary as a prominent figure in the first-century church, pursuing an active ministry that included the enactment of sacred ritual. The strong, assertive Mary depicted therein contrasts sharply with the demure, pious, self-sacrificial images of later times. Charges that the church intentionally constructed the latter persona to support its suppression of women are not unwarranted.

Scripture went to considerable lengths to present Mary as a virgin, and the first Marian dogma affirmed her virginity. The motivation may have been to connect her with the “virgin daughter of Zion” in *Isaiah*, or the “virgin of Israel” in *Amos* and *Jeremiah*. Notions of the “Virgin Mother” also connect Mary with many other personages of the ancient world as well as with the astrological sign of Virgo; her nativity is celebrated September 8. In esoteric astrology, Virgo is considered “the emanator of energies which nourish and aid the growth of the Christ consciousness.”²²⁶

The second, and more significant, dogma proclaimed Mary to be the *Theotokos*, or “Mother of God.” Although the Ephesus dogma lacked theological clarity, ordinary people saw it as permission to worship Mary. In a real sense, it launched the “cult of Mary.” The masses turned to Mary as queen and mother, seeking an advocate to intercede with a stern God—and in some cases even investing her with coercive power over Christ or the Father.

The masses also saw Mary as a worthy successor to their pre-Christian goddesses, who lingered below the surface despite nominal conversion to Christianity. As one commentator wryly observed: “God has the people one day a week; the pagan deities still have them the other six!” The ritual offering of cakes, in one instance to Asherah, and in two instances to Mary, have interesting connections, and all three probably evolved from pagan precedents.

Devotion to Mary rose to a crescendo in the high Middle Ages and continued in the Roman and Orthodox churches. Church leaders tried to limit Marian devotion to something less than worship—ignoring the testimony of the Dormition literature that the prophets, apostles, and even the seraphim worshipped her. Interestingly, the church leaders' pleas found a more receptive audience among Protestants than among their own followers.

Even then, Protestantism reacted against “Marian excess” or saw Mary as a symbol of Roman iniquity. Its rejection of Mary and of any trace of the Divine Feminine dealt a crippling blow to western civilization, in addition to impoverishing its own theology and liturgy. Today, Christians are sharply divided in their attitudes toward Mary, and in the 1960s, even Rome wavered in its traditional loyalty. Indifference or hostility toward her remains a major obstacle to recognition of the Feminine Face of God in Christianity.

The divine feminine personages in Judaism and Christianity are often portrayed as elements in a polarity, for example, we find Chokmah and Binah, the Logos and Sophia, Christ and Mary. But they were not accorded equal status. In the Kabbalah, (the masculinized) Chokmah is the

second emanation from the Ain Soph, and Binah the third. The Shekinah was lost in the wilderness, but not the Holy One. The Logos was eternally begotten of the Father, while Sophia was created in time. Sophia fell into the abyss and needed to be rescued by Christ. Mary was the Mother of God, but not herself divine; she might be Queen of Heaven, but was crowned by her son.

If we suspect gender asymmetry in these relationships, in other areas we find evidence of outright misogyny. Lilith was the epitome of evil, feared in Judaism more than Satan. Yahweh was the true God, while Asherah/Ashtoreth was a false, “foreign” goddess. It was women who worshipped Asherah and sacrificed cakes to her and Mary. Women were blamed for bringing sin into the world,²²⁷ for the woes of Pre-Exilic Israel, and for men’s concupiscence in Pauline–Augustinian Christianity.

Judaism and Christianity never hesitated to shed the blood of enemies or their own martyrs, but they recoiled from the naturally flowing blood of menstruating women. As late as the twentieth century, new mothers required “purification” before readmission to the life of the synagogue or church. Major segments of Judaism and Christianity still exclude women from the clergy—consciously or unconsciously following a tradition that their blood might defile sacred worship spaces.²²⁸

A fear of women may well account for Judeo-Christianity’s reluctance to recognize the Feminine Face of God. The ancient Mother Goddess may have been overthrown by frightened, misogynistic priests rather than by invading Aryan armies. The Feminine was permitted only in the Daughter of Jerusalem, in the immaculate, ever-virgin Mother of God, and in the corporate “Bride of Christ,” the church—whose most important members were celibate males.²²⁹

Institutional Christianity earned its patriarchal stereotypes during the Middle Ages and did little to dispel them until the mid-twentieth century.²³⁰ Since then, major segments of Christianity have committed themselves to gender inclusiveness, welcome female clergy, and are removing masculine pronouns in their references to God. These are important steps toward

recognizing the Feminine Face of God, but more remains to be done. Other major segments adhere to patriarchal tradition. Even in the more progressive denominations little progress has been made toward representing Mary in devotional artwork as an assertive, liturgically relevant figure.

Despite its shortcomings the medieval church did raise Mary to near-divine status, second only to Christ. Modern esoteric teachings affirmed Mary’s divinity and offered new insights into her ongoing global ministry. Traditional Christians and esotericists may diverge sharply in their understanding of other issues, but they display remarkable agreement in their descriptions of Mary.

Neither esotericists nor traditional Christians offer a definitive answer to the question of whether the historical Mary was an “ordinary” member of the human family who made extraordinary progress on the spiritual path, or should be placed in a separate category—the incarnation of a divine being, or the mother of God, to whom flowed “at once and immediately, the river of the Divinity.”

As a member of the human family Mary would still be an individualized monad, a unique fragment of divine essence. Her deification or divinization would rest on the expression of that inherent divinity to an exceptional degree. Eastern Orthodox theologians’ assertion that she attained *theosis*, and the assertion by esotericists that she attained the fifth initiation, point in that direction.²³¹

Even as a member of the human family Mary can legitimately be considered an *avatara*. She was probably groomed over multiple lifetimes for her Palestinian mission. Her birth seems to have been auspicious, and as a child she received special training in the temple. After giving birth to Jesus, Mary watched him grow to adulthood and take up his ministry, overshadowed by the Christ. She shared in the sacrifice of the cross, experienced a personal revelation of the Resurrection, and then went on to pursue her own ministry in the early church.

The Nicene Creed insists that Mary conceived “by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Neoplatonists viewed the Third Aspect of the Trinity

as the link between the divine and physical worlds; modern esotericists do likewise. The very word “mother” (Latin: *mater*) has etymological connections to “matter” (*materia*). Accordingly, it was fitting for Mother Mary to facilitate Christ’s descent to Earth. Perhaps it is no coincidence that many Marian apparitions take place in natural settings like mountainsides or grottos and involve phenomena like healing springs. Marian devotion takes its cue from those settings to place statues in beautiful gardens. Mary’s devic hosts no doubt appreciate it.

Several esoteric writers claimed that Mary made the rare transition to the deva evolution, to become—as Marian devotion had long styled her—“Queen of the Angels.” They also asserted that she assumed the role of World Mother. Mary serves as a living archetype, an “[e]mbodiment on earth of the Feminine Aspect of the Deity ... in whom all the highest qualities of womanhood and motherhood shine forth in their fullest perfection.” Summarizing Hildegard of Bingen’s understanding of the archetype, religious historian Barbara Newman declared: “Woman’s primary significance in the divine scheme of things is to reveal the hidden God by giving him birth. In the meantime, she gives birth to his image in every child that she bears.”²³²

To return to the issue of gender disparity in the Logos–Sophia, it is interesting to note Blavastky’s assertion that the first manifestation from the Godhead is feminine; clearly she would disagree with Augustine. Regardless of who is right, it seems evident that a Feminine Principle emerges at the very earliest “moment” and the highest level. We recall the words of the Psalmist: “[F]rom the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth”—often rendered more poetically as “I bore you from the womb before the morning star.”²³³

As it descends into manifestation, the Feminine Principle expresses herself as beings or entities at successively lower levels. All are linked by a channel of energy that communicates the essence and qualities of the Divine Feminine to our level of consciousness. In parallel, the Christ communicates the qualities of the Divine Masculine.

Sophia remains an enigma, and her portrayal by different constituencies has been fragmentary, even inconsistent. She has received little attention among esotericists, except in Anthroposophical circles. Perhaps Sophia is the World Mother, though Besant’s and Roerich’s extensive discussion of the World Mother never mentioned her. Yet the World Mother sent avatars to Earth, and Robert Powell suggested that Mary was an avatars of “Divine Sophia.”

The Russian theologians’ work on Sophia was important, but Hildegard may have shared the best insights. Hildegard’s writings may have been inspired twelfth-century miniature, which depicts Sophia/Sapientia surrounded by patriarchs and prophets and holding a medallion of Christ. Newman commented on the image: “This Sapientia ... is a mysterious persona prefiguring Christ and Mary but distinct from both; she embodies God’s decision to create a universe in order than he might enter it as a man.”²³⁴ The critical question is how distinct? Newman quoted from another medieval source: “[H]ow could the Mother not preexist with the Son, whose conception and birth opened the way for the whole rational creation to be sanctified, unified, and restored to peace?”²³⁵

The precise relationship between Sophia and Mary remains a mystery. But a case can be made, based on the testimony examined herein, that Chokmah/Sophia/Sapientia is the entity that overshadowed, or incarnated as, the historical Mary.²³⁶ Or perhaps in some sense, Mary was always an integral part of that entity.

