TREE OF LIFE, WOMB OF CREATION
Ecology and Sexuality in the Christian Contemplative Tradition

Gunnar Gabriel Gjermundsen, University of Oslo

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Abstract: *This article explores the intersection of Christian contemplative tradition and ecofeminism to address the spiritual roots of ecological imbalance. Through a critical examination of the Western tradition's historical estrangement from nature and the divine feminine, the article proposes a contemplative ecology rooted in the Hebrew Wisdom tradition and the ancient Christian practice of "natural contemplation," informed by a new reading of the Song of Songs. By integrating the divine feminine sheltered within the Wisdom tradition, as well as recognizing the deep ecological and sacramental implications of the Song, the article suggests a way to heal the rift between rationalist, androcentric, and patriarchal consciousness and its estranged other: woman, body, sex, and earth. Drawing on the biblical figure of the Tree of Life as a symbol of the interconnectedness of all earthly life with its divine ground, the article argues that inviting this estranged other back into the center of sacramental life is key to the work of ecological healing.*

> You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
> you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.
> —Song of Songs 4:12
>
> Speak to the earth, and it will teach you.
> —Job 12:8*

INTRODUCTION

A guiding intuition of contemplative ecology is that inner and outer nature are not fundamentally separate, and that the imbalances and degradations we currently witness in the external environment are reverberations of a prior experiential alienation from the sacred within human beings.[1] Contemplative practice can refresh our awareness so that we can again feel, see, hear, and touch both inner and outer nature in ways that reveal its indwelling holy beauty, thus renewing our capacity for care and responsibility toward the world we inhabit. Given Christianity's global spread and formative role in shaping the West-led global culture instrumental to planetary exploitation, a series of questions now come to the fore: Does a contemplative ecological stream even exist within the Christian tradition? Or must we join ranks with the many critics following in

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the footsteps of Lynn White Jr., assessing Christianity as irredeemably anthropocentric and dualistic?[2] Is a contemplative ecological renewal of Christianity possible?

In his seminal essay, White did hold out a possibility that Eastern Orthodox Christianity might offer resources for such a renewal, given its sacramental worldview. Indeed, it is precisely by looking East that some scholars in recent years have retrieved such resources, for instance in the monasticism of the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean, or in Byzantine theology, cosmology, and spirituality.[3] Yet these traditions are steeped in a Platonic ethos of ascent from the bondage of body and materiality to union with a suprasensible divine reality, an ethos that stands in tension with concern for the earth as an end in itself. Furthermore, the work of ecofeminism and ecofeminist theology over the last few decades has pointed out how Christian theology, whether contemplative or not, has been formulated and promulgated almost exclusively by men. These male-coded doctrines are bound to leave a profound blind spot regarding distinctively feminine ways of knowing and being in the world. It has been argued that Christianity's patriarchal and androcentric orientation reinforces a masculinist spirituality and rationality, privileging the masculine over the supposedly sinful cluster of women, bodies, emotions, sexuality, and even nature herself.[4] The "dominion" over nature that Adam was given (Gen. 1:28 New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]) has in Abrahamic cultures historically extended to dominion also over his female counterpart. This double control over both women and nature morphed in techno-scientific modernity into the "rape" and "death" of nature, emblematic of our current situation of environmental exploitation, degradation, and harm.[5]

The aim of the present article is to chart a course for a Christian contemplative ecology that fully takes onboard and allows itself to be transfigured by this ecofeminist critique. There are two keys to such transfiguration. The first is setting early Christian contemplative practice within the matrix of the Hebrew Wisdom tradition and acknowledging the experience of the divine feminine sheltered within this tradition. The second key is a renewed appreciation for the sacred erotic polarity that dwells at the heart of creation, between the masculine and feminine sexual archetypes embedded in both cosmic and human nature, and a reevaluation of the nature of sexuality. The mystery of Eros has been explored in both Late Antique and medieval Christian commentarial literature on the Song of Songs, and within the context of patristic teachings on *theosis*—mystical union with God—but always highly allegorized and spiritualistic; its full implications for embodied earthly life has so far been shied away from.[6]

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of Contemplative Studies, I will engage a number of different fields of study in this article. Section 1 introduces the ancient Christian practice of natural contemplation, which functions as the guiding light throughout the whole article, although, as I will argue, it is invited to undergo transformation in the face of ecofeminist critique. I draw from diverse voices in the patristic tradition, yet Maximus the Confessor is offered the most space throughout the article due to the depth and breadth of his vision. In section 2 we turn to the ecofeminist argument, looking at environmental harm as grounded in a historically deep-rooted sexual imbalance and the theological elision of the feminine. In section 3, historical and biblical scholarship, Religious Studies, and archaeological findings converge to give us the contours of the evolving story of the divine feminine across Jewish and Christian history, pointing to how this dimension can impact contemplative practice for it to truly take in the ecofeminist critique. Section 4 is a constructive theological attempt to describe ways of working contemplatively to address

sexual-ecological imbalance, guided by the Song of Songs and the practice of natural contemplation. In conclusion, a hypothetical erotic-energetic diagnosis of the ecological imbalance will be proposed.

Throughout my reading of the ancient sources, and especially in section 4, I am guided by a hermeneutic approach that the scholar of Jewish mysticism Elliot Wolfson has recently termed "futural remembering." This assumes that "the agency of anamnesis . . . has the capacity to redeem the past" by discovering in it new "meaning that it never had except as the potential to become what it is not."[7]

1. NATURAL CONTEMPLATION: SEEING NATURE AS WISDOM AND BEAUTY

It has been customary in scholarship to see the patristic tradition of natural contemplation (*theoria physike*) as rooted in the Christian fathers' Greek philosophical heritage.[8] However, an argument can be made that it is equally plausible and fitting to regard natural contemplation as inspired by the Hebrew tradition, specifically the Wisdom literature as well as some of the psalms. I will assume this as a premise here at the outset, while offering corroborating evidence for it along the way, mainly in this first section and in section 3. In clear resonance with Psalm 19:1–2, Paul formulates in Romans 1:20 perhaps the first definition of what would later be called natural contemplation: "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (NRSV). One of the early Greek fathers, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), builds on Paul, yet goes a step further:

> It does not seem to me that the Gospel is speaking of the firmament of heaven as some remote habitation of God when it advises us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, because the divine is equally present in all things, and, in like manner, it pervades all creation and it does not exist separated from being, but the divine nature touches each element of being with equal honor, encompassing all things within itself.[9]

Why is it, then, that so few of us experience a world pervaded by the divine? In other words, why is there suffering and evil in the world? Christian tradition's answer is the mythopoetic story of the "Fall" of Adam and Eve. Humanity once existed in a kind of primordial harmony with the Garden of Eden when they applied their free will to eat of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 3:1–24). At this "the eyes of both of them were opened" (Gen. 3:7), and God noted that they had "become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22). Then God clothed them in "garments of skin" (Gen. 3:21) and drove them out of the Garden to prevent them from eating also of the Tree of Life "and live forever" (Gen. 3:21), and placed "cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way" to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:23–24), which was located, together with the Tree of Knowledge, at the very center of the Garden (Gen. 2:9).

