

Sophia: the Gnostic Heritage

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Summary

This article presents a brief history of Sophia, best known of the divine feminine individualities of the West. Under her Hebrew name, *Chokmah*, Sophia emerged in late biblical times. But it was the Gnostics of the early Christian era who created the Sophia we recognize today. Sophia played a small but significant role in western mainstream Christianity and a much larger role in Eastern Orthodoxy. Russian Orthodox theologians not only had personal experiences of Sophia but also shared important insights into how she related to the Trinity and to the “invisible Church” that transcends historical Christianity. The article concludes with some remarks about the relevance of Sophia in modern spirituality.

Background

A masculine God dominates Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But female deities were popular in many ancient cultures, and they survive in the religions of Asia and the Pacific, and in the indigenous religions of the Americas. A popular theory is that the Great Mother once ruled supreme in much of the world but was overthrown when Indo-European tribes invaded the Middle East in the third millennium BCE. Allegedly the invaders brought with them a masculine warrior god, or several warrior gods, who eventually evolved into the Deity of the Abrahamic religions.¹

Whether or not there was once a supreme feminine deity—and the issue continues to be debated—there is no doubt that feminine deities were more common in the West in antiquity than they became during the 2,000 years of the Common Era. In recent decades resistance has increased not only among feminist theologians but also more generally to the convention that God is necessarily masculine and must be referred to in terms such as “He,” “Fa-

ther,” “Lord,” and so forth. Resistance has also increased to the custom of envisioning God in any kind of anthropomorphic terms.² Yet anthropomorphism is comforting to many people, and the concept of a powerful Goddess, complementing or even replacing the traditional masculine God, resonates with large numbers of thinking people.

Of all the anthropomorphized, feminine deities discussed today, Sophia is the most popular in the West, to judge by the literature of feminist theology, women’s studies, and New Age culture. The purpose of this article, then, is to present a brief review of the history and contemporary relevance of Sophia in western spirituality. Many questions remain concerning how Sophia can be reconciled with traditional Christian doctrine. However, opportunities also exist to integrate Sophia more firmly into the Trans-Himalayan teachings.

Sophia in Biblical Times

The Greek word for “Wisdom” is *Sophia*. But the story of Sophia extends back into biblical Judaism, where she was known by the Hebrew name *Chokmah*. *Chokmah* had a long history in the Old Testament, starting out simply as the quality or virtue of wisdom and gradually approaching the status of a divine individuality. She had a close relationship with the masculine Yahweh, even participating

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in the creation. In an often-quoted passage from *Proverbs* Chokmah addressed the reader:

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: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as *one brought up with him*: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him.³

The next chapter in *Proverbs* linked Chokmah/Sophia with the proto-Eucharist. She invited the townspeople to her feast, saying: “Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.”⁴

By the late biblical era Sophia’s rise to divine status had gained considerable momentum. In *Wisdom of Solomon*, probably written in the second century BCE, she—now Sophia, because the book was written in Greek—had become an object of desire, even worship: “Wisdom is bright and unfading... she is easily seen by those who love her, and found by those who search for her.”⁵ Perhaps the most significant passage from the same book is:

I loved her and sought after her from my youth up,
And I undertook to make her my bride,
And I fell in love with her beauty.
She glorifies her high birth in living with God,
For the Lord of all loves her.
For she is initiated into the knowledge of God,
And is a searcher of his works.

But if the possession of wealth is to be desired in life,
What is richer than wisdom, which operates everything?⁶

Jewish reverence for Sophia was continuing to develop at the turn of the Common Era. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, referred to her as the “Daughter of God.”⁷ Elsewhere, he reaffirmed her 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 with whom God uniting... became the father of creation. And this 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 [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.⁸

Sophia in Gnostic Christianity

Sophia was greatly revered among Gnostic Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era. Gnosticism’s relationship with nascent mainstream Christianity has been discussed at length elsewhere.⁹ Suffice it to say that Gnosticism thrived for some three centuries before succumbing to its own organizational weaknesses and relentless repression by the mainstream church.

