

# The Seat of Wisdom

by

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*Editor's Note: This essay appeared in Studies as "Sedes Sapientiae." It was later included as a chapter in Frithjof Schuon's books In the Face of the Absolute (World Wisdom, 1994) and The Fullness of God (World Wisdom, 2004). It is from that latter book that the text below is taken.*

The Blessed Virgin is inseparable from the incarnate Word, as the Lotus is inseparable from the Buddha and as the Heart is the predestined seat of immanent Wisdom. In Buddhism there is an entire mysticism of the Lotus, which communicates a celestial image of unsurpassable beauty and eloquence, a beauty analogous to the monstrance containing the real Presence and analogous above all to that incarnation of divine Femininity which is the Virgin Mary. The Virgin, *Rosa Mystica*, is like a personification of the celestial Lotus; in a certain respect, she personifies the sense of the sacred, which is the indispensable introduction to the reception of the Sacrament.

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One of the names which the Litany of Loreto gives to the Blessed Virgin is *Sedes Sapientiae*, "Throne of Wisdom"; and indeed, as was noted by Saint Peter Damian (11<sup>th</sup> century), the Blessed Virgin "is herself that wondrous throne referred to in the Book of Kings", namely, the Throne of Solomon the Prophet-King, who, according to the Bible and rabbinical traditions, was the wise man *par excellence*.<sup>1</sup> If Mary is *Sedes Sapientiae*, this is first of all because she is the Mother of Christ, who, being the Word, is the "Wisdom of God"; but it is also, quite obviously, because of her own nature, which results from her quality as "Spouse of the Holy Spirit" and

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1. If the Bible condemned his conduct, it was because of a difference of level—the Bible's point of view being *a priori* legalistic and thus exoteric—and not because of an intrinsic wrong on his part. In Solomon there is manifested the mystery of "wine" and "intoxication", as is indicated, on the one hand, by his Song of Songs and, on the other, by the actions for which he is blamed in the Bible; but Solomon could have said, with his father David: "I have remembered thy Name, O Lord, in the night, and have kept thy Law" (Psalms 119:55).

“Co-Redemptress”;<sup>2</sup> that is to say, Mary is herself an aspect of the Holy Spirit, its feminine counterpart, if one will, or its aspect of femininity, whence the feminization of the divine *Pneuma* by the Gnostics. Being the Throne of Wisdom—the “Throne quickened by the Almighty” according to a Byzantine hymn—Mary is *ipso facto* identified with the divine *Sophia*, as is attested by the Marian interpretation of some of the eulogies of Wisdom in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Mary could not have been the locus of the Incarnation did she not bear in her very nature the Wisdom to be incarnated.

The wisdom of Solomon—it is well to recall here—is at once encyclopedic, cosmological, metaphysical, and also simply practical; in this last respect, it is political as well as moral and eschatological. That it is at the same time much more<sup>4</sup> emerges not only from certain passages of Proverbs and the Book of Wisdom, but also from the Song of Songs, a book particularly revered by the Kabbalists.

As for the Wisdom of the “divine Mary”, it is less diverse, because it does not embrace certain contingent orders; it could never be either encyclopedic or of an “Aristotelian” tendency, if one may put it thus. The Blessed Virgin knows, and wishes to know, only that which concerns the nature of God and the condition of man; her science is of necessity metaphysical, mystical, and eschatological, and it thereby contains in virtuality every possible science, as the one and colorless light contains the varied and colored hues of the rainbow.

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2. Not losing sight of the fact that the body and blood of Christ are those of the Virgin-Mother, there being no human father.

3. “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. 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” (Proverbs 8:22-24 and the following verses).

4. This is what the majority of modern critics tend to dispute; if, however, the wisdom of Solomon had been only practical and encyclopedic, the following sentences would be quite inexplicable: “Neither compared I unto her [unto Wisdom] any precious stone; because all gold in respect of her is as a little sand, and silver shall be counted as clay before her. I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light: for the light that cometh from her never goeth out. . . . All such things as are either secret or manifest, them I know. For wisdom, which is the worker of all things, taught me; for in her is an understanding spirit, holy, one only, manifold, subtle, lively, clear, undefiled, plain, not subject to hurt, loving the thing that is good, quick, which cannot be letted, ready to do good . . . having all power, overseeing all things, and going through all understanding, pure, and most subtle spirits. . . . For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty; therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light. . . . And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new: and in all ages entering into holy souls, she maketh them friends of God, and prophets. . . . Being compared with the light, she is found before it. For after this cometh night: but vice shall not prevail against wisdom” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:9-30). If the Wisdom of the Bible were only practical and encyclopedic, there would assuredly be no reason to identify it with the Blessed Virgin, or to identify her with the Throne of Solomon.

