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FRANCIS, MARY AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE COSMOS

Film script, with annotations.

Saint Francis famously affirmed the value and meaning of Nature as Theophany. I will show how the Image of Mary is inseparable from the early Franciscans' understanding of the goodness of the Cosmos – how this vision has been lost in the west – and how, if we escape the modern failing of literalness, and see the Image of the Cosmos as it was seen in the 13th century this understanding has meaning today, whether we enjoy seeing the world in terms of Images, or Icons, or simply as the working of Love.

1 – SANTA MARIA DEGLI ANGELI

I was in Assisi in September 2019.

St Francis is everywhere. I could imagine him saying

“Why me? Why are you interested in me? It’s not about me!”

I’m a sort of composer, or I try to be, and I’m fascinated by the ancient idea of the universe being made of Harmony. Music guides Creation. It’s not just a poetic fancy. We might think about the laws of physics differently - but the idea’s still true.

The thing that really delighted me in Assisi was the painting behind the altar at Santa Maria degli Angeli, Saint Mary of the Angels.

This was the tiny church on the plain below Assisi where the Franciscan order began and where Francis died. It became one of the most important places of pilgrimage. Pilgrims would be given pardon for all the sins they had committed up to that point. A vast church was built over the tiny church to accommodate the crowds – it’s a beautiful baroque building – plain, white, geometric – with this dark secret heart within –



Saint Mary of the Angels, the original church, known as the Porziuncula, the Little Portion.

Here, above the altar, in this sacred heart of Franciscan tradition, is the painting by Ilario da Viterbo, from 1393.

The painting shows the annunciation at the centre, and the story of the Pardon of Assisi. The story tells that in 1216 St Francis had a vision of Mary, Jesus and the Angels here. Jesus asked Francis what he desired and Francis asked for a pardon of all souls who visited this place. This pardon is still valid, and can be obtained in any catholic church on the feast of the Dedication of St Mary of the Angels.

That story doesn't ring true to me, with my historian head on – but the earliest biography of Francis, by Thomas of Celano tells us:

Then he betook him to another place which is called Portiuncula where in ancient days a church of the Blessed Virgin the Mother of God had been built, but now it was forsaken, and cared for by none. And when the Saint of God saw that it was thus brought to ruin, being moved with pity, for that he glowed with devotion to the Mother of all goodness.¹

¹ <http://franciscanseculars.com/thomas-celano-first-life-of-francis/>

“He glowed with devotion to the Mother of all Goodness.” Francis had a very special devotion to Mary – and a special devotion to Mary is an essential feature of Franciscan tradition.

Here, above the scene of the Annunciation we see Francis presenting Mary with roses from the garden at Maria degli Angeli...

The garden was the site of the wood where Francis and his brothers first lived. The story tells that, one night, St. Francis, feeling the temptation to abandon his way of life, rolled naked in the bramble thorns in an attempt to overcome doubt and temptation. In contact with his body, the bramble bushes turned into [dog roses](#) without thorns.

So here Francis presents the thornless roses to Mary, the mystic Rose without a thorn, and look – all around her is an orchestra and choir of angels – in vivid colours, playing flutes, trumpets, viols, guitars, bagpipes – instruments that were not acceptable in church but can be played in heaven – beyond the limited music of this world.

2 – FRANCIS AND MARY - INTRODUCTION

Francis had a special devotion to Mary –

This is a matter of history rather than legend. Mary is of special importance to Francis - and Francis and his followers had an important role in the developing understanding of Mary and the Incarnation.

What did Mary mean to Francis – and to his followers?

If we believe that Jesus was the Son of God we might wish to understand how God could be born in this world – what is the relationship of God with Creation?

Our attitude to Mary as Christ’s mother is inseparable from our attitude to Creation.

I'm going to tell the story in two parts –

Firstly – in Francis's own words, or his biographers.

This will show how important Mary was to Francis – and as patron saint of the Franciscan Order.