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.’”¹⁰ She is also mentioned in the *Book of Enoch* (*1 Enoch*) and the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* (*2 Enoch*).¹¹ The latter presents a creation story in which God proclaimed: “On the sixth day I ordered My Wisdom to make man of seven substances... and I made [Sophia] a ruler to

rule upon the earth, and to have My wisdom.”¹² In *I 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.”¹³

The Sophia of *I 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. According to the *Apocryphon of John*, Sophia’s fall stemmed from her desire “to bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit... without her consort, and without his consideration.” She bore a son, Yaldabaoth, who “was imperfect and different from her appearance.”¹⁴ In due course the misshapen Yaldabaoth—usually assumed to have been the Hellenic Demiurge—was tricked into breathing life into man. However the evil powers imprisoned man in a physical body from which he was unable to escape.¹⁵ Sophia’s fall may have been linked to the fall of Adam or the expulsion of Lucifer and his fellow angels from heaven; or it may have symbolized the disintegration of the ancient world under the pressure of Roman conquest.

The most elaborate account of Sophia’s fall and eventual rescue is found in the *Pistis Sophia*.¹⁶ There, she fell into the depths and, for a long time, was held captive. *Pistis* is usually translated as “faith” or “faithful;” but another meaning, more appropriate in the circumstances, would be “hostage.”¹⁷ Sophia was tormented by the twelve *archons* of the zodiac. The archons stripped away her power and light, whereupon Sophia exclaimed: “I cried out for help, and 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.”¹⁸ In due course, Sophia offered 13

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“repentances” to appease the archons. The archons ignored her, but her plight eventually came to the notice of Christ, and he sent the archangels Michael and Gabriel to rescue her. Their first attempt failed, but Christ sent them

back, charging the archangels to “guide the Sophia in all the places of the chaos until they bring her up, and [to] raise her upon their hands, lest her feet touch the darkness below, and those of the darkness seize her.”¹⁹ When Sophia was finally escorted back to the heaven-world “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.”²⁰

In the *Pistis Sophia*, the story of Sophia’s fall and rescue emerges from a long series of allegorical dialogues between the risen Jesus and his disciples. Although Sophia was obviously the main character in the story, Mary Magdalene featured prominently in the dialogues, and a strong connection seemed to emerge between the two. Mary was the most vocal participant in the ongoing dialogue between Jesus and his disciples.²¹ In fact Peter complained: “My Lord, we are not able to suffer this woman who takes the opportunity from us, and does not allow anyone of us to speak, but she speaks many times.”²² But the *Pistis* Jesus praised Mary for her participation, emphasizing her status among the apostles and promising rewards for her insights. Connections between Sophia and Mary Magdalene appear elsewhere. A Coptic psalm by the Manichean poet Heracleides identified Mary as the “Spirit of Wisdom.”²³

Interesting parallels can also be drawn among the Gnostic Sophia, the Shekinah of esoteric Judaism,²⁴ and the woman mentioned in Chapter 12 of *Revelation*. After her redemption,

Sophia became the bride of Christ. *Eugnostos the Blessed* reported: “Now the Son of Man harmonized with Sophia, his consort, and revealed a great androgynous light.”²⁵ The Shekinah, the indwelling Glory of God, was exiled in the wilderness, eventually to be rescued and wedded to the Holy One.²⁶ And in *Revelation*: “[T]he woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.”²⁷ Mainstream Christianity has customarily linked the woman in the wilderness with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Valentinus (c.100–c.160), one of the best-known Gnostic writers,²⁸ referred to Sophia’s rightful home, the heaven-world, as the *Pleroma*, a Greek word that conveys the notion of “fullness.” The *Pleroma* overlaps in meaning with the traditional Christian heaven, but Gnosticism was not satisfied with a simple two-layer, heaven-earth model. Rather, the expanse of reality was divided into a series of planes. Typical cosmological models involved seven or eight planes; but the second-century Syrian Gnostic Basilides envisioned 365, one for each day of the cosmic year.

