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Rudolf Steiner on Sophia
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Abstract

This essay summarizes and recommends Rudolf Steiner's esoteric research on Sophia. According to Steiner, Sophia is a being who is close to Christ and the Holy Spirit as well as to several of the nine divine Hierarchies. In his lectures from 1906 until the year before his death in 1925, Steiner depicts Sophia as the divine feminine being who has manifested as Isis (the goddess of the Mediterranean world for three millennia), as Mary the Mother of Jesus as depicted in the New Testament, and Anthroposophia, a being who is charged with helping contemporary humanity to think freely and thereby prepare for the next advance in the evolution of human consciousness. The essay opens with the author's slow but steady relationship to the dramatic increase in scholarship on Sophia since the last decade of the 20th century and concludes with an affirmation of Sophia as a being who embodies and manifests both wisdom and love.

The essay relies on four Sophiologists influenced by Steiner's research: Christopher Bamford, editor of *Isis Mary Sophia: Her Mission and Ours—Selected Writings and Lectures by Rudolf Steiner* (2003) which includes Bamford's important Introduction; Sergei Prokofieff, author of *The Heavenly Sophia and the Being Anthroposophia* (1996); Michael Debus, author of *Mary and Sophia: The Feminine Element in the Spiritual Evolution of Humanity* (2013); and Valentin Tomberg, author of *Christ and Sophia: Anthroposophic Meditations on the Old Testament, New Testament, & Apocalypse* (1933-38; 2011).

Key Words

Steiner, Blavatsky, Theosophy, Sophia, Sophiology, Isis, Mary, Anthroposophia, Anthroposophy

In 1875, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB) and Col. Henry Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York. Two years later HPB published *Isis Unveiled*, the first of three volumes that are foundational for the Theosophical movement and for western esotericism. In 1902, two years after Rudolf Steiner's experience of Cosmic Christ, he accepted the invitation of the German section of the Theosophical Society to write and lecture on esoteric topics. Steiner accepted this appointment contingent on his having freedom to lecture and write out of his own spiritual experience. Steiner's esoteric research concerning Isis/Sophia furthers the esoteric research begun by HPB and is also core to the enormous research that Steiner conducted until his death in 1925. Whereas HPB had the task of recovering ancient wisdom, a task she performed brilliantly and courageously and for which Steiner praised her frequently,¹ one of the aims of Anthroposophy as presented by Rudolf Steiner is to show that "lifting the veil of Isis" essentially means discovering the reality of Sophia and her manifestations in and through Sophianic beings for the present and future. In a verse well known to anthroposophists, Rudolf Steiner wrote:

It is not the Christ that we lack, but the knowledge and wisdom of Isis, the Sophia of the Christ. We have not lost Christ; we have lost Sophia.²

This essay recounts Steiner's experience and description of the Heavenly Sophia and three of her most important manifestations, each in a particular culture: Isis, the pre-Christian goddess of the Mediterranean; Mary the Mother of Jesus; and Anthroposophia, the Sophia of the present time. In Steiner's view, it is also essential to understand and experience the relationship of Sophia and Christ. This essay is an attempt to explain that these three manifestations of

¹ See Bamford, ed., *Spiritualism, Madame Blavatsky, and Theosophy: An Eyewitness View of Occult History—Lectures by Rudolf Steiner* (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2001).

² Steiner, *Ancient Myths and the New Isis Mystery*, 175; "The Search for the New Isis (1)," in Bamford, ed., *Isis Mary Sophia*, 207, 211.

Sophia are distinct but not separate, rather like the orthodox Christian Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, mysteriously yet truly three and one. This essay is full of ideas but it also an invitation: knowledge of Sophia requires effort of heart and mind, and the willingness to embrace mystery that uncovers its secret in response to reverence and humility, to questioning and gratitude for revelations that come slowly, silently, and perhaps tentatively. Such revelations have a lot to do with a person's karma.

When I was a child in my Irish-Catholic family in New York City, my relation to the Virgin Mary was a mix of largely unexamined beliefs and disbelief in response to an image conveyed by countless paintings and statues at home and in my Catholic elementary and high schools. In my 20s, with the negative influence of Roman Catholic regressive ethical teachings, my religious beliefs diminished in number and conviction. In my early 30s, due to reading and writing about Sri Aurobindo, I gradually began to consider the reality of Krishna and Sri Aurobindo as avatars (divine incarnations). I also studied and taught philosophy of religion to college students. John Wisdom, a British philosopher, for example, suggested that the question concerning the existence of God is rather like responding to a poorly kept garden by asking whether a gardener cares for the garden. Hard to know; it could go either way! From another analytic philosopher of religion, Antony Flew, I was led to consider the difference between “belief that” (a claim) and “belief in” (trust). “Belief that” invites the scrutiny of philosophy and evidence; “belief in,” like faith, is a way of seeing. I was gradually moving from religious propositions to an ambivalent faith position.

