EPSOCIETY.ORG

USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of www.epsociety.org.**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to www.epsociety.org!***

All Rights Reserved
© Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

Spiritual Songs and Biblical Wisdom

Natasha Duquette
Department of English
Biola University
La Mirada, CA

Abstract. This essay proposes that distinctively Christian *poetry* ("psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs") could provide compelling models for what Paul Moser has termed "Christ-Shaped Philosophy." In this brief space, I consider the aesthetic veiling of Biblical wisdom in poetic form, both in the special revelation of scripture and in the general revelation of post-Reformation British verse. The poetry penned by Christ-shaped men and women, from George Herbert to Anna Barbauld, does not necessarily oppose the glimpses of truth conveyed through the argumentative prose of classical Greek philosophy or continental natural theology, but appeals more strongly to the heart as well as to the mind. It thus more closely follows the speech acts of Christ himself, and so could inform the style as well as practice of Christ-Shaped Philosophy.

An Invitation to Christ-Shaped Philosophers

I am not a philosopher. I am a poet and also a scholar of eighteenth-century British poetics. Thus, this essay is an invitation into interdisciplinary dialogue, a gesture of reconciliation, and an effort at peacemaking in the centuries-long war between philosophers and versifiers that began with Plato's exclusion of tragic poets from his ideal state.[1] Paul Moser has initiated such reconciliation by drawing our attention to the apostle Paul's emphasis on "spiritual songs" in Ephesians 5: 19 (KJV), and then proposing, "Hymnody might be a neglected litmus test for philosophy."[2] Hymns are poems. John Newton's "Amazing Grace," for instance, is written in ballad stanzas, a poetic form that dates back to the oral tradition of Celtic bards. If Christ-

[1] Plato, *The Republic*, VIII.

[2] Moser, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy," *Christian Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects and Perils* Center for Christian Thought Conference, Biola University, May 2012. For a discussion on Moser's paper, see the "Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project" (http://bit.ly/ChristShapedPhilosophyProject).

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

shaped philosophy can serve as a model for the study of poetics, surely poetics can also serve as a model for Christ-shaped philosophy.

Following the biblical dynamic of Christians submitting one to another (1 Peter 5:5), Christ-shaped philosophers and poets could engage in a reciprocal pattern of mutual influence, thus healing the rift created by Plato's distrust of tragic poets. Interestingly, and perhaps prophetically, Socrates states: "the tragic poets being wise men will forgive us."[3] Socrates is not necessarily being disingenuous here. Any poet, or scholar of poetics, who wishes to engage with "traditional philosophy outside a Christian context" (Moser "On Traditional Philosophy") needs to forgive the words of Socrates as transcribed by Plato. French Linguist Julia Kristeva ties poetic language to radical change, and argues, "because it is forgiveness, writing is transformation, transposition, translation."[4] Aided by the presence of the Holy Spirit, edified by the example of the cross, and filled with "God's enemy-love in their hearts" (Moser), Christ-shaped poets are especially well-equipped to engage in such constructive acts of literary, aesthetic forgiveness.

I am, of course, not the first to express such a hope for reconciliation between poetry and philosophy. The poet-philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes in the tradition of Cambridge Christian neo-Platonism in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) when he presents *The Republic* itself *as* poetry, claiming, "the writings of PLATO . . . and the Theoria Sacra of BURNET, furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem."[5] Afterall, Plato deploys allegory beautifully and waxes lyrical on the sublimity of sunlight, two tendencies shared by the poet Coleridge.[6] As a Romantic poet, Coleridge places the philosophy of Plato beside the natural theology of Thomas Burnet in a quick move that may trouble a Christ-Shaped philosopher such as Moser, with his concern that natural theology alone cannot lead us into relationship with

[3] Plato, *The Republic*, VIII, in *The Dialogues of Plato Vol. 1*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1920), p. 827.

[4] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia U P, 1989), 217.

[5] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p 14.

[6] See James Vigus' *Platonic Coleridge* (London: Legenda, 2009) for a more thorough discussion of the influence of Plato's philosophy on Coleridge's poetics. Vigus argues that Plato does not actually reject poetry all together but feels an ambivalence, which creates room for Coleridge's connection to Platonic thought. See especially Chapter Three: "The Ancient Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy."

