The Divine Feminine

All the major religions of the present world are androcentric in nature and misogynistic in practice. The following are some typical injunctions in the Christian scriptures:

> Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.
> And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (*I Corinthians* 14: 34-35)

> Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.
> But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (*1 Timothy* 2: 11-12)

These rulings are in spite of (or perhaps because of) women being more attentive to religious teachings, and participating more often in religious services than men (Pew Research Foundation, 2016). The two passages nevertheless serve a purpose – they provide clear evidence that the New Testament does not always represent the word of God.

The androcentricity of organized religion differs completely from prehistoric religious beliefs, wherein God was more likely female than male (Stone, 1978). Over recent centuries, however, female aspects of the godhead have become more and more recognized. This posting briefly considers some of the manifestations of the divine feminine, and mentions what might be involved in a feminist theology.

The Primordial Mother

In prehistoric families, the most amazing and incomprehensible event was the birth of a child. The role of the father was little understood, and mothers were revered as the primary source of this new life. A female force was therefore

naturally thought to be behind the creation of the universe, and was worshipped as a mother goddess (Graves, 1948; Neumann, 1963; Stone, 1978). Between 30,000 and 10,000 years BCE, small votive offering to the mother goddess – "Venus figurines" – were created throughout Europe. The illustration below shows (from left to right) the ceramic Venus of Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic, the limestone Venus of Willendorf in Austria and the serpentine Venus of Savignano in Italy:

Barstow (1983) describes these figurines:

> The goddess was faceless, as if to accentuate her universality, her ability to "stand for the power of the female. Lacking feet, she appeared to come straight up out of the earth, with which she was identified. Unclothed, her every body seem to have an efficacy. Often – but not always – she was big-breasted, and her hands were frequently placed under her breasts as if to display them. Many figurines show her entire body as ample, with huge breasts, belly and buttocks, as if the very plenitude of her body would ensure plentiful crops and hers. Sometimes she is pregnant, her

enlarged belly emphasized by special markings.

In neolithic times, most societies began to worship multiple divinities, though female forces were among the most important – Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Astarte in Canaan, Persephone in Greece. and Isis in Egypt. These goddesses often displayed two aspects: one related to life and fertility and the other to death and war.

These goddesses were widely worshipped, with their followers often participating in extended rites called the "mysteries."

Apuleius' Latin novel *The Golden Ass* (2nd Century CE) tells the story of Lucius who, while dabbling in the magic arts, inadvertently turned himself into an ass. At the end of the book, he attends one of the mysteries, and is changed back to human form through the power of Isis. The goddess announces herself:

> I am here before you, Lucius, moved by your prayers—mother of the natural world, mistress of all the elements, firstborn offspring of the ages, highest of the deities, queen of the dead, first among the gods, the manifestation in a single body of all the gods and goddesses. I control by my will the luminous summits of the sky, the salubrious breezes of the sea, and the mournful silence of the underworld. I am the single divine being, worshipped the world over in different forms, with varying rites and under a multitude of names. Some call me Juno, others Bellona, some Hecate, and yet others Rhamnusia. But the people on both sides of Ethiopia who are lit by the first rays of the rising sun, and the Egyptians, pre-eminent for their ancient knowledge, worship me with the proper rituals and by my true name: Queen Isis. (Translation of Singer and Finkelpearl, 2021, pp 158-60)

The illustration below shows a pectoral ornament in the form of a winged Isis from the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. In her right hand, she holds an *ankh*, the symbol for "life"; in her

left hand she holds what may be the hieroglyph for a sail, the symbol for the breath of life. On her head is a throne, indicating her majesty.

Judaism – Wisdom and Shekhinah

In the Hebrew scriptures Jahweh is most definitely male, and there is little mention of any female aspect to the deity. However, in *Proverbs* there are several passages spoken by the female figure of Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), one of which reads

> 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;
> Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. (*Proverbs*, 8 22-31)

Christians have interpreted this passage as referring to Christ the Son, who they believe was with God the Father before the world began. Christ is described as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" in *I Corinthians* 1:24.

This female figure of Wisdom in *Proverbs* is closely associated with *Sophia*– the goddess of wisdom and the creator of the world in Gnostic scriptures (Perkins, 1985).

Wisdom also became related to the concept of the *Shekhinah* – God's "presence" or "immanence" in the world. This concept was initially used to describe the holiness of the Ark of the Covenant, but expanded to include the idea of God's dwelling with his people. *Shekhinah* is manifest when believers gather to study the Torah, celebrate the Sabbath, or pray together. The Mishnah (probably derived from Jewish oral tradition in the centuries BCE) states

> If two sit together and there are words of Torah spoken between them, then the Shekhinah abides among them (*Pirkei Avot*, 3:2)

In the medieval period, the presence of God in the world was conceived as in terms of the ten *Sephiroth* of the *Kabbalah*. The tenth *Sephirah* is known either as *Malkuth* ("kingdom") or *Shekhinah* ("presence"). In Kabbalistic writings the *Shekhinah* became the female aspect of the Godhead (Smith, 1985; Scholem, 1991; Devine, 2014; Laura, 2015).

In the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (13th Century CE), the *Shekhinah* is considered as the intermediary between God and his people:

> Every message the King requires goes forth from this Lady's house. Any message from below that is sent to the King arrives first at the house of His Lady, and from there proceeds to the King. The Lady is thus the universal go-between, from above to below and from below to above. (*Zohar* 2:51a quoted by Green, 2002).