Then came a major, enduring influence: from Rudolf Steiner I learned that it is possible to know, and not just believe in, spiritual beings, and to know oneself as a spiritual being. I also learned from Steiner's foundational book, *How to Know Higher Worlds* (1904), that to change

belief to knowledge requires the practice of reverence and humility. Throughout his twenty-five years as a spiritual-esoteric teacher, 1900-1925, Steiner exemplified and taught spiritual and esoteric knowledge as well as practices for the cultivation of spiritual thinking, a discipline which is difficult to practice and difficult to know whether one has succeeded. As I have been practicing anthroposophy for four decades, I should be writing this essay entirely from direct, personal knowledge, but unfortunately these pages contain a significant amount of belief—both “belief in” and “belief that.” Twenty years ago, ideas about spiritual beings would have been all belief. I hope that in whatever future I will have left to me, my relationship to Steiner’s esoteric research, including especially Sophia, will include more knowledge than at present. This optimism follows from my conviction that belief, if deliberate and open, and if it conforms to “the path of reverence, of devotion to truth and knowledge,” and supported appropriately by exoteric knowledge, can grow and deepen, and serve as a way to spiritual knowledge.³

It is still possible to hear dozens of lectures and attend courses on anthroposophical subjects without hearing a reference to Sophia. There is no single book that attempts to integrate Steiner’s esoteric lectures with the exoteric chronicles of Sophia that have been appearing in the past thirty years. Such an integration will be confounded by dramatic differences between standard histories and Steiner’s esoteric disclosures in lectures—over twenty years in a dozen cities and unrevised—some of which treat Sophia in relation to Christ, others in relation to the tempters (Lucifer and Ahriman), still others in relation to Isis or the Archangel Michael, but no lectures or books which treat all of these figures systematically in relation to each other. Isis presents a particularly difficult challenge: her influence was spread throughout the

³ Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds*, 16.

Mediterranean but not within the Hebraic lineage. In response to Steiner’s lectures on Isis one wonders whether she was human like Mary and Jesus or more like Prometheus and other gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon—psychically or archetypically real and influential but not incarnate. She must have been significant for Lucifer to have slain her, as Steiner reports, and further, for Steiner to refer to her as the predecessor of Sophia-Mary and for him to announce that at the present time She needs to be restored as the wisdom of Sophia and the wisdom of Christ. These ideas about Isis are the limit of my understanding, but not the end of my inquiry. Because this essay raises questions I cannot answer at this time, it should perhaps be subtitled “A Progress Report.”⁴

In 2007 I was invited to a conference on Sophia sponsored by the Fetzer Institute for which I wrote a ten-page semi-poetic “invocation”⁵ to Sophia influenced by Baring and Cashford’s magisterial *Myth of the Goddess*.⁶ Several years later, while completing my book, *Steiner and Kindred Spirits*, I added a chapter on Sophia, including Hindu and Buddhist spiritual beings. I was not entirely sure whether I was writing from knowledge or belief, and even less sure of which divine feminine beings should be included in the term Sophia. In 2018, following a return visit to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville with my friend Debashish Banerji, I wrote an essay⁷ on the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram as a manifestation of Shakti with the

⁴ I am grateful to Robert Hill for fruitful conversations concerning Sophia and for suggestions that improved this essay. I have also benefitted by conversations and email exchanges on related topics with Christopher Bamford, Debashish Banerji, Carol Cole, Rev. James Hindes, Will Keepin, and Jacob Sherman.

⁵ McDermott, “Invocation to Sophia,” in *Steiner and Kindred Spirits*, 202-09.

⁶ See Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Penguin Books/Arkana, 1991).

⁷ To be published in Banerji and McDermott, *Sri Aurobindo and Modern Thought*.

distinct feeling that some of the ideas about the Mother qualified as knowledge, some as belief, and some as information that I could not quite process. I still hope to contribute to the evolving exploration between Steiner's understanding of Sophia and the wide, burgeoning exploration by dozens of scholars and devotees, including especially scholarship on the Mother according to Sri Aurobindo.⁸ The remainder of this essay is devoted to Sophia according the Rudolf Steiner.

In Steiner's foundational books, *Truth and Knowledge* (1891), his doctoral dissertation, and *Philosophy of Freedom* (1893), he developed an epistemological basis for free/spiritual thinking and free moral action. In answer to the question, "are we as individuals ever really free," Steiner in effect replies, "probably not, but you could be if you would activate your deepest self instead of your surface, sense-bound and culture-bound self." In the last decade of the 19th Century, Steiner developed a philosophical critique of the dominant materialistic conception of the human being, and particularly of thinking limited by a materialistic worldview. Twenty years later he added his esoteric experience of higher beings such as Sophia and the Archangel Michael to his earlier philosophical case for free, spiritual, I-based, thinking.