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

Christ.[7] It is true that in his early writing, Coleridge uses a tone akin to Enlightenment Deism in his discussions of general revelation. For example, in his 1795 claim that Creation declares the "attributes of the Almighty Father" as "all Nature is beautiful because its every Feature is the Symbol and all its parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all powerful Intelligence,"[8] one misses the affectionate Christological emphasis of an earlier, more Trinitarian nature writer, such as Jonathan Edwards.

Despite his intense interest in Plato, or oddly perhaps because of it, Coleridge is not the strongest example of a poet who could provide literary models for doxological, Christ-shaped philosophy. More scriptural and crucicentric poets— such as George Herbert and Anna Barbauld—may provide better models. Evangelical audiences to this day often harbor a near Platonic distrust of figurative, poetic speech, which is ironic considering Christ's own frequent use of metaphors and parables. Christ-formed poets from the past, such as Herbert and Barbauld, also make beautiful use of figurative speech while engaging deeply with scripture. Modern evangelicals can at times reject metaphorical imagery as an indirect, overly ornate, and even dishonest form of communication, as if poets were trying to trick their readers by obscuring the truth, but this suspicious view of poetry is more Greek and Platonic than Judeo-Christian. Christ-formed poetry is often much more intimately tied to the near Eastern Hebraic verse patterns of the Book of Psalms, such as parallelism and chiasma, for example, than to Platonic philosophy.

In the late seventeenth-century, John Bunyan was aware of his Puritan audience's resistance to vivid metaphorical imagery, and he sought to expose how this iconoclasm stood in tension with the visual richness of Judeo-Christian poetics. Bunyan prefaced *Pilgrim's Progress* with a defense of metaphor titled "The Author's Apology for His Book":

Solidity indeed becomes the Pen
Of him that writeth things Divine to men;

[7] In a section titled "Allegory and Making Sense of Nature," Russell Manning and John Hedley Brooke explain, "Thomas Burnet (1635-1715) explored the possibilities of the technique of accommodation, advanced by Augustine as a means of reconciling the literal truth of the Bible with the truths of nature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), 80.

[8] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures on Politics and Religion* (1795) qtd. in James McKusick, "Symbol" in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Camridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 217. Coleridge was openly experimenting with Unitarianism when he wrote these lectures.

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

But must I needs want solidness, because
By Metaphors I speak? Were not God's Laws,
His Gospel-Laws, in olden time held forth
By Types, Shadows, and Metaphors? Yet loth
Will any sober man be to find fault
With them, lest he be found for to assault
The highest Wisdom. No, he rather stoops,
And seeks to find out what by Pins and Loops,
By Calves, and Sheep, by Heifers, and by Rams,
By Birds, and Herbs, and by the blood of Lambs,
God speaketh to him. And happy is he
That finds the light and grace that in them be.

...

The Prophets used much by Metaphors
To set forth Truth; yea, whoso considers
Christ, his Apostles too, shall plainly see,
That Truths to this day in such Mantles be.[9]

John Bunyan reminds us that biblical speakers, including Christ Himself, have mantled spiritual "Truths" in lowly agricultural metaphors— "Calves, ""Sheep," "Rams," "Birds," "Herbs," "Blood of Lambs" – thus setting precedent for Bunyan's own use of symbol and allegory in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The biblical cloaking of abstract Truths in everyday, earthy symbols parallels God's mantling of His own glory in a very humble, human form, His son. The obscurity of such mantling prompted the protest, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1: 46, ESV), voiced by those who could not see the true identity of Christ. As Moser argues, the Trinitarian God of Judeo-Christian scripture is elusive. A contemporary of Bunyan's, John Milton, also notes this elusiveness in *Paradise Lost* (1667), when he evokes the sublime mystery of divine glory with the line "dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear."[10] Milton here alludes to passages in the biblical Psalms, such as 97: 3: "Clouds and thick darkness are all around him" (KJV), and he

---

[9] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrims Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); italics mine.

[10] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 3, in *John Milton: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), line 380.