The possibility that Sophia/Mary existed “from the beginning” allows us to revisit the tradition of Mary’s perpetual virginity. The Hebrew word *almah*, on which the claim of Mary’s earthly virginity rested, more generally meant “a young woman.” Accordingly, we might suggest that Sophia/Mary enjoys perpetual youth. For context, Sanat Kumara, Lord of the World, is described in Hindu, Buddhist, and trans-Himalayan teachings as the “Eternal Youth” or “Youth of Endless Summers.”²³⁷

Upon completion of her earthly mission, and attainment of theosis/adeptship, Mary may have merged or remerged with the entity, bringing

her human experience and human nature with her. Not surprisingly descriptions of Sophia and Mary overlapped, and multiple commentators intentionally or unintentionally conflated them. Yet, Christianity promoted Mary rather than Sophia, through devotion and intercession, the arts, and theological speculation. Apparitions overwhelmingly involved Mary. We gained additional insights into Mary's ongoing ministry through esoteric teachings as well as through communications to selected individuals, like Bridget of Sweden and Geoffrey Hodson.²³⁸ If indeed Sophia/Mary is a single entity, evidently she has allowed herself to be known primarily as Mary and to be associated with her Palestinian incarnation. In other cultures and religions, Sophia/Mary is known by other names, and attributes and titles are freely exchanged.

The Feminine Face of God has been discernable throughout Judeo-Christian history. Today there is growing awareness of the Feminine Face as expressed by Sophia and Mary, either separately or understood as a single entity. The "return of Sophia" and what seems to be Mary's initiative to reveal herself are seen as consequences of, but also as driving forces behind, the empowerment of women. Esotericists emphasize that we are in transition from the patriarchy of the Piscean Age to the inclusiveness of the Aquarian Age. Accordingly, we can expect the veil over the Feminine Face of God to be lifted further as we contemplate the human and heavenly realms.

¹ *Genesis* 1:26-27. All biblical quotations are from the King James Bible.

² Monica Sjö & Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 67.

³ The liturgical calendars of more modern religious traditions are still based on solar and lunar cycles. For example, the dates of Passover, Easter and Ramadan are all determined by the intersection of solar and lunar cycles.

⁴ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

⁵ Paul Collins, "The Sumerian Goddess Inanna (3400–2200 BC)," *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, (Nov. 15, 1994), 103–118. The flag of Iraq bore the image of the Star of Inanna from 1959 to 1963.

⁶ The relief is currently displayed in the British Museum in London.

⁷ For more on the Burney Relief see <https://www.ancient.eu/article/658/the-queen-of-the-night/> (Last accessed July 20, 2020).

⁸ Susan Ackerman, "Asherah/Asherim: Bible," *Jewish Women's Archive*. Online: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/asherahasherim-bible> (Last accessed Aug. 2, 2020).

⁹ *Genesis* 13:16.

¹⁰ The name YHWH was too sacred to utter, and the authors of scripture frequently substituted "the Lord."

¹¹ *1 Kings* 11:5, 33; *2 Kings* 23:13.

¹² "Asherah and Ashtoreth." Online: <http://oldtestamentstudies.data-scenesdev.com/languages/asherahandashtoreth.asp?item=4&variant=0> (Last accessed Aug. 20, 2020).

¹³ *1 Kings* 18:19; *2 Kings* 21:7.

¹⁴ *Judges* 6:25-26.

¹⁵ *2 Chronicles* 14:3.

¹⁶ *1 Kings* 15:13.

¹⁷ *2 Kings* 23:1-16. Hilkiah vented his wrath against "sodomites" as well as "idoltrous priests."

¹⁸ Ibid. 23:13. It will be recalled that "Solomon loved many strange women" and "went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians" (*1 Kings* 11:1, 5).

¹⁹ *Jeremiah* 7:18

²⁰ Ibid. 44:19. Between verses 17 and 25 Jeremiah made the same complaint four times, each time specifically mentioning the "queen of heaven."

²¹ Susan Ackerman, "Asherah/Asherim: Bible."

²² *Numbers* 11:12.

²³ *Isaiah* 34:14. Some modern translations, including the *New Revised Standard Version*, now use the name Lilith.

²⁴ "Songs of the Sage," Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q510 Fragment 1. Michael Wise *et al*, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 527. Insertions by translators.

²⁵ "Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith," *Jewish Women's Archive*. Online: <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith> (Last

accessed June 13, 2020). An example of “submission” to Adam, spelled out in the text, concerned the positions they occupied in coitus.

26 Ibid. It is unclear where the 20 days, mentioned in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, came from. The *zeved ha-bat* traditionally was performed after 80 days.

27 Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, *Treatise on the Left Emanation*, 13th. century. Reproduced in Joseph Dan (ed.), *The Early Kabbalah* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1986), 180-181.

28 Peter of Peckham (attrib.), *La lumiere as lais, and Apocalypse* (“The Welles Apocalypse”), British Library, Royal MS 15 D II folio 2r.

29 Barbara B. Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (Lake Worth, FL: Nicolas-Hays, 1986), 91-92. See also “Amulets,” *Jewish Virtual Library*. Online: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/amulet> (Last accessed July 26, 2020).

30 *1 Kings* 4:29-30, 34.

31 *1 Kings* 11:3.

32 *Proverbs* 8:22-30.

33 Ibid. 9:5.

34 The *Septuagint* contains Greek translations of the books of the canonical Hebrew Bible and the additional books referred to as “apocryphal” or “deuterocanonical.” Some of the apocryphal books were originally written in Hebrew and translated into Greek; others were written in Greek. Christian denominations disagree on which of the apocryphal books should be included in the Old Testament

35 *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:25-26, 29. It should be emphasized that the “Wisdom” literature was not written by King Solomon.

36 Ibid. 8:2.

37 Psychologist Carl Jung saw Chokmah/Sophia as an archetypal goddess, one who softened Yahweh and helped him develop compassion. See Bernice H. Hill, “Sophia and Sustainability,” 2006. Online: <http://www.cgjungpage.org/learn/articles/technology-and-environment/810-sophia-and-sustainability> (Last accessed June. 26, 2020).

38 *Ecclesiasticus* 24:9.

39 Ibid. 24:13-16.

40 Ibid. 24:18.

41 For more on Sophia see John F. Nash, “Sophia: the Gnostic Heritage,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Fall 2009), 29-39.

42 Philo Judaeus, *De Fuga et Inventione* (trans; C. Yonge), (London: Bohn, 1854-1890), IX, 52.

43 Philo Judaeus, *De Ebrietate* (trans; C. Yonge), (London: Bohn, 1854-1890), VIII.

44 Ibid.

45 See the discussion in Robert Powell, *The Sophia Teachings: the Emergence of the Divine Feminine in Our Time* (New York: Lantern, 2001), especially 39-40.

46 *Genesis* 6:17.

47 *Judges* 11:29.

48 *1 Samuel* 1:15.

49 *Psalms* 51:11.

50 *Exodus* 24:16.

51 *Isaiah* 57:15. For more information on the Shekinah see John F. Nash, “The Shekinah: the Indwelling Glory of God,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Summer 2005), 33-40.

52 Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 155. Italics by translator.

53 Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, *Ohev Yisrael*. Quoted in Aryeh Kaplan, *The Light Beyond* (New York: Moznaim, 1981), 35.

54 *Zephaniah* 3:14.

55 *Isaiah* 37:22.

56 *Jeremiah* 31:4. A tabret is a timbrel or tambourine.

57 *Song of Solomon* 4:1, 6-7, 10.

58 In Christianity, Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross wrote erotic mystical poetry.

59 The practical Kabbalah is a form of magic. The modern Kabbalah, largely the work of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, is closely allied with the Tarot. For a discussion of the ecstatic Kabbalah see John F. Nash, “Abraham Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Fall 2008), 51-64. For a discussion of the Christian Kabbalah see John F. Nash, “Origins of the Christian Kabbalah,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2008), 43-58.

60 John F. Nash, “From the Zohar to Safed: Development of the Theoretical Kabbalah,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Summer 2009), 21-46.

61 Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim* (trans; E. Getz.), (Monfalcone, Italy: Providence University, 2007), treatise 1, 45-49.

62 Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 4, 145-223. See also the discussion in Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1974), 402. In later versions of the Kabbalah the sephiroth took on the meaning of stages in the disciple’s path to enlightenment—each sephirah offering its unique experience.

63 Nash, “From the Zohar to Safed: Development of the Theoretical Kabbalah,” 21-46.

64 See the discussion in Moshe L. Miller, *Zohar: Selections Translated and Annotated* (Morristown NJ: Fiftieth Gate, 2000), 45.

65 Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 2, 80. Parenthetical inserts by translator.

- 66 Some commentators have attributed the Kabbalistic emphasis on emanation to Neoplatonic influence.
- 67 Chaim Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, ch. 1 (trans; E. Klein.), quoted in Eliahu Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2000), 17.
- 68 In one reference, the kliphoth were described as the “bark” on the Tree of Life.
- 69 Lilith is mentioned several times in the *Zohar*. See the discussion in Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith*, especially 4-7.
- 70 In rabbinic Judaism the term simply meant “maintaining social order.” The early Kabbalists gave it its cosmic meaning.
- 71 Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, chap. 2, 31. Italics removed.
- 72 *Isaiah* 6:3.
- 73 *The Bahir*, 132 (trans; A. Kaplan), (New York: Weiser Books, 1998), 48.
- 74 Statistic based on the Berg edition, which includes some interpolated commentary.
- 75 *Zohar*, 49, *Ki Tetze*: 21:102, Berg edition. Online: <https://www.zohar.com/zohar> (Last accessed Aug. 1, 2020). In *The Secret Doctrine* theosophist Helena Blavatsky identified the Shekinah with the “primordial light” and associated her with Kether: “The Spiritual substance sent forth by the Infinite Light is the first Sephirah or Shekinah. [Exoterically it] contains all the other nine Sephiroth in her. Esoterically she contains but two, Chokmah ... and Binah.” Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical Univ. Press, 1888), vol.1, 355, vol. 2, 107.
- 76 *Zohar*, 33, *Kedoshim*: 4:36.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 9, *Vayetze*: 27: 272.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 2, *Bereshit A*: 25:268.
- 79 In another version the bride adorns herself for the wedding. See Moses Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan* (trans; R. Afilalo), (Quebec, Canada: Kabbalah Editions, 2004), 229.
- 80 Some Kabbalists associate the Holy One with Jacob, son of the “archetypal parents” Abraham and Sarah, and father of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- 81 *Zohar*, 21, *Trumah*: 80:789.
- 82 Solomon Alkabetz, “The Pious Customs of Moses Cordovero,” quoted in Lawrence Fine, *Safed Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 36, 40.
- 83 Theophilus of Antioch, *Epistle to Autolychum*, II, 15. Theophilus used the term *trias* (Greek, “three”), which was translated into the Latin *trinitas* and, in turn, into the English “trinity.” Theophilus of Antioch is not to be confused

with the fourth-century patriarch of Alexandria of the same name.