According to Steiner's research concerning the evolution of consciousness, a major focus of his writing in the years 1902-12 when he was a teacher of Theosophy, it is efficacious to be devoted to higher beings. He proposed that the essential task of humanity beginning in the 20th century is to know higher beings by sense-free, "I"-based thinking. Steiner's epistemology argues that the spiritual self can realize free thinking and free action, and can enable individuals and entire cultures to receive the sacrificial guidance of higher beings, including Christ, Sophia, and the Archangel Michael. For Steiner, "to know" means direct, unmediated personal

⁸ The essay on The Mother by Debashish Banerji at the conclusion of this volume will help readers consider the relationship of the Mother/Shakti to the Sophia of the West.

experience, knowing himself as a spiritual “I” and a spiritual being. Near the end of his life Steiner characterized Anthroposophy as a path of knowledge to lead the spiritual self (the “I”) to the spiritual dimension of the Universe.⁹

Steiner’s interpretation of Sophia—and of all beings, human and divine—is narrated in the context of the evolution of consciousness. On February 3, 1913, as head of the newly formed Anthroposophical Society, Steiner delivered a lecture entitled “The Being of Anthroposophia”¹⁰ in which he recounts the ancient Greek experience of Sophia, the medieval experience of Lady Philosophy or Philosophia, and the contemporary being, Anthroposophia, whose mission it is to advance the realization of one’s higher “I.” Steiner urged that Anthroposophia be affirmed as a manifestation of the Heavenly (Divine) Sophia and the source and goal of free, spiritual thinking, and as such as the spiritual guide of the present age in preparation for the future.

In approximately a dozen lectures from 1913 to 1924, Steiner described his experience of the relationship of the Divine/Heavenly Sophia to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, to the Archangel Michael, to Anthroposophia, as well as to humanity and Earth. According to Steiner, Sophia was active in enabling classical (5th to 4th century BCE) Greek philosophers to practice philosophy-- *philo*, love; *sophia*, divine feminine wisdom. In Plato’s *Symposium*, a dialogue on the reality of love, Diotima was the muse for Socrates, Plato’s representative. Steiner recalls that in the Middle Ages, Dante experienced Philo-Sophia as a being as real as his beloved Beatrice, the active guide of his journey from Hell to Purgatory to Paradise.

⁹ Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, 13.

¹⁰ Steiner, “The Being of Anthroposophy,” in *Effects of Esoteric Development*, 1-17, and in *Isis Mary Sophia*, ch. XX.

Steiner's lectures on Sophia from approximately 1910 to 1924 assume his philosophical writing prior to his experience of the Cosmic Christ in 1899 and his esoteric research immediately following. He explains that since the Sixteenth Century very few human beings have had the spiritual capacity to experience directly, i.e., to know, spiritual beings such as the divine Hierarchies, Mary, Jesus, John the Baptist, Mary Magdalen as well as various manifestations of the Heavenly Sophia. In the modern West, unless deliberately lifted by spiritual effort, the possibility of spiritual knowledge is increasingly rare. A spiritually awake "I" is the primary means of preventing materialism from total control of human consciousness. It is Anthroposophia's mission to enable each human being and each culture to control and transform materialism. In Steiner's view, doing so is the defining challenge of the present age.

Following Steiner's lectures on Sophia, this essay essentially makes a case for a contemporary spirituality and epistemology, one that affirms an individual "I" that is usually unacknowledged and dormant, but with the aid of spiritual beings active at the present time, can be activated. An incomplete, materialistic view of the human being works against the influence of spiritual beings, including oneself as a spiritual "I." To the extent that individuals realize their freedom they will be open to the reality and influence of Sophia, to the Archangel Michael, and ultimately to Christ. In this respect, true philosophy leads to a genuine spirituality that will reveal its own philosophical foundation and defense. Steiner's lectures on Sophia are philosophical as well as spiritual and his view of Sophia affirms Her and her several manifestations as a being who exemplifies love and wisdom. Further, in his view, the way to Sophia is by wisdom—the ideal blend of love and knowledge. The human "I," the essential, eternal self is the ontological

(real) and epistemological (knowing) link between the spiritual world and the other three parts of human person--soul, mind, and body.¹¹

What Steiner refers to as free, spiritual thinking is a prerequisite and a result: knowing Sophia is possible because of the influence of Sophia. This knowledge of Sophia can lead in turn to insights on other topics. It is parallel to and in contrast to a materialistic cycle: a person's conviction that all is matter is confirmed by the apparent inaccessibility of spirit. Only spiritual thinking can access Sophia—and only if one looks in her direction and strives to think as a spiritual being and by a spiritual method. A person is not likely to find what they are not seeking, and especially will not find what they believe does not exist. It is the mission of Anthroposophia to collaborate with spiritually striving souls in order to resist the dominant materialist worldview and to complement and balance it by knowledge of spiritual beings. According to Steiner, materialism continues to crucify Christ on Earth and in the spiritual world. Anthroposophia works against this crucifixion and on behalf of Resurrection.