Secondly – I will look at what Francis and his followers said in the context of how they understood the universe – in a very different way from the views of the last five hundred years – but not so different from the most contemporary 21st century attitudes –

Do we imagine the Incarnation as the birth of the Son of God into a purely material world that is somehow detached from God? Do we imagine that the Incarnation is happening just in one planet amongst billions? Why? How do we imagine Christ became both fully God and fully human? Or do we avoid the question and see him as a teacher, more human than divine?

The universe to the 13th century mind was alive with meaning, a unity, and inseparable from God.

The nature and goodness of Creation was of vital importance to the Franciscans at a time when new philosophies, inspired by Aristotle, were reducing nature to an object to be analysed - detached from God. These new philosophies would change theology in the western church into something completely different from what Francis, Clare and Bonaventure knew – and would drastically change the image of Mary.

3 – FRANCIS AND MARY – HISTORICAL

We have to forget the Mary that has dominated western Christianity for the last five hundred years – with the emphasis on virginity, and subservience. That Mary has been seen as demeaning women, supporting the power of the church – but also demeaning Creation as a whole – when western (but not eastern) Christianity focused more on salvation and the life to come than on this world as a theophany – a revelation of God.²

Francis lived at a time when Nature had been rediscovered. There was a positive attitude to Creation³ – as we can see in the great cathedrals.

² The negative effect of the re-imagining of Mary (particularly in the Counter-Reformation) was famously discussed by Marina Warner in *Alone of All Her Sex, the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1976). As well as inventing a Mary that seemed to demean women, the western church also accepted St Augustine's invention of Original Sin (which comes from Augustine's old age when he saw civilisation to be under threat, perhaps as a punishment for sin). This was never adopted in the East. The Franciscan campaign to promote Mary's Immaculate Conception could be seen to be an attempt to undermine this unnecessary theology and show that Mary, at least, could be free from sin. If Bonaventure had been able to re-unite East and West would the eastern image of Mary have taken root in the west? Or would the destructive forces of the Aristotelian philosophy (inspired by Arabic commentaries on the philosopher) which Bonaventure opposed, have spread east? It's alarming that his secretary claimed that Bonaventure was murdered, poisoned, at the critical moment when reconciliation seemed possible. His death, on 15th July 1274, was a fatal turning point in history. (<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02648c.htm>)

³ "Natura" in the 12th century meant everything in the material, or sublunary, world - far more than we tend to think of as Nature today. "Natura" became an allegoric figure representing Nature at this time. She was

And here is Mary at Chartres – in glass, from the mid 12th century:

And here above the portal (begun about 1150) is the first Mary in stone – this is Mary as she was seen in the middle ages – as the patroness of all wisdom – who taught Christ all worldly knowledge - and is the patroness of the Seven Liberal Arts – ⁴

Here is Pythagoras representing music, investigating the laws of Harmony – or Number...from which all the arts spring...

Mary is seen in many places as Seat of Wisdom in many places in the 12th and 13th century.

(Mid 12th century, Orcival, Auvergne, France.)

There is nothing sentimental here.

Francis saw Mary as the model for his Order – the model of holy poverty. In his *Second version of the Letter to the Faithful* he writes:

The most high Father made known from heaven through his holy angel Gabriel the Word of the Father...in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb he received the flesh of our humanity and frailty. Though he was rich (2 Cor 8:9) he wished, together with the most blessed Virgin, his mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond else. ⁵

Francis emphasises the incarnation in terms of frailty and poverty in many of his own writings – his Rule and his Office of the Passion – but he also wrote *The Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary* – like Francis's Canticle of the Creatures this is a carefully composed text. Every word has a place.

Hail, O Lady, Holy Queen, Mary Holy God-bearer, Who are the virgin made church.

never thought of as a goddess, or as a “real” being, in spite of the title of the useful book by George D Economou, *The Goddess Nature in Medieval Literature*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1991

⁴ For a detailed study of Mary as patroness of the Liberal Arts, especially of language, see Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England*, Catholic University America Press, 2011.

⁵ Ed. Steven J McMichael and Katherine Wrisley Shelby, *Medieval Franciscan Approaches to the Virgin Mary*, Brill, 2018, P.15

Chosen by the Most Holy Father in Heaven, whom he consecrated with his most holy beloved Son and with the Holy Spirit the paraclete.

