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Hagia Sophia (Divine Wisdom)

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, and a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, Natura naturans.

Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia," 1963[1(p65)]

THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS emphasize the importance of adhering to a prescribed spiritual path that facilitates emotional maturity and offers the hope of transcendent wisdom. Such wisdom is accompanied by a heightened consciousness, a sense of inner silence, joy, gratitude, and a spontaneous morality. To develop wisdom, both Western and Eastern religions teach constraint, a disciplined morality, charitable concern, and compassionate action.

Among churches, the traditional setting for religious practice, Istanbul's Hagia Sophia (from the Greek for *divine or holy wisdom*) is one of the most renowned. It was founded as the Megale Ekklesia (Great Church) only 30 years after Constantine, the first Christian ruler of the Roman empire, transferred the imperial capital from Rome to the ancient city of Byzantion, renaming it Constantinople. There Christianity replaced belief in the ancient Roman gods as the official religion of a culturally and religiously diverse state. Serving as the cathedral, or bishop's seat, the church was built on a peninsula at the top of the first hill visible from the sea as ships enter the city. It was surrounded by water on 3 sides, the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus, and the Golden Horn. By AD 430, the Great Church was known as the Hagia Sophia and dedicated to the wisdom of God. Destroyed by fire in 532, it was restored by Emperor Justinian in 537, and for nearly 1000 years, it was the most important church in Christendom.[2]

The church thrived and was filled with religious icons. But in 726, Byzantine Emperor Leo III initiated the iconoclastic controversy when he ordered the destruction of religious icons throughout the empire. He had come to believe that lifeless paintings and statues of Jesus and the saints were anathema; only the Eucharist was allowed for meaningful worship. The controversy persisted for more than 100 years but was finally resolved in favor of the iconophiles, who venerated religious icons. They asserted that the biblical commandment forbidding graven images of God became obsolete with the incarnation of Jesus. With his crucifixion, images were no longer representations of an invisible God but instead testimony to the Word made flesh in Christ. For the faithful, icons revealed the *presence* of religious figures and were to be venerated.

The Hagia Sophia was rededicated, and the use of icons flourished during the Middle Byzantine period (843-1261). Uniquely contemporary commentators primarily focused their praise on the beauty of its interior with its mosaics and marble pillars, rather than on its external architectural appearance. Still its dome and design are considered the epitome of Byzantine architecture.[2,3]

Figure. Virgin and Child mosaic.

During this second flowering, the beautiful apse mosaic in the dome of the church was created, showing the enthroned Virgin and Child (**Figure**). It is the oldest of the surviving mosaics in the Hagia Sophia, dating back to 867, and the first of the post-iconoclastic mosaics. As a figural mosaic, it apparently replaced a mosaic of a cross that occupied this space at the time of the iconoclastic controversy. The mosaic is attributed to Lazarus, a highly regarded painter, whose hands are said to have been burned during the iconoclastic period when he continued to paint icons during the reign of the iconoclastic emperor Theophile. Mary, clothed in a blue-green maphorion and stola, sits on a jeweled throne. The Christ child, seated on her legs, wears gold vestments and gold sandals. His light hair with golden highlights frames his warm, receptive human face. Mosaics of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, protectors of the Virgin, appear on either side of the Virgin.[3]

Each year the Hagia Sophia was the site of public ceremonies attended by the emperor. He and his retinue entered the church through the southwest vestibule under a 10th-century mosaic (believed to have been completed in 955 [cover]) showing the Virgin and Child with Emperors Constantine and Justinian. The emperor proceeded through the imperial door, crossed the nave, and placed his offering beneath the apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child. The 3 mosaic figures appear in a large lunette over the southwest entryway. Their holiness is symbolized by halos. The Virgin, holding the Christ child, is seated on a throne in the center and is surrounded by 2 medallions with the Greek letters MP and ΘY, *Mētēr* and *Theou*, meaning Mother of God. The composition is that of the apse mosaic. Her right arm extends toward the Child and her left hand, holding a handkerchief, rests on his leg. Although there is a warm rosy tint to her skin, her portrait is formal, betraying no emotion.

The Child, seated on her knees and dressed in golden chiton and himation with silver highlights, holds out his right hand in blessing and holds a scroll in his left hand. Thoughtful and radiant, his face is full and his forehead prominent; his right leg is drawn up to suggest dynamic movement.[3] On the viewer's left, the inscription reads "Justinian, of illustrious memory."[3] Justinian is wearing a crown and dressed in imperial vestments, the most sumptuous being a long wide band of gold cloth (*loros*) that is draped around his body. He presents a model of the church with its prominent dome to the Virgin. On the viewer's right, Emperor Constantine, similarly dressed, offers her a composite model of the city; thus, the mosaic indicates her reign over religious life and her role as protector of the city. Beside him the inscription reads "Constantine, the great Emperor, amongst the saints."