One observation that should be made at this point is the following: if Mary is seated upon the Throne of Solomon and is even identified with that Throne<sup>5</sup>—with the authority it represents—this is not only by divine right but by human right as well, in the sense that, being descended from David, she is heiress and queen in the same way that Christ, in like respect, is heir and king. One cannot but think of this when one sees Romanesque Virgins, crowned and seated with the Child on a royal Throne, those Virgins which all too often display considerable artistic crudeness and only a few of which are masterpieces,<sup>6</sup> but which then convey with all the greater hieratic eloquence the majesty and gentleness of Virginal Wisdom: majesty and gentleness, but also rigor; the *Magnificat* bears witness to this when it affirms, with the accents of a martial Psalm, that *vincit omnia Veritas*.

According to the First Book of Kings (10:18-20), Solomon “made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold. The throne had six steps, and heads of bulls behind,<sup>7</sup> and there were stays on either side on the place of the seat, and two lions stood beside the stays. And twelve lions stood there on the one side and on the other upon the six steps: there was not the like made in any kingdom.”<sup>8</sup> First of all, some observations on the symbolism of the animals: the lions represent, beyond any question, the radiant and victorious power of Truth, whereas the bulls may represent, correlatively, weighty and defensive power: on the one hand, prospective power and, on the other, retrospective power, or imagination that creates and memory that conserves—invincibility and inviolability, or again, alchemically speaking, sun and moon. But there is also the symbolism of the materials: ivory is substance and gold is radiation, or else ivory, a material associated with life, is the “naked body” of Truth, whereas gold is the “rayment”, which on the one hand veils the mystery and, on the other, communicates the glory.

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5. Theologians—let it be said in passing—do not seem to realize the immense “rehabilitation” that this association with the living *Sedes Sapientiae*, and thereby with the Word, implies for Solomon, an association which is either profound or else utterly meaningless.

6. The Germanic peoples knew nothing of the plastic arts; the Greeks and Romans practiced only classical naturalism; Christian art, at least in the Latin world, had great difficulty arising from this twofold vacuum. In the Byzantine world, the art of icons was able to escape from such pitfalls.

7. Jewish translations and the Vulgate of Saint Jerome state that “the top of the throne was round behind”; they do not speak of “heads of bulls”, as do some Christian translations, whose authors base themselves upon certain semantic factors and the fact that the Second Book of Chronicles (9:18) mentions a “golden lamb”, in order—as they see it—to avoid an association of ideas with the pagan cult of the bull. It should be noted that the Jewish historian Josephus (reign of Vespasian) says: “In the place where this prince [Solomon] was seated, there were seen arms in relief, which appeared to be receiving him, and at the place where he could support himself, the figure of a bullock was placed as if to support him.”

8. This last phrase, applied to the Virgin, indicates her incomparability, her “avatic” uniqueness in the universe of the Semites.

The six steps of the throne refer to the very “texture” of Wisdom, one might say; six is the number of Solomon’s seal. It is the number of total unfolding: the creation was completed in six days, and the fundamental metaphysical or mystical perspectives, the *darshanas*, are—and must be—six in number, according to Hindu tradition. This mystery of totality results from the combination of the numbers two and three, which, the first being even and the second odd, initially summarize every numerical possibility,<sup>9</sup> in the Pythagorean and not the quantitative sense. Spiritually speaking, the number two expresses the complementarity of “active perfection” and “passive perfection”, as Taoists would say; in its turn the number three indicates in this context the hierarchy of spiritual modes or degrees, namely, “fear”, “love”, and “knowledge”, each of these viewpoints containing, precisely, an active or dynamic aspect and a passive or static one.

