

## An Overview of Sophiology

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When I was a university chaplain, I once asked my students, “If you wanted wise advice, who would you ask first? A philosophy professor or your granny?” You can imagine what the answer was. Admittedly, I got a minority report from one who said her granny was daft. And of course, if your granny were Prof. Mary Midgeley...

But we know what this is about. People who have the wisdom of experience, who listen, who have time for you, who connect; versus people who know how to argue and deduce but not how to connect.

Of course, the professor in C.S. Lewis’s classic children’s novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is a wise man. He does connect: he comes to Lucy’s rescue when her siblings don’t believe she really went into a magical country through the back of the wardrobe (**figure 1**).

“Logic!” said the Professor half to himself. “Why don’t they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn’t tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad. For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

And Lucy is vindicated. And the Professor is wise because he has an open mind. He is a solid logician, all the more so because he draws conclusion from the actual data, rather than shoehorning what he hears into a materialist grid which excludes the possibility of invisible or hidden realities. And he does so not with cold abstraction, but with love – a love expressed both in his standing up for Lucy and gently rebuking her siblings, for their sake, not just for hers.

It’s not an accident that he’s like this. The prequel novel, *The Magician’s Nephew*, which became the first of the Narnia Chronicles, tells the story of the Professor’s boyhood as Digory Kirke. Although the inspiration is probably Lewis’ own tutor, Prof. Kirkpatrick, the name is significant. Digory may mean “lost one”, and of course kirk is the Scots for church, so Digory could be the “lost church”. His Uncle Andrew is mad, bad and dangerous to know. Uncle

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Fontana Lions, 1980 [1950]), p. 47.

Andrew carries out magical experiments in order to gain knowledge and power for himself. He is an example of an unwise man – he has knowledge, but no idea how to love.

So he tricks Digory and his friend Polly, and they end up in a magical land. The result is the awakening of the sleeping witch queen Jadis, and chaos ensues. But something good comes of it. Digory obeys the words of the poem which say, “Take of my fruit for others or forbear”, resisting the temptation to eat it, and also resisting the lies of the Witch who promises him eternal youth and instant travel to his mother’s bedside – if only he eats the fruit. Instead Digory obeys Aslan the Lion and gives up the fruit as he has been commanded. The Christian allegory here is obvious. The apple turns into a new tree, and now Aslan tells him to take an apple from it. Digory does so, is sent back to this world by Aslan, gives the apple to his terminally ill mother, and she recovers. He plants the pips, which grow into a tree. Years later the tree blows down in a storm, and Digory has it made into a wardrobe...

Unlike the witch and Uncle Andrew, whose knowledge is about self-aggrandisement and, therefore, is distorted by lies, Digory has attained wisdom – he received knowledge, and passed it on with sacrificial love. His knowledge is therefore true.

Apart from being a children’s author, C.S. Lewis is best remembered as a popular apologist for Christianity: he wrote *Mere Christianity* and broadcast frequently on the radio. But his day job was being a scholar of medieval literature, and like his character Digory Kirke he became a professor, holding the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge from 1954 until his death in 1963. A convert from atheism to Christianity, he was an authority on medieval cosmology, which was the last flowering of the cosmologies of Pythagoras, Plato and Ptolemy, harmonised with the Bible and Christian tradition. Lewis gives a beautiful exposé of this in his overview of medieval and Renaissance literature, *The Discarded Image*.<sup>2</sup> As a convert to Christianity, Lewis knew what it was to be lost and then found in the church: yet because he could see things from an outsider’s perspective, he also knew that the church was lost in the modern world. I think Lewis knew that the Church had lost a relationship with the cosmos, *this* world in which we live and which, according to Scripture, is understood at its deepest level by the mysterious figure of *Chochmah*, Sophia, or Wisdom.

