The Divine Feminine and Pistis Sophia: motherhood, sexuality, and theosophical Gnosticism in Frances Swiney’s feminism
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By the end of the nineteenth century, a transformation of Britain’s spiritual culture was underway, in particular through an increase in esoteric and occult movements.1 At the same time, British feminists started to publicly claim and fight for equal rights and enfranchisement. As noted by various scholars, becoming a member of the Theosophical Society (TS) was not uncommon for British first wave feminists.2 The TS was founded in 1875 in New York by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), as an alternative religious movement devoted to forming a universal brotherhood and to “encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science”.3 The TS played a major role in combining western esotericism and occultism such as spiritualism, “Neoplatonism, Renaissance magic, Kabbalah, and Freemasonry together with ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythology joined by Eastern doctrines taken from Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta to present the idea of an ancient wisdom handed down from prehistoric times.”4 This dialogue between western esotericism and romantic ideas of the Orient was influential in the globalisation of esotericism.5 In general, the TS was attractive for women

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5 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 213.
who “needed to reconstruct their shaken faith” in traditional Christianity. The syncretistic teachings of Theosophy became a place for ideas, which were dismissed elsewhere, especially the idea of women playing an equal part in religion.

Apart from enabling women to be religious leaders, like Blavatsky and later Annie Besant (1847-1933), the TS had a two-fold appeal to women. Firstly, the TS objected to sexual discrimination in the first of their three objects: “1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour”. Secondly, the content of theosophical teaching was based on an evolutionary progress which needed the interaction of the two principles (male and female) working together for the dynamic of the cosmic process, spiritually legitimising the equality of the sexes. Furthermore, sexual abstinence or chastity outside of marriage, as promoted by the TS, “offered consolation to women who were anxious to escape compulsory (…) sexual intercourse”. Theosophy used the ideas of ancient and modern goddesses for empowerment and as an alternative to patriarchal Christianity. Without committing themselves to any specific dogma, they believed in self-development and the evolutionary transformation of humanity. Many feminists thought that the Secret Doctrine (1888) by Blavatsky offered new possibilities for the relation between the sexes by conceptualising the male and the female as equal parts in the cosmic development. Blavatsky described an evolution of humans through seven races (stages), whereby the last two were astral and spiritual. Humans

9 Blavatsky, “Our Three Objects”. This object is also stressed by theosophical feminist Charlotte Despard who was a contemporary of Swiney, see: Charlotte Despard, Theosophy and the Woman’s Movement (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913).
11 Sheila Jeffreys, The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930 (London: Routledge, 1985), 148. See also: Annie Besant, An Autobiography (London: Fisher Unwin, 1893), 242 f.: “This excessive development has to be fought against, and the instinct reduced within natural limits, and this will certainly never be done by easy-going self-indulgence within the marital relation any more than by self-indulgence outside it. By none other road than that of self-control and self-denial can men and women now set going the causes which will build for them brains and bodies of a higher type for their future return to earth-life. They have to hold this instinct in complete control, to transmute it from passion into tender and self-denying affection, to develop the intellectual at the expense of the animal, and thus to raise the whole man to the human stage, in which every intellectual and physical capacity shall subserve the purposes of the soul. From all this it follows that Theosophists should sound the note of self-restraint within marriage, and the gradual—for with the mass it cannot be sudden—restriction of the sexual relation to the perpetuation of the race.”
13 Schwartz, Infidel Feminism, 20.
would ascend to a Higher Self – the Divine Hermaphrodite – and become a part of the sexless and formless Universal Divine Principle.\textsuperscript{14} Frances Swiney (1847-1922) and Charlotte Despard (1844-1939) are two of many prominent feminists who were members of the TS. As Joy Dixon pointed out, the high amount of feminist memberships signifies a general interest in spiritual matters and alternative religiosities.\textsuperscript{15}

