

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*Wisdom
Waits
in the
Underworld*

HELEN MARTINEAU

The Lady, painting by Monika Bisits

WISDOM WAITS IN THE UNDERWORLD

Two mighty empires

With the rise of the Roman empire, focus on everything to do with the material world intensified. Power and prestige were vested in earthly achievements. Important buildings were monuments to conquering leaders rather than dwellings for the gods. These beings were to be controlled and appeased for political and economic success in this world. Morality was fed by the idea of the old republic but linked more to the idea of 'character'. Civil laws and jurisprudence were directed towards keeping order among the empire's diverse peoples and the high point for a foreigner in the vast empire was to be accepted as a Roman citizen.

In China another mighty empire emerged. Warring dynastic heads claimed a 'mandate from heaven' to rule the land. A brief period of unification by the emperor Qin (of the buried terracotta warriors fame) was followed by the Han Dynasty, which inaugurated a four hundred year 'golden age' (202 BCE-220 CE). There was a revival of Taoism and Confucianism, of the I Ching, the Book of Changes with its dynamic balance of opposites, and the metaphysical environmental art of *feng shui*. In this humane, tolerant culture, Buddhism entered from India and Nestorian Christians were welcomed.

As well, despite the vast distance between the two empires trade grew between China and the West via the coastal sea route and along the legendary Silk Road extending across the vast deserts of central Asia. Trade, cultures and religions were readily shared until the disintegration of Rome in the fifth century CE.

In China despite the resumption of brutal internal wars, continuity was retained for centuries through the age-old practical philosophies of life and the ancestor worship embedded in Chinese consciousness. We'll look then to the West for substantial outcomes of the emerging intellectual soul.

The legend of Orpheus and Eurydice

The gifted poet Orpheus was the son of a Thracian king and Calliope, the Muse of eloquence and poetry, which was always sung – her name means 'beautiful voiced'. It was said that Orpheus received his golden lyre from Apollo. When he sang and played music wild animals sat at his feet, stones danced, and trees bowed down to listen.

Orpheus and the beautiful wood nymph Eurydice fell in love. But jealous Aristaeus the beekeeper set his stinging bees onto her and as she fled a snake bit her and she died. Orpheus in his grief followed Eurydice's shade down to the fearful kingdom of Hades. There he made music for the king and queen, and good Queen Persephone was so charmed she convinced Hades to let Orpheus take his beloved back to the upper world. The king made one condition – that Orpheus lead the way without once looking back.

But near the surface and wracked with doubt that his beloved might not be following, Orpheus turned. Eurydice was swept back into the darkness. The desolate poet abandoned his music or sang only the saddest songs. He wandered through Thrace rejecting every enticement of the Thracian women, and in fury they killed him.



John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, *Orpheus and Eurydice on the Banks of the Styx*, 1878

Behind the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice is an archetypal image of humanity's inspired creative genius united with feminine wisdom. The ancient story has many layers. One is a warning: the lovers should never be torn apart. The story has a message for us now, women and men. It's about balance.

The thoughtful form of the music of Orpheus harmonizes and mellows our feelings. But without his beloved Eurydice, wisdom is absent and creative

expression is no longer imbued with feeling. The outcome is externalised in meaningless ‘muzak’ and empty words, or in rituals requiring ever more rigid rules dictated only by cold abstract thoughts.

On the other hand, uncontrolled excess of emotionalism represented by those death-dealing Thracian women ‘kills’ creativity and becomes detrimental to the soul. In all of us there is the potential for such disconnection.

In the fifth century BCE Euripides wrote his play *The Bacchae*. Vividly he portrayed the Bacchae-maenads, female followers of Dionysius, dancing themselves into a drug induced frenzy, tearing animals apart with their bare hands – as well as any man who dared to spy on their rites. Did this happen? Surely, as the rites fell into disorganized orgiastic excess. The women danced themselves into the backwaters of history and into people’s fear of the untamed feminine.

The legend didn’t end with death. The severed head of Orpheus continued to sing as it floated out to sea. This tells us that while memory of the beloved bride lasted, divine music resonated in human souls. Wisdom lived on, but in the underworld was bereft of the music of Orpheus – that is, wisdom became hidden beneath the dross in a human soul.



Sophia is still with us – 21st century statue of Saint Sophia with Wisdom attributes in Sofia, Bulgaria

Yet jump forward to our time and we see that Wisdom, divine Sophia is still with us. In Sofia, Bulgaria, she stands aloft as a giant statue representing the city, and much more if we deepen our gaze. We can

awaken her through our conscious efforts, and it is important that we remember this, always.

Jesus Christ, a truth too radical

How did we lose touch with Wisdom? The Romans were innovative as engineers and administrators across the conquered lands, and they were heavy borrowers where the spiritual was concerned, except that the Caesars deified themselves as the new earthly gods. At the height of this all-conquering Roman empire Wisdom did seem in retreat.