Lewis also had friends who had dabbled in occult magic, such as Charles Williams, so he knew the dark side of spiritual cosmology too. But more recent research has demonstrated how Lewis

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: an Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 92-197.

baptised ancient cosmology in secretly used the astronomy and astrology of each of the Seven Planets or Seven Heavens as a thematic form for each of the even Narnia Chronicles.<sup>3</sup> The medieval Christians, following the Bible (Deut. 18:10, Jer. 29:8) rejected predictive astrology, that is, foretelling future events, since it denies human free will and responsibility and more fundamentally denies God's providence. But the medievals did believe that the stars can *influence* us, however unconsciously, for ill as well as for good. However, they also believed that Christ has overcome the negative influence of the stars (the fallen angels – the “Principalities and Powers” of Ephesians 6). The psychologist Carl Jung, initially sceptical about this, warmed to this kind of astrology after it gave him breakthroughs in treating his clients.<sup>4</sup> An example, then, of the kind of knowledge that, if used wisely, could set us free.

But it's also an example of knowledge that we have lost. And perhaps it's no coincidence, then, that we've had trouble understanding who Wisdom is in the Scriptures, and that many, dare I say most, modern universities have much to say about knowledge creation and transfer but little about Wisdom. (And that makes St Mary's University and the InSpiRe centre such a wonderful oasis.) Modern analytical philosophy is largely concerned only with clarification, a good thing in itself, but it does not pretend to offer wisdom. Yet people are crying out for meaning in their lives...

So let's recap what we know so far about Wisdom from C.S. Lewis:

1. Wisdom is knowledge which listens, which hears and sees the real evidence with an open mind.
2. Wisdom's deductions about what it hears and sees are therefore more rigorous, not less so.
3. Wisdom is knowledge passed it on with sacrificial love.
4. Wisdom is concerned with a deep understanding of the cosmos, our home, and of our psychological relationship with the cosmos.

The Wisdom tradition never completely disappeared – channelled largely by women mystics and theologians such as Ven. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), whose visions of

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> See Dominic White, *The Lost Knowledge of Christ: Contemporary Spiritualities, Christian Cosmology, and the Arts* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), pp. 128-147.

Wisdom contains echoes of the great medieval doctor St. Hildegard of Bingen. But what today is called sophiology, the study of Wisdom or Sophia, emerged in nineteenth century Russia. The poet Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) was in church, and in the open doors of the iconostasis, the screen which divides the sanctuary and nave of an Eastern-rite church, he saw a mysterious and beautiful female figure who had “eyes full of an azure [blue] fire”, her gaze like “the first shining of universal and creative day”.<sup>5</sup> Solovyov understood that she represented the feminine or receptive principle in God and the whole creation. Later he saw her in the British Library, where she told him to go to Egypt. So he saw her in the Liturgy – we will see the significance of that later. He saw her in a place of learning. And she sent him to the place of an ancient civilisation that was both sophisticated and cruel, spiritual and occultist. She sent him on a mission of purification.

What started in the vision of a poetic mystic was taken up by theologians. The great Russian theologian Sergei Bulgakov thought of her as the being of God, a difficult notion which got him into trouble. Pavel Florensky, a mathematician and engineer as well as a theologian, helped Bulgakov towards a vision more of Wisdom’s presence in the persons of the Trinity and as the divine foundation of creation. In the west, Louis Bouyer saw her as a new unity of Christ and his Church. Hans Urs von Balthasar saw her as the Virgin Mary. Stratford Caldecott sees her as the divinisation of creation, in which we are called to share. Or is Wisdom actually the Holy Spirit?<sup>6</sup>

It must be admitted that the Christian Church has been a bit nervous of Sophia. Part of the problem is that she more often pops up in visions than in worked-out theology. For example, the Lutheran mystic, Jacob Boehme, a shoemaker, had a vision around 1600 in which Sophia emerges from the Holy Spirit,

clothed by the desire of God in an eternal, imperishable body becomes “Uncreated Heaven,” the Kingdom of Beauty or Body of God, Eternal Nature, in which his Glory is forever manifested. Heaven or Sophia is the model for all subsequent creation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, “Three Rendezvous”, in *The Religious Poetry of Vladimir Solovyov*, trans. Boris Jakim and Laury Magnus (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2008), p. 105; also in *The Postil Magazine*, August 1, 2017 <https://www.thepostil.com/three-rendezvous-a-poem-by-vladimir-solovyov/#.XN6YOzN7nIU> (accessed 17 May 2019).