In whom there is and was all fullness of grace and every good.

Hail his Palace! Hail his Tabernacle! Hail his House!

Hail his Robe! Hail his Servant! Hail his Mother!

And hail all you Holy Virtues which are poured into the hearts of the faithful through the grace and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, that from being unbelievers you make them faithful to God. ⁶

Francis salutes the Virgin in the highest of terms – Mother of God - in some way she IS the church– In Mary is all grace and every good – she is the dwelling place of God (his palace, tabernacle, house) – she clothes him in her own flesh (his robe) – and yet she is also his human servant and mother.

Each of these phrases is deep and full of meaning. The salutation encapsulates the complex theology of Mary of Francis's time – and it is about the very nature of Nature – the relationship of Creation – and all of us – with God.

Mary is patron saint of the Franciscan Order – and Mary and her relationship with Creation is a major theme in Franciscan tradition.

(Francis and Mary by Cimabue, The Lower Basilica, Assisi)

Or so it should be...

The 1978 Rule of the Roman Catholic Secular Franciscans mentions Mary only once:

The Virgin Mary, humble servant of the Lord, was open to his every word and call. She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family. The Secular Franciscans should express their ardent love for her by imitating her complete self-giving and by praying earnestly and confidently. ⁷

I would not say that this is wrong – and it's important to say that the key values of Franciscan tradition – poverty, simplicity, hoping to be Christ-like – are always true – but this is a dim shadow of the Mary of Francis – in which Mary was inseparable from a Creation that was alive with God – a theophany. It shows how much of the original vision even Roman Catholic Franciscan tradition has lost.

(Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Virgin of the Franciscans*, c1300, Bologna National Art Gallery)

⁶ McMichael and Wrisley Shelby, op. cit, p. 21)

⁷ <http://ofsgb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/OFS-Initial-Formation-Enquirer-cap-3-Rule-2.pdf>

In the last twenty years the true Franciscan tradition has been rediscovered – as an alternative that is sometimes startlingly different from the dominant ideas of western Catholicism, Anglicanism and Protestantism.⁸

We need to forget everything we think we know and start afresh –

We need to see the world as it was seen in the 13th century – and discover how it can be that this ancient view of Creation can be more TRUE now than the attitudes of the last five centuries.

4 – THE FRANCISCAN COSMOS

This was a time when Nature had been rediscovered. Philosophers at Chartres, for example, had a new positive view of Creation, Nature and Love...⁹

All these ideas can be found in the great Franciscan Bonaventure's *Soul's Journey into God* – but they are not his ideas – they are ways of thinking about Creation which were common, traditional – all inspired by ancient sources – particularly Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*¹⁰, which was revered as a Greek parallel to Genesis. The Jewish philosopher Philo¹¹, who lived at the time that Jesus is presumed to have lived, knew that the sacred story of the seven days of Genesis was about the formation of the pattern of Creation – not this world itself – the secret order of the cosmos that Plato also knew.

The Cosmos is Creation - the whole, beautiful thing – a world that is never detached from God - which has unity - a form and harmony – with guiding laws within it.

(Cosmos, from *De Natura Rerum*, 11th century)

The ancient mind pictured the Cosmos as a sphere – with the material world as a point at the centre – NOT the earth as we think of it but the entire material world. The material world was surrounded by spheres of planets and stars – but these are not what we think of as planets – these are poetic images of the harmonies that guide Creation.

⁸ For example, see <https://www.franciscantradition.org/>

⁹ C S Lewis wrote of “the invention of Love” in the 10th to 12th centuries. It might seem surprising how little Love was thought of, in human terms or as a creative principal until the 12th century.
<http://wordbasket.blogspot.com/2014/02/cs-lewis-and-invention-of-love.html>

¹⁰ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-timaeus/>

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philo>

The cosmos is not only inseparable from God, the source of all Being, but God is also present within it in a mysterious way.

The Cosmos is an image of God - and everything in the Cosmos, in its infinite variety, is an image or expression of God.

