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### *Book Review*

***Ostūreh-ye Sophia: Tajallī-ye Zanāneh-ye Hekmat-e Elāhī (The Myth of Sophia: The Feminine Manifestation of Divine Wisdom),***  
written by Maryamalsadat Siahpoosh; originally published in Persian, Tehran, Pileh Publishing, 2nd ed., 2021, 152 pp., ISBN 978-622-7620-04-7.

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### **Introduction and Context**

Originally published in Persian, *Ostūreh-ye Sophia: Tajallī-ye Zanāneh-ye Hekmat-e Elāhī (The Myth of Sophia: The Feminine Manifestation of Divine Wisdom)*, authored by Maryamalsadat Siahpoosh and prefaced by Dr. Leila Hooshangi, is positioned within the field of feminist theology. Siahpoosh represents an emerging yet substantive voice in Iranian feminist theological studies. Her engagement with the field began during her university training, where she developed a particular interest in feminist approaches to theology within the broader discipline of comparative religion, with an emphasis on Christian traditions. The present volume expands upon her master's thesis and further reflections undertaken during her doctoral research, which focused on the figure of Mary Magdalene. Over the past decade, she has produced several scholarly works, both articles and monographs, on feminist theology and gender studies. She now works as an independent researcher based in Canada, concentrating on feminist theology and gender studies in the context of interreligious dialogue.

The book's primary scholarly domain is feminist theology, with a specific focus on the feminine dimension of divine wisdom. It is situated within the subfield of Sophiology and centers on the myth of Sophia as an expression of divine wisdom in feminine form. Since the 1970s, feminist theologians have examined the gendered aspects of wisdom literature and the conceptualization of the divine in feminine terms. Building on this trajectory, Siahpoosh broadens the inquiry by tracing comparable manifestations of feminine divine wisdom in a variety of religious traditions, including Hinduism,

Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism. The contemporary relevance of the study stems from the renewed interest in the Sophia figure within feminist theology. Siahpoosh's analysis provides a framework for reassessing women's roles in theological discourse and in the religious imagination more broadly. By engaging multiple religious traditions and doctrinal sources, the work seeks to illuminate interpretive possibilities for recovering and rearticulating women's roles in theology and in the social history of religions. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing feminist efforts to develop constructive theological models grounded in both textual traditions and intercultural perspectives.

### **Structure and Main Arguments**

*The Myth of Sophia* is structured into four chapters, each developing a distinct dimension of the study's broader theological and comparative inquiry. *Chapter One* introduces the theoretical foundations of the work by situating feminist theology within the wider landscape of religious feminism. It outlines the historical development of feminist theological thought, examines its principal methodological approaches, and highlights core thematic concerns such as female embodiment, the significance of women's culture and lived experience, and the critical function of religious language and literature. This chapter establishes the conceptual framework that undergirds the rest of the study.

*Chapter Two* turns to the principal focus of the book: the feminine dimension of divine wisdom within Judaism and Christianity. It surveys relevant developments in Gnosticism, explores debates concerning the gender of God in Jewish and Christian thought, and examines key figures of feminine divine wisdom such as *Hokhmah* or *Chokmah* and the *Shekhinah* in Jewish tradition, as well as the various manifestations of Sophia in Gnostic Christian texts.

*Chapter Three* examines Sophia more directly, addressing the theological and symbolic issues associated with her figure. The chapter analyzes the role of Sophia within feminist theology and investigates her relationship to Mary Magdalene, drawing on a range of textual portrayals. It further discusses Christological implications of the Sophia myth and incorporates Jungian perspectives on archetypal symbolism to expand the interpretive horizon.

*Chapter Four* broadens the scope of the inquiry by exploring expressions of feminine divine wisdom in other religious traditions. This includes Eastern traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, alongside Western religious currents including

Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism. By tracing these comparative parallels, the chapter situates Sophia within a wider cross-cultural and intercultural context.

A central argument of the book is that the myth of Sophia, understood as the feminine manifestation of divine wisdom, provides a productive framework for reassessing women's status in theological discourse and the social history of religions. Siahpoosh argues that feminist theologians, by foregrounding feminine wisdom and the female embodiment of the divine within the Judeo-Christian tradition, aim to articulate a "women's theology" that challenges patriarchal theological models. By extending this analysis to other religious traditions, the book suggests that the feminine dimension of divine wisdom is neither confined to nor unique within these traditions; rather, it appears in diverse forms across different religious worlds.