In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, who converted the Ha-

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gia Sophia into a mosque, adding minarets at the each of the 4 corners and replacing the altar with a mihrab pointing toward Mecca. The mosaics were plastered over because of the Islamic ban on representational images. Moslems introduced their own religious symbols yet retained the name Ayasophia, the place of Holy Wisdom. In 1935 at the founding of the Turkish Republic, the church was converted into a museum and the mosaics were restored.[2] But for the faithful, both Christian and Moslem, it remains a source of inspiration.

Over the centuries, understanding how spiritual wisdom is gained and how it might be taught has lost none of its appeal. Best known in the early 20th century are William James' Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh on natural religion, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.[4] He emphasized the importance of religion not only for spiritual guidance but also from a biological perspective. His first lecture was on religion and neurology; James writes that although all states of mind are neurally conditioned, "their significance must be tested not by their origin but by the[ir societal] value. . . . "[4] His focus was on personal experience and not on institutional religion. James wrote that experiencing the divine results in an enthusiasm for living and overcomes unhappiness. He referred to a sense of reality beyond the special senses; for example, the sense of presence that lingers after the death of a loved one and the sense of a divine presence consistently described in the world's religions.

James was deeply impressed by pioneering Canadian psychiatrist William Bucke's (1837-1902) *Cosmic Consciousness*,[5] which was published the same year that he began his lecture series. In it Bucke refers to his own experience of illumination and proposes that such experiences are increasingly common. James quotes Bucke, Walt Whitman's executor, when he writes about Whitman and the religion of healthy mindedness: "When I first knew him, I used to think that he watched himself, and would not allow his tongue to give expression to fretfulness, antipathy, complaint, and remonstrance,"[4(p73)] but later, after long observation, Bucke realized that these negative emotions were entirely absent in Whitman.

Bucke proposed that the moral sense is mediated via the autonomic nervous system. His book describes his personal experience of sudden enlightenment and rapture that, while brief in duration, irrevocably changed his outlook on life. Bucke spent the rest of his life—he was in his mid thirties at the time of his experience—studying sudden enlightenment, epiphanies, in the lives of mystics, philosophers, writers, and artists. Bucke postulated that there is an evolutionary trend toward cosmic consciousness and that eventually it will be as common as self-consciousness is today.

Toward the end of the 20th century, existential theologian Ralph Harper[6] proposed that if we are to be wise, we must re-examine what it means to exist. He wrote that our sense of personal continuity has at its heart the memory of presence. Presences linger, have authority, and are basic to our experience of personal reality and what it means to be fully human. He discusses presence from both psychological and theological perspectives.

Concurrently, evolutionary neuroscientist Paul MacLean began to search for the neurological substrate of the subjective self in the brain, introducing the term *epistemics* to describe the systematic study of subjective knowledge.[7] He contrasted epistemics with epistemology, the study of objective knowledge. There have followed a series of brain imaging studies seeking to establish brain activation during subjective states such as trust, empathy, and decision making. Others (this issue)[8] are beginning to look more broadly at topics like wisdom itself, examining its neurobiology and dissecting its components, especially brain regions (prefrontal cortex, limbic and striatal regions) linked to rational thought, emotion regulation, value relativism, and prosocial attitudes. Still others present moral dilemmas and seek to establish brain regions activated during the resolution of cognitive conflict and those involved with moral reasoning.[9] These authors find that both prefrontal cortex and ventromedial prefrontal cortex work in concert to master moral concerns.

It is difficult to consider subjectivity without studying consciousness and seeking to find which brain regions bind together during subjective conscious reasoning.[10] Such studies include meditation practitioners and normal volunteers and provide preliminary support for neuromodulation of consciousness.[11] All these correlational studies signal a growing interest in how the brain functions in an integrated way to allow us to be more human and the psychological consequences of disruption of these brain systems.

Still, as James proposed, we seek to experience the "hidden whole-ness" that Merton described in his poem (epigraph) about divine or holy wisdom. Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist monk who sought silence and solitude in a contemplative monastery yet remained engaged in the world, believing that world peace requires helping others to appreciate the wisdom that comes from the inner life of the spirit. His journey bridged various religious traditions, cultures, and disciplines. Merton expressed this vision in his novels, essays, devotionals, and autobiographical writings. Yet it is his poetry that comes closest to conveying the importance of striving toward wisdom. His poem "Hagia Sophia" is organized around the liturgical hours of a monk's day. The day begins as he awakens and proceeds as he experiences the sense of a divine presence as Wisdom. He acknowledges it, and, as he engages that presence, the interior silence deepens throughout his day. Refreshed he goes forth as a new man and falls asleep that night with renewed understanding of the wordless gentleness that welcomed him that day "with indescribable humility. . . . [Her tenderness enjoined] my own being, my own nature, and the gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom."[1(p65)]

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Dedication: To Frances MacNeil with appreciation for her generous assistance over the past 6 years.

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