In the contemplative tradition of the early Church, which developed in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor in the first few centuries CE, this story was understood as containing, in allegorical form, a teaching about human nature, its current configuration, and how it may be transformed contemplatively. Maximus the Confessor (d. 622)—who synthesized the monastic and theological tradition before him—explains that after the Fall "all those with a share in human nature had their

power of intellect and reason narrowed to the surface appearances of sensible objects, and had no conception of any reality beyond what could be perceived through the senses."[10] So the Fall is a kind of awakening—"their eyes were opened"—yet an awakening into an awareness exclusively oriented to the conceptually mediated three-dimensional world of material reality, and the task of physical survival in it. This kind of consciousness issuing from the Tree of Knowledge creates a dualistic split in the human mind based on the basic conceptual categories of "like" and "dislike"—akin to Freud's pleasure principle. According to Maximus:

> If man . . . confines himself solely to discriminating between pleasure and pain, then he "eats" from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, he succumbs to the irrationality of sensation, having the ability only to discriminate with respect to what sustains bodies [and] embraces pleasure as something good, and rejects what is painful as evil.[11]

According to Maximus, human beings are trapped. They seek pleasure and flee pain, but never find abiding peace and wellbeing, independent of the shifting sands of sensory experience and material circumstances. The problem goes even deeper, however. Maximus explains that the root of "evil is ignorance of the benevolent cause of beings" and that "in our own weakness and fleshly attitudes, we have preferred material things to the commandment of love."[12] Losing sight of the love that sustains and unifies all things, "there has developed a perpetual war . . . to the mutual destruction of all."[13] When other human beings are seen with a purely "fleshly attitude" as mere physical objects, wholly separate from oneself, then distrust, fear, and disharmony easily creep in, and, in the final consequence, conflict and war.

So for the fathers, inner suffering and outer conflict result from a failure of unitive vision. Healing and restoration of peace and unity is possible by learning to (again) discern the presence of the one divine presence in creation—experienced as goodness, intelligence, truth, wisdom, light, and beauty. These are vital nutrients for the soul, which the physical surfaces of things cannot supply. As Origen of Alexandria (d. 253) puts it, these are "mysteries of God's wisdom and knowledge that restore and nourish the souls of the saints."[14] Such is the task of what the fathers call natural contemplation: to "know God's creation, as we have said, by apprehending the harmonious wisdom to be contemplated in it."[15]

The foreclosure of contemplative awareness results from "passionate attachment" to the surface features of the physical dimension.[16] Becoming attached to or "stuck" on this surface can be seen as the primordial Fall being recapitulated in real time, in the phenomenology of each encounter we have with experiential reality. Gregory of Nyssa explains that becoming unstuck requires a certain kind of discrimination:

> [With] obtuse faculties of thinking, it is a difficult thing to perform this feat of noetic analysis and of discriminating the material vehicle from the immanent beauty, and thereby of grasping the actual nature of the Beautiful . . . Owing to this, men give up all search after true Beauty. Some slide into mere sensuality. Others incline in their desires to dead metallic coin. Others limit their imagination of the beautiful to worldly honors, fame, and power . . . The most debased make their gluttony the test of what is good.[17]

In other words, human beings' inherent and universal yearning for divine beauty, when not properly guided by contemplative, discriminating knowing, "falls" and becomes channeled into the whole gamut of worldly "fallen loves." In the quotation from Gregory of Nyssa we can already see several of the eight classic "passions" delineated in the influential psycho-spiritual road map of Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399): gluttony, lust, greed, anger, sadness, despondency, vanity, and pride.[18] These are seen as afflictive tendencies of the mind that shackle its desire energy to the various material manifestations of reality, inhibiting the conversion of that desire to love of reality's essential truth and beauty. The fathers are unanimous in declaring that, as Maximus puts it, "only a soul which has been delivered from the passions can without error contemplate created beings."[19] Working through the passions is necessary to awaken the capacity for natural contemplation.

How, then, to work with the passions and train the "obtuse faculties" of the mind that Gregory speaks of? The fathers point to the centrality of three elements: *purification* of the heart, *dispassion* of the mind, and the dawn of universal *love*. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8). This becomes a touchstone for the monastic contemplative project. By dwelling in solitude, away from the crowd, the city, and its enticements, and by single-pointedly devoting oneself to prayer—for instance, the mantric repetition of the name of Jesus—the inner movements of thoughts, emotions, and bodily energies tend, after a period of intensified turmoil, to settle down. The inner state that then develops is called *apatheia*, translated both as "dispassion" and as "inner freedom." It allows the soul's consciousness to become limpid and clear, and to reveal its own naturally indwelling light.[20] By remaining in this state of stillness and clarity when encountering the sensory content of the experiential world, the mind remains centered and poised, no longer subject to the usual passionate attachment to its surface features.

Attaining stillness (*hesychia*) and dispassion is no small feat. It represents the eye of the needle that one must pass through to regain the natural innocence of the soul, which is one of complete attentive receptivity and openness. From this place each moment reveals itself as a gift, the gift of manifest creation blooming forth in experience from the one sacred source of all that is. And this source is love. The fathers thus emphasize both that "dispassion engenders love" and, further, that opening one's heart in selfless, universal love—*agape*—is the "door to the *gnosis* [i.e., contemplative knowing] of nature," for "the light of spiritual *gnosis* is the intellect's life . . . engendered by the love for God."[21] In Maximus, this intimate connection between contemplative knowing (*gnosis*) and love shows that discriminating between the sensory and the spiritual does not necessarily separate dualistically. The two aspects are united in Christ, who through his universal loving embrace of all things straddles the divide between the created world and its uncreated essence:

> He united heaven and earth in Himself, joined what is sensible with what is intelligible, and revealed creation as a single whole whose extremes are bound together through virtue and knowledge of their first Cause.[22]

Hence, when reality is experienced according to the deified perception of natural contemplation—with "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16)—reality is experienced as unified, even if also as differentiated, and thus the Fall is reversed in concrete phenomenology.

Returning to the story of the Garden and the Tree of Life at its center, several of the fathers seem to connect natural contemplation specifically with just this symbolic figure. Commenting on the passage in the book of Proverbs where Wisdom is identified with the Tree of Life (Prov. 3:18), Maximus upholds this identification and describes how the contemplative soul,

> having kept the divine commandment, adheres exclusively to the noetic discrimination that discriminates the eternal from the temporary, "eats" from the Tree of Life, by which I mean to say [partakes of] the wisdom that is constituted on the level of the intellect.[23]

Indeed, a common patristic interpretation of God's banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden and from the Tree of Life was not as an act of anger or jealousy, but as an act of compassion, protection, and spiritual pedagogy. God saw that in their immature state they would become burned by the sheer radiance of the Tree of Life. God then trusted that as their spiritual understanding matured by working through the Tree of Knowledge toward the Tree of Life, they would eventually become ready to return to the sacred center again, only now knowing reality in its fullness, both conceptually and gnostically, and hence as coequals with God himself.[24] Natural contemplation can be seen as key to this vast pedagogical journey of return.