Scholem (1965) describes the uneasy status of *Shekhinah* in Jewish religious thought:

> This discovery of a feminine element in God, which the Kabbalists tried to justify by gnostic exegesis, is of course one of the most significant steps they took. Often regarded with the utmost misgiving by strictly Rabbinical, non-Kabbalistic Jews, often distorted into inoffensiveness by embarrassed Kabbalistic apologists, this mythical conception of the feminine principle of the Shekhinah as a providential guide of Creation achieved enormous popularity among the masses of the Jewish people, so showing that here the Kabbalists had uncovered one of the primordial religious impulses still latent in Judaism. (p. 105).

Christianity – Mother Mary

Mary, mother of Jesus, is not considered extensively in the Christian scriptures. Outside of five main episodes – the angelic annunciation of the forthcoming virgin birth, the visitation with Elizabeth, the nativity of Christ, presentation of Jesus in the temple, and the crucifixion, she is scarcely mentioned. In one brief episode she visited her son while he was teaching and was ignored (Mark 6: 31-34). However, Christ did acknowledge her at the crucifixion, telling John, "Behold thy Mother!" (John 19: 26-27).

Mary was not mentioned in the first version of the Nicene

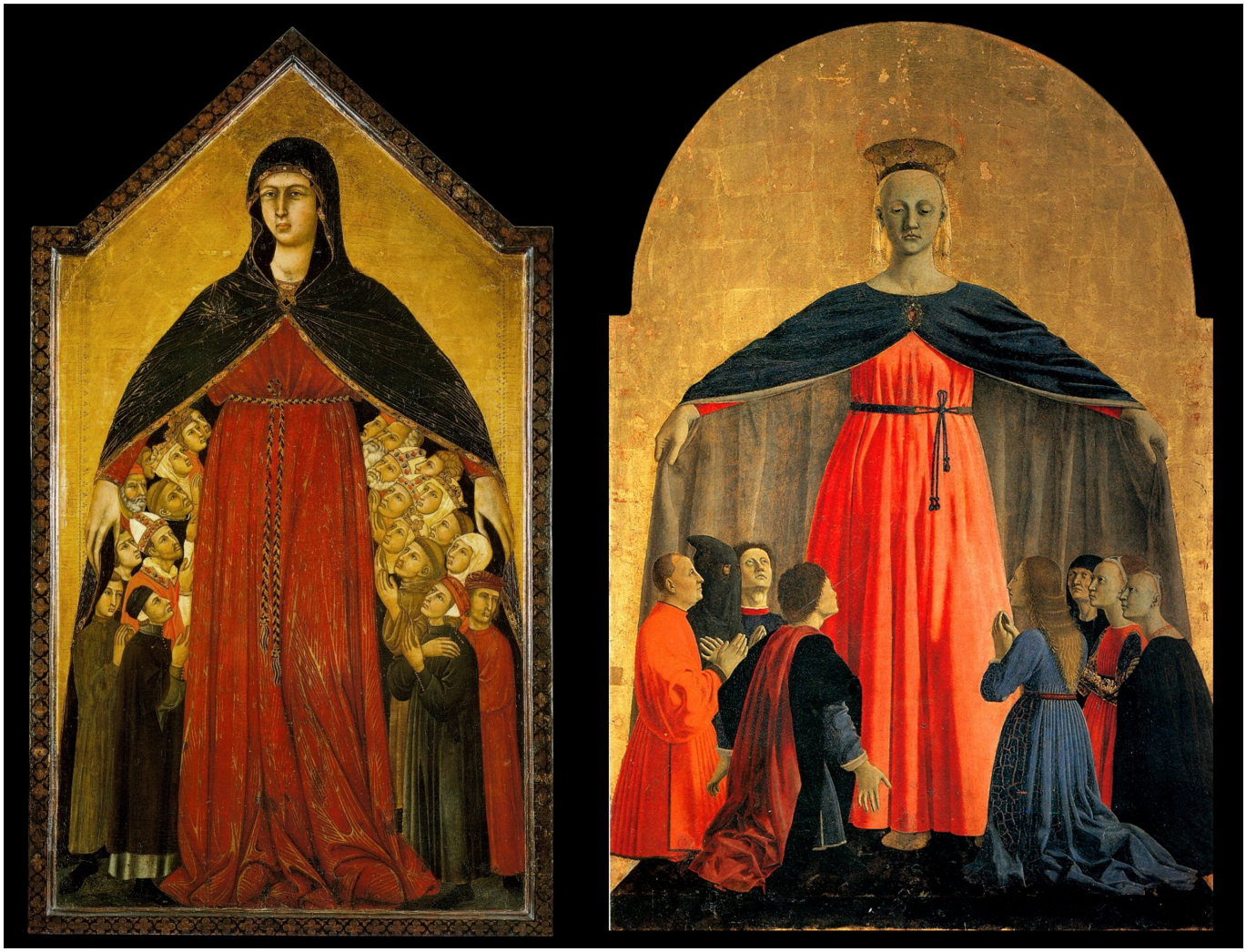
Creed of 325 CE, but acknowledged as the virgin mother of Christ in the revised version of the creed in 381 CE:

Jesus Christ …. who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man

Since Christ was both God and Man, his mother was special – *Theotokos*, the bearer of God. This was first pronounced at the council of Ephesus in 431 CE. Mary the mother of God has been long venerated in the Eastern churches. The illustration below shows the mosaic (9th Century CE) in the cathedral (now mosque) of the *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople, and the icon of Mary and the Infant Jesus of Vladimir (1131 CE).