George Robert Stowe Mead (1863-1933), president of the Blavatsky Lodge in London and private secretary to Blavatsky as well as founder of the European Section of the TS and editor of \textit{The Theosophical Review} (est. 1887), engaged with the subjects of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, and Hermeticism.\textsuperscript{16} His interpretations of Gnosticism as well as his translation of the \textit{Pistis Sophia} (1896) strongly influenced the esoteric feminism of Frances Swiney. As Laura Schwartz demonstrates, the debate on whether religion or secularism offers a better guarantee of women’s rights has a long history in Britain. According to Lucy Bland, Victorian Christianity highly contributed to the ideological construction of (moral) womanhood.\textsuperscript{17} However, there were contrasting positions in the use of religion for supporting feminist and anti-feminist arguments. For Schwartz, the discourse of feminism and anti-feminism itself was integral to modern definitions of “secular” and “religious” in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{18} Vice versa, religion was fundamental to feminist thought.\textsuperscript{19} On the one hand, many Christian denominations, especially Evangelical denominations, promoted the subordination of the wife to the husband.\textsuperscript{20} On the other hand, the “moralising” role which was seen in women was used by feminists as a feminist argument.\textsuperscript{21} Schwartz argues that spirituality itself was a political site in and of itself implicating that it was a distinctive discursive resistance within an encompassing religious discourse since, no matter if secularists renounced religion or religious feminists used it for their claims, “religion is conceptualised as the broad political terrain upon which different forms of feminism were constituted”.\textsuperscript{22}

This article will use Swiney’s work to illustrate the possibilities of feminist agency within a religious or esoteric discourse. Furthermore, it will demonstrate how the discourse on womanhood as motherhood influenced Swiney’s interpretation of Mead’s Gnosticism. Lastly, it will show how Swiney utilised and interpreted Gnosticism for her evolutionary feminist argument to acknowledge the importance of esotericism and, consequently, interpretations of Gnosticism on British first wave feminism.

\textsuperscript{14} Dixon, \textit{Divine Feminine}, 154.
\textsuperscript{15} Dixon, \textit{Divine Feminine}, 6.
\textsuperscript{16} Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Clare Goodrick-Clarke, \textit{George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest} (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005), 1, 168.
\textsuperscript{17} Bland, \textit{Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality} (London: Tauris, 2001), 48.
\textsuperscript{18} Schwartz, \textit{Infidel Feminism}, 1.
\textsuperscript{19} Schwartz, \textit{Infidel Feminism}, 1.
\textsuperscript{20} Bland, \textit{Banishing the Beast}, 52.
\textsuperscript{21} Bland, \textit{Banishing the Beast}, 52.
\textsuperscript{22} Schwartz, \textit{Infidel Feminism}, 92f.
Frances Swiney’s theosophical feminism

Theosophist Frances Swiney was a writer and women’s rights activist. She was mainly concerned with eugenics, sexuality, and feminism. Since 1890, Swiney had been a feminist activist, lecturer, and writer in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. She co-founded the Cheltenham Women’s Suffrage Society in 1896; was Vice President of the Cheltenham Food Reform and Health Association; and lectured in organisations such as the Higher Thought Centre in London, Theosophical lodges, and Ethical Societies. Swiney was also a member of the Theosophical Society, the Sociological Society, the National Union of Women Workers, the Secular Education League, the Woman’s Freedom League, and the National Woman’s Social and Political Union as well as of the council of the Woman’s Branch of the International Neo-Malthusian League.

In addition to her activism, she engaged in feminist debates through her writings. She regularly contributed to The Anglo-Russian, The Christian Commonwealth, The Awakener, The Westminster Review as well as the Indian Ladies” Magazine and the American feminist paper The Woman’s Tribune. Furthermore, Swiney published a series of books and pamphlets, such as The Awakening of Women (1899) and The Bar of Isis (1907). Since 1910, her books were co-published by the League of Isis which she founded in 1909. This organisation, together with her writings, reflects a deep engagement with theosophical teachings: the belief in a spiritual evolution and in the Divine Mother (Isis), as well as the belief that Theosophy can overcome the perceived boundaries between science and religion. Swiney’s work illustrates the inherent confidence that science and religion can be combined – as it was believed in the TS.

One of the aims of Theosophy was to transgress the perceived differentiation of religion and science. According to Jeffrey Franklin and Michael Bergunder, nineteenth century Britain was transformed by the rise of science to “dominance in truth-telling authority”. Science claimed to explain supernatural phenomena with empirical methods. However, the boundaries between science and religion had been controversial throughout the nineteenth century. Many perceived this differentiation of a scientific materialist and a religious spiritual understanding of the world as unsatisfactory and tried to defend belief against materialism. As a result, it enabled the rise of new religions and

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24 “Death of Mrs. Rosa Frances Swiney”, 3.
27 Bergunder, “«Religion» and «Science» within a Global Religious History,” 117; Franklin, Spirit Matters, ix.
spiritualities. Esotericism, in particular, tried to transgress these boundaries. At first, spiritualism aimed on empirically verifying the contact with the dead in the spirit world, then occultism tried to discover the spiritual world through various scientific methods. This thought was adapted by the TS, as it becomes apparent in its second and third objects:

2. To encourage the study of Comparative religion, Philosophy and Science.
3. To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in the human being.