A substantial portion of the study is devoted to Gnosticism, reflecting the author's premise that the Sophia myth emerges most distinctly within Gnostic Christian mythology and has thus become central to feminist theological reflection. Mary Magdalene is given particular attention, not only as a historical figure associated with Jesus but also as a symbolic embodiment of Sophia. This interpretive move supports the book's broader aim of envisioning more egalitarian perspectives on gender within religious systems.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative-analytical approach grounded in the close reading of sacred texts and the examination of their socio-historical contexts. Early Christian Gnostic writings, especially those discovered at Nag Hammadi, constitute the primary textual corpus. By engaging these sources, the author seeks to reconsider interpretive traditions that have historically marginalized or distorted women's roles, thereby opening space for alternative theological constructions.

### **Critical Evaluation and Scholarly Contribution**

The work demonstrates a coherent and methodologically consistent argument by grounding its analysis in feminist theology and, more specifically, in the subfield of Sophiology. Its central objective, to reconsider and restore women's roles through engagement with religious traditions and doctrinal sources, is pursued throughout with a sustained focus on the feminine manifestations of divine wisdom. The book's core claim that the Sophia myth serves as an interpretive framework for reassessing women's status in theology and in the social history of religions is articulated clearly and developed systematically.

A notable scholarly contribution of this study is its expansion of the scope of Sophialogy beyond the Judeo-Christian corpus, which has historically been the primary focus of feminist theological inquiry. By tracing parallel expressions of feminine divine wisdom in traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism, the author introduces a valuable comparative dimension that enhances the intercultural depth of the field. This broader analytical lens allows the study to highlight recurring patterns and symbolic resonances that transcend specific religious boundaries.

The evidentiary base of the work is particularly strong. Siahpoosh engages extensively with early Christian Gnostic texts, including those from the Nag Hammadi library, whose diverse and multifaceted narratives provide fertile ground for exploring alternative representations of Sophia. Her reinterpretation of Mary Magdalene as an embodiment of divine wisdom is especially noteworthy, demonstrating how these sources can illuminate marginalized or overlooked perspectives on women's roles within early Christian movements.

One of the study's most significant contributions lies in its effort to recover and reinterpret women's roles within theology and the religious imagination. By challenging dominant androcentric symbols and proposing a more balanced representation of the divine, the book offers critical resources for feminist theological reflection. Its attention to female embodiment and to women's cultural experiences provides a constructive starting point for reshaping theological discourse and for reexamining the gendered dimensions of religious history.

The limitations of the work stem primarily from the nature of the sources on which it relies. Gnosticism, having been condemned by the institutional Church and excluded from mainstream Christian theology, occupies a contested position within Christian intellectual history. Heavy dependence on Gnostic materials, whose cosmologies are often dualistic and whose theological claims were vigorously critiqued by the Church Fathers, raises questions concerning the normative status of these sources within Christian theology. Additionally, debates surrounding the gender of the divine remain philosophically and theologically complex, and the study touches on issues that continue to provoke considerable scholarly disagreement.

### **Thematic Significance**

This book positions itself as a substantial contribution to contemporary feminist theology by foregrounding Sophia as a central thematic concern. In doing so, it engages

one of the most enduring questions in feminist theological discourse: how the feminine dimension of divine wisdom can be recovered, reinterpreted, and integrated into constructive theological reflection. Its comparative breadth, spanning Judeo-Christian, Eastern, and ancient Near Eastern traditions, distinguishes it from studies that limit themselves to textual critique within a single religious framework. Through this wider lens, the book provides feminist theologians with a conceptual and methodological space in which to articulate new interpretations of the feminine divine.

Rather than confining its inquiry to a single tradition, *The Myth of Sophia* adopts an approach that resembles the careful uncovering of layered intellectual histories. It retrieves often-neglected mythological and theological motifs surrounding feminine divine wisdom, motifs that have been overshadowed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation, and brings them into renewed scholarly visibility. This process of recovery, while textual in nature, has clear implications for contemporary debates on religious identity, symbol formation, and the representation of the divine.