Steiner describes some of his Sophianic thinking, i.e., thinking in accord with Anthroposophia's influence that presumably enabled him to experience Anthroposophia's relationship to other Sophianic beings. The purpose of Steiner's Anthroposophy is to show how each person can come to know and develop a deep relationship with Anthroposophia and her relationship with other Sophianic beings. As Steiner states in his set of lectures, *Awakening to Community*, Anthroposophy is devoted to Sophia:

The term "Anthroposophy" should really be understood as synonymous with "Sophia," meaning the content of consciousness, the soul attitude and experience that make a person a full-fledged human being. The right interpretation of "Anthroposophy" is not "the wisdom of humanity," but rather "the consciousness of one's humanity." In other words, the reversing of the will, the experiencing of knowledge, and one's participation in

¹¹ For Steiner's description of the human being, see Steiner, "The Essential Nature of the Human Being," *Theosophy*, 21-62.

the time's destiny, should all aim at giving the soul a certain direction of consciousness, a Sophia.¹²

Christopher Bamford

For Steiner's own amazing experiences and insights, we should read his lectures; for a more accessible grasp of the meaning and significance of his esoteric research, it is often more effective to read summations and interpretations by scholars of Steiner's lectures such as Christopher Bamford, Sergei Prokofieff, Michael Debus, and Valentin Tomberg. Christopher Bamford's book, *Isis Mary Sophia*, includes his characteristically inspiring introduction and all of Rudolf Steiner's lectures on Sophia. These lectures reveal the many members of the Heavenly Sophia—including especially Isis, Mary, Philosophia, and Anthroposophia—and their relationships with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Bamford summarizes his understanding of Isis Mary Sophia:

The feminine divine is clearly present everywhere in the founding civilizations of our present moment. She is called by many names—Inanna in Sumeria; Astarte among the Hiittites; Ishtar in Babylon; in Egypt (among many others), Isis, Maat, Hathor, Nut, and Neith; in Greece, Demeter, Persophone, Artemis, Athena, Hecate. The list is endless—Sophia and Mary are only two more. The more one seeks, the more Goddesses one finds. This apparently riotous confusion should not be taken as evidence of polytheism—far from it. These figurations—all of whom may be said to be aspects of Sophia—represent different states of one and the same primal principle, acting according to successive phases of becoming.¹³

In the above passage I would delete the word “only.” For the past 2000 years Mary as a manifestation of Sophia is the primary image of the divine feminine in the West. Bamford's terms, “the feminine divine,” “aspects of Sophia,” and “the same primal principle” are presumably equivalent to Steiner's concept of “The Heavenly Sophia.” Like so many feminine

¹² Steiner, *Awakening to Community*, 61.

¹³ Bamford, *Isis Mary Sophia*, 23-24.

(predominantly but not necessarily female) qualities, the most important characteristic of Sophia is her subtle relationships with other spiritual beings.

Bamford repeats Steiner's amazing revelation concerning the presence of Isis behind a 30-foot wooden sculpture of Christ that Steiner himself sculpted with the help of Edith Marion, an accomplished sculptor. The sculpture is in a building called the Goetheanum on top of a hill in Dornach, near Basel, Switzerland. The sculpture depicts three figures: Christ, whom Steiner refers to as "The Representative of Humanity," is the main figure in the center between the two tempters, Lucifer and Ahriman. In 1918, in the third of seven lectures entitled *Ancient Myths: The New Isis Myth*, Steiner offered a new Isis myth which includes a reference to a fourth being behind the sculpture: "there was a fourth, invisible, figure, a being, Isis."¹⁴ In telling this new Isis myth, Steiner recalls the words which the ancient Egyptians ascribed to Isis: "I am the All, I am the Past, the Present, and the future; no mortal has yet lifted my veil."¹⁵ With a mix of mythical and contemporary images, Steiner places this myth in a culture, "the land of the Philistines," characterized my devotion to materialistic science, and specifically in a building that resembles the actual first Goetheanum, under construction from 1913 to 1922.¹⁶ In the myth Steiner locates Isis:

Mostly she was invisible, but sometimes especially intuitive visitors glimpsed her. They saw that, in fact, she was asleep and that beneath her was the inscription "I am humanity. I am the past, present, and future. Every mortal should lift my veil."¹⁷

¹⁴ Steiner, *Ancient Myths and the New Isis Mystery*, 62-66.