Regardless of how many planes there were, each had unique properties and was inhabited by its own spiritual entities. The entities might be benevolent or malevolent, though at the higher levels they tended to be mostly benevolent. Moreover, the entities often came in male-female pairs.²⁹ According to Basilides the inhabitants of the *Pleroma* included the *Logos* (“the Word”) and *Sophia* (“Wisdom”).³⁰ As the fourth Gospel makes clear, the *Logos* was Christ. The suggestion that the *Logos* and *Sophia* might be complementary divine entities is of the utmost importance and will be discussed further in this article. Meanwhile it should be noted that the Gnostics, like the Nestorians of the fifth century, distinguished the divine Christ from the human Jesus.³¹ Only Jesus died on the cross; the divine Christ could never die.

In their desire to suppress Gnosticism, the church fathers wrote numerous tracts attacking its teachings. In a polemical tract attacking Valentinus, Tertullian of Carthage (c.160–

c.220) scorned Gnostic accounts of the fall of Sophia: “After her vain endeavors, and the disappointment of her hope, she was, I suppose, disfigured with paleness and emaciation, and that neglect of her beauty which was natural to one who was deploring the denial of the Father—an affliction which was no less painful than his loss.”³²

The Neoplatonists of the third century CE onward tended to distance themselves from the Gnostics, despite having common roots. Nevertheless, both Plotinus (c.204–270), usually regarded as the “father” of Neoplatonism, and his younger contemporary, Porphyry, mentioned *Sophia* in their comments on Gnostic teachings.³³

Sophia in Mainstream Christianity

Sophia played a smaller, but still significant role, in mainstream Christianity. Theophilus, second-century bishop of Antioch, who is credited with coining the term “Trinity,” identified its three aspects as *Theos*, *Logos* and *Sophia*.³⁴ A century later, Paul of Samosata, also bishop of Antioch, did likewise. However, institutional Christianity was destined not to embrace *Sophia* in that role.³⁵ In his search for an appropriate third person of the Trinity, Athenagoras of Athens turned instead to the Hebrew/Zoroastrian Holy Spirit. Even then, there was still a chance that feminine characteristics would be retained. The Holy Spirit was known in biblical Judaism as the *Ruach* (“spirit” or “breath”). Grammatically, *Ruach* is a feminine noun, and church fathers Origen and Jerome both quoted the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, where the Holy Spirit is referred to as the “Mother.”³⁶ Valentinus also identified the Holy Spirit as God the Mother and sought to relate the virgin birth to a feminine Holy Spirit rather than to Mary.³⁷ Unfortunately, when the New Testament was compiled in Greek, “Holy Spirit” was rendered by the neuter noun *Pneuma*.³⁸ Given their growing misogyny, it is unlikely that the church fathers were disappointed when attempts to depict the Holy Spirit as feminine came to an end.

Notions of the sacred feminine occupied the thoughts of many people in the Middle Ages.

We need only think of the troubadours and Beatrice in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Another individual who entertained such thoughts was Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the famous French abbot. Among much else, he is considered father of the Western Marian cult. For one of his sermons, Bernard turned to the book of *Proverbs*: “Wisdom hath builded her house she hath hewn out her seven pillars.”³⁹ However, he stopped short of actually identifying “Wisdom” (Latin: *Sapientia*) as a feminine entity;⁴⁰ Wisdom to him “was none other than Christ Himself.” The identification of Sophia with Christ was not altogether without precedent. When the Emperor Justinian saw the newly constructed basilica of *Hagia Sophia* (“Saint Sophia”) in Constantinople, he is reported to have exclaimed, in a reference to Sophia's biblical origins: “Solomon, I have outdone thee.” However, despite the fact that “Sophia” is grammatically feminine, the basilica was dedicated to Christ.

Bernard's close contemporary and friend, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), wrote a beautiful poem about Sophia—again in her Latin form *Sapientia*:

O power of Wisdom!
 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!⁴¹

About 150 years later, an alchemical text, *Aurora Consurgens*, gained considerable popularity. Referring to Sophia/Sapientia, it declared: “[H]er fruit is more precious than all the riches of this world, and all the things that are desired are not to be compared with her... She is the tree of life.”⁴² Moreover her qualities were: “power, honor, strength, and dominion.”⁴³ The text did not identify its author, but many scholars believe it was none other than Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), often considered the greatest Christian theologian of the West. Near the end of his life Aquinas had a profound mystical experience that led him to question much of what he had written earlier.