- 84 For example, *Matthew* 28:19 reads “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” But many scholars believe that the reference to the Trinity is a later interpolation, and that the verse originally read: “Go ye, and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you.”
- 85 *John* 14:26. Personification is emphasized in *John* 16:5-9.
- 86 *Acts* 2:2.
- 87 The Hebrew equivalent of *pnos* is *neshamah*, which appears in *Isaiah* 42:5—together with *ruach*—and elsewhere in scripture. Shortly after the Pentecost event, however, Peter quoted from *Joel* 2:28: “I will pour out my spirit [*ruach*] upon all flesh.”
- 88 Nicene Creed (381). Note that the statement relating to the Holy Spirit did not include the *filioque* clause “proceeds from the Father and from the Son.” That was a later interpolation which led to the East–West schism of 1054. Nor did it use the male pronoun that appears in modern versions: “He has spoken through the Prophets.”
- 89 *Qur’an* 5:116. Whether the Mariamites ever existed is unclear, but significantly the *Qur’an* was written at a time when Mary was being raised to near-divine status.
- 90 “A Song of Anselm,” *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* (Westminster, UK: Church House, 2005).
- 91 Julian of Norwich, “Third Meditation,” *Showings: the Long Text*, ch. 59.
- 92 Quoted in English translation by Andrew Weeks, *Paracelsus: Speculative Theory and the Crisis of the Early Reformation* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997), 83-84.
- 93 Bede Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West* (Singapore: Medio Media, 1982), 192.
- 94 Fr. Griffiths continued his priestly duties in an environment that may have been familiar to the Apostle Thomas but was unfamiliar to most western Christians. Importantly, he worked within the framework of the Church of Rome, giving his ideas credibility in circles that might otherwise have dismissed his comments out of hand.
- 95 *Luke* 7:35.
- 96 John F. Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, vol. 1 (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2007), 255-284.

⁹⁷ *Eugnostos the Blessed*. III, 80, James M. Robinson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Library*, Revised Edition (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 231.

⁹⁸ The two books were not included in the canonical Bible, but *1 Enoch* was widely referenced by the early Christian fathers. Tertullian referred to it as “scripture,” and there is even a reference to it in *Hebrews* 11:5. Attribution to Enoch, grandfather of Noah, was pseudepigraphic; the authors were probably Hellenic Jews writing somewhere between 200 BCE and 100 CE.

⁹⁹ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis* (trans; R. Wilson), (San Francisco: Harper, 1977/1984), 311.

¹⁰⁰ *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, XXX:8, 12, (trans; W. Morfill), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896/1999), 39-40.

¹⁰¹ *The Book of Enoch*, XLII:1-2, (trans; R. Charles), (San Diego, CA: The Book Tree, 1917/1999), 61.

¹⁰² Violet MacDermot, Introduction to *The Fall of Sophia* (trans; V. MacDermot), (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 2001), 22-25. *Pistis* is usually translated as “faith” or “faithful;” but another meaning, more appropriate in the circumstances, would be “hostage.” For an interpretation of the symbolism of the *Pistis Sophia* see: <https://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/2395-the-pistis-sophia-an-introduction?gclid=EAIaIQob-ChMI4abwt76M6wIVhI7ICh0TIghmE-AAYASAAEgJ6afD> (Last accessed Aug. 20, 2020).

¹⁰³ *Pistis Sophia*, MacDermot, *The Fall of Sophia*, book 1, § 32, 122.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, book 2, § 81, 174.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Magdalene asked 39 of the 46 questions in the first two books of the *Pistis Sophia*. See Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993), 47. Interestingly, Jesus’ reference to Sophia in *Luke*, cited earlier, is followed two verses later, by a reference to the “woman in the city” who brought an alabaster box of ointment to anoint his feet. In 591 CE Pope Gregory I conflated Mary Magdalene with the “woman in the city” to produce the western church’s icon of the “penitent sinner.” In 1969 the Church of Rome formally acknowledged that they were two different women.

¹⁰⁶ *Proverbs* 9:1.

¹⁰⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (trans; M. Dods), (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 604.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (trans; E. B. Pusey), book IX, Project Gutenberg.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Oakland, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1978), 64. See also Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 157. Like the Hebrew *Chokmah* and the Greek *Sophia*, *Sapientia* is a feminine noun in Latin.

¹¹¹ “Writings of St. Hildegard von Bingen ... on the Holy Spirit.” Online: http://holyspirit-shekinah.org/_writings_of_st_hildegard_von_bingen.htm (Last accessed July 25, 2020).

¹¹² Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 49. We do not know whether Hildegard was aware of the comment in *Eugnostos the Blessed* cited earlier.

¹¹³ See for example, Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human & Solar* (New York: Lucis, 1922), xv.

¹¹⁴ Böhme, who lived in Silesia in what is now Poland, had a limited formal education, but he studied medicine, the Kabbalah, and the Hermetic arts.

¹¹⁵ Jakob Böhme, *The Threefold Life of Man*, quoted in: N. Berdyaev, *Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme*, etude II, 1930, 34-62. See also Böhme’s *Mysterium Magnum* (London, 1654), chapter 18.

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of Böhme’s teachings on gender see: Désirée Hirst. *Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 92-96.

¹¹⁷ Jakob Böhme, *Confessions* (trans; W. Scott Palmer), (San Francisco: Harper and Bros., 1954), 97.

¹¹⁸ Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens*, Journal Entries: 1670-1675, The Philadelphian Society, 1696. See also Julie Hirst, “The Divine Ark: Jane Lead’s Vision of the Second Noah’s Ark,” *Esoterica* (vol. VI), 16-25. Lead’s name was often spelled “Leade.”

¹¹⁹ “Martyr Sophia and her three daughters at Rome,” Orthodox Church in America. Online: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2017/09/17/102638-martyr-sophia-and-her-three-daughters-at-rome> (Last accessed Nov. 22, 2019). According to some accounts, only the three daughters were martyred. Other accounts identify this Sophia with the fourth-century St Sophia of Milan.

¹²⁰ See for example, Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation* (New

- York: Weiser Books, 1998), Plate 17. Some of the older icons show a male figure.
- 121 Source: Sophia Foundation of North America. Translated from Old Slavonic by Natalia Bonetskaya.
- 122 Vladimir Solovyov, "The Three Meetings," Quoted in Eugenia Gourvitch, *Vladimir Solovyov: the Man and the Prophet* (Great Barrington, MA: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992), 25.
- 123 Ibid., 32.
- 124 Ibid., 34, 36.
- 125 Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth*, (trans; B. Jakim), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 239. Emphasis in original.
- 126 Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God*, (trans; P. Thompson *et al.*), (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 1993), 138-139.
- 127 See for example Gregory Palamas (14th century), "Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life," §105, *Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 393; also Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1963/1977), 33-34.
- 128 2 Peter 1:4. For a discussion of theosis see John F. Nash, "Theosis: a Christian Perspective on Human Destiny," *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2011), 15-33.
- 129 Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 50.
- 130 Ibid., 65..
- 131 Ibid., 72.
- 132 Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth*, 252.
- 133 Ibid., 252-253. Emphasis in original
- 134 Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God*, 35-37.
- 135 Ibid., 52.
- 136 Ibid., 74.
- 137 Rudolf Steiner, "The Being of Anthroposophy," lecture, Berlin, February 3, 1913.
- 138 Rudolf Steiner, *The Gospel of St. John* (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 1908/1940), 191.
- 139 Rudolf Steiner, "Sophia: the Holy Spirit, Mary, and Mary Magdalene," lecture, Munich. Nov. 1, 1906, Included in *Isis Mary Sophia* (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2003), 52.
- 140 Powell, *The Sophia Teachings*, 46-47. It should be noted that the identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha is not universally accepted.
- 141 Ibid., 48.
- 142 Susanne Schaup, *Sophia: Aspects of the Divine Feminine Past and Present* (York Beach, ME, 1997), 212.
- 143 Geoffrey Ashe was a major proponent of that theory. See his *The Virgin: Mary's Cult and the Re-Emergence of the Goddess* (London: Arkana, 1976/1988).
- 144 By contrast, Peter is mentioned 191 times in the New Testament, and John 48 times. Mary receives substantially more coverage in the *Qur'an*; in addition to numerous individual references, a complete *surah*, or chapter, is devoted to her.
- 145 Luke 1:28, 30, 35.
- 146 Matthew 1:23. Isaiah 7:14 reads: "Behold, a virgin (Hebrew: *almah*) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." In addition to questioning the interpretation of *almah*, some scholars challenge the assertion that the passage was even intended to be a messianic prophecy.
- 147 Despite Paul's claim that Christ appeared to multiple people—including "above five hundred brethren at once" (1 Corinthians 15:6) and himself—the New Testament never acknowledges that Mary saw her risen son.
- 148 Acts 1:14.
- 149 Revelation 12:1.
- 150 Ibid. 12:5, 14.
- 151 Ibid. 12:17.
- 152 See for example the discussion in Ashe, *The Virgin: Mary's Cult ...*, 121-122.
- 153 *Infancy Gospel of James* (trans; A. Roberts & J. Donaldson), *Early Christian Writings*, §§ 7-8.
- 154 *Gospel of Bartholomew* II:4-22 (trans; M. R. James), Gnostic Society Library. This text, sometimes called *Questions of Bartholomew*, is dated variously from the 2nd to the 6th century. For more on Mary's life and ministry see John F. Nash, *Mary: Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess* (2020). Online: <http://uriel.com/Mary/index.html>.
- 155 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, (trans; A. L. Williams, London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), §100:5, 210. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book III, ch. 22, §4 (trans; W. Rambaut, Christian Classics Library).
- 156 "Under thy compassion," *Rylands Papyrus* P 470, c.250 CE. John Rylands University Library, Manchester, UK.
- 157 An important difference, however, is that Chesed is the masculine element, and Geburah the feminine one!
- 158 Epiphanius, "Against Collyridians," *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (trans; F. Williams), 2/e, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies.