¹⁵ Steiner, *Ancient Myths and the New Isis Mystery*, 62.

¹⁶ The first Goetheanum was begun in September 1913 and was very nearly finished when it was burned to the ground by arson on New Year's Eve of 1922. The sculpture was still in an adjacent workshop when the Goetheanum was burned.

¹⁷ Steiner, *Ancient Myths and the New Isis Mystery*, 22.

In this passage Steiner has revised words in the original ascription to Isis: instead of “I am the All,” Steiner has proposed “I am humanity,” and instead of “no mortal has yet lifted my veil” Steiner has proposed “Every mortal should lift my veil.” Although Steiner’s myth seems to me rather obscure it would seem to invite humanity to understand and foster a new relationship between Isis and Christ. Anthroposophy as teaching and practice is intended as a means of lifting the veil of Isis. Steiner’s new Isis myth focuses on the Isis as the “wisdom of Christ.” In a lecture on December 24, 1920, Steiner stated:

The rediscovered power of Isis, which is now the power of the divine Sophia, will allow Christ, who has united with the Earth since the Mystery of Golgotha, to become active in the new insight into the universe, to become active with us because of our new knowledge. We do not lack Christ; but the knowledge of Christ, the Sophia of Christ, the Isis of Christ is lacking.¹⁸

Christopher Bamford’s explanations of Steiner on Sophia grants access to both Steiner and Sophia in the spirit of each, i.e., without dogmatism or simplification, and without removal of the mystery and complexity. Perhaps the surest way to be faithful to his understanding is to quote one of his summary statements:

To put it succinctly as possible, for Rudolf Steiner Sophia is wisdom in all its manifestations— divine, heavenly, cosmic, earthly for this perspective, wisdom is everywhere. She is an evolutionary reality surrounding and permeating us. To truly acknowledge reality, we must say that we live and move and have our being in her.¹⁹

Similar to C. G. Jung who reads spiritual experience with the help of archetypes, Steiner tends to use the language of beings. These two interpretive frameworks are closer than Steiner or Jung were able to admit. With respect to Christ and Sophia, the language of beings seems more accurate than the occasionally vague terminology of archetypes but with respect to Isis

¹⁸ Steiner, *Ancient Myths and the New Isis Mystery*, 174-75.

¹⁹ Bamford, “Introduction,” *Isis Mary Sophia*, 21-22.

“archetype” might be more accurate. Isis and Sophia are manifestations of an even deeper or more generic reality, the Divine Feminine archetype. It seems to me that Steiner’s—and Bamford’s—interpretation reveals the various manifestations of the Divine Feminine without losing the archetypal source or unity. In more than a dozen lectures Steiner reveals the gifts of Sophia through several manifestations, several historical periods, and under several names. Like *Dao*, the divine feminine that can be named is not the eternal name. Steiner knew this but he also knew that in the present age when humanity is separated from and largely ignorant of divinity in all of its manifestations, specificity, if accurate, can be efficacious.

Sergei Prokofieff

The fullest account of Rudolf Steiner’s conception of Anthroposophia, the manifestation of the Heavenly Sophia devoted to free human thinking and the evolution of humanity, is found in Sergei Prokofieff, *The Heavenly Sophia and the Being Anthroposophia*.²⁰ As the title of this dense, rather overwhelming book, indicates, Anthroposophia has the task of enabling human beings to attain spiritual knowledge. In the Foreword to this volume Prokofieff makes the following disclosure:

An intensive study of Anthroposophy revealed itself as not only a contemporary spiritual-scientific teaching issuing from the sources of esoteric Christianity but also as a living being of the spiritual world, as Anthroposophia, who brings to human beings of the 20th Century the new revelation of the Heavenly Sophia, the divine wisdom.²¹

Prokofieff identifies the being Anthroposophia as a member of the “Heavenly Sophia.” As stated in the Book of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, the Heavenly Sophia was present at the creation of the world. She relates more or less as an equal to Christ and the Holy Spirit, and also manifests

²⁰ See Prokofieff, *The Heavenly Sophia and the Being Anthroposophia*, trans. Blaxland de Lange (London: Temple Lodge, 1996).