The ecotheological import and ramifications of such a view and practice are noticeable, and have already been explored in recent scholarship.[25] What has so far not been explored is how this view and practice—formulated more or less exclusively by men—fares when it is confronted with the vitally important critique levied in recent decades against the Christian worldview, as well as its secularized Western descendants, by ecofeminism and ecofeminist theology. It is the hypothesis of this article that fertile results may emerge from this critical encounter—both for theory and for *theoria* (i.e., contemplative practice).

2. BODY, WOMAN, SEX, EARTH: THE DARK OTHER

The practice of natural contemplation can be seen as a therapy for dualistic and anthropocentric ways of perceiving nature: in a sense, it is about decentering awareness from the separate human ego by coming to experience nature as God does. At the same time, the spiritual life for patristic writers—many of them monastics—is construed in terms of an ascending linear directionality. The soul is on a journey from the senses and matter to the spiritual intellect and the suprasensible divine. The problems attendant to such a "transcendentalist" thrust in Christian spiritual life were pointed out early on by ecofeminist critics and a diverse range of critics in their wake.[26] What I want to focus on here is a slightly different question: What if this dynamic is in fact rooted in a sexual imbalance, in a split between the sexes?

Let us begin to consider this question by going back to the situation of the Fall in Eden: the early Church came to associate women with sin and temptation, especially of the bodily kind, because they interpreted the story as Eve having succumbed first, by failure of self-control, and then leading her husband astray. Implicitly, Eve, the first woman, was blamed for the Fall. In addition, Eve was created out of Adam's "side," and thus is created in some sense for the sake of

her man. Hence she is to be subservient (1 Cor. 11:7–9; 1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11–14). Even as profound a theologian as Maximus also held the view that it was Eve who led her husband astray.[27] Furthermore, it was not uncommon among the fathers to simply equate the original transgression in the Garden with sexual intercourse, given how the Hebrew word for "knowledge," *yada*, can also mean "carnal knowledge" (Gen. 4:1 NRSV).[28] Then sexual intercourse, or at least erotic desire and pleasure, becomes inherently sinful, indeed, the *original* sin, as Augustine (d. 430) would term it. For most of the fathers, Augustine included, sexual intercourse has one purpose only—procreation—and if desire or pleasure is involved, it becomes sin. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) explains that

> Our ideal is not to experience desire at all . . . A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife . . . that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will.[29]

If this sounds strangely unnatural to modern ears, the proposal was taken with utmost seriousness by Augustine. For him, sexual desire and pleasure were inherently shameful, a shame expressed by Adam and Eve covering themselves with fig leaves after the Fall.[30] At the same time, he did seem to recognize the strangeness of the proposal himself, as he writes in *The City of God*: "The trouble with this hypothesis of a passionless procreation controlled by the will, as I am here suggesting it, is that it has never been verified in experience."[31] Nonetheless, his views on the topic came to shape Christian tradition and cultural life in far-reaching ways.

Reading this with even a cursory psychoanalytic sensibility one cannot help but wonder if the founding figures of Christian theology—almost exclusively men—simply split off and projected their (unconscious) unresolved issues around erotic desire onto women and femaleness itself. We can add to this Paul's sharp, almost Manichean dualism between spirit and flesh (e.g., Rom. 8:5–8), a dualism that would deeply imprint the whole of patristic theology. Thus, we can begin to discern how *woman*, *body*, and *sexuality* came to be clustered together at one end of a stick that needed to be controlled, or even disavowed, by men in order for their spiritual intellect to remain pure. It bears mentioning that the Pauline corpus is ambivalent on the issue of the body, at other points stating that our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). This ambivalence is expressed in the two words Paul used for the body: *sarx*, usually translated as "flesh," and *soma*, translated as "body." Leaving to one side the debate over whether Paul's terminology was an expression of nuance rather than ambivalence, it is safe to say that in its historical reception it has proven problematic.

Such views of woman and body were not unique to Christianity. Greek, Roman, and Hebrew cultures were at the time already thoroughly patriarchal and even misogynistic. Moreover, Plato, so influential among patristic theologians, strongly recommended the intellect's monarchical rule and control over the body and its irrational emotions, seen in ecofeminist critique as a form of subjugation of human nature.[32] However, the ideal of asceticism and renunciation of marriage was indeed new, certainly compared to Hebrew tradition. Jesus's notion of becoming "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12) was seized upon as a call to celibacy, especially given the apocalyptic expectation of the Kingdom's imminent arrival.

Now, we may note—and here we enter more fully into the ecofeminist critique—that nature and the earth itself is a kind of body too, made of matter and infused with often hard-to-control forces disrupting the plans made by human intellects. Furthermore, as has been noted by many, there was an intimate association of nature and earth with womanhood in the ancient world.[33] Nature and earth were regarded as a feminine being (e.g., as the Goddess Gaia, or simply as Physis, "the mother goddess of all," in the Orphic *Hymn to Nature*). Noted ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague explains:

> [There is an] ancient and deep identification of women with nature, an identification so profound that it touches the very marrow of our being: our birth from the bodies of our mothers and our nourishment from the body of the earth. The power of nature—and of women—to give and withhold life epitomizes the inescapable connection between the two.[34]

It is not then the association of women with nature per se that is the locus of critique for ecofeminist thinkers. It is rather the splitting off and devaluation of both women and nature—as well as body, emotions, sexuality, and the dark depths, in general—that creates a preference for, and hence an imbalance toward, spirit, rationality, masculinity, and the light-filled heights (in the minds of both men and women, it should be added). For despite the trope that God and Christ are beyond gender, both the religious imagery and language of God as Adonai, Dominus, Father, and Lord has left little room for apophatic subtlety in the minds of believers. In addition comes the profound imprint such theology has left on ecclesiastical and social hierarchies. As Mary Daly pithily sums it up, "If God is male, then the male is God."[35]

The transition from a matrilineal culture oriented around the Goddess of the earth to a patriarchal culture centered on the worship of a male sky-god appears to have unfolded across the ancient Near East and Europe over a period of several thousand years.[36] Through this process, nature, along with women and sexuality, became an "other," because the men in charge tended to no longer submit to, revere, and listen to her ancient wisdom ways. Rather, there developed an objectifying approach to the control and management (and even exploitation) of both nature and of women's bodies. A relative latecomer in this long patriarchal lineage is the seventeenth-century vision of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, who declared themselves "masters and possessors of nature,"[37] intent on "entering and penetrating into [her] holes and corners."[38] Inaugurating the mechanistic view of nature as commodity and inert soulless matter, she is to be "forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded" by the combination of "human knowledge and human power," which, needless to say, meant *men's* knowledge and power.[39]