It's as if there is only one idea or design in God's mind – which Christians call the Word -

And the Word is simply God - but reflected in creation in infinite ways. Every single thing is a reflection of the Word

This idea that everything is an expression of the Word is sometimes associated with Duns Scotus but it's much older – it was described by the 7th century Maximus the Theologian¹², who learned from the Platonists Proclus and Iamblichus.¹³

This very ancient image of Creation was shared by philosophers in Greek, Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions – but by Francis's time Christian theologians realised that there is another essential dimension to this view of Creation.

Creation isn't static – it's not a machine set in motion – it's an outpouring of love. God is Good (as the Platonists always said) – but that means God must love – God must be One but also about relationship – a lover and the beloved - AND LOVE MUST BE FREE!

– and everything is drawn by love to be what it might be (though of course things are imperfect – and somehow reveal God even more by being imperfect) – and everything desires to return to God by being a whole –

Creation is a performance, freely forming, pouring out in love, guided by those harmonies – or numbers – which are not simple numbers but also sounds, rhythms, colours, images - the fundamental laws of Nature which allow the music to form freely.

Creation ... is like a beautiful song that flows in the most excellent of harmonies but it is a song that God freely desires to sing into the vast spaces of the universe.

(Quoted in Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, New City Press, 2012)

The Cosmos is a beautiful whole which contains the ever-changing material world, which seeks God, drawn by Love....

And everything has meaning – everything reveals God – everything communicates God – the cosmos is a theophany.

¹² See Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, SPCK, 2013

¹³ The influence of the later Platonists on Christianity (and possible vice-versa) is a very complex subject. The sixth-century writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius is sometimes said to have adapted Platonic ideas to Christianity, but more recently Panagiotis G Pavlos has argued that Dionysius is using Platonic language to explain distinctly Christian ideas to a Greek audience. (*In Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity*, Routledge, 2019.) Dionysius sees all Creation as an outpouring of Love from God, all a Theophany, and the Church is the whole of Creation reunited with God.

And what of us?

We are made of the elements that make the physical world. Francis sang of Air, Water, Fire and Earth We might say, like Carl Sagan, we are physically made of stardust – but we are all worlds in miniature. We are microcosms. We not only share our physical nature with the Cosmos we have the same sacred pattern within us - the harmonies, laws or numbers, or, we might say, archetypal qualities - as the whole Cosmos. We are individual but we are intimately parts of the whole. We participate and share. This unity isn't only mystical – it draws us into a moral responsibility for the world.¹⁴

But we don't see it. We are blinded by what Christians call sin, or a Platonists, like Shakespeare, might call "this muddy vesture of decay" – simply the difficulty of being human in this changing world...

We – and Mary – are worlds in miniature – united, though we might not see it – but Mary – in some way – can...

St John's gospel tells us that

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God

And that

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not

But the Greek word is Cosmos – it can't really be translated as anything else. Why say world, or Creation (which might imply a literal making of things by God) when Cosmos is the proper word?

He was in the Cosmos and the Cosmos was made by him and the Cosmos knew him not.

And if God is Love and loves the cosmos God desires to be united with it – in every part – body and soul – even the darkest corners.

And so God enters the Cosmos through Mary.¹⁵

¹⁴ This moral responsibility for Creation, or Nature, is not a specifically Christian idea. It is a natural effect of any philosophy which believes that everything in Nature shares a common origin, or Source of All Being, such as Platonist and Stoics and other religions with the same world-view. The Incarnation, though, is a way of thinking about a very deep and intimate relationship of the Source of All Being, Nature and our Humanity.

¹⁵ Though Mary is undoubtedly Christ's mother, it has to be remembered that he has no physical father and that Mary, as representation of the Cosmos, or simply as a representative of Nature, or humanity, contains both male and female. The Cosmos, though it can be likened to a womb, is not sexual. As the traditional characters of the planets remind us it contains every archetype of humanity, as do we as microcosms. In Christ, as St Paul says, there is no male and female. (Galatians 3:28). Mary is a human mother, but the early Franciscans saw her as a model for both men and women – and everything.

The Word was made flesh.