After the turn of the 1st Millennium CE, Mary began to be more and more honored in the Western Church. No one really understands this change in religious feeling. Most of the new

Gothic Cathedrals in France were dedicated to *Notre Dame* (“our Lady”), and special Lady Chapels were built in English cathedrals. Believers thronged to images of Mary for consolation and for mercy. The following illustration shows two representations of the *Madonna della Misericordia* (“Lady of Mercy”), by Simone Martini (1310) and Piero della Francesca (1462).



Various traditions and beliefs have accumulated over the years so that now Marianism is an acknowledged subset of Christian beliefs, particularly in the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches (Johnston, 1985; Leith, 2021; Matter, 1983; Rubin, 2009). In 1568 the *Ave Maria* was included in the Roman Catholic Breviary. The most famous setting of the prayer is by Gounod (1859) based on Bach’s Prelude No 1 (1722).

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Hail

Mary, full of grace,
Dominus tecum the Lord is with thee
benedicta tu in mulieribus Blessed art thou amongst women,
et benedictus fructus ventris tuis, Jesu and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater dei, Holy Mary, Mother of God,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus pray for us sinners,
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. now and at the hour of our death.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/13-Ave-Maria.m4a

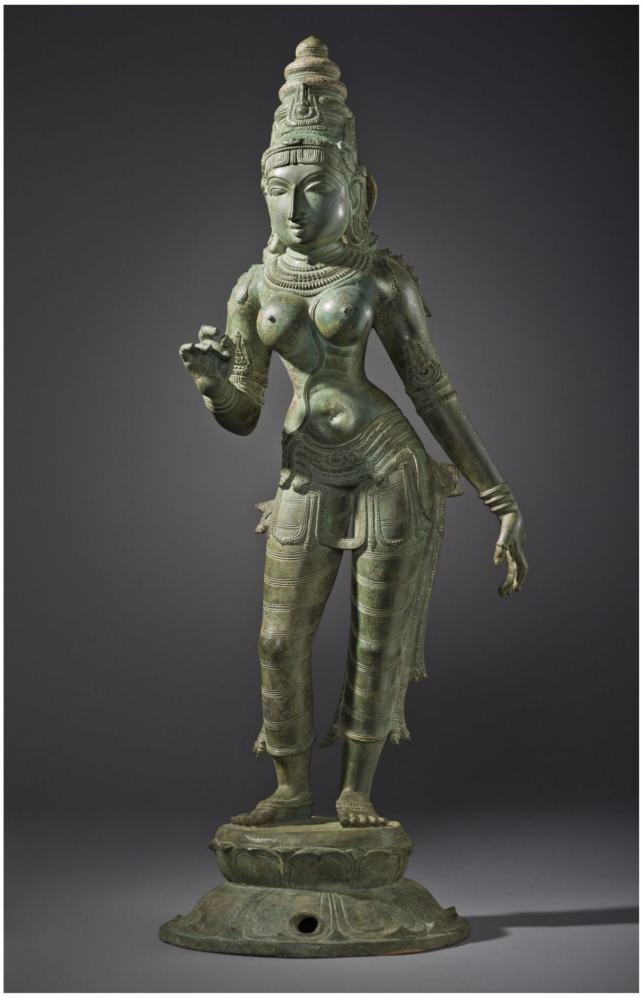
Theologians have long argued that Mary must have been herself conceived without sin so that she might carry the incarnation of God within her womb. This doctrine of the “immaculate conception” was discussed for many years, but only finally accepted by the Vatican in 1854. Since Mary was without sin, there was no need for her to die. Theologians therefore proposed that before her death she was instead taken up directly into heaven – “the assumption of the Virgin.” This idea finally becoming Catholic doctrine in 1950. Protestants reject both these doctrines. When it comes to Mary, the Christian churches have been loathe to allow their members the beliefs they long for.

Hinduism

In contrast with the Western (or Abrahamic) religions, Hinduism is adorned with goddesses of many types and purposes (Kinsley, 1986; Pattanaik, 2000). Eroticism is an acknowledged

part of divinity.

The supreme goddess *Mahadevi* is widely venerated. She changes form at will and goes by many names. She can exist alone as *Shakti,* the goddess of cosmic energy, or as Kali, the goddess of time and change. The illustration below shows a bronze statue of *Bhudevi,* the "Goddess of the Earth" (13th Century CE) from the Los Angeles Museum of Art



The female goddess often serves as the consort of a male divinity – *Parvati* with *Shiva,* and *Lakshmi* with *Vishnu*. Sometimes these pairs become unified into one deity – the androgynous *Ardhanarishvara,* whose right side is feminine and left side male. The illustration below shows a sandstone relief of *Shiva and Parvati* (11th Century CE) from the Dallas Museum of Art, and a bronze *Ardhanarishvara* (circa 1000 CE)

from the Los Angeles Museum of Art.

Buddhism

Buddhism is often considered as a religion without the need for gods or goddesses. Since the universe has existed forever there is no need to postulate a divine force that once created it. However, the Buddha in his various manifestations and many of his enlightened followers (the *Bodhisattvas,* from *bodhi,* knowledge, and *sattva,* being) are revered as sincerely as any of the gods in more definitely theistic religions.

The Buddha and most of the Bodhisattvas are male. The hierarchy of priests and monks in Buddhism are male (Faure, 2008). However, over the centuries the feminine has made its appearance.

One of the most important of the Bodhisattvas was known as

Avalokitasvara – "the lord (*isvara*) who gazes (*lokita*) down (*ava*) at the world." This Bodhisattva of Compassion is described as the "Regarder of the Cries of the World" (Reeves, 2008) in Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra* (the Sanskrit original deriving from the1st century CE, Chinese translations occurring in the third to sixth Centuries CE).