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

interprets such apparent obscurity by suggesting God's brightness is too intense for human eyes to bear, so it appears as darkness, as when we look too long into the sun and dark spots appear before our eyes. Elsewhere, Milton personifies "holy light" in *Paradise Lost*[11] and addresses it directly as "thou":

> Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice
> Of God, as with a mantle didst invest
> The rising world of waters dark and deep,
> Won from the void and formless infinite.[12]

In these lines, Milton alludes to Gen. 1:3 "God said let there be light, and there was light," but he also suggests Christ's presence with God in the beginning, as depicted in John 1, especially verse 5, "the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not" (KJV). The incarnation of the Word made flesh is the most gripping example of God's intentional cloaking of His wisdom in an unexpected and sadly, to some, incomprehensible form.

In Christ's speech acts we also see the "highest Wisdom" cloaked, or incarnated, in concrete, lowly metaphors, which only those with "ears to hear" (Matt 11:15, 13:19, 13:43; Mark 4:9, 4:23, 7:16; Luke 8: 8, 14:35) can comprehend. The Truths mantled in Christ-Shaped metaphors are hidden from those like John Bunyan's satirically named "Worldly Wiseman." It is the state of one's heart, rather than one's level of worldly knowledge, which allows for the reception of true wisdom. As Moser points out, in the Bible: "Paul actually does contrast two different kinds of *wisdom*: 'a wisdom of this age' and 'a secret and hidden wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 2:6–7)." Just before the section quoted by Moser, the apostle Paul proclaims, "We preach Christ crucified unto the Jews a stumbling block and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1: 23 KJV). Paradoxically, what looked like foolishness to Greek philosophers—the God of the Heavens taking on a lowly human form and dying the death of an ignominious criminal—is the source of "highest Wisdom" to Christ-shaped men and women.

[11] Milton, *Paradise Lost,* Book 3, line 1.
[12] Milton, *Paradise Lost,* Book 3, lines 9-12.

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

"The Glorious Sunshine of the Gospel"

> . . . it is certain that these philosophers had been for a long time before searching out where to fix the true happiness of man; and, not being able to agree upon any certainty about it, they could not possibly but conclude, if they judged impartially, that all their inquiries were, in the end, but vain and fruitless; the consequence of which must not be only an acknowledgment of the weakness of all human wisdom, but likewise an open passage hereby made, for letting in those beams of light, which the glorious sunshine of the gospel then brought into the world, by revealing those hidden truths, which they had so long before been laboring to discover . . .[13]

If we follow the apostle Paul's logic, then Christ-shaped poetry would be crucicentric poetry that conveys the redemptive truth and light of the gospel. George Herbert's "Easter Wings" provides an example of such chiasmic verse, with the cross providing both subject and *shape* of the poem:

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne
And still with sicknesses and shame.
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee

[13] Jonathan Swift, "On the Wisdom of this World: I Cor. III. 19" in *The Works of Jonathan Swift* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1900), 171.

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

Let me combine,
And feel thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.[14]

Following the pattern of the biblical Psalms, Herbert uses a chiasmic structure to take the reader downward, through the valley of the shadow of death, until he or she reaches a turning point, ultimately resulting in victorious movement upward and Godward. Herbert's "Easter Wings" also echoes the chiasmic structure of Philippians 2: 5-11, which moves from Christ's equal co-existence with God in the beginning, to the humble death of Christ on the cross, to the exaltation of Christ in Heaven with the Father. This Philippian hymn or poem of the apostle Paul's ends with a command: "every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2: 11 KJV). How can spiritual songs contribute to such communal and doxological acts of confession and wisdom?

In attempting to answer such a question, we need to consider the dynamic history of spiritual songs as evidenced in the hymnals generated by living church communities. For centuries, hymnals touched the everyday lives of Christians (young and old, male and female, poor and rich) with their assortment of Christ-formed poetry. One such collection, *Church Melodies, a Collection of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs*,[15] contains a poetic paraphrase of Philippians 2: 5-11 in ballad stanzas, "Lord of Life and Light," composed by British dissenter Anna Barbauld. By 1833, the ballad form had come to signify a democratic, communal aesthetic, viewed as more accessible to diverse audiences than esoteric metaphysical verse, such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings," with its difficult diction. The popularity of the ballad revival was largely due to William Wordsworth's 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, which advocated the use of everyday diction in ballad stanzas as a sort of leveling aesthetic. The egalitarian ballad form was also extremely popular in post-revolutionary America. Fascinatingly, another ballad written by Anna Barbauld, "Ye are the Salt of

[14] George Herbert, "Easter Wings, "*Representative Poetry Online* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003). <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem973.html>.