<sup>6</sup> This is the briefest summary taken from Stratford Caldecott’s masterly exposition in his *The Radiance of Being: Dimensions of Cosmic Christianity* (Tacoma: Angelico Press, 2013), pp. 258-275.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 253.

This did not go down well with the Lutheran hierarchy. It sounded far too much like the huge cosmogonies and theogonies – myths of the birth of the universe and the birth of God – which are found in Gnostic texts like the *Pistis Sophia*. Such texts take Platonic and Stoic philosophies about Sophia, the world spirit, and attempt to fuse them with Jewish, Hermetic and Christian traditions. Sophia is turned into a goddess, the twin of Jesus. But Stratford Caldecott reminds us that Boehme was not trying to do theology. He is telling a *story* – his is “the active imagination turned towards God”<sup>8</sup>. This is what artists do.

But surely the New Testament makes it all simple: *Jesus* is the Wisdom from on high (1 Cor 1:24). He is the Word by whom God created the world. Yet Jesus also says that “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus breathed out the Spirit on the apostles on Easter night (John 20:22). But Jesus is the Son, not the Father.

So what do we make of this? On one level we understand Sophia instinctively. Yet we cannot explain. In fact, though, the mystics are reminding us, in poetry and story, in image and music, of a forgotten Biblical tradition. In Proverbs 8, Wisdom (feminine in Hebrew (*chokhmah*) and Greek (*sophia*)) recalls how she rejoiced or played or danced before God as he created the world. She was like a master craftsperson, a little child, or a harmoniser (8:30, the texts differ). And she delighted to be with human beings (Prov 8:31).

The character of Wisdom is celebrated at greater length in the books of Wisdom and Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. These form part of the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but are regarded as apocryphal in the Protestant tradition, though still venerated. “The spirit of Wisdom” is given to the writer of Wisdom (traditionally King Solomon), who received from God *knowledge* of what exists: the structure of the world, the activity (*energeia*, literally “energy”) of its elements, the times, the solstices, the seasons and the constellations, animals, spirits, plants, “both what is secret and what is manifest.” Wisdom is an “intelligent, holy” spirit who is “a breath of the power of God” and a “pure emanation of his glory,” a “reflection of eternal light,” a “spotless mirror of the working of God,” and an “image of his goodness.” She is one but does all things (Wis 7:22-27). In Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom comes from the Lord God and is with him forever, knowing the waves of the sea, the height of heaven, the breadth of the earth and the abyss, and is an “eternal foundation” among the human race (Sir 1:1-4, 15; see also 24:2-6). She tells us that God created her in the beginning, and sent her to dwell in Israel (Sir 24-8-9). So she will glory in the midst of her people and open her mouth in the assembly of the Most

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 252.

High, i.e., the liturgy. She ministered before the Creator in the holy tabernacle—where Solovyov saw her. She grew tall as trees and was fragrant like incense (Sir 24:1-17).

The “sophiological passages” in Wisdom and Sirach, like Proverbs, contain a great deal of ethical wisdom, e.g. “For the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, / but the might will be mightily tested” (Wisdom 6:6). These form a context for Wisdom. You cannot be wise if you do not live in an ethical, loving way. As we saw with the example of C.S. Lewis’s Professor, Wisdom listens, and is passed on with sacrificial love. In one of the few passages about Wisdom in the New Testament, St. James says that the wisdom from above is “peaceable, gentle and willing to yield” (James 3:17). Wisdom is receptive; she listens.

The Old Testament Wisdom books point to a Wisdom who is not God, yet an intelligent spirit created by him, who reflects his light, who emanates from him, and contains the deepest knowledge of creation. This points to science, but also to craft and architecture/engineering (the craftsperson), and to art – she is a harmoniser. As Margaret Barker said to me, she directs the heavenly choir. And we should remember that in the ancient world choirs danced – from the choirs of Greek tragedy to the Jewish monastic community of the Therapeutes.<sup>9</sup> So she is a choreographer too, moving through the depths of the cosmos. She brings together word, music, movement and cosmos in the liturgy, where she speaks, and is like the incense in the Holy of Holies. And she loves people. Wisdom *connects* – between God, creation and humanity.