²¹ Prokofieff, *Heavenly Sophia and the Being Anthroposophia*, 1.

downward as Anthroposophia. According to Steiner, the mission of Anthroposophia—and Anthroposophy—began with the dawn of what Steiner calls the fifth cultural epoch, to which he assigns the dates 15th Century (essentially the European Renaissance) to the 35th Century, one and a half millennia from now.²²

Explaining the relationship of specific Sophia members to the divine or “Heavenly” Sophia²³ is one of the most important contributions of Steiner-Prokofieff research. They explain that as spiritual knowledge is no longer automatic as it was at the time of the ancient Hebrews, ancient Greeks, or medieval Christians, Anthroposophia, in a deed similar to the Hindu idea of avatar—a divine being who intervenes when a civilization needs transformation—is enabling humanity to resist the lure of the materialist worldview and materialist thinking. Spiritual thinking requires a disciplined opposition to the prevalent, and increasingly powerful, tempters of the age, namely, Lucifer and Ahriman. Lucifer seeks to convince humanity that spirit can be accessed without effort and that there is no need to attend to the demands of either the spiritual or the material world. Ahriman seeks to convince humanity that the physical world, including the human being, is without spirit.

Whereas the so-called New Age tends to be Luciferic, the remainder of the culture is clearly in the grip of Ahriman.²⁴ Anthroposophia enables humanity to recognize that material reality must be transformed by spiritual effort, particularly by the active thinking of the spiritual

²² Steiner’s references to millennia in the far distant future might seem implausible in relation to the current relentless burning of Earth.

²³ “Heavenly” and its alternative “Divine” should be understood to include Sophia’s devoted participation in the service of the evolution of consciousness.

²⁴ This double temptation resembles Sri Aurobindo’s description of Indian and western culture, respectively: the (Luciferic) “Ascetic Refusal” and the (Ahrimanic) “Materialist Denial,” in *The Life Divine*, Book One, chs. 2 and 3, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972-).

“I,” as the way to overcome fear and lethargy. She supports a philosophy of freedom and “intuitive thinking as a spiritual path”—the title of the American edition of Steiner’s foundational book, *Philosophy of Freedom* (1893). Because Steiner’s writings and lectures include many fields and disciplines, it can seem overwhelming, but it has the advantage of showing how his basic insights and practices are supported by and have implications in a wide range of disciplines.

Michael Debus

Mary and Sophia,²⁵ by Michael Debus, a priest of the Christian Community,²⁶ combines thorough knowledge of Steiner’s writings with scholarly knowledge of Christian theology. This double source enables Debus to offer a clear understanding of Sophia and the Mother of Jesus within the Christian tradition, especially in relation to the ecumenical councils of Nicaea (325) and Ephesus (431). According to Steiner and Debus, the Nicæan Creed implicitly denies to Christ, and thereby to the Mother of Jesus, participation in the evolution of humanity. The Nicæan Creed, and thereby Christian theology and spirituality, have attributed to Christ and to Mary a divine status which by implication denies their evolution. This mistake led to the definition of Mary as *Theotokos*, Mother of God. According to Steiner’s esoteric research, Mary is the mother of Jesus, a human being who at his baptism received Christ, a divine being. In a further distortion, in 1950, Pope Pius XII declared the bodily assumption of Mary as a required article of Catholic faith. C. G. Jung’s reference to this papal declaration as “the most important

²⁵ See Debus, *Mary and Sophia: The Feminine Element in the Spiritual Evolution of Humanity*, trans. Tiegeler and Hindes (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2013).

²⁶ See Steiner, *First Steps in Christian Religious Renewal: Preparing the Ground for the Christian Community*, trans. Post, intro. Bamford, CW 342 (2010).

religious event since the Reformation” contributes to this denial of the spiritual evolution of Mary.²⁷

The Virgin Mother made--and presumably continues to make—unique, world transforming contributions to and through the Christian tradition but according to Steiner she is not the Sophia needed for spiritual thinking, the defining challenge of the present epoch and the next evolutionary stage of human development. In this respect, though not in others, Steiner himself and his relation to Sophia can be viewed as post-Christian, or perhaps “spiritual, not religious.” It is also true, however, that in many hundreds of lectures Steiner reveals his research on the profound karma of the Virgin Mary both on her own and in relation to Jesus Christ, and with John the Evangelist to whom she was joined by Christ at His crucifixion. Whereas Anthroposophia leads the effort to transform materialist thinking, Mary the Mother of Jesus continues to serve as a mediator between humans and divinity, and as the exemplar of sacrifice and love—exquisitely fused in Michelangelo’s *Pieta*.

As a result of the incarnation of Christ in Jesus, the unified being, Jesus Christ can be seen to permeate Christianity and western culture. The relationship of Mary the Mother of Jesus to Sophia, however, is more difficult to discern. Thanks to stories and fabulous Renaissance paintings, the Mother of Jesus is shown as a sublime, sacrificial mother and mediator, but Christians seem not to experience her adequately as an expression of the Heavenly Sophia. Some devotees of Mary want her proclaimed as divine, perhaps as the only Sophia, others as an easily accessible ideal mother. In Steiner’s view, she is between these two descriptions: she is a manifestation of the Heavenly Sophia and she is the uniquely, exquisitely fashioned being who