As the centuries passed and as Buddhism spread from its origin in India to Tibet, China and South East Asia, *Avalokitasvara* changed into female form (Yü, 2000). In Tibet, the Bodhisattva became *Tara* (Blofeld, 1979; Shaw, 2006). Tara herself is manifest in many different ways. Among them are white Tara, the goddess of Compassion, and green Tara, the goddess of Enlightenment. The illustration below shows an Indian stone sculpture of *Avalokitasvara* (9th Century CE) and a gilt copper-alloy casting of *Tara* (14th Century CE) from Tibet or Nepal and now in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. *Avalokitasvara* is holding a lotus flower. Tara's left hand shows the *mudra* (gesture) of teaching and her right hand the mudra of charity.

In China *Avalokitasvara* evolved into *Guanshiyin* (the Chinese translation of “the one who perceives the sounds of the world”) or *Guanyin* (pinyin; Kuan Yin in the Wade-Giles romanization). In Japan *Guanyin* became Kannon, re-assuming a male identity. The illustrations below shows a painted wooden carving of Guanyin (circa 1100 CE) in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas, and a colossal statue of Guanyin (2015) in the Tsz Shan Monastery in Hong Kong.

The Jesuits first arrived in China in the 16th Century. Christian concepts soon became part of life and culture in Southern China. One particular effect was the syncretism (from Greek *syn* together and *krassis* mixture) of *Guanyin* and the Virgin Mary (Paul, 1983; Reis-Habito, 1993). The illustration below from Pham (2021) shows two ivory carvings in the Metropolitan Museum of Ar in New York: a European representation of Mary (13th Century) and a Chinese representation of Guanyin (16th Century).

The Eternal Feminine

With the Scientific Revolution and the Age of the Enlightenment, reason began to exert itself in the affairs of the soul. The existence of God was either denied, or considered only in the abstract. However, cold reason could not handle the emotions, which came to the fore in the Romantic Movement. Feminine forces were the means to handle feelings.

At the end of Goethe's *Faust Part II* (1831), Faust, who had sold his soul to the devil in order to achieve knowledge and power, is saved from damnation by the intercession of female heavenly powers. Their final chorus in the play celebrates the power of the "Eternal Feminine."

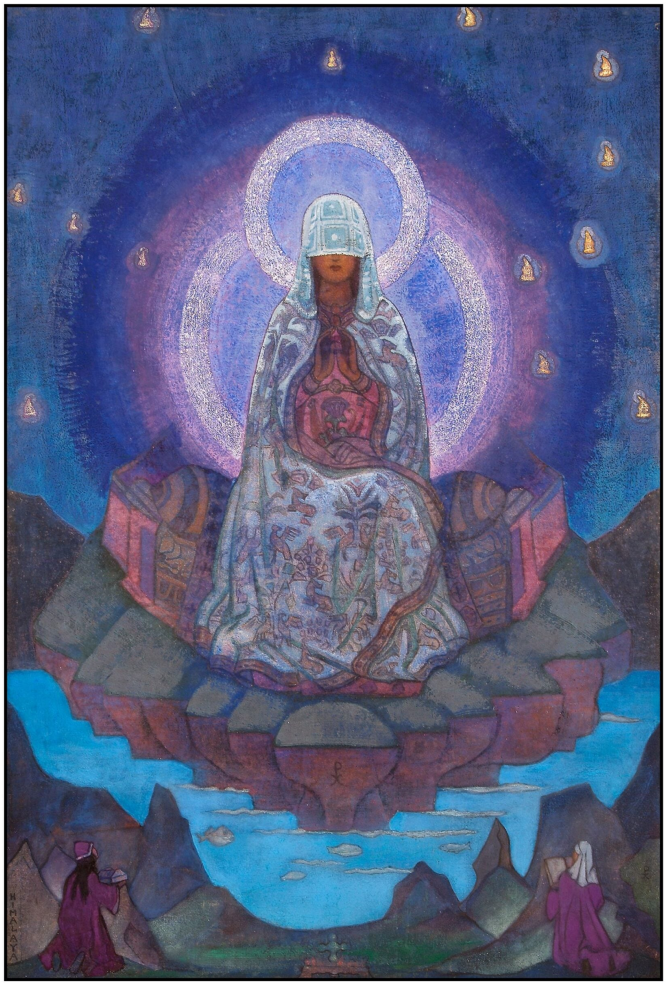
Alles Vergängliche	All that has happened
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;	Is only a parable;
Das Unzulängliche	The insufficient
Hier wird's Ereignis;	Is now fulfilled;
Das Unbeschreibliche	The indescribable

Hier ist’s getan;	Is now realized;
Das Ewig-Weibliche	The Eternal Feminine
Zieht uns hinan.	Leads us upward.

The chorus has been set to music by Schumann in his Scenes from Goethe’s Faust (1853), Liszt in his Faust Symphony (1880) and by Mahler in his Symphony No 8 (1910). The following is the Mahler version:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/9-12-Mahler_-Symphony-8-In-E-Flat.m4a

Theosophy



From 1875 to the middle of the 20th Century the Theosophical Movement exerted an uneasy influence on our thinking. Under

the initial direction of Helena Blavatsky (1831 -1891), the movement combined Western esotericism and spiritualism with Eastern religious thought, and added a dash of charlatanism. Theosophy did promote of peace in a world enamoured of war and it did increase Western understanding of Eastern spiritual ideas. However, it ultimately foundered on its own fakery. The illustration on the right shows a painting of *The Mother of the World* (1937) by the Theosophist painter and explorer Nicholas Roerich.