Yet she was powerfully present at the pivotal point of time when the dove-like spirit descended upon Jesus and the high being that would be called Christ entered the world stage. Through what has come to be known as *the Christ Mystery*, Wisdom lived in the hearts of the disciples who were awakened to the spiritual reality of what they experienced. That number of course included Mary Magdalene whose wisdom was acknowledged by gnostic writers for example, even if forgotten by the mainstream church. I have chosen the seventh portal, 'The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene' to allow her to speak to us about what the Christ event meant for her and continues to mean for the whole earth.

Meanwhile the gospels we have reveal the teaching of Jesus Christ re-awakening that longing for union. Matthew chapter 5 records him in Galilee teaching the widely valued 'Beatitudes', that affirm the pure-hearted ones, the peacemakers, the merciful and empathetic. It was a message for all who 'hunger and thirst' for the inner beauty of the soul, whose desire was to creatively express this beauty in the world, despite what 'the world' dictates. This was about inner freedom, freedom to be who you are, but freedom inspired by empathy and love. It was natural for women to be among the disciples and early Christian leaders.

The doors would close again as if the message was too radical for a church that had put on Christianity like an overcoat. Dogma was carefully observed and received texts were dutifully copied in the religious houses.

But through Mary Magdalene's story we will see how the Christ spirit, uncontained by man-made forms, continued to operate, and in truth how Wisdom has always been present, part of the all, part of us.

The intellectual soul embedded

Two distinct ways of looking at heaven, earth and their inhabitants would influence how the West has viewed the spiritual up until the present day. Greek philosophy, without discarding the gods and goddesses, reframed mythologies into philosophical explanations of existence in which the spirit interpenetrates the physical. The Hebrew Torah as it developed from the fifth century BCE, had dramatically condensed the activity of

divine beings into a story aimed at uniting the ‘people of Yahweh’. Jews worshipped their special god and gave a secondary place to the diverse array of spirits and non-physical forces. Judaism spread into cities around the Roman empire and the foundational teaching became part of Christianity.

As the Greco-Roman era moved through the centuries the rational contents of the mind continued to be the battleground among educated people. From philosophers of Classical Greece to early Christian fathers to Islamic scholars to medieval Scholastics the rightness of ideas was what mattered. Passionate debate over meaning flourished.

We have entered a period where concepts and ideas become intimately connected with the self. It’s about ownership of what one thinks. The downside is that opposing thoughts feel like an attack. No wonder this is an era full of argument – sometimes taken to violent extremes.

After Imperial Rome fell apart the Roman church was strong enough to survive the so-called Dark Ages. From the mid-seventh century armies from Arabia stormed across much of the former empire and into Spain bringing the religion of Islam with them. It meant two legalistic and heavily structured religions came up against each other militarily. Yet after managing to hold back the Moslem advance, in the following centuries the Christian West would forge links with Islamic scholars who were part of what is known as Islam’s intellectual and scientific Golden Age. Ideas entering Europe included translations of the work of Aristotle, Egypt’s hermetic teachings and ancient Babylonian star lore.



The seven liberal arts and some students

Cathedral schools, such as those at Chartres in France and Cologne in Germany, became Christendom’s main repositories of learning until the emergence of the first universities. Men in these schools (and it was only men), studied the seven liberal arts derived from classical education: the Trivium of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric (speech) and the Quadrivium

of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. The seven liberal arts were pictured as female. They were Muses and wisdom beings which meant the divine feminine permeated scholarship.

And in the seclusion of convents, women could be educated, even highly – like Heloise of Argenteuil and the mystic and polymath Hildegard of Bingen; their writing included radical ideas predating feminism.

Today we aspire to understanding through evidence-based objectivity and discovering how things behave. Although this did happen, it took place within a holistic framework in an age when you had to understand through inwardly connecting with your knowledge.

In Medieval Christendom a deep soul longing

In medieval times life was hard, violent and rough and spirituality was part of everyday life in a way that's alien to most people in our secular culture. Human life was not valued but the state of the soul was, and the Roman church aimed to control souls through its patriarchal hierarchical structure. The concept of 'you are either with us or against us' fenced in belief. It had enormous repercussions on the lives of the many who couldn't read and write and gained their religious education from church rule and the popular mystery and morality plays depicting scenes from the gospels and battles between good and evil.