Fear of nature lurks in the unconscious of this mindset. Yet it is not a fear inspiring awe and reverence, but rather attempts to control and dominate. Commenting on the 1944 critique of Enlightenment rationality by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, contemporary ecophilosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen speaks of how this fear of nature was dealt with:

> [The] Enlightenment promised [that] men would cease to fear nature; all beliefs, rituals, and sacrifices demonstrating awe in the face of what they feared—as greater than themselves, more powerful, more mysterious—could safely be abandoned. Knowledge, as conceived and as acted upon by science, would ensure the overcoming of fear of nature

> once and for all, provided it was allowed to replace the mythical worldview without remainder . . . "Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear."[40]

This is an ancient fear of wild nature beyond the confines of the city walls and the order of culture, but it is also, we may surmise, a fear of woman herself and the power her erotic allure has always exerted over men. Such is evident in the violent persecution of so-called witches at the hands of the Inquisition in medieval and early modern Europe. Many of these women were custodians of a still surviving European indigenous earth-wisdom of medicinal plants, climatic omens, and psychosomatic healing. They became targets in the battle between the sexes, and the battle between religious ideology and a dark other—essentially a projective phenomenon in human psychology—coming to symbolize the nefarious and the irrational.[41] Here womanhood is again associated specifically with sinful sexual desire, now attaining an even darker tenor. As the 1486 inquisitorial manual *The Hammer of Witches* (*Malleus Maleficarum*) has it: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable."[42] Viewed psychoanalytically, women became containers for pious, light-bearing men's own repressed psychic material, especially sexual desire.

In sum, those who would lay the blame for the disharmony between civilization and its earthly environment solely at the feet of Descartes and Bacon (or the Enlightenment) have simply not looked far enough back into the deeper psychohistorical and psychosexual strata out of which their vision is but a further development. These strata also go some way toward explaining why Christian theology and spirituality became skewed toward ascent and transcendence, and came to regard woman, body, and sexual desire with suspicion. Part of the hypothesis of this article is that the place where Christian tradition needs to look to truly respond to this critique is the Wisdom tradition and its vision of the divine feminine.

3. THE WISDOM TRADITION AND THE DIVINE FEMININE

The biblical Wisdom literature is generally considered to consist of the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sirach, and the Song of Songs. In Proverbs, rooted in an oral tradition supposedly reaching back to King Solomon himself, and probably written down around 500 BCE, we learn that,

> YHWH acquired me first,
> His way before his works.
> Ages ago I was set up . . .
> when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
> then I was beside him, like a master worker;
> and I was daily his delight,
> rejoicing before him always.[43]

Here Wisdom herself speaks, as a personified cosmic being, a personal feminine presence embodied in all of nature, and indeed, as the consort of YHWH, "rejoicing before him always" (hence the capitalization of her name). The Hebrew *amon* occurring here (Prov. 8:30), often

translated as "master worker," was rendered in the Septuagint as *harmozousa*, "the Harmonizer," highlighting a central aspect of Wisdom as the orchestrating intelligence immanent in all of nature.

The word "wisdom" is a feminine noun in Hebrew—*hokhmah*—just like the Greek *sophia*. But the feminine face of Wisdom is not just an artifact of grammar. For example, Ben Sirach 15:2–3 describes her as "mother" and "bride," and that "she will feed [the seeker] with the bread of learning, and give him the water of understanding to drink," a clear iconization of the Goddess as a compassionate, nurturing mother. In the Wisdom of Solomon, she becomes a lover to the king himself: Solomon "loved her and sought her from my youth; I desired to take her for my bride, and became enamored of her beauty" (Wisd. of Sol. 8:2 NRSV). This theme of loving Wisdom as the key to attuning to her guidance crops up in other places too:

> Blessed are those who find Wisdom . . .
> Her ways are pleasant ways,
> and all her paths are peace . . .
> By Wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations . . .
> Do not forsake Wisdom, and she will protect you;
> love her, and she will watch over you.[44]

As we saw in section 1, love is the gateway to natural contemplation too, to opening the secret garden of nature as wise guidance and beauty. Intimately related to love are the attitudes of wonder, awe, and reverence, central to receiving Lady Wisdom's guidance (Wisd. of Sol. 6:12; Job 37:14). Indeed, "The fear [*yirah*, meaning "awe, reverence"] of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10), which, as we saw above, the rationalist worldview of the Enlightenment sought to block out of human awareness.[45] There are striking parallels here to the roots of philosophy and science. Both Plato and Aristotle emphasized wonder/awe—*thaumazein*—as the starting point of *philosophia*, which is the love of *sophia*.[46] Moreover, Parmenides, regarded as the founding father of Greek philosophy, recounts how he came to learn the secrets of nature from an ecstatic visionary encounter with the Goddess in his poem *On Nature*. Arguably, the scientific impulse too is birthed out of the same attitude to nature: a love of truth and wonder at the dazzling intricacies of the universe, as attested to by great natural scientists from Leonardo da Vinci to Albert Einstein. Before the motives of control, utility, and theoretical abstraction begin to encroach upon the wonder transpiring between the researcher and the phenomenon, such "gentle empiricism," as Goethe called it, has always existed at the heart of the scientific endeavor.

Historically, the Wisdom literature spans centuries, from as early as the time of Solomon's Temple (tenth–sixth centuries BCE) to second-century CE Alexandria, and scholarship points to its vast ramifications both forward and backward in time. Biblical scholar Margaret Barker argues for the link between the Wisdom tradition and the older tradition of the female "Asherah" or "Queen of Heaven" (Jer. 44:17), worshiped together with YHWH in the religious life of Canaan and Israel before the Deuteronomic reforms of King Josiah.[47] The cult of this Israelite Goddess had a clear animist tenor, a sacred tree being her most important symbol, and her worship occurred on mountaintop altars, in sacred groves, and even in Solomon's Temple itself. In addition to the countless female figurines found at several sites in Israel, the archeological finds from Kuntillet Ajrud suggest that Asherah was indeed YHWH's female consort in the older religion of Canaan.[48]

In his classic study, Raphael Patai notes that "the worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh ('*his* Asherah') was an integral element of religious life in ancient Israel prior to the reforms introduced by King Josiah in 621 B.C.E."[49] Barker adduces textual and archaeological data to suggest that the Tree of Life was in fact a symbol of her, which was also Wisdom's symbol (cf. Prov. 3:18; Rev. 2:7; 1 Enoch 25:3–5), and hence that the Wisdom tradition preserved the divine feminine element that the Deuteronomists tried to delete.[50]