But who is she? Lady Sophia is elusive! I’d like to look at the approaches of two different books. First, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: a Theological Introduction*<sup>10</sup> by Craig G. Bartholomew’s & Ryan P. O’Dowd, two Protestant scholars who have recognised that we need to recover our sense of wonder at nature, which, according to Job, was a matter of wisdom (Job 38:7).<sup>11</sup> God creates the earth by his wisdom. But – just when we are facing an ecological crisis that is destroying the planet and humanity with it, there has been, as the authors put it, an “eclipse of creation in evangelical theology” – a passionate concern to proclaim Jesus as saviour, but a forgetfulness of God’s work in creation.<sup>12</sup> They argue that, ironically, modern

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<sup>9</sup> Dominic White, *The Lost Knowledge of Christ*, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew & Ryan P. O’Dowd *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: a Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove/London: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

Evangelicalism has made exactly the same mistake as Gnostic sophiology, rejecting creation in a search for “pure” spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

This is enormously helpful. It suggests that the problem Christian authorities had with the Gnostic cosmologies was not so much their multi-layered heavens, nor their adoption of the Sophia World-Soul of ancient philosophies. The trouble is that Gnosticism hates the world, the whole creation and anything material. In the Gnostic *Pistis Sophia*, Sophia fell into the world and Jesus only came to get her back to heaven. Gnosticism cares nothing about the body or the suffering poor or the suffering earth. It is not even a religion. It is merely a source of knowledge teachings about the cosmos, especially its invisible layers, to enable the individual to escape this world. Today, there is much of interest and value in non-religious spiritualities, but they are weak on community, even though they are ecologically focussed (unlike Gnosticism). But certainly the Gnostic Sophia sits ill with the Biblical Sophia who delights to be with humankind (Prov. 8:31).

So who do Bartholomew and O’Dowd think Sophia is, then? The Protestant tradition has tended to see her as a personification of the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom rather than an actual being (as Dame Folly is also personified). The Orthodox tradition (Bulgakov, Florensky and co) have seen her as a hypostasis, which James Dunn reads as being “between a person and personification”.<sup>14</sup> I must confess I have no idea what that might mean. To me, it’s like saying something is half way between a dream and an animal. Dunn decides she is “an extended metaphor”.<sup>15</sup> I am even more lost. Bartholomew and O’Dowd opt, solidly and safely, for Jesus being the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24, quoted earlier): Jesus is the pre-existent creator, ethical governor and exemplar, agent of reconciliation and clue or key to understanding nature of redemption and world order.<sup>16</sup> But as we’ve seen, Jesus also said that to have seen him was to have seen the Father, and he breathed forth the Holy Spirit on his disciples.

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<sup>13</sup> So, they point out, a modern worship chorus has, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full I his wonderful face, and things of the earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glorious grace.” Bartholomew amends this to: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full I his wonderful face, *and things of the earth will receive their true perspective*, in the light of his glorious grace” (Ibid. p. 267).

<sup>14</sup> James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 271 – Bartholomew & O’Dowd, p. 237.

<sup>15</sup> Dunn, p. 272 (Bartholomew & O’Dowd, p. 238).

<sup>16</sup> Bartholomew & O’Dowd, p. 239.

And while I think Bartholomew and O' Dowd make a very powerful case *for* Wisdom, sticking with Jesus as the Wisdom of God leaves us with a very male God – which I believe is not all these scholars' intention. But Genesis tells us that God made humankind male and female in his own image – and in the beginning God's Spirit (*ruah*, which is feminine) hovered over the waters. Doesn't this suggest some connection between the Spirit, Wisdom and a feminine side to God?