[15] Abner Jones, ed., *Church Melodies, a Collection of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (N.Y. New York: Moore & Payne, 1833).

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

the Earth," encouraged Christ-shaped social action and eventually appeared in the American anti-slavery hymnal *Songs of the Free*,[16] for example.
For the purposes of this essay, however, we will focus on Barbauld's crucicentric ballad, "Lord of Light and Life," as its Christ-formed movement is closer to that of "Easter Wings":

Again the Lord of life and light
Awakes the kindling ray,
Unseals the eyelids of the morn,
And pours increasing day.

O what a night was that which wrapt
A heathen world in gloom!
O what a Sun which broke this day
Triumphant from the tomb!

The powers of darkness leagued in vain
To bind our Lord in death;
He shook their kingdom when He fell,
By His expiring breath.

And now His conquering chariot-wheels
Ascend the lofty skies;
Broken beneath His powerful Cross,
Death's iron sceptre lies.

This day be grateful homage paid,
And loud Hosannas sung;
Let gladness dwell in every heart,
And praise on every tongue.

Ten thousand differing voices join
To hail this welcome morn,

[16] Anna Barbauld, "Ye are the Salt of the Earth" in *Songs of the Free and Hymns of Christian Freedom* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836), 125-26.

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society

Which scatters blessings from its wings
On nations yet unborn.[17]

Both Herbert in "Easter Wings" and Barbauld in "Lord of Life and Light" take the reader on a chiasmic journey down through the valley of the shadow of death towards the risen Christ: from Creation, through crucifixion, to "victorie" (Herbert) or "triumph" (Barbauld). Both poets foreground the eventual upward movement of the resurrection: Herbert through his title and Barbauld in the lines "O what a Sun which broke this day, / Triumphant from the tomb!" (lines 7-8). However, Herbert's emotive, individual appeal to his personal Lord—indicated through increasing use of words such as "me," "I," and "my" as his lyric progresses— contrasts with Barbauld's more corporate story of "*our* Lord" (line 24). In this way, Barbauld's ballad comes closer to Philippians 2, where Christ is referred to in the third person, most likely because Paul's spiritual song, like Barbauld's, was intended for use by a diverse group of believers.[18] Barbauld's rallying cry "Let gladness dwell in every heart, / And praise on *every tongue*" (my italics, lines 19-20) echoes the "every tongue" of Phil 2:11. Barbauld paints a vibrant scene of collaborative worship, in a multiplicity of languages, where people of every nation confess Jesus Christ as their Lord to the Glory of God the Father.

The Joy of Philo-Chrīstus

If philo-sophia is the love of wisdom, and God paradoxically embodies the highest Wisdom in the sorrowful crucifixion and glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we need to think of Christ-shaped philosophy as the love of Jesus. What better way to express the affection of such philo-*Chrīstus* than in spiritual songs? How could Christ-formed poems, such as those penned by George Herbert and Anna Barbauld, serve as litmus tests or even models for Christ-shaped philosophy? Christ-shaped men and women writing philosophy could follow the crucicentric poetry of Herbert and Barbauld by incorporating downward movement, through humility and loss, towards exaltation of Jesus as Lord, into their arguments. By no means would philosophers ever be expected to write in lyric verse or ballad stanzas, but the charting

[17] Anna Barbauld, "Lord of Life and Light" in *Church Melodies, a Collection of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs*, d8.

[18] For a reading of Phil 2: 5-11 as a corporate hymn, see Peter O'Brien's commentary *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 186-188.

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org

of chiasmic structure through philosophical argument could result in a doxological tone of greater wonder and joy in the Lord.

Natasha Duquette is Chair of the English Department at Biola University (California).

© 2013
Evangelical Philosophical Society
www.epsociety.org