Biblical scholarship has long recognized that Eden may very well be a symbolic representation of Solomon's Temple, due to their many uncanny structural and symbolic parallels.[51] Thus, Barker suggests that the story of Genesis 3 encodes, in addition to the primordial Fall, also a *historical* Fall: the loss of Lady Wisdom qua Tree of Life, a result of choosing the law of Deuteronomy qua the Tree of Knowledge, followed, some decades later, by the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple (i.e., the loss of Eden) at the hands of the Babylonians.[52] Such an interpretation finds resonances in later Kabbalistic tradition, where

> The Tree of Life came to represent the pre-existent Torah, the radiant divine Sophia beyond all temporal limitation. The Tree of Knowledge, by contrast, represents the exilic teaching, a Scripture and legal tradition filled with strict dichotomies between permitted and forbidden.[53]

This view coheres with the previously mentioned interpretation, common among the Church fathers, that the Tree of Life symbolizes the unitive knowing of creation through natural contemplation and indeed is sometimes directly equated with Wisdom.[54]

Many pieces of evidence suggest that the tradition of Lady Wisdom continued within the poetic and iconographic imagining of Mary as Theotokos ("God-bearer") in Byzantium and later the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches. The icons of Mary-Sophia as a divine feminine being in the Kiev and Novgorod cathedrals are a striking example of this, which eventually became a major inspiration for the Russian theological revival of the figure of Sophia around the turn of the twentieth century.[55] In a recent study of the fifth-century Byzantine *Akathistos* hymn to the Mother of God, Thomas Arentzen shows how the hymn paints a suggestive picture of Mary as the "womb" of all creation woven into the fertile natural landscape described in vivid detail, in a way that—I would argue—strikingly parallels the Wisdom literature. Arentzen shows how the hymn disturbs the individualized nature of Mary by the extraordinary profusion of natural imagery she is clothed in:

> With metaphors so overwhelmingly ecomorphic (as opposed to anthropomorphic), it allows the Theotokos to appear in more-than-human terms, to the degree that her humanity is decentered, as if the whole creation had been groaning in labor pains.[56]

Such a groundswell of images in the religious imagination, whether iconographic or poetic, arguably went far beyond what male theologians were willing to articulate in explicit doctrine. In her own study of the *Akathistos* and its Latin counterpart, the *Litany of Loreto*, Barker points to the range of functions and titles given to Mary as corresponding both to Wisdom (e.g., as bringer of illumination, understanding, and knowledge to the minds of the faithful) but also as mirroring closely the titles given to the Lady of Solomon's Temple.[57] Barker suggests on this basis that an

oral tradition around the Lady of the Temple had been kept alive through the postexilic period, and was appropriated by the early Christians, for they received Mary—perhaps only at an inchoate, unthematized level—as a heavenly mother akin to the Sophia of Hellenistic Jews, or the Queen of Heaven of the ancient Israelites. These pieces of evidence suggest that beyond the Wisdom literature as a collection of texts we must also acknowledge a living tradition or lineage of Wisdom, what Old Testament scholar Norman Habel has called "the Wisdom school."

As the different expressions of the Wisdom tradition show, there is a rich treasury of teaching here exploring the immanence of God in creation, and how human beings are called to heed her wise counsel to develop righteous, healthy, and harmonious relationships with all its domains and inhabitants. Such wise know-how is precisely something that cannot be written down in a book, nor grasped in a set of rules and techniques by the phallogocentric orientation of the Tree of Knowledge. Rather, it is a silent knowledge, emerging in the sensing and listening clearing between human bodies and the more-than-human environment, and passed on from human to human through close observation, oral teaching, and spiritual osmosis. The Wisdom lineage offers a pragmatic, down-to-earth, and even animist orientation to the contemplative experience of nature, which tempers the linearly ascending path of the fathers. Free of eschatological thrust toward the future, Wisdom consciousness works to preserve and conform with the peace, harmony, and integrity of creation as it exists here and now on earth, yet also in covenantal relationship with God through the cosmic and "everlasting covenant" of Genesis 9:16.[58] We may surmise that this has something to do with the roots of this tradition in the (even more) ancient earth-wisdom of the Goddess, worshiped in diverse forms across the ancient Near East—including in Israel as Asherah, the Tree of Life.

Now, where does this leave us with respect to the question of the divine feminine in Christian theology and contemplative practice? Despite the tradition's rich hymnography and iconography, its theology has never allowed itself to articulate the Divine *as* feminine. Mary is God's earthly mother; there is no feminine divine presence immanent to creation, no Mother Earth, and certainly no Goddess. To be sure, the Holy Spirit was experienced as a feminine being and as a mother figure in many segments of early Christianity prior to the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, in keeping with the term's feminine gender in Hebrew (*Ruach Elohim*) and Aramaic (*Ruha*).[59] But this view became marginalized. The preceding suggests that a new retrieval of Lady Wisdom in Christian contemplative practice, liturgy, and theology is not only grounded in an important strand of the tradition, but also, through an act of futural remembering, could open ways to transforming the legacy of patriarchal consciousness.

The charge of polytheism can be deflected by appeal to Genesis 1:27. The implication of this verse, too often overlooked, is that both male and female sexual archetypes—*ish* and *isha* in Hebrew—are images, or icons, of God. They are two distinct faces or personal expressions—*prosopa* in Greek patristic terminology—of the formless and genderless mystery at the source of being, the divine essence, or *ousia*. This union-in-distinction is an expression of the antinomic and mysterious relational fulcrum at the heart of reality, the wellspring of its creative, personal, and ultimately erotic and sexual dynamism. The next section will expand on this last point by describing two examples of working contemplatively with Eros inspired by the Wisdom lineage to move toward a healing of the Christian theological imbalance with respect to women, body, and sexuality that was diagnosed in section 2.

4. PRACTICING THE SACRED MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

In an important recent article and book, rabbi and environmentalist Ellen Bernstein argues that the Song of Songs is "the most deeply ecological text of the entire biblical canon" even though it has hardly ever been read or commented upon as such.[60] The Song transmits, as she writes,

> the Bible's most profound ecological message in poetry, creating a sensual experience of the natural world. Over and over, it likens the lovers to the land and its inhabitants, asserting the indelible connection between humanity and earth. It reimagines the world as garden ecosystem, vibrant and whole and suffused with love. It pictures a land in which praise for the other, be it human or animal creature, plant or the land, is continually on the lips of the lovers.[61]

Like Mary in the *Akathistos* hymn, the lovers in the Song take on the ecomorphic features of the land, and in turn the land itself becomes eroticized and enchanted as it takes on the features of the two lovers in states of passionate yearning or ecstatic embrace. In this fresh reading, the Song becomes a love song to and from the earth, a love song between humanity and the earth, and, given what we established in the previous section, a love song of call and response between the Holy One and his consort, the enfleshed divine feminine as creation itself, the "spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Wisd. of Sol. 7:26 NRSV).