A unique approach to the question is taken by István Cselényi,<sup>17</sup> himself a rather unique figure. He is a priest of the Hungarian Catholic Church, which is an Eastern Catholic Church of the Byzantine Rite – essentially an Orthodox Church in communion with Rome. Like the Orthodox Church, the Hungarian Catholic Church ordains married men to the priesthood, and Cselényi is himself married. On the basis of his own marriage he begins with a thoughtful meditation on the complementarity of man and woman, made in God's image and likeness. He is very aware of the neglect of the tradition of God as mother, which St John Paul II attempted to restore.<sup>18</sup> Cselényi notes how a problem of ancient Greek philosophies, which, as we saw, had a lot to say about Wisdom as the World Soul, is that in talking about the concept of being, they tend to leave very low down the list the idea of being as relational (for example, I am *Peter's friend*). But we exist in relation – we are social animals, our relationships with each other and with our community, country etc. make us what we are. Cselényi knows from experience how his priesthood has come into being out of his relationship with his wife, the two of them made together in God's image. Which suggests that for those of us called to celibacy, married to God, not only should we be living in union with God but we should be fundamentally relational, open to receiving and giving God's presence in everyone we encounter, rather than being distant and inward-looking. Indeed, finding other polarities in nature (such as form and matter, body and spirit), Cselényi argues that the whole of nature has a nuptial structure.

And since Cselényi is Catholic as well as Eastern Christian, he is well versed in Western Catholic theology too, as well as the Eastern tradition, so his work on sophiology is effectively a bridge – Wisdom relating, connecting again...

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<sup>17</sup> István Cselényi, *The Maternal Face of God: Explorations in Catholic Sophiology* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017 [2008]).

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 8. Available online: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html) (accessed 9 May 2019).



Especially important is what Cselényi draws out of St. Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyon. Irenaeus is so early that he was himself a disciple of one of the disciples of St. John the Evangelist, so he's an important carrier of early Christian tradition. Irenaeus' main work is *Against the Heresies*, a refutation of Gnosticism. His criticisms of Gnosticism can be severe, but the discovery of original Gnostic texts shows that Irenaeus represents their beliefs very accurately. Furthermore, Irenaeus is a major source for what I have called elsewhere "the Lost Knowledge of Christ", the early traditions of the Church about the cosmos, in particular the cosmic cross and the journey through the heavens.<sup>19</sup> So while he dismisses the Gnostic cosmogony of Sophia, Jesus' twin sister falling into this grubby material world and having to be got back to nice clean heaven by her brother, we might be surprised what Irenaeus says about Wisdom's role in creation. Discussing God and creation, Irenaeus says,

Since eternity, in fact, right by the Father there is the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit. It was by them that he made all things, freely and totally independent, and it is to them (the Word and Wisdom) that the Father addresses himself, when he says, 'Let us make humankind in our image and likeness.'<sup>20</sup>

Irenaeus goes on to point out that as Scripture makes it clear that there is only one God, then the Word and Wisdom, that is the Son and Holy Spirit, as well as the Father, must be God (e.g. Mal. 2:10).<sup>21</sup> Wisdom, Irenaeus argues, must be the Holy Spirit, since according to Proverbs it was by Wisdom that the Lord founded the earth. He develops this, drawing on Wisdom as the "harmoniser" in Proverbs 8. Irenaeus says that the Word made things, while the Spirit harmonised them, *connected* them together.

And what have we done? In forgetting Wisdom, we have let the Church and fall apart, as well as society, politics and the planet. Compare that with Professor Digory Kirke, Professor "Lost Church": by connecting, listening, love and logic, he can hear the truth in Lucy's words.

Certainly Irenaeus' teaching means Wisdom is more than a metaphor: Wisdom is the Holy Spirit. So have we solved the problem then? Our friend Margaret Barker has argued extensively that before Josiah's reform in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Wisdom was understood to be the bride of El Elyon, the Most High God, and their Son was the Lord. In other words, Israel believed in a proto-Trinity. For reasons which are not entirely clear – but I suspect from the internal evidence

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<sup>19</sup> Dominic White, *The Lost Knowledge of Christ*.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, AH IV.20.1 (my translation).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. IV.20.2.