159 According to the Greek historian Herodotus the Scythians worshipped a *heptad*, a pantheon of seven gods, all paired with goddesses.

160 “John the Son of Zebedee,” E. A. Wallis Budge, *Legends of Our Lady Mary the Perpetual Virgin and her Mother Hanna* (London: Medici Society, 1922), 245ff.

161 “Bartholomew the Apostle,” *Legends of Our Lady Mary* ..., xxxvii-xxxix.

162 *Life of the Virgin* (trans; S. J. Shoemaker), (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), §§93-96, 120-123. *Transitus Mariae*, reproduced in Agnes Smith Lewis (ed.), *Apocrypha Syriaca*, Clay and Sons, 1909, reprint: (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), book II, 20; book III, 34.

163 Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019), 70-102.

164 Examples include a sixth-century mosaic in the Basilica of Parenzo, Croatia; an eleventh-century mosaic in Ravenna, Italy; and most evocatively, the early fifteenth century *Le sacerdoce de la Vierge* (“The Priesthood of the Virgin”), from the school of Amiens, France.

165 *Life of the Virgin*, §111, 136.

166 *Ibid.*, §117, 141.

167 *Transitus Mariae*, book V, 65-66. See also the translation in Appendix C of Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 374.

168 *Ibid.*

169 *Matthew* 13:55-56; *Mark* 3:31-32; 6:3.

170 See the discussion in Ashe, *The Virgin: Mary’s Cult* ..., especially ch. 8.

171 Peter of Damascus, “A Treasury of Divine Knowledge,” *Philokalia* (trans; G. Palmer *et al.*), Eling Trust, 1977, vol. 3, 130.

172 Hildegard of Bingen, Antiphon “O Splendidissima Gemma,” *Symphonia*, (trans; M. Ather-ton), *Hildegard Selected Readings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 117.

173 For example, Walsingham, England, became a popular pilgrimage destination after a Marian apparition to a Saxon noblewoman in 1061.

174 Thomas à Kempis, *Founders of the New Devotion: Being the Lives of Gerard Groote, Florentius Radewin and Their Followers*, English translation (London: Kegan Paul, 1905), 64.

175 Second Council of Constantinople, Canon 15.

176 Maria de Ágreda, *Mystical City of God*, vol. 1, §42 (trans; F. Marison), (Hammond, IN: Conkey, 1722/1902), 56.

177 *Ibid.* The English translation of the *Mystical City of God* received an *Imprimatur* from the Roman Catholic bishop of Fort Wayne, IN.

178 Nicene Creed, as approved by the First Council of Constantinople.

179 Cyril of Alexandria, “In Defense of the Theotokos,” homily, Council of Ephesus, June 22, 431.

180 Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon for the Sunday within the Octave of the Assumption,” 207.

181 *Matthew* 25:31.

182 Jill Raitt *et al.*, *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2 (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 1987), 412.

183 Second Council of Constantinople, Canon 15.

184 Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1900), 195-197. See also Mara Freeman, *Kindling the Celtic Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2000), 254-256. Parts of the Scottish highlands and western islands were largely untouched by the Reformation, allowing traditional customs to be retained longer than was possible in other parts of England and Scotland. The annual offering of cakes to Mary seems to have survived until the nineteenth century.

185 J. A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 265-266.

186 Quoted in Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (London: Penguin, 2003), 186-187.

187 *Song of Solomon* 4:7. An inscription over the Lady Chapel in Westminster Cathedral, London, reads: *Tota pulchra es, Maria, et macula originalis non est in te* (Latin: “Thou art all fair, O Mary, and the original stain of sin is not in thee”).

188 Anselm of Canterbury, *Concerning Virginal Conception and Original Sin* (trans; J. Hopkins & H. Richardson), 1099, ch. 12. Online: <https://jasper-hopkins.info/DeConceptu.pdf> (Last accessed Aug. 2, 2020).

189 Pius IX, Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, Rome, December 8, 1854.

190 Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, Vatican City, 1950, §44.

191 Leo XIII, Encyclical on the Rosary *Lucunda Semper Expectatione* §2, Vatican City, 1894.

192 Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Vatican City, November 21, 1964, ch. VIII, especially §§53, 66, 67.

193 *Ibid.*, §67.

194 See for example Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 14-16.

195 John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*: “On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of

- the Pilgrim Church,” Vatican City, March 25, 1987.
- 196 John Paul II, prayer before the Roman Icon of Our Lady, “Salus Populi Romani,” Vatican City, December 8, 1990.
- 197 Schaup, *Sophia*, xiii.
- 198 Notable for its contribution to this effort has been the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, an international network of academics.
- 199 Even in our own time, former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote: “Since very early on, Christians had imagined the Church in the form of a woman, and ... the woman praying with hands extended and head covered, stood for the whole believing community considered as Christ’s bride.” *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (London: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 43-44.
- 200 Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 2.
- 201 A contemporary of Helena Blavatsky, Kingsford served for one year as head of the London lodge of the Theosophical Society until a dispute with A. P. Sinnett and other issues led to her resignation from the society. She converted to Roman Catholicism but pursued her esoteric work, which included mediumship.
- 202 Anna Kingsford, *Clothed with the Sun*, 2/e (London: Watkins, 1889), 31.
- 203 Annie W. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity or The Lesser Mysteries*, 2/e (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1905/1966), 140.
- 204 Annie W. Besant, “The New Annunciation,” *The Theosophist*, (vol. 49, June 1928), 278ff. Capitalization in original.
- 205 Sandra Hodson (ed.), *Illuminations of the Mystery Tradition: Compiled from the Writings of Geoffrey Hodson* (Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishing House, 1992), 70. Published posthumously by his widow.
- 206 Ibid.
- 207 Sandra Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary: The Occult Diary of Geoffrey Hodson* (Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishers, 1988), 267. Published posthumously by his widow. For a more extensive exploration of Hodson’s writings on Mary see John F. Nash, “Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess: Mary in the Writings of Geoffrey Hodson,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Winter 2019), 37-65.
- 208 Alice A. Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy* (New York: Lucis, 1957), 291. Capitalization in original.
- 209 Ibid.
- 210 Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Masters and the Path* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1925), 288. Leadbeater made a similar point in *The World Mother as Symbol and Fact* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1928), 17-18.
- 211 Corinne Heline, *The Blessed Virgin Mary: Her Life and Mission* (Black Mountain, NC: New Age Press, 1971), 106-107.
- 212 S. Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary*, 268.
- 213 Ibid., 82.
- 214 For a discussion of the Jungian archetypes see Joan Relke, “The Archetypal Female in Mythology and Religion: The Anima and the Mother,” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* (vol. 3, no. 1, Feb. 2007).
- 215 S. Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary*, 81-82. Perhaps it was no accident that those were the feminine ideals of Victorian/Edwardian society in which Hodson grew up.
- 216 Geoffrey Hodson, *The Kingdom of the Gods* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1952), 244.
- 217 Andrew Harvey, *Return of the Mother* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001), 343.
- 218 Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, 192.
- 219 Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, 88, 215. Emphasis removed.
- 220 Helena P. Blavatsky, *Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society: Stanzas I & II*, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1889, 4.
- 221 Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Healing* (New York: Lucis, 1953), 362-363.
- 222 Valentin Tomberg (attrib. to), *Meditations on the Tarot: a Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (trans; R. Powell), (Rockport, MA: Element, 1985/1993), 281.
- 223 Ibid., 282-283. Parenthesis and capitalization in original.
- 224 Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith*, 122.
- 225 *Revelation* 18:2. The next verse leaves no doubt about the gender and moral status assigned to Babylon: “all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.”
- 226 Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy*, 155.
- 227 *Ecclesiasticus* 25:24.
- 228 The blood of Archbishops Thomas Becket and Óscar Romero was never considered to defile the altars where they were slain. Moreover, the blood of Christ lies at the very heart of Christian ritual.
- 229 It is hard to avoid comparisons with Cybele’s male disciples who castrated themselves.

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- ²³⁰ Exceptions were the Quakers, who affirmed gender equality in the 17th century, and other small denominations in the 19th century.
- ²³¹ Charles Leadbeater even suggested that Mary attained the sixth initiation. See *The World Mother as Symbol and Fact*, 4-5.
- ²³² Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 93.
- ²³³ *Psalms* 110:3. Among major translations, only the Douay–Rheims Bible mentions a star.

- ²³⁴ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 58-50.
- ²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ²³⁶ Sophia may have overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation in somewhat the same way as the Christ overshadowed Jesus at the Baptism.
- ²³⁷ See for example Bailey, *Initiation, Human & Solar*, 38.
- ²³⁸ See ch. 6 of Nash, *Mary: Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess*.

The Rise of the New World Religions

W. Kim Rogers

Summary

The background from which “new religions” arise appears to be a loss of world-orientation, that is, an understanding of what to hold on to, to rely upon. Since it was once present, there is a turn to the past to find the sense of reality one’s predecessors were guided by. The elements sought for seem to be rooted in the world of the initiate, which, when they are syncretistically combined, give content to many arcane learning-ancient religion movements from the 5th century BCE to today.