If in fact the statements quoted above were made by Aquinas, they would be remarkable words for a cleric schooled in the patriarchal tradition.

An important contribution was made by the medieval anchorite Julian of Norwich (c.1342–1416).⁴⁴ During her long seclusion in a tiny cell in Norwich, England, she claimed to have had 16 visions of Christ, which formed the inspiration for a number of classic mystical texts, including *Revelations of Divine Love*. Interestingly, she referred to God as “our Mother.”⁴⁵ But she did not explicitly speak of Sophia.

Someone who did speak explicitly of Sophia was the Lutheran mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), who lived in Silesia in what is now Poland. Böhme's formal education was limited, but he studied medicine, the Kabbalah, and the Hermetic arts. He may also have read the works of Meister Eckhart with whom he shared important beliefs.

Reflecting his Kabbalistic influence, Böhme explored the human and cosmic aspects of gender: “[T]he masculine principle is predominantly anthropomorphic and creative, whereas the feminine principle is predominantly cosmic and birth-giving.”⁴⁶ Echoing a theory usually attributed to Plato's Aristophanes, Böhme asserted that Adam initially was androgynous and virginal.⁴⁷ That virginity was embodied in Sophia: “not a female, but a chasteness and purity without a blemish.”⁴⁸ Adam lost his primeval virginity through the fall, and Sophia's place was taken by his earthly companion Eve. Thereafter man remained in an incomplete state, yearning for his primeval wholeness. The solution lay not in withdrawal into ascetic celibacy, as the church urged, but in a spiritual reunion of the masculine and feminine; through woman man could once again find his primeval Sophia.⁴⁹ The masculine-feminine tension was just one expression of the fundamental juxtaposition and resolution of pairs of opposites.⁵⁰ The tension might be the source of much suffering, but it provided an environment in which our spiritual potential could be realized.

Böhme identified Sophia with the Trinity; but, like the Gnostics, he 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.”⁵¹

Englishwoman Jane Ward Lead (1624–1704), who was influenced by Jakob Böhme, had several visions. In one vision, a woman 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.”⁵² Speculations about a female messiah occupied the Guglielmites of the 13th century⁵³ as well as the 18th-century Shaker “Mother” Ann Lee. The Frenchman “Père” Barthelemy Enfantin, who was born 12 years after Lee’s death, predicted that he would meet a female messiah and mother of a new savior, though it is not recorded whether he did.

Sophia in Eastern Orthodox Christianity

Sophia has always been revered in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. “Sophia” is not always considered to be a feminine personage, and we saw that the basilica of *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople was dedicated to Christ. Nevertheless, the feminine Sophia has found special resonance in the Russian Orthodox Church. Numerous churches are dedicated to St. Sophia, particularly in Russia, and she appears in many icons. The icon in the cathedral at Novgorod is one of the best known.⁵⁴ The Russian Orthodox liturgy for the feast of the Assumption 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.”⁵⁵

Jakob Böhme’s work influenced the Russian philosopher and poet Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov (1853–1900).⁵⁶ Solovyov had three visions of Sophia, the first during Mass on Ascension Day, when he was nine years old. A poem he wrote many years later recalled 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.⁵⁷

Whereas the *Pistis Sophia* linked Sophia with Mary Magdalene, the language of Solovyov’s poem links her to Mary, the mother of Jesus.⁵⁸

Solovyov’s second encounter with Sophia was in the British Museum. As before, he saw her in blue and gold. “Her face shone before me. But Her face alone. And that instant was a long happiness.”⁵⁹ The third was in the Egyptian desert, where 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.”⁶⁰ Solovyov’s sensitive poetry blended his devotion to Sophia with romantic yearnings of unrequited love, and again we can see connections with the troubadours and Dante’s 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. He too 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 creation and is perceived in creation in her concrete appearances as the ideal person of man, as his Guardian Angel.”⁶¹