As Bergunder demonstrates, any attempt to overcome a differentiation between religion and science “required that there existed such a separation in the first place”. In *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky refers to Theosophy as the “Universal Wisdom-Religion, (...) the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology”. Science and theology by themselves would fail; in contrast, occult science, like Theosophy, would discover the truth by constantly comparing ideas from both. Such a comparison or rather combination of science and religion is also evident in Swiney’s work:

Religion and Science should, then, be in accord and complementary to each other. (...) The natural law cannot differ from the spiritual, and there is no ground for antagonism if the cosmic law of correspondence is fully understood with the essential oneness underlying all manifestation.

The attempt to combine religious or esoteric and scientific argumentations is typical of Swiney’s feminism. Mainly, Swiney engaged with the contemporary debates of British eugenics which was led by Caleb Saleeby (1878-1940) and Reginald Ruggles Gates (1882-1962), two famous eugenacists. These eugenacists highly influenced Swiney’s eugenicist framework. Furthermore, she was a member of the Eugenics Education Society from its foundation, in 1907. Swiney’s own society, the League of Isis, saw its main goal in learning and teaching about the Natural Law of reproduction in order of “the betterment of the Race” and “the building up of the Higher Self”. Its object was “the protection of maternity by means of right teaching (in the highest sense) of the

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29 Bergunder, “«Religion» and «Science» within a Global Religious History,” 118.
31 Bergunder, “«Religion» and «Science» within a Global Religious History,” 117.
35 Eugenics Society, Minutes 1907, Wellcome Library.
law of sex”.37 Practically, this resulted in the preservation “in the woman during the creative periods of gestation and lactation absolute continence, so as to assure full, healthy development in the child, and no pathological symptoms in the mother during pregnancy, parturition, and nursing”; as well as in keeping “the Temple of the Body pure and undefiled” and “raising sex-relations from the physical to the spiritual plane”.38 The main book distributed by the League of Isis was Swiney’s Bar of Isis (1907) which is concerned with racial degeneration. Swiney blamed “a selfish, lustful, diseased manhood” which “sought in woman only a body”.39 As a solution, men should obey the Law of Nature and a married couple should only have between four and six children, live chaste during pregnancy and for three years after (during lactation) so that women could effectively care for their children.40

Judging from the wide range of press responses, the League of Isis and the book The Bar of Isis were internationally known. The Indian Spectator said that everyone must agree with Swiney regarding the need for a “higher conception of sexual morality among civilised men”.41 The Indian Patriot agreed that the law of the mother is the law of life and the law of God and it should be obeyed in order to uplift the race.42 The Canterbury Times (New Zealand) acknowledged the “deeper scientific truth” in the pamphlet The Responsibilities of Fatherhood which should lead our lives, “as they must before evolution can advance farther”.43 Likewise, Votes for Women agreed that fatherhood must be taken as seriously as motherhood and “where man ceases to seek in woman only a body, the new life of the race will have begun”.44 According to them, this pamphlet showed the “usual cleanness and thorough understanding” of Swiney’s subject.45 Votes for Women also commented on Racial Poisons Nr. 5 The Racial Curse. It would “set forth with scientific precision and convincing logic the reasons why purity and self-control in sex relations are of first importance both to the individual and the race”.46 According to Swiney, The American Baby Magazine whose editor, Professor Starr Jordon, was president of the American Eugenics Society had “freely quoted with approval” from The Bar of Isis, and The Christian Commonwealth had “recommended it as one of the two best guides on the sex question”.47 The Awakener wished this book, written by “a teacher of the race”, would be in the hands of every man and woman.48

40 Swiney, The Bar of Isis, 18.
41 The Indian Spectator, “Press Opinions”.
42 The Indian Patriot, “Press Opinions”.
43 The Canterbury Times, “Press Opinions”.
45 Unknown, “Race Improvement,” 814.
47 “Note,” “Press Opinions”.
48 The Awakener, “Press Opinions”.