The Gaia Hypothesis

In the 1970s, studies of how the Earth's atmosphere constantly maintained parameters of temperature and pH that were optimum for the continuation of life led to the Gaia hypothesis, named after the Greek Goddess of the Earth, the primordial mother of all life:

the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate. The notion of the biosphere as an active adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis we are calling the 'Gaia' hypothesis (Lovelock and Margulis, 1974)

According to the Gaia hypothesis, human life is just a component of a larger self-regulating organism, the planetary biosphere. Some are skeptical of this hypothesis, claiming it describes the Earth's process as determined by its future ends – teleological – rather than by its antecedent causes – mechanistic. However, just because science does not easily accommodate purpose does not mean that there is no underlying purpose to the universe.

The Gaia hypothesis has gained much recent support from the modern environmental movement. In some sense humanity has become a cancer on the life of the planet. Unchecked climate change threatens the homeostasis of the world and the life of

everyone.

Feminist Theology

During the past few decades, feminist philosophers have challenged the androcentricity of the Christianity and Judaism (Anderson, 1998; Christ, 2003; Goldenberg, 1979; Johnson, 1984, 1992). These thinkers have pointed out the unfairness and inappropriateness of restricting the priesthood to men. And they have criticized mainstream theology for its focus on logic at the expense of intuition. One cannot prove the existence of God, but one can feel it.

Many people handle the unknowns of life by believing in the ethical instructions and the explanatory narratives that are available in religion. Science does not teach us what to do and does not always get us through the night. By providing a purpose to life and by promising ways to approach suffering and death, religion can help. Feminist religion – "theology" (Goldenberg, 1979) with its stress on grace and compassion promises to be far more effective than present mainstream theology.

References

Anderson, P. S. (1998). *A feminist philosophy of religion: the rationality and myths of religious belief*. Blackwell.

Apuleius (2nd Century CE, selected by Singer, P., translated by Finkelpearl, E. D., and illustrated by Kendel, A., & Kendel, V., 2021). *The golden ass*. Liveright (division of W. W. Norton).

Barstow, A. L. (1983). The prehistoric goddess. In C. Olson (Ed). *The Book of the goddess, past and present: an introduction to her religion*. (pp 7-15). Crossroad.

Blofeld, J. (1979). Kuan Yin and Tara: Embodiments of wisdom-compassion. *Tibet Journal*, 4(3), 28-36

Christ, C. P. (2003). *She who changes: re-imagining the divine in the world*. Palgrave-Macmillan.

Devine, L. (2014). How Shekhinah became the God(dess) of Jewish Feminism*. Feminist Theology, 23*(1) 71–91.

Faure, B. (2008). *The power of denial: Buddhism, purity, and gender*. Princeton University Press.

Graves, R. (1948, amended and enlarged, 1961). *The White Goddess; a historical grammar of poetic myth.* Faber and Faber.

Green, A. (2002). Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic symbol in its historical context. *AJS Review, 26*(1), 1-52.

Goldenberg, N. R. (1979). *Changing of the gods: feminism and the end of traditional religions*. Beacon Press

Johnson, E. A. (1984). The incomprehensibility of God and the image of God male and female. *Theological Studies*, *45*(3), 441–465.

Johnson, E. A. (1985). The Marian tradition and the reality of women. *Horizons*, *12*(1), 116–135.

Johnson, E. A. (1992). *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse*. Crossroad.

Kinsley, D. R. (1986). *Hindu goddesses: visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition*. University of California Press. Available at Arkiv.org

Laura, J. (2015). Kabbalah: in its beginnings. *Women in Judaism*, *12*(2), 1–16.

Leith, M. J. W. (2021). *The Virgin Mary: a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Lovelock, J. E., & Margulis, L. (1974). Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis.

Tellus, 26, 2-10.

Matter, E. A. (1983). The Virgin Mary: a Goddess? In C. Olson (Ed). *The Book of the goddess, past and present: an introduction to her religion*. (pp 80-96). Crossroad.

Neumann, E. (1963*, second edition* 1972, *translated by R. Manheim,*). *The great mother: an analysis of the archetype.* Princeton University Press.

Pattanaik, D. (2000). *The Goddess in India: the five faces of the eternal feminine.* Inner Traditions International.

Paul, D. (1983) Kuan-Yin: Savior and savioress in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. In C. Olson (Ed). *The Book of the goddess, past and present: an introduction to her religion*. (pp 161-175). Crossroad.

Perkins, P. (1985). Sophia and the Mother-Father: the Gnostic Goddess. In C. Olson (Ed). *The Book of the goddess, past and present: an introduction to her religion*. (pp 97-109). Crossroad.

Pew Research Center (2016). The gender gap in religion around the world. (March 22, 2016).

Pham, K.D. (2021). Compassion, Mercy, and Love: Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Reeves, G. (2008). *The Lotus Sutra: a contemporary translation of a Buddhist classic*. Wisdom Publications.

Reis-Habito, M. (1993). The Bodhisattva Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 13, 61-69

Rubin, M. (2009). *Mother of God: a history of the Virgin Mary*. Yale University Press.

Scholem, G. (1965, reprinted 1996). *On the Kabbalah and its symbolism*. Schocken Books.

Scholem, G. (1991). The feminine element in divinity. In G. Scholem. *On the mystical shape of the Godhead: basic concepts in the Kabbalah*. (pp 140-196). Schoken Books.

Shaw, M. E. (2006). *Buddhist goddesses of India*. Princeton University Press.

Smith, C. (1985). The symbol of the Shekhinah: the feminine side of God. *European Judaism*, *19*(1), 43–46.