Loss of World-Orientation

A problem well worth consideration within human studies, particularly in the history of religions, is how there could have arisen a number of so-called “new religions” over the last two-and-a-half millennia that have great similarities but very little historical connection with each other. This essay proposes a solution to this problem. Several times in the course of the history of the societies of the West,¹ there has occurred, among some segments of these societies, a slippage or loss of the world-orientation which had provided one’s forefathers a state of adequacy between themselves and their circumstances. Loss of orientation means a state of passive release of a hold one has had on reality—a letting go that may be coupled with a certain revulsion of certain ways of dealing with reality—in which one experiences increasing bewilderment, even feels chaos as impending. William Butler Yeats (who was very deeply involved in several occult movements) describes this experience in the familiar lines from his poem “The Second Coming”:

Things fall apart. The center cannot hold.
More anarchy is loosed upon the world, ...
and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned.²

Such a loss of orientation results in a new perception of the land of one’s birth as an alien abode, a strange land. A person experiences something like an “unaccountable movement of the boundaries,” a “forgetting of the location of the graves of the ancestors.” One has lost one’s place in a homeland and is left only with the disturbing feeling that a world whose form one does not quite remember is hiding in the shrubbery, under the masks and costumes of its people, behind the facades of their houses, beyond those hills. Gone is the universe with which a person can feel a sense of kinship, the order in which one has one’s place,³ and, as this happens the universe loses its moral character and becomes indifferent to one’s aspirations. One suffers the lot of an exile who is lonely, unprotected, uncomprehending in a situation that seems at times full of danger.

The weakening of a society’s world-orientation has been concomitant with the weakening of its religion’s power to inform the members of that society concerning what they may hold by, rely on, guide themselves by. This is true even when “religion” continues as one factor in a person’s life—indeed, the effective sign of the faltering of a religion is when it becomes one among other parts of the culture of a society.

As it no longer enlightens its adherents about the meaning of their world, a religion then becomes just a formal institution of behavior and belief.

Some members of society may then adopt an extreme position of support for certain present

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expressions of their religious tradition by which they tie their hopes completely to the world as it is and cannot understand how others can live otherwise, how “credit” can be established under any other conditions. They have nowhere else to turn that they can see except to anarchy—an indication, perhaps, of how close they are to such anarchy themselves. It is their religion’s ability to supply certain stimuli for their emotions, the feeling of danger avoided, of personal security obtained, which is most important to them.

However, other persons have already despaired of the present. It seems to such a person that those who adhere to the traditional religion now have new gods, or rather false gods, and the real gods have gone away. The real gods for one thus, are precisely the gods who must be sought. The individual’s experience of the world’s strangeness is a reflection of one’s religious estrangement, a feeling of impending misfortune or even threat of destruction has its roots in one’s sense of the absence of the real gods. True religion becomes for one then a way of seeking the real gods—a way of “salvation.”

The rise of certain new religious movements in the West, and today also in Korea and Japan, is to be accounted for then in terms of a need for the security of a world made meaningful by religion for those who no longer find the traditional religion of their society viable. They are responses, not to the experience of disorientation directly, but rather to the weakening of a traditional religion as the source of orientation within society, for they seek the solution to this problem in a substitute religion.

Turn to the Past

From one’s experience of homelessness and exile, there arises an anguish, and a homesickness for a world one has never known. When persons are no longer sure of their ideas, when they do not know what to hope for, work for, or expect in the world, when they can no longer identify present and future, then there may be a turn to the past⁴—when, it is supposed, the meaning of things and the right ways of relating to them were all known by sages or ancestors or gods. Yet this past seems “hidden,” to be a secret. One feels that he will be freed from

one’s bounds to this alien world if one just knew... what one is sure was known by the great men of the past and still is known by a few custodians of this secret knowledge of one’s own day.

One is like an orphan who, on discovering one’s condition, wants to have a home of one’s own and roots, a position in a system of social relationships in which one will be instructed or guided by those superior in knowledge and age who know the “way.” Because one does not know anything about oneself except that one needs to be someone important to someone and to belong somewhere, to have a status-role in a society which extends even to the powers of the universe, one seeks a domestication of reality but, as might an orphan, through the composing of a fantastic household.

Because this past religious interpretation of the world seems to be hidden, to be a secret, I shall refer to the attempts to recover it as the ancient learning—arcane religion movements. From this hopeful turn (that nevertheless borders on melancholia) towards a religious past with which one is not himself acquainted, and which in this its seeming occult character acquires the form of mystery, comes one’s imaginative invention of a new past. But one is not, must not be, in this original. One finds for oneself a connection with the past by borrowing syncretistically from religious expressions whose origins are distant in time.⁵ These, however, may be partially cloaked in the garb of the latest form of learning or a more pure and “original” expression of the religion of the majority of members of one’s society.

From whence comes the intimation of a “lost past” which guides one’s choice of the sort of things which are to be borrowed? This comes, it seems to me, in addition to folklore and tales preserved by rural populations, such as is found in Ireland or Southeastern Europe, from a subculture which is transmitted in part to children through the way adults sometimes talk to them (e.g., babies are found under cabbages or a stork brought them, the boogeyman or ghosts or goblins will get you if you don’t watch out, etc.) and the stories (“fairy-tales”) adults tell them, and in part through the lore of older children (a penny

in your shoe will bring you luck, and so will crossing your fingers, etc.). According to Iona and Peter Opie, famous for their studies of folklore, children “remain tradition’s warmest friends,” and their lore changes very little from generation to generation, for instance, Roman childrens lore being almost identical with that of today’s children.

Children’s beliefs fall into a definite pattern, the dominant motive of which, Opie and Opie say, is a concern with the things that they think will bring good luck or bad.⁶ These beliefs and their attendant practices, along with much folklore, have their roots, apparently, in the way reality appears within a past religious orientation, perhaps beginning with the world-picture of hunting based societies. It certainly existed within some of the food-producing heroic societies of Southeastern Europe and persisted in similar societies in Northern Europe through the period of the Middle Ages. This religious world-picture is, in my opinion, the “forgotten” or “lost past” which these disoriented and “homeless” persons seek to recover.

World of the Initiate

The world then was viewed in the light of some form of the ceremony of initiation. This ceremony is an orientating act-metaphor of such societies through which the “marks” are set by which the members of these societies “take their bearings” and learn what to rely on, what one can direct or guide oneself by, and through which a given society’s range of activities are thereafter located.

Initiatory ceremonies are the usual means by which a change in social status is affected. This may be the transition from childhood into adulthood, entrance into secret societies or professions, or even into full membership into one’s social class, caste, or society. There is also the initiation of the shaman which, though it still involves one’s social status, is much more individualistic than these. In general, initiation involves a body of ceremonies and oral teachings through which the initiate becomes a different being: it is viewed as natural for things to be transformed into other things, as when warriors become bears, wolves, or persons undergo a change of sex, social status, and so on.

The initiation of the child into the society of adults may well serve here as a paradigm. It is a time when the child learns the lore and traditions of his society, learns his position in the real, that is, the adult world. In this process, the initiate often undergoes physical tests and ordeals such as circumcision or scarification, the knocking out of a tooth or cutting off of a finger joint, and even experiences of sheer terror. However, the end result is that he thereby comes into a new form of social life not shared by the uninitiated.

As birth installs a person in a world, moving from one social world to another is often interpreted by primitive peoples as a process of rebirth. The majority of initiatory ordeals, Mircea Eliade says in his renowned study of initiation, imply a ritual death and new birth,⁷ but one returns to life under a new form. That is, one thereby assumes a superior mode of being patterned on a model revealed by ancestors or heroes or gods and previously known only to those—one’s elders—who were initiated earlier.

The initiate gains a history—a sacred history—of which one was before not only in ignorance but to which one’s life had not the least conscious connection. Although others around one, one’s elders, knew it and existed through it. To the initiated adult, it appears that one has lived in two worlds and understands how as a child, beings belonging to another world appeared simultaneously in one’s own.

Corresponding to the plurality of age groupings, or rather, divisions of social status, there are two or more divisions of being which are recognized, and the crossing of whose boundaries is given to the initiated. Beings may exist successively or even simultaneously in them. Human beings passage from one to another is viewed as dependent upon knowledge received from those (shamans, mages, masters, etc.) already “in the know” and attended by diverse difficulties and perils.

These different regions of being are given spatial location in some societies in terms of an upper world (sky) and lower world (earth). However, in others, the “other” world is located down the river, or across or even under the sea.

In the former case, passage to an upper world may be afforded by a tall rock or mountain, a tree, or even the center pole of a tent. Sometimes a subterranean world (hell, hades, etc.) is added producing the familiar three-storied universe.

The other regions of being are in many ways analogous to that of the sensuously perceivable, although greater power and authority belongs to beings inhabiting these other regions. From the “other” world animal “spirits” are released to replenish the game, for a new living being is given, not made. To that “other” world go the “spirits” of the community’s dead—whose needs there, it seems, are much the same, to judge by the presence of food and other useful articles included in their graves.

It is in connection with this plurality of regions of being that we ought also to place beliefs in omens and talismans. Alongside causes—which primitive peoples have understood quite well—must be put harmful or helpful influences, that is, a form of authority related to status. In some primitive societies, the rite of manhood is the ordeal by which a boy demonstrates his ability to win one or more of those “wild” powers to his service by showing that he can survive in the wilderness, or by obtaining a “vision,” meeting a “spirit,” and so on. The ordeal of the shaman ought also to be remembered in this connection.