Eastern Orthodox theologians saw in Sophia a model of the invisible church, the *Ekklesia*.⁶² The *Ekklesia*, in that context, is not the Christianity we know, the imperfect church struggling through history, but the *Church*: a perfect Platonic Form. Pavel Florensky spoke of the Mystical Church, “the unifying, preexistent, heavenly, mystical form,” contrasting it with the “historical church.” Russian Orthodox priest Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871–1944) took up the same theme. “The Church in the world,” he wrote, “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 twofold 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.”⁶³

Sergei Bulgakov also saw a close association between Sophia and the Glory of God, which traditionally was associated more closely with the Shekinah of Judaic tradition.⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ Commenting on the passage in *Proverbs*, cited earlier in this article, in which Chokmah/Sophia was with God “from the beginning,” Bulgakov identified Sophia as the “prototype of creation.”⁶⁶ Correspondingly, he saw creation—and particularly humanity—as the “creaturely Sophia,” the actualization of that prototype.⁶⁷

If Sophia is a divine feminine individuality, how does she relate to the Trinity? We have already seen that Theophilus of Antioch and

Paul of Samosata identified Sophia as the third person of the Trinity. And Böhme identified her with the entire Trinity. Florensky identified Sophia as a “nonsubstantial” fourth person of the Trinity:

Sophia takes part in the life of the Trihypostatic Divinity, enters into the interior of the Trinity, and enters into communion with Divine Love. Since Sophia is a *fourth*, creaturely, and therefore nonsubstantial Person, she does not “form” a Divine Unity.... As the fourth Person, she, by God’s condescension (but in no way by her own nature!), introduces a distinction in relation to herself in the providential activity of the Hypostases of the Trinity.⁶⁸

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.”⁶⁹

While Pavel Florensky was executed in a Soviet purge, Sergei Bulgakov managed to escape to the West. But Bulgakov was criticized by the Orthodox Church hierarchy on the grounds that his Sophiology undermined trinitarian doctrine. Forced to distance himself from Florensky’s views, he retreated to the position that Sophia is the “nonhypostatic essence” of God. Since the divine essence is shared by all three hypostases, Sophia is neither a fourth hypostasis nor an expression of any one of them to the exclusion of the others: “The three persons... have one life in common, that is, one Oursia [divine essence], one Sophia.”⁷⁰ 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.”⁷¹ Interestingly, Bulgakov saw

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Sophia, rather than the Logos, as the mediator between God and the world, arguing that “the hypostasis of the Logos cannot provide such a unifying principle.”⁷²

Eastern Orthodox teachers speak of *theosis*, or “deification.”⁷³ Theosis, the spiritual goal of the great saints, is a process of enlightenment brought about by the agency of divine energy; Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor is regarded as the supreme example. We can envision, as the Russian theologians did, global theosis as the spiritual goal of Christianity—perhaps even the whole of humanity. For Sergei Bulgakov that global theosis was the final manifestation of Sophia, the Bride of Christ, and the implications for a new appreciation of the Divine Feminine are obvious. Through our individual and collective spiritual growth, perhaps we can glimpse the deification of the church and humanity and the manifestation of Sophia on earth.

Concluding Remarks

According to legend, Pythagoras coined the term “philosophy” when he exclaimed “I love wisdom [*sophia*]”—though wags have long suggested that he was referring to a woman of his affections. Be that as it may, “Wisdom” is a feminine noun in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and other languages, and its personification may have been inevitable. As we have seen, that personification was taken to great heights in late-biblical Judaism, in the Gnosticism of the early centuries of the Common Era, and in Russian Orthodox theology in the 19th and 20th centuries. Sophia/Sapientia made significant but less prominent inroads into mainstream western Christianity. Meanwhile, “Theosophy” and “Anthroposophy” are other familiar words which incorporate *sophia*, and much has been written about their significance.⁷⁴

By the latter part of the 20th century Sophia had been co-opted by feminist theologians seeking a goddess. In the process “Sophia” became a catch-phrase—one selling hundreds of books, tapes and DVDs—for all things feminine and divine. She now absorbs not only Chokmah and the Shekinah but also the Greek Athena and the Buddhist Prajnaparamita

and Kuan-Yin. Yet if Sophia has lost her specific identity, humanity has gained insights into its own nature, including the masculine-feminine balance that Jakob Böhme urged that we re-establish within ourselves. To quote Carol Parrish-Harra:

Who is this numinous Sophia? She is Mother Wisdom, come to guide us home... [Sophia] dances through my life, peeks through the windows of my mind, whispers words of wisdom, laughing and playing... To follow Sophia is the opportunity of our time... She leads to dynamic adventure requiring that we face our fears, learn to love, and dare to move more fully toward our potential.⁷⁵

That said, to remain faithful to the traditional understanding of Sophia may be more rewarding. Even in her traditional form she is a powerful figure. She could appear to Solovyov in human form. She serves a cosmic role, perhaps subsuming the Trinity. And she serves as a symbol for the overarching Ekklesia. Elsewhere,⁷⁶ this author has suggested that the Ekklesia can provide a model of the New World Religion discussed by Alice Bailey.⁷⁷ “Sophia in process of becoming,” to use Bulgakov’s phrase, can extend beyond Christianity. Understanding her role, as it pertains to the new religion, could be especially valuable, and opportunities for further work in this area clearly exist.

For the moment, perhaps, Sophia’s role as the Bride of the Logos is the most evocative. Considering Sophia to be a feminine complement to Christ can give new meaning to the Christian message. It can alleviate stereotypes of Christianity as a patriarchal religion. It can also open up new avenues for bringing Christianity into closer contact with other esoteric systems, like the Kabbalah, which stress gender balance at all levels of reality.

Certainly, the whole concept of Sophia raises difficult theological issues. Reconciling Sophia with trinitarian doctrine would be as much a concern for Western religious authorities as it was for theologians in the East. Mainstream theologians in West and East have even been reluctant to revisit notions of a dis-

inction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ—though esoteric Christianity leans heavily in that direction.⁷⁸ The suggestion that Sophia in some way manifested in, or overshadowed, a human being, even someone of the status of Mary of Nazareth, would offend many theologians. Perhaps Theosophical research on the World Mother might help in that regard.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the popular myth that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife may betray a still dim, but growing, realization of a cosmic marriage between the divine Christ and Sophia. Clearly, more work needs to be done in all these areas. The effort would be challenging, but it could provide important new insights.

¹ See for example Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman*, Dorset Press, 1976, especially ch. 4. See also: Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1948, and Monica Sjöö & Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Harper & Row, 1975.

² For example, Paul Tillich proposed that God should be envisioned as the "Ground of Being." See his *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 240.

³ *Proverbs* 8:22-30. Emphasis added. The Hebrew *aman*, which is rendered here as "one brought up with him," can also be translated as "trusted confidant," even "nurse." However, some Bibles reduce *aman* to "a master worker" or "architect," difficult to reconcile with "delight," which follows. Others go in the other direction and use "darling." Unless stated otherwise, all biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version.

⁴ *Proverbs* 9:5.

⁵ *Wisdom of Solomon* 6:12 (transl: E. Goodspeed), *The Apocrypha*, Random House, 1959, p. 188. The King James Bible has "Wisdom is glorious."

⁶ *Wisdom of Solomon* 8:2-5, p. 192.

⁷ Philo Judaeus, *De Fuga et Inventione*, IX, 52 (transl: C. Yonge), Bohn, 1854-1890.

⁸ Philo Judaeus, *De Ebrietate*, VIII, (transl: C. Yonge), Bohn, 1854-1890.

⁹ John F. Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, Xlibris, 2007, vol. 1, pp. 255-284.

¹⁰ *Eugnostos the Blessed*. III, 80, James M. Robinson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Library*, Revised Edition, Harper-San Francisco, 1988, p. 231.

¹¹ 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. The authors—and there were probably more than one—were not the biblical Enoch, the grandfather of Noah; but they describe Enoch's visions. The authors were probably Hellenic Jews writing somewhere between 200 BCE and 100 CE. The books seem to have been written in a mixture of Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek.

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

¹³ *The Book of Enoch*, XLII:1-2 (transl: R. Charles), The Book Tree, 1917/1999, p. 61.