Stone, M. (1978). *When God was a woman*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Yu¨, C.-F. (2000). *Kuan-yin the Chinese transformation of Avalokites´vara*. Columbia University Press.

Wine-Cup Immortal

Li Bai (701-762 CE), also known as Li Po, was one of the famous Tang dynasty poets who called themselves the *Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup* (an irreverent allusion to the Eight Immortals of Taoism). Li Bai wrote prolifically, and over 1000 of his poems survive. Much of his life is mythical, the stuff of novels rather than of history (Elegant, 1997). He was a devotee of Taoism, a fine swordsman, and a great lover of wine. In his youth he served the emperor. After becoming involved in one of the rebellions, however, he was exiled from the court. He then spent much of his later life wandering “beyond the gorges” in the hinterland of Imperial China. Legend has it that he died drunkenly trying to embrace the moon’s reflection in the Yangtze River, but his death was perhaps a suicide. The illustrated portrait (from the Tokyo National Museum) was painted by Liang Kai in the early 13th century. The seal in the upper right corner signals that the painting was owned by Anigo, an important official in the Imperial court of the Yuan dynasty.

Appreciating Chinese poetry requires seeing as well as hearing. The beauty of the calligraphy is as important to the poetry as the music of the words. The poems are therefore difficult to assess without some feeling for the characters in which they are written, since these allude to meanings beyond

those directly expressed by the spoken words. This post therefore begins with a few notes on Chinese characters.

Some Chinese characters derive from pictograms (simplified images):

Pictogram	Character	Sound	Meaning
	日	rì	sun
	月	yuè	moon
	山	shān	mountain
	水	shuǐ	water
	雨	yǔ	rain
	目	mù	eye
	人	rén	person
	木	mù	tree

Other characters derive from ideograms (graphic representations of an idea):

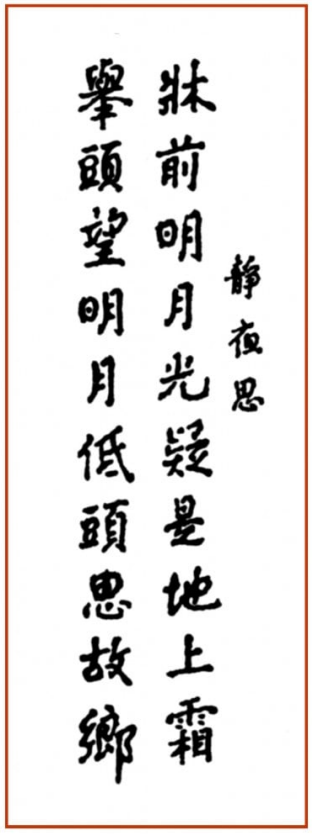
上	shàng	above	下	xià	below
中	zhōng	middle	不	bù	not
一	yī	one	二	èr	two
三	sān	three	五	wǔ	five

Most characters are formed by combining other characters. Some of the combinations are based on the meaning of the components; others are based on their sound:

木 (mù, tree)	+	木 (mù, tree)	=	林 lín	forest
口 (kǒu, mouth)	+	“away”	=	言 yán	words
日 (rì, sun)	+	月 (yuè, moon)	=	明 míng	bright
女 (nǚ, woman)	+	子 (zǐ, child)	=	好 hǎo	good

In Li Bai’s name, the character Li means “Plum” – a tree on top with many children (blossoms) below. The character Bai means “white” – it originally comes from a pictogram of an acorn (which is white inside).

Chinese poetry has a long history. *The Book of Poetry* was compiled around 600 BCE. Confucius (551-479 BCE) made it an essential part of the education of a scholar or statesman. By the time of Li Bai court poetry had become quite regular – common forms were an octet or a quatrain of five-syllable lines, with every second line rhyming. The following quatrain is one of Li Bai’s most famous poems. The English translation is by Arthur Cooper and the Chinese calligraphy is by Shui Chien-Tung (Cooper 1973):



Quiet Night Thoughts

Before my bed there is bright moonlight

So that it seems like frost on the ground;

Lifting my head I watch the bright moon,

Lowering my head I dream that I’m home.

Chinese poetry is generally written from top to bottom and from right to left. For simplicity, the following representation of the poem together with the word for word translation presents the characters from left to right to facilitate listening to the sound and following the translations.

靜夜思	Quiet Night Thoughts					jìng yè sī				
床前明月光	bed	front	bright	moon	shine	chuáng	qián	míng	yuè	guāng
疑是地上霜	suspect	is	ground	top	frost	yí	shì	dì	shàng	shuāng
舉頭望明月	raise	head	gaze	bright	moon	jǔ	tóu	wàng	míng	yuè
低頭思故鄉	lower	head	think	old	home	dī	tóu	sī	gù	xiāng

The original Chinese for Quiet Night Thoughts is from Zong-Qi Cai's anthology (2008). The reading of the poem in Chinese (by an unknown reader) is from the sound files associated with the anthology:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/lipo_quiet-night-thoughts.mp3

The following is an octet of Li Bai that celebrates the joys of drinking by moonlight:

花間一壺酒	flowers	among	one	pot	wine	huā jiā yī hú jiǔ
獨酌無相親	alone	drink	no	mutual	dear	dú zhuó wú xiāng qīn
舉杯邀明月	lift	cup	invite	bright	moon	jǔ bēi yāo míng yuè
對影成三人	face	shadow	become	three	men	duì yǐng chìng sān rén
月既不解飲	moon	not	not	understand	drink	yuè jì bù jiě yǐn
影徒隨我身	shadow	vainly	follow	my	body	yǐng tú suí wǒ shēn
暫伴月將影	temporary	with	moon	with	shadow	zàn bàn yuì jiāng yǐng
行樂須及春	practise	pleasure	must	catch	spring	xíng lè xū jí chūn
我歌月徘徊	I	sing	moon	linger	to-and-fro	wǒ gē yuè pái huí
我舞影零亂	I	dance	shadow	scatter	disorderly	wǒ wǔ yǐng líng luàn
醒時同交歡	wake	time	together	exchange	joy	xǐng shí tóng jiāo huān
醉後各分散	rapt	after	each	separate	disperse	zuì hòu gè fēn sǎn
永結無情遊	always	tie	no	passion	friendship	yǒng jiē wú qíng yóu
相期邈雲漢	mutual	expect	distant	cloud	river	xiāng qī miǎo yún hàn

A translation of the poem by Arthur Waley (1919) reads

Drinking Alone by Moonlight

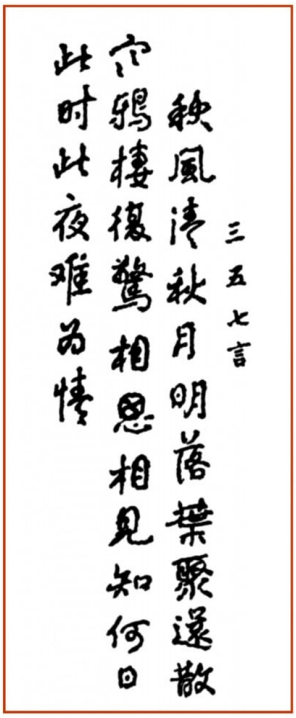
A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;
Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,
For he, with my shadow, will make three men.

The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;
Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.
Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave<
I must make merry before the Spring is spent.
To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;
In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.
While we were sober, three shared the fun;
Now we are drunk, each goes their way.
May we long share our odd, inanimate feast,
And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.

Chinese poetry has both rhyme and rhythm (Liu, 1962; Cai, 2008). The rhymes often come at the end of every second line (e.g. in Drinking Alone by Moonlight). Rhymes are mainly determined by the vowels, and less related to the attendant consonants. However, many of the rhymes depend on pronunciation that was current in the time that the poem was written, and may not always be apparent in the way the poem sounds nowadays. Chinese is a tonal language with the vowels showing unchanging, descending, descending-ascending, and ascending pitches. These changes are represented in the accents above the pinyin transliterations. The first type of vowel has a longer duration than the others. The rhythm of the poetry depends on both the duration of the vowel and the different changes in pitch.

Recitations of the poem *Drinking Alone by Moonlight* are available in both English and Chinese at Librivox.

Li Bai also invented new poetic forms. The following poem has lines of three, five and seven words (translation and calligraphy in Cooper, 1973).



Three five seven words

The autumn wind is light,
The autumn moon is bright;

Fallen leaves gather but then disperse,
A cold crow roosts but again he stirs.

I think of you, and wonder when I'll see you again?
At such an hour, on such a night, cruel is love's pain!

The translation of Chinese poetry is difficult. The first translations of Chinese poetry into a European language were in French by Judith Gautier and the Marquis d'Hervey Saint-

Denis in the middle of the 19th Century. These were further translated from French into German by Hans Bethge, who published *Die Chinese Flöte* (Chinese Flute) in 1907.

Gustav Mahler adapted seven of the Bethge poems for his 1911 song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*. The following are excerpts from the beginning of two of the songs, translated from the German to English. The tenor is Fritz Wunderlich; Otto Klemperer conducts the New Philharmonia Orchestra; the recording is by EMI in 1967.

> **Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde** (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow)
>
> The wine already beckons from the golden goblet,
> but don't drink just yet – first, I'll sing you a song!
> The song of sorrow shall sound out
> in laughter in your soul. When sorrow draws near,
> the gardens of the soul lie wasted,>
> both joy and song wilt and die.>
> Dark is life, dark is death.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_trinklied_beginning.mp3

Von der Jugend (Of Youth)

> In the middle of the little lake
> stands a pavilion made of green
> and white porcelain.
> Like a tiger's back
> the bridge of jade arches
> across to the pavilion.
> Friends sit in the little house,
> beautifully dressed, drinking, chatting;
> some are writing down verses.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_jugend-beginning.mp3

The “translations” are full of mistakes. The line “Dark is Life, dark is Death” (Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod) is an interpolation that fits with the idea of Li Bai’s poem but is not so directly stated in the original Chinese. The porcelain pavilion is actually the pavilion owned by someone named Tao (which can also mean “porcelain”). Bethge called his poems *Nachdictungen* (recreations). The Mahler Archives has a wonderful website that describes the changes in the translations leading to *Das Lied von der Erde.*

The first major translations of Chinese poetry into English were by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in his 1915 book *Cathay*. At the time, Pound knew no Chinese, and his translations were based on the notes that Ernest Fenellosa, an American art historian working in Tokyo, had made from discussions with two Japanese professors (Mori and Ariga). These notes were given posthumously to Pound by Fenellosa’s widow. Despite his lack of any understanding of the originals, Pound’s translations are true and forceful (Yip, 1969). Most of the poems in *Cathay* are by Rihaku – the way that the characters of Li Bai’s name are pronounced in Japanese. As well as the *hiragana* and *katakana* symbols (*hiragana* and *katakana*), Japanese writing also uses many Chinese characters (*kanji*), but these are pronounced differently from the Chinese.