This view of the things that human beings meet with in the world pre-supposes (and in the domestication of animals and plants it is demonstrated) that they are relatable to and indeed relate to human beings, that they understand, sympathize (or the contrary) and communicate with persons. When this view is combined with the view of a plurality of regions of being, these affairs can be seen as manifestations in this world of the “spiritual” powers of the “other” world.

... reality is viewed as comprised of two or more worlds. They are arranged hierarchically according to degrees of enlightenment, the world in which a person finds himself being the lowest, but with communication and movement from world to world being possible. A person may enter these other worlds by obtaining knowledge—often ecstatically—of worlds, gods, and self.

“Spirits” then can mean either invisible beings or familiar natural or manufactured material beings (e.g., plants, animals, snakes, birds, or portions of these, and stones, axes, spears, pipes, etc.) which also have an existence in another,

often human form, in an alternative region of being. Note that in “fairy tales” this older world-picture is preserved: beasts are “spirits” (talking animals), and sometimes spirits take human or semi-human forms, such as, the pooka, centaur, mermaid, and so forth.

Shamanism, which is a development within this initiatory interpretation of reality that is com-

prised of two or more regions of being, deserves special mention here. The shaman is the one who knows of the way from one region of being to another, but as this way can be entered only by dying, he is the man who can “die” and “return to life” many times. He is initiated either in solitude or by elder shamans—ordeals which are usually experienced as death by dismemberment and rebirth. Through his initiation, the shaman learns the techniques of dying and returning to life (that is, of falling into an ecstatic trance and awakening), what to do when this occurs, and how to orient himself in the unknown regions which he enters during his ecstasy.

The shaman learns the road to the villages of the dead, the dangers to avoid as he climbs the World Tree into the different heavens above to meet the gods, the location of the hole by which he may descend into the underworld, the methods of winning the favor of the “mistress of animals” who dwells below the sea and so on. The shaman is the one who understands the mysteries of life and death. Further, he develops forms of music, poetry, and art to express all this.

Because of his ability to transcend the region of being in which his bodily existence is found, the shaman can act like a “spirit” himself. He is said to become invisible, turn himself into an animal,

see ghosts and spirits, perceive things at a great distance and foretell the future, He can also defend the community against demons—that is, “unfavorable spirits”—and all those powers of evil which cause diseases, sterility, scarcity, and disasters of all sorts.

Recovery of the World of the Initiate

Keeping the above description of a premodern religious world-picture in mind, let us now turn to a brief examination of the interpretation of man and the world present in various ancient learning/arcane religion movements.

The first such religious movement to arise, so far as can now be determined, was Orphism in Ionia in the sixth century BCE. Orphism caught up the existing myths and practices of a Dionysian cult that were combined with shamanistic rites borrowed from Thrace and Phrygia. Initiation into the Orphic cult taught persons how to escape from a bodily, worldly existence—an existence that appeared to them (in very un-Greek manner)⁸ as a prison that bound the divine being present in the human soul to a chain of rebirths. The agricultural mystery religions, such as those of Demeter and Cybele, the cults of the grain and yearly vegetation cycle, are in later Hellenistic times joined to similar concerns for the spiritual destiny of the individual, in contrast, and even conflict with the older family and public cults. Christianity perhaps owed its first success outside Palestine to its being taken for an Oriental mystery religion like these.

Successors to the mystery religions were the Gnostics of the first four centuries CE. Gnosticism is concerned with eliminating the ignorance by which a person's present existence is bound to this world. It seeks to teach persons about the divine nature of the soul (a “spark of light,” a part of the pleroma), its fall into an alien world, its imprisonment in the body, and its redemption through their messenger who brings the saving knowledge of its divine origin and destiny. This history of the soul is told through many different and fantastic stories, elements of which are borrowed from various sources such as the Greek, Syrian and Egyptian mysteries, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

In the Middle Ages, this interpretation of the world was renewed by movements of diverse character. For example, there was the Catharian heresy of the 12th century. Perhaps this was a response to a weakening of an indigenous world-view through the spread of a more Roman version of Christianity through those peoples who had hitherto little understanding of basic Christian doctrines. In most of Europe up to the high Middle Ages, Christianity tended to be translated into pagan terms instead of paganism being replaced by Christianity. What appealed to most people was not the theological significance of its doctrines but the magical power of its rites and relics. Catharism took the form of a gnostic like version of Christianity that viewed the human soul as an imprisoned angelic being. It drew upon the ideas of Bogomilism, a Manichean sect still surviving then in Eastern Europe.

Another example was the growth of alchemy, in which certain initiatory patterns have been preserved but applied to experimentation with material substances, that were said to suffer, die and be reborn or transmuted to a new mode of being. However, what occurs externally is repeated within the soul of the experimenter, whose experiments end with his own complete regeneration⁹ as a higher, godlike being. Gaining control over the material beings, he thus gains control, too, over his soul and its destiny.

Mention here should also be made of the establishment of esoteric societies belonging to more modern times, such as the Rosicrucian Order, which arose early in the 17th century. These esoteric societies set the pattern for many imitators to follow, including the late 19th century Theosophical Society, for whom the realization of the essential identity of the human self and the divine was the ultimate goal of life.

Arcane Learning/Ancient Religion Movements Today

Today there are a considerable number of occult sects, secret societies, hermetic or spiritualistic movements, and New Age cults, all seeking an alternative reality, which often takes Manichean forms. Such movements as Scientology, Eckankar, and the UFO cults teach that

men need to know how to relate to higher planes of reality that the messengers or masters bring. This knowledge will raise men to new spiritual heights, help them overcome those forces that are opposed to human good, resolve the conflicts they experience in this world, and confer upon them superhuman abilities.

Spokesmen for this religious world-picture are also to be found within contemporary Christianity. There is, for example, Hal Lindsey, whose views present another and (as they draw upon traditional apocalyptic themes) still different version of this way of seeing reality. Lindsey describes himself as a messenger bringing to the present generation the knowledge of the future as revealed to the great seers of the past—the prophets of Israel. By accepting this message one is initiated into “Christ’s fraternity” and can begin to understand some of the secrets of God, namely, that one will be changed and be freed from the limitations of this bodily existence: hunger, aging, pain, and indeed one will be transferred from this world—which is going from bad to worse—to a better one.¹⁰

Not many of these groups practice initiation ceremonies (“initiation” is often reduced to reading a book or listening to tapes or videos), but obtaining the traditional benefits of initiation would seem to be their almost exclusive function. They offer persons access to “mysteries” in the seemingly well-founded belief that, this is what people are interested in,¹¹ as Paul Twitchell of the Eckankar movement said.

This quest is not limited to religious or religion-like movements. A comprehensive attitude that one adopts toward man and the world in general, such as the anti-Semitism of the present century, may also be an expression of such an interpretation of reality.¹² Further, certain aspects of drug use today may constitute a kind of “cult of experience,” an active search for a mystical reunion with an ultimate source of meaning through the intense personal experience of an alternative reality,¹³ which sometimes explicitly appeals to shamanistic practices.

In the movements described above, the world as viewed in the light of patterns of initiation, or at least, a similar one, appeals to those still seeking in religion a source of orientation in the face of

a world that has grown alien, even if the rites themselves have not always survived as such.

However, these ancient learning/arcane religion movements, display a negativity which was not characteristic of the world-view of the past that these, in their different ways, strive to recover. There is a rejection of the accepted interpretation of the world, that is, of the world of the majority of the members of a given society. The present world is viewed as a false world, a “veil-world” concealing the true world—but a “veil” that has not always been in existence. For the truth, it is believed, has been manifest in the past. This idea of a veil drawn over the true world implies a forgetting, a mistake, or a conspiracy to be overcome, but nothing is implied about what lies behind the veil.

Hence, there is an uncritical willingness to believe in a world that may have little or no relation to the rest of one’s society. One pretends to oneself that one is convinced of this or that. One wraps oneself up in doctrines which fill the lack of genuine conviction.¹⁴ One is sure it must be so just because it cannot be so (that is, by the accepted convictions of one’s society) for one has an unshakable sense of bewilderment. Thus, almost any fantastic story containing certain elements will be believed, and sometimes more than one story at the same time without regard to their coherence. This will to believe does not produce a fanatic but a faddist, and supports a tendency to move from one cult to another—but one is sure each new belief is the answer.

The beliefs of the members of these movements are as such, the beliefs of a minority. Individuals look for help from other sources than the established religion and this world’s leadership, which seem to them incapable of solving their problems or even to be part of those forces in the cosmos opposed to their solution. The sense of one’s alienness, the awakened “homesickness” of the individual becomes the source of a feeling of superiority, of power, and a secret life, which distinguishes one from those who belong to this world.¹⁵ Following from this alienated sense of reality, there are various dualisms to be overcome: body versus spirit; ignorance versus knowledge; weakness versus power; the false versus the true world; a fallen

versus a pure existence; a merely human destiny versus a divine destiny; and so on. But what has a positive significance for members of these movements? First of all, reality is conceived of as being concerned with persons and their activities. What happens anywhere in reality affects human beings, and vice versa. This reality is viewed as comprised of two or more worlds. They are arranged hierarchically according to degrees of enlightenment, the world in which a person finds himself being the lowest, but with communication and movement from world to world being possible. A person may enter these other worlds by obtaining knowledge—often ecstatically—of worlds, gods, and self.

Secondly, the quest for “salvation” in these ancient learning/arcane religion movements has led to the disclosure of a new god: the “self.” The roots of this belief in the self are to be found in the turn of one’s interest towards oneself, one’s past, in the feeling that one is orphan in an alien household, and also in the experience of the shaman who can act as a spirit, transcending the world to which he is bound by bodily existence.