²⁷ C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, para. 732. Jung further explains that this dogma supported by more than a thousand years of belief, and then adds: “It does not matter at all that a physically impossible fact is asserted, because all religious assertions are physical impossibilities.”

combines two sublime souls--the young mother of Jesus in the Luke Gospel who gives birth in a stable in Bethlehem and was visited by shepherds, and the not-so-young upper-class mother of Jesus in the Matthew Gospel who was visited by the Magi from the Middle East and had to flee to Egypt. Even a cursory reading of the opening two chapters of the Luke and Matthew Gospels will reveal two incompatible narratives that Christian piety has fused into the Christmas story. Because the idea of two Marys, and therefore two Jesus children is too complex and too implausible, such a fusion is perfectly understandable.²⁸ And yet, patient, reverent, humble, contemplation of these two stories might prove efficacious intellectually and spiritually.

It is important to try to transform Steiner's research on Sophia into a living picture, a constant guide and inspiration. Nothing less can access a picture so radically different from the Christmas story at the heart of Christianity. To consider two Marys and two Jesus children requires a deep and reverent, and free, exercise of imagination--an effort to see the true image. While this essay is focused primarily on the results of Steiner's research, with a steady emphasis on thinking, Steiner's recommendations for a spiritual/anthroposophical life requires a commitment to, and integration, of three disciplines: thinking, feeling, and willing. These three are also the three primary yogas of the Bhagavadgita: in addition to *jnana-yoga*/knowledge, the Gita teaches *bhakti-yoga*/love, and *karma-yoga*/action.²⁹ While Steiner himself often gives the impression that he is all about thinking, research, and arguing against materialism, a close look at

²⁸ See Steiner, *According to Luke: The Gospel of Compassion and Love Revealed*, intro. and descriptive outline Robert McDermott (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2001).

²⁹ See Steiner, *The Bhagavad Gita and the West: The Esoteric Significance of the Bhagavad Gita and Its Relation to the Epistles of Paul*, ed. Robert McDermott, CW 142/146 (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2009).

his life, his commitments, eulogies, and prayers will show him to be a deep lover of the divine, of humanity, and Earth.

Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, symbolizes motherhood, divine feminine, acceptance and transcendence, and triumph of the divine over suffering and death. She is a symbol of purity and love. Presumably, the Philo-Sophia of Boethius and Dante, both Medieval Christians, was an expression of the Mother of Jesus. As the three fabulous Russian Sophiologists—Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky—were steeped in Christian mystical theology and practice it seems likely that the Sophia that they experienced was the Mary of the Christian tradition. Steiner views the Virgin Mary as the inspiration and guide for evolution of humanity on the path of love--which is distinct from but not separate from the path of wisdom.

The teaching and practice of Anthroposophy, especially as expressed in Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom*,³⁰ and equally in dozens of his lectures on the figures and events depicted in the New Testament, fosters the joining of love and wisdom, specifically wisdom as embodied and taught by Anthroposophia and love as exemplified by Mary the Mother of Jesus. While Anthroposophy (and the mission of Anthroposophia) according to Steiner is intended to be post-Christian (at least post-Christianity as he knew it, or as it has evolved thus far), it is obviously close to the Christian tradition.³¹ It is also true that Steiner referred to Buddhist anthroposophists as well as Christian anthroposophists.

³⁰ See Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 2008.

³¹ As an example, I am a member of the Anthroposophical Society in America, including its esoteric core, The School of Spiritual Science, am an active member of the Christian Community, and I am also an active member of Grace Cathedral, an inspiring Episcopal parish in San Francisco.

Valentin Tomberg

The biography of Valentin Tomberg (1900-73), perhaps the most profound Christian esotericist (also called Hermeticist) of the 20th century, is a powerful reminder that membership in a religious tradition is sometimes a challenge, and never more so than in Europe before, during, and after the Second World War. In his teen years in Russia, Tomberg was a Theosophist; from approximately age 20 to 40 living in Europe, he was a devoted Anthroposophist; and during the last three decades of his life, he was a Roman Catholic.³² Tomberg is the author of *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Esotericism*, a learned and brilliant volume that he wrote in the early 1960s “to an unknown friend.” He could have written these 600+ pages in his native Russian or in any number of European languages but he wrote in French in order to continue the traditions of Tarot and of Roman Catholic esotericism. The book has an obvious Roman Catholic perspective which invited the strongest possible endorsements by some of the leading 20th century Catholic mystics and theologians, including: two famous Benedictines monks, Bede Griffiths and Thomas Keating; Antoine Faivre, a scholar of European esotericism and a Roman Catholic; and a glowing afterword by Hans Urs von Balthasar, widely regarded as the greatest 20th-century Catholic theologian.