The following is one of Li Bai’s poems that became famous with the Pound translation. Pound combined the poem with a summary of Fenellosa’s notes that has its own cryptic beauty

The Jewelled Stair Grievance

> The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
> It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
> And I let down the crystal curtain
> And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

NOTE: Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore

a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of the weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

More recent translations are by David Hinton (1996):

> Night long on the jade staircase, white
> dew appears, soaks through gauze stockings.
> She lets down crystalline blinds, gazes out
> through jewel lacework at the autumn moon.

and by Charles Egan (in Z-Q Cai, 2008);

> On jade stairs, the rising white dew
> Through the long night pierces silken hose
> Retreating inside, she lowers crystal shades
> And stares at the glimmering autumn moon.

The story behind the poem is only hinted at. A lady at the palace in love with the emperor finds herself no longer in his fancy. The autumn moon suggests the cooling of their summer passion. The crystal curtains suggest that the scene is viewed through tears. Pound puts the poem into the first person. Though not indicated in the original, this personal point of view accentuates the longing and the regret. Another translation that follows Pound’s use of the first person is available on Mark Alexander’s webpage which provides translations for many different Chinese poems.

Discerning the true meaning of a poem through different translations is a little like looking for the numinous through different scriptures.

Another of Pound’s translations records the story of a young woman, married in youth and innocence, learning to love her husband and finding out that love can bring sorrow as well as happiness.

The River Merchant’s Wife

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse;
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden –
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fo-Sa.

Li Bai was very musical and many of his poems deal with the sounds of the lyre or the flute. Harry Partch composed *17 lyrics of Li Po* in the early 1930s using the translations of Shigeyoshi Obata (1928). He tried to remove the music from the tonality conventions of the Western traditions. The following is one of the lyrics. It is intoned by Stephan Kalm (who provides the flute sounds as well as the words) with accompaniment on tenor violin by Ted Mook. The recording is by Tzadik, 1995.

Whence comes this voice of sweet bamboo?
Flying in the dark?
It flies with the spring wind,
Hovering over the city of Lo.
How memories of home come back tonight!
Hark! the plaintive tune of “Willow Breaking”,p>

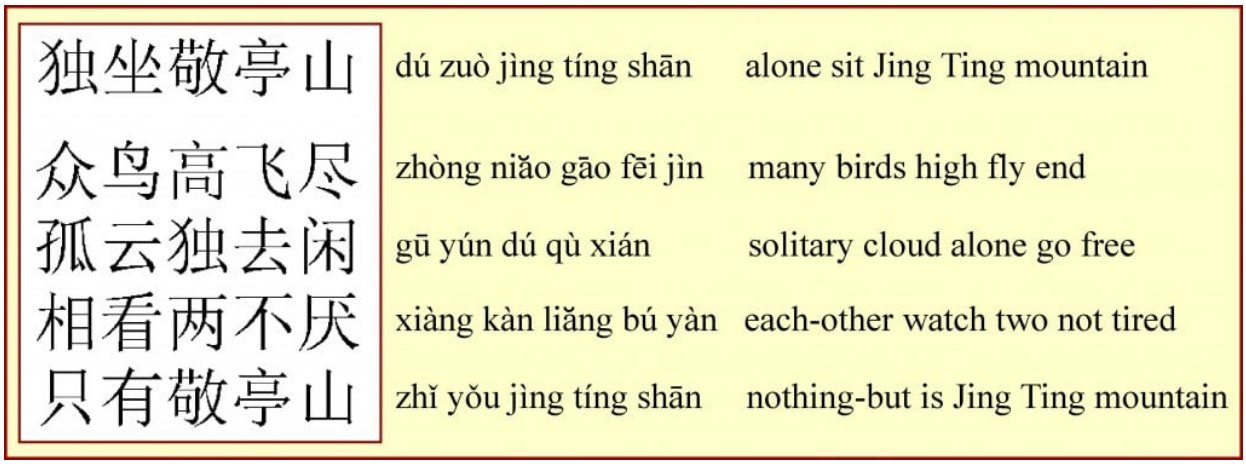
https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/partch_lipo_flute.mp3

(“Willow-Breaking” is the name of a sad folk song.)

Li Bai spent some time in the monasteries that were scattered through the hills of China, and became adept at meditation, or *zazen*. One of his poems (translated by Sam Hamill, 2000) gives the essence of this process. Jing Ting mountain is near Xuancheng city in the Anhui province of China. Further notes on the poem and a version of the poem in song are available on the webpage of Shirley Yiping Zhang.

Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.



Bynner, W., & Kiang, K. (1957). *The jade mountain: a Chinese anthology, being three hundred poems of the T'ang Dynasty*, 618-908. New York: Knopf.

Cai, Z-Q. (2008). *How to read Chinese poetry: a guided anthology.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Cooper, A. R. V. (1973). *Li Po and Tu Fu*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

Elegant, S. (1997). *A floating life: the adventures of Li Po: an historical novel*. Hopewell,NJ: Ecco Press.

Hamill, S. (2000). *Crossing the Yellow River: Three hundred poems from the Chinese*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions.

Hefling, S. E. (2000). *Mahler, Das Lied von der Erde*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Pres

Hinton, D. (1996). *The selected poems of Li Po*. New York: New Directions

Obata, S. (1922). *The works of Li Po, the Chinese poet*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Pound, E., (1915). *Cathay.* London: E. Mathews.

Waley, A., (1919). *The poet Li Po, A.D. 701-762*. London: East

and West.

Weinberger, E., (2003). *The New Directions anthology of classical Chinese poetry*. New York, NY: New Directions

Yip, W., (1969). *Ezra Pound's Cathay*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Liu, J. J. Y. (1962). *The art of Chinese poetry*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.