SENSUSOUS RELATION WITH SOPHIA IN CHRISTIAN THEOSOPHY

ANTOINE FAIVRE

The biblical texts which mention Sophia, “the Divine Wisdom” (hokmā in Hebrew, sapientia in Latin),¹ have been the object of many commentaries throughout the history of Christianity.² Her ontological status is one of the most debated issues in the history of sophiology. Two interpretations have been, and still are, particularly prominent. The first one considers her as a “personification,” that is, just an aspect or even a mere metaphor of Christ or of the Holy Spirit (an interpretation fostered by the use of the very term “Divine Wisdom”); whereas, according to the other, she is a “real Person,” alongside the Trinity, albeit not a/the fourth Person.³ For people of the second persuasion, she may easily become someone with whom, by definition as it were, a personal relationship is possible. And this relationship has proved in some cases to take on the form of an amorous, even intimate⁴ rapport, as documented notably in the literature of the Christian current called Theosophy.

Indeed, one of the most cherished themes in theosophical literature⁵ is Sophia. Although Christian Theosophy clearly emerged at the beginning of the seventeenth century with Jacob Boehme (1575–1624),

¹ Particularly Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Baruch, Sirach and Wisdom. See discussion in Lang, “Wisdom,” who argues that although she has often been treated as a literary personification, originally she was probably a real goddess.
² For an overview, see Schipflinger, Sophia-Maria.
³ Several biblical passages would seem to present Sophia as a “real person.” She claims she was “created”: “The Lord created me the beginning of his works, before all else that he made, long ago. Alone, I was fashioned in times long past, at the beginning, long before earth itself. When there was yet no ocean I was born” (Proverbs 8:22–24, according to the New English Bible). She also says that “the man who rises early in search of her will not grow weary in the quest, for he will find her seated at his door” (Wisdom of Solomon 6:14).
⁴ A number of passages in the biblical texts dealing with Sophia were of a nature to foster such a kind of interpretation. For example: “Wisdom I loved; I sought her out when I was young and longed to win her for my bride, and I fell in love with her beauty” (Wisdom of Solomon 8:2).
⁵ For an overview of the theosophical current, see Faivre, “The Theosophical Current,” and “Christian Theosophy”; and Versluis Theosophia and Wisdom’s Book.
an important predecessor in the preceding decades was the German physician and alchemist Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605), best known today as the author of *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*, written in Latin. That book originally appeared in 1595, but the second and considerably enlarged edition (1609) has greatly contributed to its fame.\(^6\) For the most part devoted to an extensive commentary on the sapiential texts of the Bible, it is also replete with many alchemical, neo-paracelsian discussions, and the twelve complex illustrated plates which adorn it were to become even more famous than the text itself. Khunrath took Sophia to be a real person but did not claim to have been in “sensuous” contact with her.\(^7\) However, it is probably the *Amphitheatrum* that sparked off the strong interest in the Divine Wisdom over the three following centuries, beginning with Boehme’s sophiology.

Boehme’s visions and speculations bear mostly on Sophia’s ontological and cosmosophical role, but he also strongly emphasized the notion of “God’s corporeality.” Besides, his works are not devoid of some passages that might signal an occasional intimate relationship with her. For example, he writes that she addressed him as her bridegroom: “O my fiancé/how good I feel in being married with you/do kiss me with your desire/that I may show you all my beauty.”\(^8\) Nevertheless, sensuous though this may sound, it is intended in a mostly “interior” way; indeed, a little further she adds: “I will have my dwelling within thy innermost/and be your dear faithful bride/I do not marry your terrestrial flesh/because I am a queen of the heavens/And my kingdom is not of this world.”\(^9\)

Some later theosophers, while endorsing Boehme’s views in the main and maintaining the necessity of an “interiorisation” of Sophia within

---

\(^6\) For a bio-bibliography of Khunrath, see Telle, “Khunrath, Heinrich.”

\(^7\) Sensuous evocations are not absent from Khunrath’s text for all that. See for example in Appendix I how he commented upon *Wisdom of Solomon* 8:2 (quoted above, note 3). But the expressions he uses there, which also bear the mark of *The Song of Songs*, may be interpreted metaphorically as well. Let us note in passing that *Wisdom of Solomon*, although absent from the German translation by Luther, was not ignored, present as it was in other translations. Khunrath devoted long commentaries to it in his *Amphitheatrum*.

\(^8\) “O mein Bräutigam/wie ist mir so wohl in deiner Ehe/küsse mich doch mit deiner Begierde/in deiner Starke und Macht/so will ich dir alle meine Schöne zeigen” (Böhme, Der Weg zu Christo, 31).

\(^9\) “Ich will mit dem Perlein im inneren Chor wohnen/und deine getreue liebe Braut seyn: In dein irrdisch Fleisch vermehle ich mich nicht/dan ich bin eine Königin der Himmeln/und mein Reich ist nicht von dieser Welt” (Böhme, Der Weg zu Christo, 33).