The cosmic and human significances of the six directions of space—and the subjectification of space is certainly not arbitrary—reveal the contents of Wisdom, its dimensions or “stations”, so to speak. The North is divine Purity and human renunciation, *vacare Deo*; the South is Life, Love, Goodness, and, in human terms, trust in God or hope; the East is Strength, Victory, and, on the human side, spiritual combat; the West is Peace, Beatitude, Beauty, and, in human terms, spiritual contentment, holy quietude. The Zenith is Truth, Loftiness, Transcendence, and thus also discernment and knowledge; the Nadir is the Heart, Depth, Immanence, and thus also union and holiness. This complexity brings us back to the cosmological and encyclopedic dimensions of Solomon’s wisdom; it permits us to have a glimpse of the ramifications of the diverse orders of possibilities that unfold between the Nadir and the Zenith, that is to say, between the Alpha and the Omega of universal Possibility.

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The foregoing considerations enable us to extend our analysis of the Solomonian number even further, at the risk of becoming involved in a digression that would raise fresh problems; but this does not matter, since further precisions may be useful. The axes North-South, East-West, and Zenith-Nadir correspond respectively to the complementarities Negative-Positive, Active-Passive, and Objective-Subjective, which summarize the principal cosmic relationships; this is the fundamental symbolism of the three dimensions of space: length, breadth, and height. When looking toward the East, whence comes light, the East will be “in front”, the West “behind”, the South “on the right”, and the North “on the left”, whereas the Zenith and the Nadir remain immutable; these last two refer also to the pair Principle-Manifestation, the first term being for us “objective”, by reason of its Transcendence, and the second term “subjective”, because in the face of the Absolute the world is ourselves, and we are the world. But the Nadir may also represent “depth” or “inwardness” and thus the divine Self, in which case the Zenith

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9. This is what space demonstrates: it has three dimensions, but the introduction of a subjective principle of alternative or opposition gives it six directions; this structure retraces the totality of the Universe.

will assume an aspect of “projection”, of limitless *Māyā*, of unfolding and indefinite Possibility; in the same way, the root of a tree is manifested and unfolds in and by the crown.

Space is defined likewise, and even *a priori*, by two principal elements, the point—subjectively the center—and extension, which respectively express the two poles “absolute” and “infinite”; time for its part also comprises such elements, namely, the instant—subjectively the present—and duration, with the same significance.<sup>10</sup> In the number six, the implicit number three corresponds to the center or present, and the number two to extension and duration; the center-present is expressed by the ternary, and not by unity, because unity is here envisaged in respect to its potentialities and thus in relation to its possibility of unfolding; the actualization of that unfolding is expressed precisely by the number two.<sup>11</sup> All this is a way of presenting the “Pythagorean” aspect of the number six and consequently the role of this number in integral Wisdom.

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“Fear”, “love”, and “knowledge”, or rigor, gentleness, and substance; then “active” and “passive” perfections, or dynamic and static ones: herein, as we have seen, lies the elementary spiritual message of the principal number six. This scheme expresses not only the modalities of human ascent, but also, and even primarily, the modalities of divine Descent; it is by the six steps of the Throne that saving Grace comes down towards man, just as it is by these six steps that man ascends towards Grace. Wisdom is in practice the “art” of emerging from seducing and fettering illusion, of emerging first through the intelligence and then through the will; it consists first in knowledge of the “Sovereign Good” and then, by way of consequence, in the adaptation of the will to this knowledge, the two things being inseparable from Grace.

Divine *Māyā*—Femininity *in divinis*—is not only that which projects and creates; it is also that which attracts and liberates. The Blessed Virgin as *Sedes Sapientiae* personifies this merciful Wisdom, which descends towards us and which we too, whether we know it or not, bear in our very essence; and it is precisely by virtue of this potentiality or virtuality that Wisdom comes down upon us. The immanent seat of Wisdom is the heart of man.

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10. From a quite different point of view, it can be pointed out that the number three refers more particularly to space, which has three dimensions, whereas the number two is concerned rather with time, whose “dimensions” are the past and the future—without speaking here of the cyclic quaternary which is contained in duration and which is no more than a development of duality.

11. The number three evokes in fact not absoluteness itself, as does the number one, but the potentiality or virtuality which the Absolute necessarily comprises.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*A man after fourteen years' penance in a solitary forest obtained at last the power of walking on water. Overjoyed at this, he went to his Guru and said, "Master, master, I have acquired the power of walking on water." The master rebukingly replied, "Fie, O child! is this the result of thy fourteen years' labours? Verily thou hast obtained only that which is worth a penny; for what thou hast accomplished after fourteen years' arduous labour ordinary men do by paying a penny to the boatman!"*

Sri Ramakrishna.