¹⁴ *Apocryphon of John*, II:9-11 (transl: F. Wisse), James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Revised version. HarperCollins, 1988.

¹⁵ Frederick Wisse, Introduction to *The Apocryphon of John*, James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Revised version, HarperCollins, 1988, p. 104.

¹⁶ Violet MacDermot, Introduction to *The Fall of Sophia*, Lindisfarne Books, 2001, pp. 22-25. Two manuscripts of the *Pistis Sophia* were acquired on the Egyptian antiquities market in 1770 or thereabouts.

¹⁷ In Greco-Roman society a hostage might be held to guarantee performance of a contract: i.e., to guarantee "good faith."

¹⁸ "Pistis Sophia" book 1, § 32 (transl: V. MacDermot), *The Fall of Sophia*, Lindisfarne Books, 2001, p. 122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, book 2, § 73, p. 166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, book 2, § 81, p. 174. The pairs of aeons can be compared to the sephiroth on the outer pillars of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

²¹ As Susan Haskins pointed out, Mary Magdalene asked 39 of the 46 questions in the first two books of the *Pistis Sophia*. See her *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, Riverhead Books, 1993, p. 47.

²² *Ibid.*, § 36, p. 125.

²³ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, p. 49.

²⁴ Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, vol. 1, p. 268.

²⁵ *Eugnostos the Blessed*, III, 3, 81, p. 218.

²⁶ John F. Nash, "The Shekinah: the Indwelling Glory of God," *Esoteric Quarterly*, Summer 2005, pp. 33-40.

²⁷ *Revelation* 12:6.

- ²⁸ Valentinus was educated in Alexandria, but in 136 CE he moved to Rome and remained there for 25 years.
- ²⁹ The polar entities can be compared to the *sephiroth* on the outer pillars of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.
- ³⁰ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis*, (transl: R. Wilson), Harper, 1977/1984, p. 311.
- ³¹ The Nestorian heresy, which claimed that “Jesus Christ” was two persons and two natures, was condemned by the First Council of Ephesus in 431. Official Christian doctrine, from then on, insisted that Jesus Christ was one person with two natures, human and divine. John Nestorius, after whom the heresy was named, may not in fact have held the “two person” belief.
- ³² Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians*, 10, (transl: A. Roberts), Gnostic Society Library.
- ³³ See for example Plotinus, *Enneads*, ninth tractate, §10. Source: Internet Sacred Text Archive
- ³⁴ Theophilus of Antioch, *Epistle to Autolychum*, II, 15, Theophilus used the term *trias* (Greek, “number 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.
- ³⁵ Sophia managed to survive in the East, though not always in connection with the Third Person of the Trinity. In the West the only vestige of the Trinity’s sophianic origins is a vague awareness that wisdom, in its everyday sense, flows from the Holy Spirit.
- ³⁶ See for example: Robert J. Miller (ed.), *The Complete Gospels*, HarperCollins, 1992, pp. 428-433. No complete manuscript of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* survives.
- ³⁷ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, Ballantine Books, 1993, p. 100.
- ³⁸ See for example: *Acts 2:4*.
- ³⁹ *Proverbs 9:1*.
- ⁴⁰ Bernard, who wrote in Latin, would have used *Sapientia*, which, like the Hebrew *Chokmah* and the Greek *Sophia*, is a feminine noun.
- ⁴¹ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine*, Univ. of California Press, 1978, p. 64. See also Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970, p. 157.
- ⁴² Thomas Aquinas (attributed to), *Aurora Con-surgens*, I: 20-25, (transl: Marie-Louise von Franz.), Inner City Books, 2000, p. 35.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, V: 13, pp. 53-55.
- ⁴⁴ “Julian’s” real name is not known.
- ⁴⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (Long Text), ch. 52, Paulist Press, 1978, p. 279.
- ⁴⁶ Jakob Böhme, *The Threefold Life of Man*, (transl: S. Janos), Quoted in: N. Berdyaev, *Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme*, etude II, 1930, pp. 34-62.
- ⁴⁷ In Plato’s *Symposium* Aristophanes declared that man was originally androgynous but was cut in two by Zeus to curb his pride. Ever since, man has sought his female half, and vice versa.
- ⁴⁸ Böhme, *The Threefold Life of Man*, pp. 34-62. See also Böhme’s *Mysterium Magnum*. London, 1654, chapter 18.
- ⁴⁹ For a discussion of Böhme’s teachings on gender and their influence on William Blake see: Hirst, *Hidden Riches*, pp. 92-96.
- ⁵⁰ The pairs of opposites also include good and evil. For a discussion of the opposites as they are addressed in the Kabbalah see John F. Nash, “Duality, Good and Evil, and the Approach to Harmony,” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Fall 2004, pp. 15-26.
- ⁵¹ Jakob Boehme, *Confessions* (transl: W. Scott Palmer), Harper and Bros., 1954, p. 97.
- ⁵² Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens*, Journal Entries: 1670-1675, Bradford, 1696. Lead was often spelled “Leade.” See also Julie Hirst, “The Divine Ark: Jane Lead’s Vision of the Second Noah’s Ark,” *Esoterica*, vol. VI, pp. 16-25.
- ⁵³ The Guglielmites of Milan, Italy, formed a small, close-knit sect devoted to “St. Guglielma” (d. 1282), a Cistercian oblate. Members of the sect were executed by the Inquisition in 1300.
- ⁵⁴ See for example Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation*, Weiser Books, 1998, Plate 17.
- ⁵⁵ Source: Sophia Foundation of North America. Translated from Old Slavonic by Natalia Bonetskaya.
- ⁵⁶ Solovyov inspired the character Alyosha in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.
- ⁵⁷ Vladimir Solovyov, “The Three Meetings,” Quoted in Eugenia Gourvitch, *Vladimir Solovyov: the Man and the Prophet*, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992, p. 25.
- ⁵⁸ Rudolf Steiner spoke of Mary as the “Virgin Sophia.” See his *Gospel of St. John*, Anthroposophic Press, 1908/1940, p. 191.
- ⁵⁹ Solovyov, “The Three Meetings.” p. 32.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 34, 36.
- ⁶¹ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth* (transl: B. Jakim), Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 239. Emphasis in original. Florensky’s Sophiological doctrines are interest-