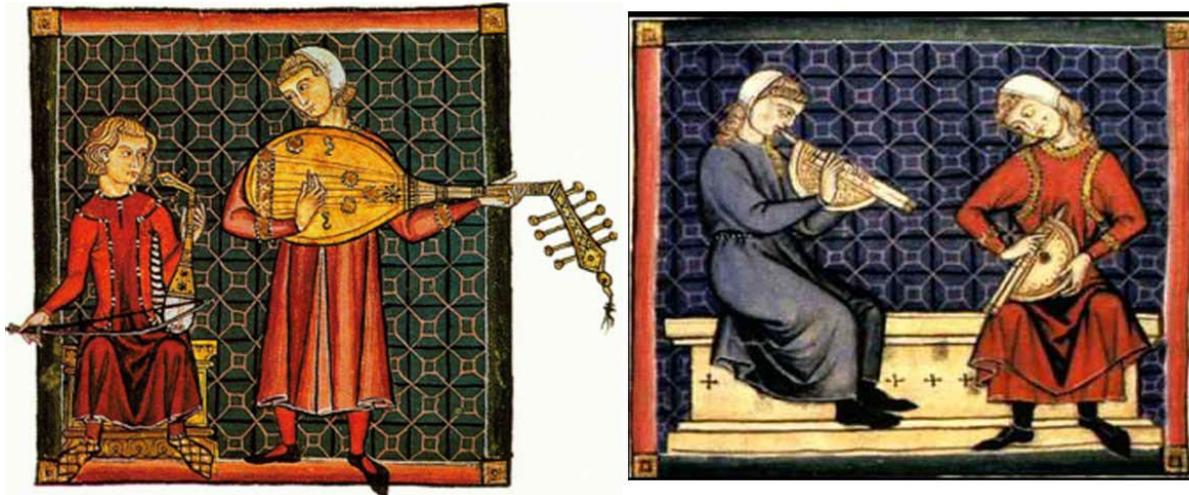
Religion was a refuge, yet there remained a deep and unfulfilled need in human souls. It was a longing to return to the heart and source of Christianity, a knowledge and experience of one's own spiritual essence, which had almost been swamped by politics and bureaucracy. Monasteries and convents were established in wildernesses all over Europe as people sought a purer, more spiritually attuned life. Within this church-based culture profound mystical philosophies emerged because of an intense soul-based feeling for knowledge of the spiritual as it impacted on the world.

This same inner need gave rise to pilgrimages to holy places, mostly relating to Christian martyrs. Legends grew up around the 'saints' and Mary Magdalene was at their forefront. We will explore her legends as we seek to discover who she was and is.

The crusades were a very physical answer to the same longing. Regain Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the heathens and you will find salvation for your soul – that was the thinking. The church sanctioned these activities, but quickly stamped out anything that smacked of heresy.

In 1244 the Catholic Inquisition instigated a crusade that destroyed the Cathars of Languedoc because of their gnostic-inspired ideas of a personal path to enlightenment. Cathar love for the feminine figure of

Sophia was a casualty, although she had already found a place in the secular poems of the troubadours.



They too emerged from the south of France bringing a new form of poetry to the towns and castles of Europe. Mostly set to well-known melodies, the words were personal, born from inner experience. 'My heart is full of sweetness, I cannot keep it from coming forth,' sang Bernart de Ventadorn.

These poet-singers were nobles, a few clerics, some ordinary laymen and there were also women, who were called *trobairitz*. It was exceptional for women to be able to express themselves in public like this, for at this time women had no legal rights and few personal ones.

Some troubadours were itinerant entertainers and others lived in their own castles. They wrote and usually performed the words they composed. Sometimes though they employed *jongleurs* and minstrels to play for them. Many of the jongleurs could also juggle and do acrobatics. Jongleurs could rise to become troubadours; troubadours down on their luck could also work as jongleurs, even if they were of the nobility. In that sense these performers were freer of the rigid social structure than most people in medieval times.

The word *troubadour* is related to *trouver* or *trobar*, 'to find or discover'. And in the guise of entertainment, the poet-singers revealed the secrets of spirit to those open to discovering them. In sensual, evocative language they sang of the veiled glories of nature and the seasons. They sang about personal heart longing, lustily at times with the hope of both erotic

fulfilment and the mystical exaltation of the love called *fin'amor*, perfect, idealised love for the subject of their desire, and yet far more than this.

Ah pure love, font of good, which illumines the world.

—Marcabru

A song has no real value if the song does not surge from within the heart, and a song cannot surge from the heart if it has no heartfelt *fin'amor* in it.

—Bernart de Ventadorn

And when the art journeyed north, *trouvères* added *chanson de geste* about noble deeds and brave heroes seeking the Holy Grail, often carried by a pure-hearted woman. Songs were couched in the language of chivalry and in the courts of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie of Champagne became highly formalised. But underlying it all was a radical message about our spiritual quest in ways that were acceptable and popular. People experienced something profound that touched their souls even if they did not quite know what it was. The church authorities failed to realise the degree to which 'heresy' was being spread.

Despite restrictions, all through the Middle Ages feminine wisdom was everywhere present among the nuns in their convents, among artists, mystics, alchemists, and the frequently threatened healers called 'wise women'.