Christ's human body is entirely Mary's – but it's not only physical – it's also the microcosm – the image of the Cosmos with its divine order and unity – Mary is daughter of God – and daughter of her son.

Mary, the individual person, contains God - who contains EVERYTHING.

There is no rose of such virtue
As is the rose that bare Jesu,
Alleluia.

For in this rose contained was
Heaven and earth in little space,
Res miranda.

Just as the COSMOS gives birth to every infinitely varied expression of the Word Mary gives birth to God who is all things – and yet can be imagined in human terms.

Yes – because we are all microcosms we all share – and participate – in one human nature. The incarnation affects us all – but it's tShe great Mystery. God is beyond time -

Does the Incarnation effect Creation in all time?

The Cosmos is an image of God's Unity.

Everything thing that has being bears within it the Word.

Mary contains God. She bears Christ.

In doing so Mary is the cosmos bearing God – who contains all things.

Everything is Mary.¹⁶

When our senses are cleansed we can see God in all – because All is Mary.

Whether or not the incarnation was a historical event this is a way of thinking about the world, a cosmos and everything in it, has meaning and value – in its height and depth, light and dark, physical and spiritual – though can we really ever separate the two?

¹⁶The relationship of Mary and Cosmos is discussed in Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary, Continuum*, 2003. Boss suggests that Mary can be associated with the Chaos which preceded Creation according to Genesis. Chaos in this sense seems to be equivalent to unformed matter, but Mary is not only the matter from which the cosmos is made, and which gives Christ his body, she is also the pattern or form of the Cosmos – but the matter, a Platonist would say, cannot exist without its form. Sarah Jane Boss told the present writer that there are some factual inaccuracies in this book which she regrets but it is an interesting source for Marian speculations.

And this new cosmos is everything – everywhere and everyone. We might use different images but it's the same world.

This **story** tells us that if we can clear away the muddy vesture we can see God in Creation not through complex philosophy and intellect - but through the love and humanity Mary has shared with God. Mary draws us to Christ. We are all Christ-bearers. The relationships become more and more interwoven – all leading to God.

I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (John 14: 20)

This is, in a very simple way, what the 13th century world was like. Everything had meaning. The world was a form of scripture.

To Bonaventure scripture was a forest in which any golden phrase could mean Mary and be woven into a sermon¹⁷ – and the world was a book – which was one Word – to some Franciscans of the 13th century the whole world and everything in it was Mary bearing the Word.¹⁸

To Angela of Foligno the whole world was pregnant with God.

Mary was the mother of all meaning¹⁹ – and we could sing and dance with everything as our brother and sister.

It's all madder than we can possibly imagine –

But isn't this what happens when we realise that Creation is an outpouring of Love and God is incarnate?

This is the Mary of the great cathedrals – and especially in England where she had been revered more than anywhere else in the west – in the great churches of Eton and Kings where the most beautiful and sophisticated music in the world tried to imitate the angels praising Regina Mundi Clara, Bright Queen of the Cosmos.²⁰

¹⁷ Scripture could be read "literally", in the sense of what it actually says, but everything in scripture had multiple meanings, and communicated spiritually and mystically as well as "literally". Bonaventure, and others, could see any phrase in scripture as being a prophetic reference to Christ – and Mary – and so a sermon could be made as a tapestry of quotations illustrating the theme. This is possibly hard to understand now when there is a quite alien idea of reading scripture historically or literally, which perhaps comes from the same change in attitudes that lead to treating Creation "literally" as an object rather than a theophany. This medieval use of scripture could be taken to extremes. It is very unfortunate the late 13th century *Psalter of the Virgin Mary*, which adapts psalms as prayers to the Virgin, was believed to be by Bonaventure, thus damaging his reputation especially in the Protestant world.

¹⁸ To the 12th century philosopher the wildest places in nature represented unformed matter – "Silva" in Latin, which also means "wood" or "forest" – which Nature longed to bring closer to God. See Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, D S Brewer, 1993. Such places are sometimes where Mary can be known most mysteriously – springs and grottos. Of course, this might seem "pagan" (but what do we mean by "pagan"?) but the meaning is the same – the source of all being hidden within nature.