- ing since he wrote at length about deep male friendships that express both *agape* and *eros*.
- ⁶² John F. Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, vol. 2, pp. 280-283.
- ⁶³ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God*, Lindisfarne Press, 1993, pp. 138-139.
- ⁶⁴ See note 26.
- ⁶⁵ Bulgakov, *Sophia*, p. 50.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65..
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252. Emphasis and parenthetical comment in original. Eastern Orthodox theologians tend to use “hypostasis” rather than “person” of the Trinity.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253. Emphasis in original
- ⁷⁰ Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God* (transl. P. Thompson *et al.*), Lindisfarne Press, 1993, pp. 35-37.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- ⁷³ 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*, Penguin Books, 1963/1977, pp. 33-34.
- ⁷⁴ See for example Christopher Bamford, Introduction to Rudolf Steiner, *Isis, Mary, Sophia*, SteinerBooks, 2003, pp. 7-44.
- ⁷⁵ Carol Parrish-Harra, *Sophia Sutras: Introducing Mother Wisdom*, Sparrow Hawk Press, 2006, p. 271.
- ⁷⁶ John F. Nash, “Festival of Goodwill: the New World Religion,” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Summer 2009, pp. 76-80.
- ⁷⁷ See for example Alice A. Bailey, *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy*, Lucis Publishing Co., 1957, pp. 393ff.
- ⁷⁸ See for example: Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, First Church of Christ Scientist, 1875, pp. 333, p. 336; Daniel Andreev, *Rose of the World*, 1.3, Daniel Andreev Charity Foundation, 1997; Annie W. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, Theosophical Publishing House, 1914/1953, p. 89; Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation: Human and Solar*, Lucis Publishing Company, 1922, pp. 43-44.
- ⁷⁹ John F. Nash, “The World Mother: Teachings of Helena Roerich and Geoffrey Hodson,” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Winter 2006, pp. 35-46.