of the Bible that the priests had become corrupt and started worshipping angels (that is, the stars, some of which are fallen...), Wisdom and her cosmological knowledge got thrown out of the Tabernacle. They were replaced by the God of Law and Word but not image, with the Book of Deuteronomy (the book of the law found in the Temple) as the benchmark. So the Lady, Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, was lost.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulty – which Irenaeus does not address – is that Wisdom also speaks of herself in Sirach as *created* by God (Sirach 24:8-9, as we saw above). So how can she be the uncreated Holy Spirit?<sup>23</sup> This has led theologians such as Cselényi to suggest there may be two wisdoms: first, Uncreated Wisdom (the Holy Spirit) and second Created Wisdom, the kindly, intelligent spirit, as represented in the Orthodox icon of Holy Wisdom (**figure 2**).

And the tradition of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches has been to connect Created Wisdom with the Virgin Mary. Eastern churches dedicated to the Holy Spirit (such as, most famously, the Hagia Sophia, the Holy Wisdom in Istanbul, **figure 3**) all celebrate their dedication on feasts of Mary. In the pre-Vatican II Roman liturgy, the first reading for the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is taken from Proverbs 8 – wisdom the craftsperson-harmoniser, playing or dancing before God as he creates the world. In the French Church in London, Dom Robert's beautiful tapestry celebrates Mary as Wisdom (**figure 4**). The Litany of Loreto, a favourite devotion to Mary in Catholic tradition, applies all the Biblical titles of Wisdom to Mary. Sr Cathy Jones demonstrated to us last year that, in fact, evangelical Protestants, who have a great devotion to the Holy Spirit, speak about her in the same terms as Catholics do about Mary (such as intercessor). St Hildegard of Bingen, in her ecstatic chants about the Spirit and creation, also celebrates Mary – as a leafy branch (a title of Wisdom). And the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German visionary Ven. Anne Catherine Emmerich is quite clear that Mary is the incarnation of Wisdom. Anne Catherine saw Mary's conception symbolically: her parents embrace, and are covered by a bright cloud. Wisdom was the cloud who led Israel out of Egypt (Wis. 17), and of course a voice comes from a bright cloud covering Jesus at his Transfiguration. Cselényi sees Mary as the incarnation of the World Soul, the kindly, intelligent spirit who was created

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<sup>22</sup> See Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: the Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 229-261; Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord: Volume 1: The Lady of the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Cf AH III.11.8, citing Wis 1:7.

by the Most High and is beloved of humankind. Devotion to Mary as Queen of Heaven falls into place (**figure 5**).

But in that case, why can't we just say that Mary is the Incarnation of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus is the Incarnation of the Son, the Word? Is it that the patriarchal Church cannot cope with a divine feminine, a goddess?

While appalling statements about women by male clerics are a sad commonplace of Christian tradition, the real reason Mary is not divine is that Scripture makes it clear that Mary and the Holy Spirit are distinct: the angel, explaining how, as a virgin, Mary will conceive the Son of God, says, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*" (Luke 1:35). And Mary responds with a word which is stronger than the translation, "Let it be with me according to your word". The Greek *genoito moi* literally means, "Would that this would be for me." It's a big yes, it's the yes of Wisdom, Mary the incarnate World Soul, in total harmony with the Uncreated Wisdom who is the Holy Spirit.

And as for Jesus being the Wisdom of God, we see his *incarnation* as God's Wisdom, because Jesus is God's connecting together of divine and human, of heaven and earth, through the motherhood of Mary.

I suggest there is a more profound reason here too. As Christians, following our spiritual ancestors the Jews, we are wary of idol worship – "You shall have no strange gods before me." If we make a goddess out of nature, we destroy nature, because we ask of it what only God can give us. "I fell upon the lovely things of your creation," said St. Augustine of his life before conversion.<sup>24</sup> In the same way the media idolise and then destroy celebrities. Marriages fail when the idolised other gives place to the fragile reality.

Yet as we saw from Craig Bartholomew's and Ryan O'Dowd's book on Wisdom, Christians have tended to focus exclusively on Jesus and neglect creation. All grace and no nature. This means we have neglected the environment, our common home, and on a psychological level, many Christians have got mentally ill from religious practice which is divorced from their bodies, their psychological needs and their environment – either through fault spiritual teaching by church leaders, or self-willed religious escapism, or a mixture of both.