By broadening the horizons of Sophialogy beyond its traditional Judeo-Christian focus, the book demonstrates that feminine expressions of divine wisdom are neither isolated nor anomalous. Its examination of Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Mandaean materials equips scholars with a comparative framework for tracing convergences and divergences in global configurations of the feminine divine. From this vantage point, Sophia is not treated merely as an abstract symbolic construct but as a conceptual tool capable of informing discussions on women's religious roles and contributing to broader attempts to recalibrate the gendered dimensions of theology.

The book's broader intellectual significance lies in its sustained challenge to the patriarchal structures that have shaped traditional theological discourse. By highlighting feminine imagery, female embodiment, and women's cultural experience, the study marks an important point of departure for feminist theological reflection. Its reconsideration of figures such as Mary Magdalene, interpreted not only historically but also symbolically as embodying Sophia, enriches ongoing debates concerning women's authority and status within Christian communities and more broadly within religious society.

Siahpoosh's use of specialized sources, particularly the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts, adds a further layer of scholarly rigor. These sources provide complex narrative traditions through which alternative visions of the feminine divine can be explored. The author's interpretive engagement with these materials showcases both methodological diligence and creative hermeneutical openness, aiming to correct longstanding distortions in the

reception history of women's religious roles. In this sense, the study maintains a careful balance: it brings substantial textual evidence into conversation with a hermeneutics oriented toward gender equality, thereby contributing to the gradual rebalancing of theological discourse.

Situated within the fields of feminist theology and Sophia-study, this book offers significant value for advanced teaching and research. Its comparative framework, theoretical clarity, and engagement with marginalized textual traditions make it a meaningful resource for scholars and students concerned with the intersections of gender, theology, and the history of religions.

### **Use and Relevance for Teaching and Research**

This study offers considerable value for teaching and research across several disciplines. Its analytical and comparative approach, extending the figure of Sophia beyond the Judeo-Christian corpus to include Eastern and other Western religious traditions, renders it a particularly useful resource for courses and research projects concerned with feminist theology, comparative religion, and interreligious dialogue. The breadth of its textual engagement makes it suitable for academic research centers, seminar discussions, and upper-level university courses that address questions of gender, symbolism, and theological anthropology.

The book's sustained attention to the reinterpretation of women's roles in religious history and its critical analysis of Gnostic sources make it especially relevant for discussions of religious language, the symbolic construction of the divine, and the gendered dynamics of theological discourse. Its exploration of Mary Magdalene as an embodiment of Sophia, for instance, provides a productive entry point into debates on women's authority, agency, and representation in Christian traditions.

The following groups in particular may benefit from its insights:

- Theologians and scholars of religion, for its contribution to Sophia-study and its effort to develop a more balanced understanding of divine gender;
- Students and instructors in Women's Studies, History of Religions, Comparative Religion, and Feminist Theology, given its interdisciplinary reach and solid theoretical grounding;
- Philosophers and readers interested in mystical and mythological traditions, including those working with Gnostic sources and Jungian archetypal analysis.

Overall, the book serves as a versatile teaching and research tool, offering conceptual clarity and intercultural perspective for scholars engaging questions of gender, symbolism, and religious meaning.

## **Conclusion**

*The Myth of Sophia: The Feminine Manifestation of Divine Wisdom* represents a noteworthy contribution to feminist theology and the study of Sophia. Through a comparative-analytical methodology, Siahpoosh traces the figure of Sophia, the feminine dimension of divine wisdom, not only within the Judeo-Christian tradition but also across several Eastern and ancient Western religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism. This expanded scope enriches existing discourse by illuminating recurring patterns of feminine divine symbolism and providing a more nuanced framework for understanding the gendered aspects of the divine.

The enduring significance of the work lies in its use of Sophia as a conceptual lens through which to reassess women's roles in theology and in the religious imagination. By foregrounding feminine divine imagery and reinterpreting figures such as Mary Magdalene, the study offers new avenues for evaluating gender dynamics within religious systems. Its engagement with Gnostic texts further strengthens its contribution by retrieving alternative narratives that challenge historically dominant patriarchal interpretations.

This book is recommended for scholars in theology, philosophy, women's studies, comparative religion, and related fields. It offers a compelling and intellectually rigorous framework for rethinking feminine wisdom within the global history of religions and contributes meaningfully to contemporary conversations on gender and the divine.

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