In his early 20s Tomberg wrote to Rudolf Steiner that he was committing himself to the service of Steiner’s anthroposophical research and to the School of Spiritual Science, the esoteric core of the Anthroposophical Society. Tomberg drew heavily from Steiner for his book *Christ and Sophia: Anthroposophic Meditations on the Old Testament, New Testament, and the*

³² For an informed and judicious biographical summary of Tomberg’s relationship to anthroposophy and Catholicism, see Bamford, “Introduction,” in Tomberg, *Christ and Sophia: Anthroposophic Meditations on the Old Testament, New Testament, and Apocalypse* (Great Barrington, MA, Steinerbooks, 2006), vii-xxxv.

Apocalypse written in 1938. There are traces of Steiner's influence throughout Tomberg's *Meditations*, written in the early 1960s, with scarcely any acknowledgement of this influence. Some anthroposophists automatically oppose any claims by anthroposophists that "go beyond Steiner." In a letter dated March 9, 1970, Tomberg explained to a correspondent that since science requires both universality and evidence by tests, he no longer considered Steiner's Spiritual Science to be scientific.³³

In 1938, Tomberg resigned from the Anthroposophical Society. Five years later he joined the Catholic Church, another reason why he has been the target of criticism by anthroposophists. Sergei Prokofieff is the most prominent of these critics.³⁴ Tomberg's discussion of Sophia and the Virgin Mary in his *Christ and Sophia* and in his *Meditations*, seem to me generally consistent with Steiner's research, and admittedly, but not improperly, beyond Steiner's research. Tomberg describes the biography of Sophia and the Virgin Mary with authority and deep insight. He was convinced that spiritual beings such as Sophia "have a kind of biography [that] extends through many thousands of years."³⁵ In the chapter entitled "Pentecost," Tomberg emphasizes the importance of Sophia in the heavenly realm and Mary on Earth in the center of the Apostles. The following passages are among dozens that could be quoted from this chapter especially with respect to Pentecost:

Because of the extremely complicated influences and experiences coming from the spiritual world, Mary had an astral body that was so purified it could receive revelations of Sophia and pour them out again as inspirations of the soul.... The spiritual revelation of the Pentecost could become soul through the Virgin Mary and be transmitted by her *as*

³³ *Anthroposophical Society News for Members*, March 2005, p. 34.

³⁴ See Prokofieff, *The Case Against Valentin Tomberg* (Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge, 1998).

³⁵ Tomberg, *Christ and Sophia*, 304.

soul to the disciples.³⁶ . . . Just as the earthly human circle formed around one human being (Mary), the circle of archangels enclosed one archangelic being (Sophia).³⁷

Because Tomberg was convinced that Pentecost provides the foundation for the future of Christianity—by which he means the body of souls, not particularly the institution—he helps us to see the ways that Sophia and Mary serve the relationship between Christ and humanity, and particularly the idea that Sophia and Mary are spiritually evolving. Tomberg integrates Christian esotericism and Christian theology, or the streams of wisdom and love. The following passage from his *Meditations* exemplifies his mature intuition concerning Sophia and Mary. This passage occurs in Tomberg’s beautiful letter on the Arcanum XIX, “The Sun”:

It is she—the “Virgin of light” of the *Pistis Sophia*, the Wisdom sung of by Solomon, the Shekinah of the Cabbala, the Mother, the Virgin, the pure celestial Mary—who is the soul of the light of the three luminaries, and who is both the source and the aim of Hermeticism. For Hermeticism is, as a whole, the aspiration to participation in knowledge of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Mother, Daughter and Holy Soul. It is not a matter of seeing the Holy Trinity with human eyes, but rather of seeing with eyes—and in the light—of Mary-Sophia. For just as no one comes to the Father but Jesus Christ (John xiv, 6), so does no one understand the Holy Trinity but by Mary-Sophia. . . . And just as the Holy Trinity became flesh in Jesus Christ, so did the light of the Holy Trinity become flesh in Mary-Sophia.³⁸

This passage and many similar ones call for a careful reading of Tomberg’s intuitions, almost all in the lineage of Steiner’s esoteric research. While it seems to me regrettable that Tomberg did not credit Steiner’s influence in his *Meditations*, his insights can nevertheless be appreciated as a creative synthesis of anthroposophy and Christian Hermeticism.

³⁶ Tomberg, *Christ and Sophia*, 306.

³⁷ Tomberg, *Christ and Sophia*, 310.

³⁸ Tomberg, *Meditations on the Tarot*, 547.

Conclusion

Steiner's esoteric research and interpretation of Sophia would seem an important understanding of Sophia in the West. It leaves to be developed an understanding of these Sophianic beings in relation to comparable beings in non-Christian traditions, including Avalokiteshwara, Quan Yin, Shakti/Kali and Durga, and the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The editors of this book consider these essays to be an important contribution to this profound task. May the exploration continue.

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