¹⁹ A

²⁰ Devotion to Mary was more developed in England before the Norman Conquest than in the rest of the Europe. See Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge University Press,

4 – MARY IN FRANCIS AGAIN

Let's look again at Francis's *Salutation*:

Hail, Lady, O Holy Queen, Mary holy God-bearer, Who are the virgin made church.

Mary is Queen - Queen of Heaven, because she was taken into heaven to be Queen of Heaven and the Cosmos – and it is to Mary, not Christ, that Francis presents the roses from the garden at Santa Maria degli Angeli.

“God-bearer” is Theotokos,²¹ Mother of God. Mary as microcosm has contained God. She is, as Dante wrote “daughter of her son.”²²

“Virgin made church” - the church here is the entire body of believers – or, ultimately, the entirety of redeemed humanity, reunited with God – and everything – is united in Mary as the New Creation.²³

Christ could say to everyone – and everything – whatever the words this is absolutely inclusive:

Woman, behold your son. (John 19:26)

Chosen by the Most Holy Father in Heaven whom He consecrated with His most beloved son and with His Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in whom there is all fulness of grace and every Good.

Mary, so the story goes (or, at least, the apocryphal infancy gospel, the *Protevangelium of St James*, which provided many popular stories about Mary and which some say, and others do not, might include very early traditions. Mary was chosen and prepared. She belonged to the temple and danced on its steps.

Hail his Palace! Hail his Tabernacle! Hail his House!

Mary is God's dwelling place.

1990. It is intriguing that many of the influential figures in early Franciscan tradition, such as Alexander of Hailes, came from England or were associated with England. Franciscan attitudes to Mary were influenced by Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4-1109). The climax of English devotion to Mary was the establishment of Eton College and King's College, Cambridge, by Henry VI. Both were architectural marvels but both buildings were built for extremely sophisticated music, the most complex music in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century. The showpieces were large scale motets in praise of Mary. Fortunately, much of the music of Eton survived the destruction of culture of the reformation. *O Regina Mundi Clara (O Bright Queen of the Cosmos)* is a text set for Eton by John Browne. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y28FW6JBd7w>

²¹ See Andrew Louth, *op. cit.*

²² Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Paradise, Canto 33.*

²³ See note 13.

The Tabernacle, like the Holy of Holies of the Temple, was a representation of the Cosmos – it not only represented the pattern and inner laws of the universe it actually was that pattern when God was present.

The tabernacle is a precise equivalent of the sacred Cosmos.

Mary is the pattern of the Cosmos in which God finds a new dwelling – more than that – in being a receptacle for God she is the Cosmos.²⁴

Hail his Robe! Hail his Servant! Hail his Mother!

“His Robe” suggests Christ’s physical body – though it is not only physical nature which Christ takes from Mary – but also human nature in a spiritual sense - the patterns of the cosmos.

“His Servant” reminds us that even Mary is Christ’s servant – as we all are.

And sixthly – “His Mother” - which is astonishing bit true.

²⁴ Margaret Barker (in several books, including *The Mother of the Lord, Vol.1, The Lady in the Temple*, Bloomsbury Academic. 2012) argues that the story of Mary is a memory of a far more ancient tradition of the Temple – in which case the story of the Incarnation is a retelling of an ancient tradition of the relationship between God and Creation. Rachel Fulton Brown shows that Mary was associated with the Tabernacle as pattern of Creation by the 13th century writer Servosanctus whose work is an extravagant praise of Mary in every part of scripture and creation. (In McMichael and Wrisley Shelby op. cit. p. 145). Though Servosanctus and others in the 13th century might not have had any knowledge of the early Temple the Mary they present has echoes of the Lady of the Temple in Margaret Barker’s work, and, as I have tried to suggest, has a meaning in terms of the ancient Platonic idea of the Cosmos – but the figure of Wisdom, which Barker sees as the Lady of the Temple, is not a material woman but a representation of the sacred pattern of Creation – as she is in Sophia symbolism of the Russian Orthodox mystics. The ancient Lady of the Temple might have been more like the Roman version of Isis, an embodiment of Nature as well as its inner secrets. Mary is also material, human, a Mother, who unites God with material Nature – but she is multi-layered. Any image of Mary is transparent – there are other images beyond. She cannot be said to be Isis, or Wisdom, or the Hebrew Lady. She is a person first and foremost, who also has these other roles while still being human, thus interweaving Nature and the sacred pattern in a complex way. This is, it seems, the characteristic Christian dimension - but I would not be able to say whether or not early Hebrew theology, and Platonism, actually saw any less of an intimate relationship of God with Creation. The one feature that seems to be special to the 12th and 13th century Christian story is the emphasis on creative Love – but I am sure students of late Platonism would argue that this also was not unique. Another feature that stands out in both ancient Hebrew and medieval Christian traditions is the language of images, especially human images, rather than intellectual concepts. But even this is also the case with late Platonism... What is important is to realise that there is nothing new under the sun and it is very risky to assert that one religious tradition has more divine or historical authority than another. But these footnotes, when they are not being simply references, are personal observations, limited by own rather niche areas of interest,