Many myths have been told about this god that deal with such matters as its source, its present condition, its search for its identity, and its realization of its destiny. Their common theme is expressed in vastly differing symbols. However, the theme is always recognizable: to know oneself and to be nothing but this self-knower is the supernatural vocation of the self. One must seek release from the confining/obscuring plane of a bodily, worldly existence that inhibits/opposes such self-knowledge, and being so freed and knowing oneself to be a part of another world, one will rise to a spiritual plane of existence where one has a godlike status. In general, one may say that one is viewed as acquiring superhuman powers. This transformation is made possible by the medium of a messenger or master who brings to the requisite knowledge for one’s advancement and elevation.

The shaman’s initiation and spirit journey probably forms the remote background for the myths of the “self.” These myths retain some spiritual or godly attributes for man while going on to explain why these are not apparent at present.

Though the various ancient learning/arcane religion movements have not themselves the form of a genuinely historical tradition, each being a syncretistically produced “tradition” invented by those lacking an effective religious tradition, this new god has gained a continuing and increasingly wider acceptance extending far beyond its original religious setting, and in our time has come to be a subject investigated in philosophy, literature, and psycho-analytic theory.

Note: This newly edited article was reprinted from the Spring 2007 issue of *the Esoteric Quarterly*.

- 1 Taoism in China seems to represent a parallel but independent and the only ancient nonwestern development like that which is described in this essay.
- 2 W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: MacMillan, 1957), 402.
- 3 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 49. 323.
- 4 R. Harper, *Nostalgia* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1966), 27.
- 5 In Europe and America this has in the past meant borrowing materials from the Near East and from India—the sources of the “older” religions. Cf. R. Ellwood, *Religions and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 217-218.
- 6 I. Opie and P. Opie, *Lore and Language of School Children* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 2, 210.
- 7 M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), xii.
- 8 Cf. D. Lee, *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959), “View of the Self in Greek Culture.”
- 9 M. Eliade, *Rite and Symbols of Initiation*, 123-124.
- 10 H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970, 17, 19, 137, 139, 141, 178-179).
- 11 J. Godwin, *Occult America* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1972), 120.
- 12 J.P. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 17, 70.
- 13 Cf. K. Keniston, “Drugs and the Meaning of Life,” in *Philosophy for a New Generation*, second edition, ed. by Bierman and Gould (New York: MacMillan and Co, 1973). Also, I.

- Gotz, *Psychedelic Teacher* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 28, 33.
- 14 J. Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1958), p. 86. 15. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 50.
- 15 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 50.

Krishna, the Sneak Thief

Vijay Srinath Kanchi

The personality of Krishna has always been an enigma to his devotees and laypeople alike. Illustrious yogis have worshipped him as *Makhan Chor*, the butter thief, and *Ranchod*, or one who ran away from the battlefield. Such strange, seemingly pejorative connotations for a Supreme Lord are unusual. A God or a hero who is worshiped by his followers is always eulogized for the many positive attributes he possesses. Human history bears testimony to the fact that any failures and shortcomings belonging to such personalities are never pointed out or are conveniently buried and forgotten over time. Krishna, however, is an exception. He may be the only hero in human history described with epithets that would appear to make a mockery of him. It is understandable if his detractors and unbelievers raise these points. Yet, even saints and yogis immersed in deep meditation and worship of Krishna have composed *kirtans* (yogic chants) with these seeming denunciations. Why did the saints and yogis include such derogatory titles among Krishna's many names? The answer lies in the symbolic meaning of these titles.

Let us understand the nuances in the epithet *Makhan* (butter) *Chor* (thief). The process of extraction of butter from the milk by a milkmaid is akin to the process of accumulation of mental energies into a ball of focus by a practicing Yogi in his daily spiritual practice. The Yogi during the course of dhyana or meditation arduously musters all his mental faculties (which have the tendency to dissipate), into a ball of focus. Just as a tortoise draws its limbs into its shell, the practicing Yogi seeks to gather his drifting mind from the senses in order to stay focused on the object of his meditation. It is like churning milk and gathering the butterfat (knowledge and love) dispersed within it. However, as the Yogi endeavors to stay focused, he unknowingly slips into mental currents that sway him away from his object of meditation. And suddenly he realizes that the fruit of his laborious effort has been lost! Again, he resolves to detach himself

from diffusing thoughts and sensual perceptions to realize dhyana or perfect presence but again he finds himself lost in thought currents. Again, and again, he strives to achieve and maintain a unified consciousness.

Someone or something continues to steal his hard-earned possession! The cream of the mind that he so diligently sought is stolen or lost. His associative thinking faculty immediately reminds him of the story of naughty Krishna, who stole butter from the houses of Gopikas, the milkmaids. The Yogi's situation is no different from those Gopikas or milkmaids. In both cases, some thief enters the dwelling and steals the hard-earned prize! The Yogi is not disturbed by this; on the contrary, he realizes that Krishna is playing hide and seek. He realizes that the fruit of his labor has been stolen because his unrefined mind is unable to stay focused. His mind is still mischievously fickle, so he fixes his mind on the object of meditation only to find his hard earned cream of effort stolen again! The Yogi sings in praise of the sport of the naughty young thief that divests him of his earnings.

The Yogi is also reminded of Durga, the Supreme Lord's feminine equivalent, praised in the *Durga Saptashati* as the *mahamaya*, the illusory potency of God, which forcefully drags the minds of even the adept yogis into the mire

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of fascination. Yes, a fascinating sport is unfolding in his mental arena; and the Yogi is ecstatic as he recalls that Durga is also the giver of liberation.

Such is the game played between the Krishna and the Yogi. In this tug of war, the Yogi

sometimes manages to achieve great focus. At other times, he is lost; his mind wavers, and he is pulled into the mire of mental currents. Thus, Krishna, the *Ranchod*, relinquishes the battlefield in this tug of war and vanishes from the sight of the Yogi! A beautiful game is on!

Book Review

Freemasonry: A Philosophical Investigation, by **Giuliano Di Bernardo**, Pittsburg, PA: Dorrance Publishing, 2020. Hardcover and Kindle editions 206 pages. List price \$27. Available from online booksellers. ISBN-978-1-6453-0624-5.

Filling a notable gap in the literature on Freemasonry in the English language (the only comparable publication being Leo Apostel's *Freemasonry: A Philosophical Essay* dating from 1985), this slim book (206 pages) is eminently approachable. Seemingly aimed at the general reader, it is concerned with Masonry of today and although it references Freemasonry of the past, it does so as a means to understand the current situation.

Giuliano Di Bernardo held the chair of Philosophy of Science and Logic at the University of Trento in Italy. An active Freemason, Di Bernardo has held several important Masonic roles including serving as Grand Master of the Grand Orient of Italy and Founder and Grand Master of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy. He has also been a lifetime member of the Supreme Council of Italy of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

One of the great strengths of this book is that complex arguments are broken down into logical, manageable sections, each of which is presented in a specific and well-considered order allowing the reader to follow the author's trains of thought clearly. In addition, the consistency with which terminology is explained and then applied aids the non-specialist in grasping the flow of the arguments.

The introductory chapter ("The Origin and Development of Esoteric Thought") serves two main purposes: The first part orients the reader to the philosophical underpinnings of much of what will follow, while the second establishes commonalities between esoteric societies in general and introduces some of the ideas about Freemasonry in particular that will be unpacked in later chapters. The second part also clearly

defines a set of terms that will be used extensively throughout the book, setting up and explaining the author's assertion that Freemasonry is a secular, non-exclusivist, partial anthropology.

It is rare to find a clearly written yet brief summary of the origin and development of Esotericism. Perhaps because this text seems aimed at the general reader, Di Bernardo felt the necessity to preface his discussion with this background. Those readers steeped in the history of Esotericism may find the broad strokes that Di Bernardo paints startling or may mourn the omission of a particular person of whom, or theory of which, they are especially fond, and yet Di Bernardo provides a succinct and logical account. His narrative has three main foci: The traditions of Orphism and the Pythagorean Academy that serves as a foundation to so much of what follows; the transition from the Medieval period (with its focus on faith and religion and dearth of esoteric teachings) to the Renaissance; and in a much more focused third section, the rise and fall of the Illuminati which Di Bernardo calls "the most important esoteric society of modern times."

Clarity of presentation, especially as it relates to a general reader, is clearly important to Di Bernardo, something evident throughout the book and illustrated by the following: When approaching the transition from the Medieval to Renaissance ways of thinking, Di Bernardo provides a brief and balanced summary of the standard historical view of that transition (by way of geographical discoveries, the new science based on the revolutions in thought brought about by Copernicus and Galileo, and the profound changes in religious thought brought about by the Protestant Reformation). Only then does he suggest that there may be other reasons that underpin this transition, introducing the work of Dame Frances Yeats (1899-1981), the English historian who wrote extensively about the influence of Hermeticism on the Renaissance, to support this assertion. This

opens the door for his discussion of Renaissance Neo-Platonism, with the incorporation of the Christian Kabbalah, the spread of Rosicrucianism, the work of John Dee and the movement to promote universal Christian reform.

There is no place in the book where the author makes clear his intended audience or his purpose in writing the text. I have surmised from the above that the audience is a general reader. I am further led to wonder if Di Bernardo expected his readers to be Masons. In the section of the first chapter that presents the rise and fall of the Illuminati, Di Bernardo notes the organization's founder's desire to keep the Illuminati separate from Freemasonry "which at the time was spreading throughout Europe" (p.13). This comment is the first time the author has mentioned Masonry in this survey of the underpinnings of esotericism, and I wondered why no mention had been made of the founding of modern Masonry (which we are told in passing a few pages later was in 1717). A general reader may well not be aware of the history of the society and find the gap in the chronological approach rather startling, whereas Masons are presumably well-aware of the history of the society and would not have needed a brief paragraph locating the historical origin of the organization.