We can discern in the Song the core teachings common to the Wisdom lineage, such as the mysterious web of interconnectivity between nature, humanity, and God. In the Song, these are rendered in a sensual and erotic key. As we saw in section 1, practicing natural contemplation requires bringing loving attentiveness to our encounter with the natural world, including other humans. This is why the Song of Songs can also be interpreted—along with the other books in the Wisdom literature—as a text specifically about natural contemplation: about King Solomon courting Lady Wisdom in all of her intricate and beautiful expressions in scents, colors, textures, flowers, animals, and in the very landscape itself. Contemplating nature with the Song draws us into the constantly burgeoning "cosmoerotic" reality in which we are always immersed yet often become forgetful of. It reveals itself in the pleasurable tickle of sunshine on naked skin, in the gentle caress of the wind, in the excited rush of river water in springtime, in the powerful ravishment of thunder and lightning, not to mention the dance of sexual polarity ubiquitously present in plant and animal life. The human being is given the gift of sensorially participating, through such contemplative openness, in the energetic lovemaking of nature herself.

This becomes a powerful reminder that the erotic desire the human being feels in her own body—whether for her human partner, the earth, or the divine—is neither shameful nor sinful. It is a completely natural phenomenon, an expression of the desire of nature herself, for the human body is made of her flesh. Such desire is nothing but the life force, the *élan vital* of nature, and when allowed to flow freely it offers the all too rare experience of being fully alive, fully charged with vitality. When opening up to the flow of nature's Eros, the lifeworld is no longer the somewhat dull and familiar backdrop to the daily schedule of tasks. It becomes instead an alluring and enchanted place, luminous and full of aliveness and the wondrous magic and symbolic interconnectivity characteristic of natural contemplation.

The encounter with the earthen milieu has for millennia given rise to such ecstatic fullness for human beings, for instance through the festivities, carnivals, dances, and ceremonial rituals associated in traditional cultures with the major turnings of the seasonal cycle, such as the solstices and the equinoxes, the planting and the harvest. Such experiences are subversive to the ordinary encapsulation of egoic consciousness. They challenge the "buffered self" of modernity, and the objectification and aestheticization of nature after the Industrial Revolution and Romanticism, which, as Timothy Morton has shown, end up holding her at an arm's length.[62] This is why Bernstein's ecological reading of the Song is also very much *deep ecological*: it begins to soften the imaginary membrane between the human ego and the natural world, a world that the ego itself has grown out of, and remains fully dependent on, yet imagines itself in schizoid separation from.[63] Moreover, the Song reveals from where the depth of deep ecology arises: the divine ground enfolding both the human and the more-than-human in its cosmic Eros.

The deep-ecological Song is subversive also to the allegorical eroticism typical of Christian theology. Such love all too often refuses to plunge its roots deep down into the body and the sexual center of the human being. The Song is intensely erotic and its language and imagery juicy, enfleshed, and sexually suggestive. Yet its interpretation in the tradition has consistently been transposed onto a spiritualistic, allegorical plane, in accord with the strict spirit-flesh bifurcation, and the suspicions toward body, women, and sexuality explored in section 2 above.[64] It is true that modern biblical scholarship and literary analysis has in many ways moved away from the traditional allegorical reading and now reads the Song quite literally, as a love poem celebrating the beauty and power of embodied love between two human beings.[65] But centuries of avoidance of the literal meaning have profoundly shaped the tradition of the Church, its theology and practice, and indeed Western culture itself. Writing in 1992, biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that since the Bible barely touches upon the subject, finding "a vision of sexuality commensurate with the significance of sex in people's lives remains *monotheism's unfinished agenda*."[66]

Writing more recently, theologian Sarah Coakley implies much the same, and adds that even late modern secular Western culture's views of desire and sexuality are "still haunted by a lost religious past."[67] Coakley continues by arguing that it is urgently important now, for both the Church and secular culture, that "enacted sexual desire and desire for God are no longer seen in mutual enmity, as disjunctive alternatives."[68] In a striking inversion of one of the paragons of secular culture, Coakley invites us to

> turn Freud on his head. Instead of thinking of "God" language as being really about sex (Freud's reductive ploy), we need to understand sex as really about God, and about the deep desire that we feel for God—the precious clue that is woven into our existence about the final and ultimate union we seek.[69]

Coakley can here be accused of committing just as reductive an analysis as Freud did. Yet I think there is a profound insight here, which may, when unpacked, offer the exact antidote needed for the sexual-ecological imbalance that we have diagnosed.

Most conservative Christians hold that as long as the act culminates with the potential of conception, it is fine if pleasure is also involved along the way, but not otherwise. This is one reason contraception and homosexuality have met with condemnation by significant segments of

Christendom, for they challenge squarely the view that the meaning of sexual Eros is exhausted by its procreative function (in addition to a vaguely specified notion of strengthening the bond between husband and wife). But reducing sexual union solely to a procreative and bonding function surprisingly makes strange bedfellows out of conservative Christians and the most reductive Neo-Darwinian materialists, who argue that the human phenomenology of sexual love and pleasure is an irrelevant epiphenomenon of the process of genetic replication, or at best a dopamine reward to boost procreative behavior. This convergence is not accidental, I think, for it expresses very well the fact that (male) theologians have so far been unable or unwilling to discern and learn about the spiritual dimension of sexuality (for the reasons already outlined in section 2), and hence it remains for them a mere physical or psychosomatic process, bereft of spiritual and sacramental significance.

Coakley suggests a Trinitarian way to unpack the spiritual dimension of sexual union. The Trinitarian dynamism shows itself as the two human bodies and souls coming together open up a third force between them, the holy energy of sacred Eros, which in Christian tradition can be associated with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 18:20). Coakley sketches the outlines of such a Trinitarian account relying on Luce Irigaray, who describes lovemaking as "our creation of that ecstasy of ourself (*de nous en nous*) prior to any child." Coakley goes on to describe it as "the Holy Spirit impinging, as pure gift, on the realm of sexual exchange—alluring, transforming, purifying, and inviting it into the divine life."[70] Through the earthly lovemaking here below, the Spirit descends in grace and rises up in ecstasy, prayerfully to the heavenly Father.

A different but complementary way to Coakley's would be to highlight the sacramental dimension of sexual union. If approached with the open, unencumbered, and loving awareness of natural contemplation, lovemaking can attain a sacred depth, for as we saw in section 1, such awareness is precisely what reveals that the physical is never merely physical. The lovers are facing each other, yet also facing upward together, with the flowering of their Eros, pleasure and ecstasy, offered up as a prayer of thanksgiving to heaven for the immeasurable gift of embodied life here on earth in its sweetness, beauty, and bliss. Here the flesh is fully redeemed, the two bodies now truly "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). As Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément has argued, such contemplative awareness can be part of everyday human life and need not be the preserve only of saints and monastics:

> The "contemplation of nature" can give spiritual flavor to our lives even if we lay no claim to be in any way "mystics" in the rather particular sense that this word has acquired in the West. A little loving attention in the light of the Risen Christ is enough.[71]

This way of reading and practicing the Song would then constitute, to speak with Paul Ricoeur, a kind of "second naiveté." By returning to and integrating the literal reading and its physical enactment—after having seen through it to the mystical depth of physical reality—one realizes that the mystical meaning of Eros as most fundamentally about union with God need not exclude the body or one's human consort.