I see Francis and his followers as the flowering and end of a tradition.

Bonaventure feared the effect of the new intellectual philosophy that was inspired by a version of Aristotle from the Islamic world. Creation was becoming an object. God was detached from Creation – increasingly unknowable.

And this world of theophany and vision, in which everyone could dance and sing, might be seen as a threat to the authority of the church.

In the west religion became more about salvation and the world to come than theophany. Creation was devalued with disastrous consequences.

Mary became a quite different image – often sentimental – with the emphasis on purity and obedience.

But this did not happen in the eastern church.

This Mary of the Franciscans is an Icon – not a literal representation - we see through the image – there is always something beyond – a deep meaning – perhaps a more ancient image of Queen or Wisdom²⁵ – the image draws us into God – and because of the Incarnation Everything is an Icon.

Some of us find thinking in images difficult now we are so used to being analytical, empirical and literal. Others can be drawn to this imaginative way of approaching truths beyond words.

It is possible to speak of this Cosmos, the lost Cosmos of the 13th century, in abstract words.

I suspect Ilia Delio and other contemporary Roman Catholic writers avoid mentioning Mary because the Mary of the western church is so weighed down with unhelpful baggage (as they say) – but Delio's most recent and radical writings are the closest to this lost vision in inclusive language – this truth must be true of everyone, everything, everywhere in the cosmos whatever stories and images we might use to help us think about it:

There is an absolute Divine Love at the heart of life, a wholeness of Love completely centered, irresistible and attractive. This Love is the life force of unity and deeply vested in what life becomes. To wake up to this Divine Other at the heart of life is to admit that reality

²⁵ For the Russian Orthodox idea of Sophia or Wisdom see Andrew Louth *op. cit.* In a talk for the Temenos Academy on Russian Sophiology in 2018 and following questions Andrew Louth amusingly made it clear that the relationship between Mary and Wisdom is not to be defined. I like the idea of Mary and Image – I which images are transparent and always have another image beyond them, and so an image can be something else and yet not be, or still be itself. <https://www.temenosacademy.org/product/temenos-academy-review-23/>

is relational; nature is relational and we are relational because love is relational and God is Love.

(Ilia Delio. *A Hunger for Wholeness*. Paulist Press, 2018)

If you prefer images to the abstract and literal the greatest picture of the cosmos, which is also the human soul or imagination, is Dante's deeply Franciscan Divine Comedy.²⁶

Near the climax St Bernard of Clairvaux sings of Mary:

Virgin-mother, daughter of the son, more extreme than any other creature in humility and greatness...you are she who has so ennobled human nature that its Worker did not disdain to become its work. (Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 222, Faber, 1943)

For Dante the Love that Delio speaks of is

the love which moves the sun and other stars.

²⁶ It is often suggested that Dante was a Franciscan Tertiary, though there is no direct evidence. Recent research confirms the very significant Franciscan influence on his work, and the influence of his work on later Franciscans. See; Edited by Santa Casciani, *Dante and the Franciscans*, Brill, 2006.