128
Apart from illustrating Swiney’s positive wide and international reception, the example of the League of Isis reveals that the discourses of motherhood, race, and reproduction greatly influenced Swiney’s theosophical feminism. This rested in the notions of womanhood and reproduction of Swiney’s time which were bound to the differentiation of the sexes. At the time, the sexual difference was an ontology which was impossible to dismiss, since sexual difference was perceived as natural. Therefore, feminists had to argue on these grounds. There is scholarly consensus that the suffrage movement was not only concerned with women getting the vote, but rather focused upon a so called “sex war”. According to Susan Kent, the central goal of the Women’s Movement was the transformation of women’s lives through a redefinition and recreating of Britain’s sexual culture. Sexuality and politics, in contrast to First Wave feminism’s general perception, were not part of separate spheres but thought of as inseparable from one another. The topics of sex and sexuality permeated the social and feminist discourse and dominated the public debate. The discussions were centred on the connected issues of the double standard which confirmed man’s sexual needs; and thus, the necessity of prostitution and venereal diseases which were widespread at that time. Feminists tried to break the silence around venereal diseases, a problem in itself: many women (and men) were not adequately informed before entering marriage; venereal diseases were “frequently communicated to unsuspecting wives – doctors were reluctant to disturb marital harmony by indicating the nature of their malaise”. This resulted in high maternal and infant mortality rates. According to Lesley Hall, so called “social purity” feminists, like Swiney, whose model of an ideal society was centred around the monogamous marriage “in which both partners came to marriage chaste, and practiced a high degree of continence even within marriage” as well as the wider discourse of “sex reform”, tried to replace the double standard by a new moral sexual standard. By the late nineteenth century, science claimed not only to explain the human body, but also to define and understand womanhood as such. Feminists had to argue on these grounds, as it becomes apparent in the following quote by Swiney:

50 See exemplarily on “sex war”: Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*.
51 Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, 3f.
54 Hall, “Suffrage, Sex and Science,” 189.
57 Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 53.
[Reproduction is] the threshold of the great mysteries of woman’s evolution, woman’s fall, and woman’s ascent.\(^{58}\)

Swiney saw the male sexual urge as powerful and inevitable resulting in the contrary positions that it was necessary for men’s (and women’s) health or that there was a need for definite self-control.\(^{59}\) There was a noticeable decline in the birth rate of the middle and upper classes and this decline was perceived as biological. Consequently, feminists as well as eugenicists considered the choice of one’s sexual partner crucial to the future of the British nation.\(^{60}\)

Swiney’s main argument rested in the basis of the “natural”, heterosexual, and monogamous family in which husband and wife together brought humankind back on the path of purity and sexual morality.\(^{61}\)

Man and woman, therefore, in an ideal marriage, will co-operate as the complement of the other towards this end; each bringing out the best that is in the other: each generously acknowledging a superiority in the distinctive and individual capacities of the different sexes.\(^{62}\)

For Swiney, womanhood meant fulfilling one’s duty as a wife and mother and her duty as a citizen to save the British race. This should result in woman’s franchise.\(^{63}\) As a result, Swiney’s esotericism predominantly focused on the Divine Mother – Isis – and the Divine Feminine in the Cosmic Process. The concept of evolution plays a central role in all of Swiney’s works, as it does in Theosophy.\(^{64}\)

As its title suggests, Swiney’s first major work, *The Awakening of Women or Woman’s Part in Evolution* (1899), puts women in an evolutionist framework. For Swiney, evolution meant the “physical, moral, social, and spiritual progress of the Universe; it is the unfolding of the invariable laws upon which the whole Creation is based”.\(^{65}\) In *The Cosmic Procession* (1906), Swiney argued that a cosmic procession led by the Feminine Principle went alongside the physical evolution.\(^{66}\) Feminism and the end of women’s material and spiritual subjugation are inevitable steps in the biological and spiritual evolution of humankind.

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\(^{58}\) Frances Swiney, *The Awakening of Women or Woman’s Part in Evolution* (London: George Redway, 1899), 89.


\(^{63}\) Swiney, *The Awakening of Women*, passim.