But what is the relevance of all this to contemplative ecology? First, the deep-ecological and sexual ways of reading and practicing the Song, when put together, bring the reality of embodied, sensory life on earth squarely into the center of religious life, rebalancing the rationalist,

spiritualist, and transcendentalist thrust present in the tradition, an important target of ecofeminist critique. If the argument in this article has so far been sound, the failure to develop a sacramental view of incarnated Eros and of Eve's body—her microcosmic one, as well as her macrocosmic one, the earth—is central to Christianity's problematic ecological legacy under critique since the 1960s.

Second, making explicit the sacred mystery of sexual union intimated by the Song is a necessary step toward washing away the stain of sin, shame, and commodification that has been projected onto the female body, sexual organ, and womb in Abrahamic cultures. According to ecofeminism, this may turn out to be key to the work of ecological healing given its principle linking the treatment of woman and nature—"as goes one, so goes the other."[72]

Third, if we take seriously the contemplative-ecological intuition of multiscale interrelations between the human microcosm and the earthly and heavenly macrocosm—an intuition deeply resonant with Maximus's cosmological vision—then the sacramental work of unification between two human beings in sacred sexual union may have ramifications beyond just the two individuals. As the Jewish commentarial literature makes clear, the Song is a gift from God to Adam and Eve offering a way to reverse the Fall of Genesis, to reenter Eden, to realize Paradise, through the reestablishment of primordial wholeness and unity.[73] This occurs by healing the successive rifts instituted by the Fall through the Song's gift of erotic love: between man and woman (Gen. 3:16), between humans and earth (Gen. 3:15, 17–19), and between humans and God (Gen. 3:23).[74] We might further add, following Maximus: between spiritual intellect and sensate body, and between heaven and earth.[75]

With this view, sacred sexual union can be a site of such work of healing, sanctification, and return to wholeness on behalf of the larger whole of the cosmos. Just as heavenly bliss and ecstasy can occur in individual contemplative prayer, the heavenly bliss and ecstasy that the two lovers taste as they merge together is indeed heaven come down to earth, filling these earthly vessels with its healing, vivifying, divine light. If Adam is established in the inner freedom of dispassion (*apatheia*), and is therefore able to wisely transmute the energy of Eros flowing between him and Eve—a practice that in many ways parallels natural contemplation—then he is free to consciously release his physical seed as a prayer to God for a new human life in Eve.[76] But he is also free not to do so, and instead together with Eve offer their lovemaking to God as a prayer for unity, vitality, and spiritual blessings for each other, for the earthly garden and for the greater communal whole of which they are part. Such contemplative work in the microcosm inscribes itself in a very ancient lineage of liturgical work on behalf of health and fertility for land and community, practiced across the ancient Near East, including in Jerusalem.[77]

CONCLUSION

Based on the preceding argument, we can conclude by hypothesizing an erotic-energetic diagnosis of the ecological predicament. With the loss of the living cultural knowledge of the sacred mystery of Eros, both in temple worship and in seasonal deep-ecological fertility rites, as well as in the privacy of the home between man and woman, Eros has become desacralized. In Christianity, the mystery of sexuality and fertility was reduced either simply to procreation, and hence a purely physical phenomenon on the periphery of religious life, or as something sinful to be sternly held in check or repressed. By failing to honor sacred sexual union as a sacramental act or at the very

least provide spiritual guidance to help keep such practice sacred and theologically aligned, the male ecclesial elite abdicated their pedagogical responsibility and left people to their own devices (a failure that is certainly not limited to Christian cultures). Over time, and with the advent of secular materialism, this guidance vacuum left the playing field open to the excesses of late modernity: Eros and sexuality as a focal point of hedonism, or as a commodity, exploited by corporations to entice consumers into buying more products, or by the pornographic industry to generate profitable addictions in millions of young men. This also contributes to the abject desecration wrought by the rape and abuse of women and children across the globe.

Can this desecration of Eros and human bodies be linked to the desecration of the biosphere? Here is a sketch of such a hypothesis. Due to the mentioned guidance vacuum, many are today left with the twin extremes of sexual repression and sexual licentiousness, the latter often a consequence of the former, as psychoanalysis has taught (excepting, of course, those who truly succeed in a chaste, celibate, or monastic life). These extremes result from cleaving only to the Tree of Knowledge, with its lists of dos and don'ts, a knowledge that does not transfigure. When not sanctioned and honored as sacred, the energy of Eros tends to become usurped by and channeled into the psycho-spiritual afflictive tendencies delineated by the Christian fathers—lust, greed, vanity, gluttony, rage, and so forth. These are the conative drivers of individual and collective misuse of inner and outer nature, keeping human consciousness glued to the surface of physical reality, which never fulfills the soul's spiritual hunger. Consequently, this unfulfilled hunger tends to channel Eros "vertically" toward ever-more ambitious pseudo-eschatological projects of material conquest or spiritual ascent. At the same time, there is limited support in modern secular societies for Eros to circulate "horizontally" through communal ritual and inner work, to flow into and transmute the human lifeworld into an enchanted garden of luminous intelligence and beauty. As we saw in section 1, such sacred light and beauty is vitally needed nourishment for the human soul, allowing her to settle into her nature in gratitude, contentment, and rest. Hence, behind Weberian disenchantment and the restless productive and consumptive activity of the modern self, driving earthly exploitation, may in fact lie a desacralized Eros.

Deeply resonant with the diagnosis offered in this article, Pope Francis comes very close, in the opening lines of his epochal *Laudato Si'*, to attributing animist agency to the earth as a feminine being who has suffered abuse at the hands of human civilization:

> "Praise be to You, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us" . . . This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.[78]

This article has argued that remembering the traditions of Wisdom and of natural contemplation may offer an ancient key to healing this situation. Both traditions teach that loving wonder and sensory attentiveness to nature's flesh is the key to learning from her, and through her, the secrets of the universe, earthly and divine, to lead a healthy, harmonious, and God-aligned way of living. If Christians were to rediscover Lady Wisdom as the Harmonizer (*harmozousa*) and learn to perceive the divine feminine embodied in all nature, they would be offered a down-to-earth mystical knowledge that could help them radically reenvision the relationship between humanity, God, and our planet. It could also open up the mysteries of Eros and fertility beyond

procreation and allegory, and contribute to healing the patriarchal legacy of repression and commodification of women, bodies, and sexuality. Lifting the millennia-old projective construal of woman and nature as dark other or as commodity, and bringing them into the revered center of sacramental life again, can be seen as Adam and Eve's reunion and their return to the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life points to the radiant womb at the heart of creation, continually birthing the miracle of life, and all of experiential reality, through the holy union of male and female, seed and soil, mind and nature. The womb and the temple that houses it must be kept sacred, whole, and healthy—in the microcosm as in the macrocosm. Such multiscale work of healing, protection, and sanctification is integral to the "ecological conversion" that now calls on humanity and is at the heart of what contemplative consciousness is all about.[79]