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), X.27/p. 231f.

But in Mary, God shows us that He does not need to have everything subsumed into Him. He can cope with humankind and the rest of creation being other to Him. Yet how are we one with God – or with each other – without the individual, me, being erased, subsumed, engulfed? This crisis besets us in the turn away from God in our society, and in individualism. So many people fiercely defending their individuality – and rightly so. Yet at the same time so lonely. Brexit is this conflict on a political level, with a new tribalism manifesting itself in society: the other as enemy.

In the Christian mystical understanding of union with God, I do not cease to be myself in union with God. In coming to share in his divine nature, being divinised, I become, at last, fully myself. Our friend Alex Svalova, in her lecture on romantic love last year, told us that the Russian word for chastity is *tselomudrie*, “whole wisdomness”. Mary’s virginity is a sign of her integrity, her being fully herself even as she is overshadowed by the Spirit and becomes mother of God’s Son, and image of the Holy Spirit, the maternal face of God. As we saw, it is the *Incarnation* of Jesus, born as a human from Mary’s body, that shows Jesus as the Wisdom of God: God connecting himself with humankind by taking flesh. The incarnation is God’s wise act.

The Church has indeed become a lost Church in forgetting Wisdom. Wisdom rejoices in otherness, in the excitement of difference – that humankind is made in God’s image and likeness *because we are different, because we are irreducible beyond two genders*. But in forgetting Wisdom, the place of woman in the Church was eroded and largely lost. Indeed, the gift of women’s authority in the Church has not, I think, yet been fully grasped. Abuse is always the abuse of power. To abuse my power which was given to me as the power to serve others, I have to fail to see the other as human: I have to fail to see the divine image in them. I make them less than me. Organisations which are or have become inward looking are at the highest risk of becoming abusive because unlike Wisdom they refuse to *connect*, to connect with the other. A model of clergy which does not connect with non-clerics, does not connect women, is at risk of abusing and at risk of covering up, because it only sees what it wants to see.

Scandals are continuing to emerge. But the one good thing I see coming out of it is a spirit of change. I had a question-and-answer session with a group of Catholic Traditionalists a while ago. The question of women’s ministry came up. Generally the Traditionalist wing of the Catholic Church has been critical of all talk of women’s ministry and talk in the Church – either they are inclined to think this tends towards heresy, or the women among them feel content

with the status quo. But the revelation of abuse had changed that for this group. I said I felt we were moving towards a different understanding of authority as complementary. Our safeguarding officer, who is part of that group, is a lay woman, married with children. I spoke of her authority – “When it comes to safeguarding, I do what she says.” There were smiles and nods of agreement. Sophia is becoming visible, joining a broken Church back together, in harmony.

Finally, to return to the Wisdom and the relationship between our psyche and the cosmos, something which, as we saw, the medievals knew about. Many people experience a conflict between what Christianity seems to demand of them, and actually being true to who they are. Serious breakdown can result from this conflict. Wisdom offers resolution to this conflict through the celebration of the liturgy, if the liturgy is celebrated with wisdom’s understanding. We saw from the Book of Sirach how she ministered in the Tabernacle, how she was like incense. In the liturgy, natural objects – such as sandalwood and roses, which we burn as incense – become more themselves. They exceed themselves, becomes ec-static, standing out. Likewise water and fire, and the body in word, music, gesture and movement are all raised up in liturgy through inspired art, through the work of artists in materials, word, music and movement. Again, God does not subsume into himself these things or our own creations or ourselves. This is a gentle God who loves his creation in Wisdom’s knowledge: a God who takes his creatures up so that they become themselves, glorified. In the liturgy, the movement of which is guided by the incense-bearer – Wisdom the Choreographer – creation itself is divinised, becomes itself, is *connected* with God. In the unity of God we come to delight in the otherness of each other and of every created being. We realise our baptismal priesthood, as priests of creation, with Wisdom, ministering in God’s Temple.