

# **Finding Wisdom in Her Lap: Mary as *Alma Mater***

written & presented by  
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My Spirit Rejoices in God My Savior • Mary in Anabaptist Dress

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## **ESSAY**

### **Slide 1 | Title Slide**

This is my contribution to a presentation my sister Anne and I developed for the conference held in Elkhart in 2011. What I have written and made available in this video outlines how I believe Mary is a powerful theological resource for making the case for Anabaptist-oriented higher education. What is not in this presentation is Anne's contribution in which she shares her process and proposals for a visual representation of our shared interpretation of what it means to be "Christ-centered" in Mennonite educational settings.

### **Slide 2 | Part I**

If you are curious about Anne's contribution to this presentation, contact her by e-mail: [annehberry@mac.com](mailto:annehberry@mac.com).

### **Slide 3 | Job 18:12**

'But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?' (Job 28:12 NRSV). Mennonite Church USA and her members are in a time of deep — seemingly fathomless — transition. One of the sectors where this transition has been churning and stirring for decades is in denominationally-based educational institutions. With declining birth rates, increased patterns of assimilation, and increased ethnic diversity among Mennonites in the United States, the colleges, universities, and seminaries of MC USA have been struggling with traditional definitions of "Mennonite education." Gone are the days when schools like Eastern Mennonite University or Bethel College or Goshen College can meet enrollment targets by recruiting young people from Mennonite communities and congregations, and our seminaries are growing more dependent on ecumenically-oriented recruitment strategies. In fact, when it comes to the undergraduate degree programs we can see in data collected by the Mennonite Education Agency our young people are not always interested in being part of the learning communities on Mennonite college campuses. Apart from the polity questions these trends and dynamics raise, there is an incredible opportunity for us to dive into the fathoms of denominational transition and explore the rivers of life and meaning waiting to refresh and

renew us. Anne and I/Malinda and I have been talking amongst ourselves for the past year about our own hopes for the renewal of vision and a clarity of purpose for Mennonite-style higher education. But sometimes you have to be the change you want to see in the world — this is where our collaboration for this presentation comes into play.

#### **Slide 4 | *Broken Shield***

As we have talked together about our experiences as women, as women of color, and as Mennonite women of color, we have found ourselves articulating a philosophy and theology that grows from a tradition of “nonconforming freely” in the More-with-Less tradition of Mennonitism described by Doris Janzen Longacre in her landmark book, *Living More with Less*. In that book, Longacre defined five life standards that we believe represent the aesthetic and “value added” of Mennonite higher education: do justice, learn from the world community, cherish the natural order, nurture people, and nonconform freely. This is not the time to debate the merits or theological content of the More-with-Less life standards, rather we want to share with you how these standards become for us an aesthetic of simplicity, integrity, and Christian discipleship that describes the beauty and power of Mennonite higher education. This beauty and power is in turn symbolized by the image of Mary, the *Alma Mater*.

Whether in informal or formal descriptions of their life and culture, all of the higher education institutions that are part of MC USA identify themselves as being “Christ-centered.” This phrase is not uniquely Anabaptist or Mennonite. In fact, I (Malinda) would argue that it has come to us from rhetoric intended to evoke a christology that is highly individualized and generically Christian rather than the christological speech of the Historic Peace Church tradition that describes Jesus the Christ as the expression of God that gather us together into communities that listen for and discern the meaning of his enduring call to follow in The Way. This call is most clearly expressed in our communal renunciation of violence (including imperial Christianity and Christendom) and turning to embrace God’s justice. So what does it “Christ-centered education” mean on Mennonite college, university, and seminary campuses? It means that learning, knowledge, and self-awareness are based on a commitment to the pursuit of God’s wisdom, that we “study war no more.”

The world of the Ancient Near East was the cradle for mythologies and theologies that

continue to shape symbols, images, and personifications that continue to manifest in societies and cultures all around the globe. Mary, we would all agree, is no exception. I (Malinda) have come to my study of Mary through feminist theology and its use of comparative religious studies. What I find is that Mary can be interpreted and seen as manifestation of both human and divine archetypes. As such, she invites us to consider how we can weave together what I think of as strands or principles of “earthly femaleness” and “divine femininity” to resource our female- and feminine-poor religious life. Again, this is not the time to reflect on the ways that patriarchy and male-supremacy have distorted femaleness and femininity, rather my (Malinda’s) intention is to note, as Merlin Stone puts it, there was a time *When God was a Woman* which means that our twenty-first-century constructions of gender (masculinity and femininity) are not the only or even best ways of comprehending the mystery of God.<sup>1</sup> To return to the larger point, Mary, like Jesus, is both a person in history and an enduring symbol of God’s power to transform us into agents of God’s justice. How? As the *alma mater*.

### Slide 5 | Dictionary

*Alma mater*, a term we associate with school songs and being alumni, is a Latin phrase that we can translate as “nourishing mother.” If we borrow from Spanish where *alma* means “soul,” then we can speak of the *alma mater* as a “nourishing soul mother.” But how does this title apply to Mary? In both the ancient world and our own, religion is a phenomenon of great diversity. Through the ages, as religious leaders and thinkers have tried to “get it right,” they have sometimes “gotten it wrong” — the “it” being what can be viewed as legitimate and correct belief. One of the things religious leaders of the Christian West and our own Anabaptist tradition have gotten wrong about Mary is that she is merely Yahweh’s “handmaid.” In Christian mythology and symbolism, Mary is a blending of two important traditions of divine female/feminine archetypes: the mother *and* the virgin.