NOTES

[*] Biblical quotations are from the New International Version, unless otherwise specified.
[1] Christie, *Blue Sapphire*.
[2] White, "Historical Roots," 1203–1207.
[3] Christie, *Blue Sapphire*. See, e.g., Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament*.
[4] See, e.g., Johnson, *Women, Earth*. This is not to say that alternative views cannot be found in the tradition, e.g., among medieval and early modern female mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Jeanne Guyon.
[5] Merchant, *Death of Nature*.
[6] The term *eros*, originating in classical Greek tradition, means love as sensual, passionate desire, which can express itself in romantic or sexual relations, but equally in the desire animating the spiritual or contemplative quest. The *locus classicus* of the latter sense is Plato's *Symposium*. Love as Eros was often capitalized as the name of the Greek god of erotic love. The question of its difference and overlap with other ancient Greek terms for love, such as *philia* (affectionate love) and *agape* (selfless, universal love) is complicated and beyond the scope of this article.
[7] See Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 10.
[8] This is the approach of Lollar in his authoritative treatment of the subject, *To See Into the Life of Things: Natural Contemplation in Maximus the Confessor and His Predecessors*; see especially chap. 2.
[9] Gregory of Nyssa, "On What It Means," 87.
[10] Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, § 59, in *On Difficulties*, 413.
[11] Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, § 43, in *On Difficulties*, 247. See also Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, "Introduction," in *On Difficulties*, 88.
[12] Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, "Introduction," in *On Difficulties*, 85. Maximus, *Liber Asceticus*, PG 90, 916D–917A, quoted in von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 184.
[13] Maximus, *Mystagogia*, § 23, in *On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy*, 81.
[14] Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, IX.7, quoted in Clément, *Roots of the Christian*, 99.
[15] Maximus, *Centuries on Love*, 3.24, in *Philokalia*, 2:86.
[16] Maximus, *Centuries on Love*, 1.1, in *Philokalia*, 2:53.
[17] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate*, § 11, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 5:355.
[18] For this map, see Evagrius's *Praktikos*, §§ 6–14, in *Praktikos*, 16–20.
[19] Maximus, *Various Texts*, II.67, in *Philokalia*, 201.
[20] Evagrius, *Praktikos*, § 64, in *Praktikos*, 33–34.
[21] Maximus, *Centuries on Love*, 1.2, in *Philokalia*, 53; Evagrius, *Praktikos*, "Prologue," in *Praktikos*, 14; Maximus, *Centuries on Love*, 1.9, in *Philokalia*, 54.
[22] Maximus, *On the Lord's Prayer*, in *Philokalia*, 287–288.
[23] Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, § 43, in *On Difficulties*, 247–248.
[24] See Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 45*, *For Easter*, 8 (PG 36, 850), quoted in Clément, *Roots of the Christian*, 85–86; Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, "Introduction," in *On Difficulties*, 87; John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, book 2, chap. XI, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 9:29–30.
[25] Wirzba,"Christian *Theoria Physike*," 211–230.
[26] Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 186–211.
[27] Maximus, *Ambigua ad Ioannem*, § 10, in *On Difficulties*, 249.
[28] See, e.g., Clement, *Stromata*, 3.17.
[29] Clement, *Stromata*, 3.57–58.
[30] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 14.17.
[31] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 14.26.
[32] Plumwood, "Nature, Self and Gender," 3–27.
[33] See Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 1–41.
[34] McFague, "Earthly Theological Agenda," 328.
[35] Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 9. See also Johnson, *She Who Is*, 33.
[36] Gimbutas, *Civilization of the Goddess*; Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine*, esp. chap. 1.

[37] Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 51.
[38] Bacon, "De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum" (1623), quoted in Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 168.
[39] Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620), quoted in Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 171.
[40] Vetlesen, *Denial of Nature* (Routledge, 2015), 56; emphasis added.
[41] See Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 127–148.
[42] Quoted in Broedel, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 26.
[43] Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 179; Proverbs 8:22–23, 8:29–31. This is biblical scholar Norman Habel's translation; see his "Innate Wisdom," 172.
[44] Proverbs 3:13, 3:17, 3:19, 4:6. I have here capitalized "Wisdom" to better express the personification made in the textual sources of the Wisdom literature.
[45] The Hebrew *yirah* can be rendered as both "fear" and "awe." For more on wonder, awe, and Wisdom, see Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*.
[46] Both Plato, in *Theaetetus* 155d, and Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 982b, concur on this point.
[47] Barker, *Mother of the Lord*.
[48] Coogan, *God and Sex*, 167–176.
[49] Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 53.
[50] Barker, *Great Lady*, 237–285.
[51] Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism."
[52] Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 341.
[53] Mayse, "Tree of Life," 3–26, 10–11.
[54] E.g., Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, § 43, in *On Difficulties*, 247.
[55] See Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, 231–283.
[56] Arentzen, "*Chora* of God," 127–149, 132.
[57] Barker, "Images of Mary," 110–131.
[58] See Murray, *Cosmic Covenant*.
[59] Van Oort, "Holy Spirit as Feminine," a3225.
[60] Bernstein, "Ecotheology of the Song," 197.
[61] Bernstein, *Toward a Holy Ecology*, 49.
[62] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 27; Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 5.
[63] For the distinction between shallow and deep ecologies, see Næss, "Shallow and the Deep," 95–100.
[64] The traditional reading of the Song among the fathers—for example, those of Origen, Gregory, and Bernard of Clairvaux—was either as a mystical marriage between soul and Christ, or between the Church and Christ (in Jewish tradition, between *Knesset Yisrael* and the Holy One).
[65] See, for instance, Hess, *Song of Songs*.
[66] Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 212; emphasis added.
[67] Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 1.
[68] Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 87.
[69] Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 96.
[70] Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 98–99.
[71] Clément, *Roots of the Christian*, 227.
[72] McFague, "Earthly Theological Agenda," 328.
[73] Fishbane, *Song of Songs*, 192–193.
[74] Bernstein, "Ecotheology of the Song," 204.
[75] See Maximus, *Ambigua*, § 41, in *On Difficulties*, 102–121.
[76] Although they did not conceive of it in the context of the human love relationship, the fathers were keenly aware that contemplative practice develops the capacity for transmutation of the energy of desire into bliss; see Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, § 55, in *Philokalia*, 223.
[77] For the *hieros gamos* in ancient Israel, see Weinfeld, "Feminine Features," 515–529.
[78] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 1.
[79] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 145.

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