After his broad-ranging introductory chapter, the author proceeds to narrow the focus, discussing Freemasonry itself (with chapters on its conception of man, symbols, morality and constitutions). Each chapter is carefully conceived to provide the background for later discussions and as such the book is not one to be dipped into randomly but rather read chronologically from cover to cover. This can be illustrated by looking at the author's treatment of transcendence. Introduced briefly toward the end of the first chapter, it then forms one of the five elements of the Masonic anthropology discussed in the second chapter and is central to chapter four's discussion of Freemasonry and Morality as well as several chapters in the second half of the book.

Any discussion of Freemasonry naturally comes up against material that may not be discussed outside Masonic circles and Di Bernardo makes no apology for this neither does he shy

away from including the Masonic initiatory secret (in principal) in his narrative as it forms an important component of much of his discussion. This can be seen in the chapter on "The Symbols of Freemasonry" where, after having established the purpose of symbolism (to denote conceptual abstractions or to function allegorically); having examined the erroneous public attitudes toward Freemasonry that are the result of a misunderstanding of the purpose of symbolism; and having suggesting that Masonic symbolism not only provides a common ground for the world-wide organization and a continuity of tradition, but that the content of the initiatory secret cannot be revealed without symbolism; Di Bernardo makes the important observation that revealing the initiatory secret and symbolism of Freemasonry would destroy its very foundation.

The second main section of the book expands upon relationships mentioned briefly in the former chapters: relationships between Freemasonry and religion, between Freemasonry and mysticism, between Freemasonry, positivism and science, and between Freemasonry and the Roman Catholic Church.

Throughout the book, Di Bernardo grounds his discussion in historical fact, often referencing policy documents as a starting point for his exploration. In the chapter on Freemasonry and religion, for example, the discussion is based on the 1985 Declaration issued by the United Grand Lodge of England and entitled *Freemasonry and Religion*, while the chapter on Freemasonry and the Roman Catholic Church examines the position revealed in several documents, including the 1884 encyclical of Pope Leo XII - *Humanum Genus*, the 1983 *Declaration on Masonic Associations* of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), the 1980 *Declaration of the German Episcopal Conference on the Membership of Catholics in Freemasonry*. Not only does this provide a grounding for the philosophical investigation, it also provides the reader with valuable historical context for the discussions.

The wide-ranging scope of Di Bernardo's investigation can be seen in the chapter on

Freemasonry and religion. The grounding in historical discussion allows him to clarify that historically, Freemasonry has been a religion (in that it began by sharing and accepting the Christian God) and that it has also been a syncretism of several religions (inspired by Deism). The latter caused a rift between reactionary (Christian-based) and deist-inspired Masons in England that was resolved with the 1813 *Act of Union*—a document that established the modern position that Freemasonry should not be confused with any substitute for religion. A thorough philosophical investigation of what constitutes a religion and how Masonry is not a religion then begs the question that if Masonry is not a religion, what is Masonic sacredness? This part of the discussion includes an examination of the role of Masonic ritual. An important element of this is the discussion on the Royal Arch ritual—a ritual based on aspects of Christianity that was incorporated into the third-degree ritual by the 1813 *Act of Union*. Di Bernardo asks: do the aspects of Christianity in the Royal Arch ritual function purely symbolically or as expressions of a true Christian ritual?

This book should prove informative and engaging to any reader with an interest in Freemasonry. I am only sorry that the author aimed this at a general reader only and did not apply the standard academic apparatus more rigorously. In a time when inter-disciplinary/cross-disciplinary studies are touted in academia as the way forward, and bearing in mind the important contribution Freemasons have made to all branches of society, I could imagine scholars in any number of fields finding this text useful and the addition of academic apparatus would not have made the text any less approachable for the

general reader. A few examples of the challenges presented will suffice: There is a nice bibliography, but not all the works mentioned in the text appear in the bibliography (for example neither Locke's *Epistola de Tolerantia* nor Montaigne's *De le Liberté de Conscience* both mentioned pp. 27-8, appear in the bibliography). In addition, differentiation between the authorial voice and standard views is not always clear. For example, at the beginning of the second chapter ("The Masonic Conception of Man") the author, having distinguished between esoteric and profane concepts of Freemasonry, declares:

The quintessential esoteric concept in Freemasonry is that of the 'Initiatory Secret.' The fundamental profane concepts are those of Freedom," "Tolerance," "Brotherhood," and "Transcendence." From these are derived all other concepts, such as love, benevolence, charity, respect, solidarity, improvement, oath and the like. (p 23).

This appears to be a standard view which the author proceeds to unpack; however, a few pages later while exploring the differences between brotherhood and equality, the author comments: "This is why I have included brotherhood and not equality among the fundamental concepts of Freemasonry." In saying this he makes clear that what had initially appeared to be a standard view was in fact the author's own idea. However, these sentiments are probably only of concern to academics and should not discourage anyone from reading this important and engaging book.

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Book Review

The Initiate of the Aquarian Age, by Dr. Joseph B. Majdalani, published by the Society of Friends of the White Knowledge, under the Esoteric Science Series, Beirut 2010. Paperback, 112 pages. Available at www.esoteric-lebanon.org and as an e-book from Amazon.com.

The Aquarian Age is the forthcoming epoch in humanity's evolutionary development—following the present age of Pisces, which began with the coming of Christ. Preparation for the dawning of this Golden Age has been popularized in various stereotypes and clichés, along with randomly coined terms related to the “real man,” “free thought,” and “channeling” as “New Age” prerequisites for development. Therefore, a book was needed to end the confusion and expose the higher realities of the esoteric science, which had been previously restricted to the adepts.

The Initiate of the Aquarian Age explains that the Initiates are now teaching the science of the future in private circles. However, they will establish public institutions for the teachings of the invisible aspects in man as delineated in the esoteric science. These teachings will include the tenets of the sacred truth and the Universal Laws governing the life of man as the center of existence. Afterward, they will appear openly amongst the general public for the promulgation and demonstration of proven realities revealing that the Initiates are the scientists of the future “par excellence.”

This book provides unprecedented access to the traits that define the ideal man—the Initiate—as the axis of the Aquarian Age. Though intended for the elect and confirmed aspirants, this book will prove of absorbing interest to various seekers on the inner path of development who seek to improve their lives through the advanced ways of self-progression. However, for those engaged on a mystical or spiritual journey with a group or a guide, *The Initiate of the Aquarian Age* will speak loudly, helping them to develop spiritual discernment and reevaluate

the authenticity and efficacy of the path and guides they follow.

It is worth mentioning in this respect that *The Initiate of the Aquarian Age* addresses “Meditation” as a tool for the Initiate-to-be to tune to the higher levels for the receipt of subtle vibrations, and the taking in of Prana, to nourish both the gross and subtle sheaths. The aspirant may then unfold and awaken the various levels of consciousness and their relative vehicles or subtle components. The book also sheds light on Mantras, another essential tool that varies according to the level and purpose of the meditation practiced. The correct intonation of a Mantra helps the Initiate to attune to the higher planes and illuminated beings in the divine sphere, which propels him towards achieving his mission. All this complements the detailed methodologies provided in the precedent book *Meditation and Contemplation*, by the same author.

The book elucidates how “*the Aquarian Age will prepare the aspirant to quicken his unfoldment and development, since the evolution of the mind, in esoteric affairs, is fully connected with the evolution of the self.*” It stresses that “*self-reliance is mandatory, and self-confidence is imperative, and self-knowledge is one's provision.*” In line with his other publications, Dr. Joseph B. Majdalani directs seekers to the fact that inner change at the level of the individual is the “magical” way to bring about real social and global change by dissolving the negative elements latent within the psyche and attuning with the inner virtues of “the Initiate of the Aquarian Age.” Seekers shall be working towards creating an “Aquarian Age” within themselves, and thus consciously realizing the future “now.”

Neither pedantic nor religious, *The Initiate of the Aquarian Age* humbly depicts a complete (inner and outer) way of life that became necessary with the advent of the Aquarian Age. It delivers to humanity a compelling insight into much that is unknown today, revealing the inner

meanings of the New Age mission, and illustrating the architecture of the “Pyramids of Development.” These “pyramids” are not meant for fanatics or traditionalists, but for the sole purpose of helping prepare seekers for a wider understanding of the past and future, together with the lifetime mission which they may undertake.

The book is charged with needed facts guiding seekers and Initiates-to-be. But it emphasizes that the attainment remains the seeker’s responsibility on the path of self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-development. It emphasizes that *“the more we open our minds and practise right thoughts, the higher we elevate and expand our consciousness. This affirms that mind is consciousness in experimentation, and that the unfoldment of mind consequently leads to the development of consciousness.”*

The author dedicates the book to the Initiate-to-be in the coming Age of Initiation. While previous esoteric publications by Dr. Majdalani delineated the road of self-development, this book is about the road to mastery or the hidden tenets of “Raja Yoga.” As such, the book is foundational for those who would realize their true potential and seek to fulfill it to its greatest extent.

The Initiate of the Aquarian Age was translated from English into Bulgarian. It was also published in English and Arabic by the same author, along with more than seventy other esoteric books (in eight languages) published by the Society of Friends of the White Knowledge. This futuristic masterpiece consists of instructive speeches and illuminating teachings that reveal the inner truths of the Aquarian Age and its Initiates, together with the prerequisites for effective advancement in self-development and self-realization.

The author has applied and verified the far-reaching messages in this book to his own life, for only those who have consistently applied the qualities of the Initiate to themselves can attune to the heartstrings of humanity.

While higher esoteric revelations continue to be transmitted by word of mouth to the worthy, readers should attempt to attune their understanding with the heartthrobs of *The Initiate of the Aquarian Age* and meditate on the unspoken words concealed between the lines to be at one with the Great Masters of Wisdom, ever striving to elevate humanity as their only mission on Earth.

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