The ancient Greeks and Romans described the *alma mater* as a goddess, associating her with the various mother goddesses and some of the virgin goddesses throughout the Greco-Roman world particularly: Gaia, Cybele (Ki-bul-ē), Rhea, Demeter, and Athena in the Greek tradition and Tellus,

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of these themes and topics I consider works like the following to be indispensable: Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1984); Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); among others.

Ceres, Minerva in the Roman.

### **Slide 7 | Mother Earth/*Ara Pacis* Altarpiece**

Here is the *alma mater* depicted as Tellus in the *Ara Pacis Augustæ* (Altar of Augustan Peace, 13-9 BCE). In 2006, a new museum was opened to preserve this altar. But like much of Rome's great architectural feats, this altar was built to commemorate peace achieved by military victory. In other words, Tellus is the nourishing mother of those who conquer and rule.

### **Slide 8 | Athena/*Alma Mater***

This is the iconic *Alma Mater* who preside over the campus of Columbia University in New York. If she reminds you of the statue of Abraham Lincoln in Washington, DC, it is no coincidence because she was created by the same artist, Daniel Chester French. She is one of many representations of the *alma mater* that became popular to erect on university campuses in the United States. The tradition of personifying educational institutions as *almae matres* began in Europe and has grown over time to include not only the school but the song associated with that institution. The *alma mater* at Columbia is considered to be a representation of the goddess Athena or Minerva — an interesting choice given that Athena/Minerva is one of the virgin goddesses, but here wisdom becomes the nourishing mother of knowledge. French's *alma mater* clearly represents the traditions of classical liberal arts education, but on the campus of a corporate university, she also represents the commodification of education and the role U.S. educational institutions have played in building the nation's military-industrial complex. Recall that the Manhattan Project, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' multi-site project that successfully developed the atomic bomb, included Columbia University.

### **Slide 9 | Mary/*Madonna with Child***

This slide gives us a sense of popular depictions of Mary as the Madonna in the, Medieval period (roughly the fifth to fifteenth centuries). During this period, Christians saw in Mary a manifestation of the *alma mater*. Rather than Mother Earth or Goddess Wisdom, they saw in her the doorway to salvation open. The Litany of Loreto is one of the forms that lists various titles for Mary, including "Seat of Wisdom." In this sculpture, Mary appears throne-like and the infant Christ is seated on her lap. Visually, we are reminded of Tellus holding children on her lap and Athena on her throne

presiding over knowledge.

We also know that during the Medieval period, the use of female/feminine imagery to describe the church became an important part of popular piety. The scriptural image of the church as Christ's bride combined with the mythological trope of the God-King whose mother becomes his queen and bride to make Mary a symbol of the church who is wedded to Christ. The inclusive language movement has helped us understand the patriarchal meaning behind references to the church as female, and yet in turning from that language, it seems we have also lost access to Mary (making our conversations at this conference especially important!).

At the same time, like the goddesses of the Greek and Roman traditions, the image of Mary as Mother Church is double-edged for those who view God's *shalom* as the renunciation of violence and not merely the preservation of peace. As we work to rediscover Mary and clothe her in Anabaptist dress, I (Malinda) hope that we venture forth in a way that brings us closer to Wisdom.

### **Slide 10 | *MotherRoot***

This piece by Jan Richardson is not a depiction of Mary, but it speaks of the importance of being rooted as a strong tree that produces good fruit from generation to generation. Unlike the Roman altars commemorating military peace, the corporate universities doing their part for the war machine (the Manhattan Project that developed U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities included research conducted at Columbia University), and the lust for power of imperial Christendom and much of contemporary U.S. American Christianity, Mennonite higher education offers its students and the world something more deep, something more nourishing, and something more wise: the opportunity and invitation to lay down sword and shield, the opportunity to be like a tree planted by the water, the opportunity to seek Wisdom seated in the lap of his Mother — Christ-centered education hungry to find God's great *shalom*. Our schools are manifestations of Mary: the Seat of Wisdom, Mother Church, *Alma Mater*, and Mother Root who teaches her children to study war no more.

## Appendix 1

A comparative chart of the Greek and Roman goddesses.

|                | Greek   | Roman                     | Meaning  |
|----------------|---------|---------------------------|--|
| <b>mothers</b> | Gaia    | <i>Tellus/Terra Mater</i> | Mother Earth/Mother Nature   |
|                | Cybele  |                           | caverns, mountains, nature, animals, Great Mother  |
|                | Rhea    |                           | mother of the gods, often seated   |
|                | Demeter | <i>Ceres</i>              | harvest, grains, agriculture   |
|                | Hera    | <i>Juno</i>               | queen of the gods, marriage, women, childbirth, family<br><i>protector and special counselor of the state</i>  |
| <b>virgins</b> | Hestia  | <i>Vesta</i>              | hearth, architecture, ordering of domesticity and family<br><i>hearth, home, and family</i>  |
|                | Athena  | <i>Minerva</i>            | wisdom, civilization, warfare, strength, strategy, female arts, crafts, justice, skill<br><i>poetry, medicine, wisdom, commerce, weaving, crafts, magic, and the inventor of music</i> |
|                | Artemis | <i>Diana</i>              | hunt, wild animals, wilderness, childbirth, virginity and young girls, bringing, relieving disease in women<br><i>wild animals, woodland, the moon,</i>                                |