The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics – a feminist interpretation of Mead’s Gnosticism

As said above, Swiney, like contemporary feminists, had to argue within a religious and, in this case, Victorian Christian discourse. Even though as a Theosophist she was interested in “Indian” religions and the religions of “Ancient Egypt”, her work mainly focused on interpretations of the Kabbalah and the Gnostics. She utilised them to argue against the patriarchal conceptions of modern, institutionalised Christianity.67

Unsurprisingly, Swiney became interested in the writings of G. R. S. Mead, who was well-known in the Theosophical circles of London in which Swiney frequently lectured. Mead had been a member of the TS since 1884, became Blavatsky’s private secretary, and worked with her on The Secret Doctrine and various articles. Nevertheless, he always pursued his own studies. At first, he was mainly interested in Buddhism and Hinduism, however, in the 1890s he got more and more inspired by Western Esoteric traditions. As a Classics graduate of Cambridge, he published the first English Translation of the Pistis Sophia as a series in the Theosophical periodical Lucifer in 1896.68 From 1896 to 1898, Mead wrote surveys in Lucifer about the lives of Neo-Platonists and Gnostics of the first two centuries A.D.69 He was probably introduced to the Gnostics by Blavatsky herself, who thought that Gnosticism derived from Buddhism whose teachings supposedly travelled to ancient Greece.70 In contrast, Mead maintained that Gnosticism was the ancient precursor of Theosophy and the latter should become its modern successor.71

Mead left the TS in 1909 but he had written several books concerned with Gnosticism by then, such as the collected translation of Pistis Sophia (1896) and Fragments of a Faith Forgotten (1900) in which he developed a “Gnostic Theosophy”.72 For him, their teachings were similar in regard of a human and cosmic evolution as well as the belief in a world-soul and the entrapment of the human soul in matter. According to both, the human soul would return to and reunite with the Supreme God in the end of the cosmic process. In Fragments of a Faith Forgotten, Mead argued that both, Gnosticism and Theosophy, were the same: both were teaching the divine wisdom.73 However, as analysed by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Clare Goodrick-Clarke, Mead’s interpretation of Gnosticism varied from others. Not only did he believe in the cyclic law but also in the rebirth of souls as well as the law of Karma. Moreover, his studies in Hermeticism resulted in his renouncement of the strict Gnostic dualism

67 See especially Swiney, The Cosmic Procession.
68 Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest, 2.
69 Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest, 2-4.
70 Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest, 8.
71 Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest, 9.
72 Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest, 13.
73 Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest, 11 and 68.
which taught the evil of matter in favour of a monism accepting the world as fundamentally good.\textsuperscript{74}

However, these two books were Swiney’s major sources for her esotericism. In her article, \textit{The Maternity of God} (1906), Swiney changed the direction of her argument from criticism of Christianity in its current patriarchal state of degrading women to the use of Gnosticism for her feminism. According to her, Christianity in its early ages was deeply imbued with the “sublime feminism of the Gnostics”.\textsuperscript{75}

In 1909, she published the book \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics} in which she agreed with Mead that the Gnostics tried to discover a world-religion in harmony with science, “to create a theosophy which would appeal to all minds”.\textsuperscript{76}

Modern occultism was a “spiritual evolution” which happened “not through a new inspiration (...), but by a more thorough knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of the ancient and forgotten wisdom of past ages” – Gnosis.\textsuperscript{77}

Like Mead, Swiney maintained that the Gnostics believed in reincarnation and the Karmic Law. Furthermore, humankind would develop in a cosmic process whereby it would abandon its dual manifestation – its differentiated sexuality – and return to the oneness of all creation “where there is neither male nor female”.\textsuperscript{78} This corresponds with the “Gnostic Theosophy” developed by Mead as well as the general theosophical teachings on the cosmic development and the Divine Hermaphrodite.

As is was typical of her, Swiney went a step further and, instead of a sexless Divinity, she envisioned the Divine Feminine. For her, the Divine Mother was oneness of the sublime cause, and all emanation would derive from her and return to her in the end of the circled cosmic process.\textsuperscript{79}

For the soul is the feminine creative principle in man (...). The Feminine is therefore the inner nature of man, and woman (...), the objective representative of the Divine Feminine.\textsuperscript{80}

The world would currently be in the masculine phase, a phase of the subjugation of women, which would have to end if humankind wished to be reunited with the Holy Spirit, the Divine Feminine.\textsuperscript{81}

As a result, she could use Gnosticism for her feminist argument. In Swiney’s opinion, the Gnostics were being suppressed by the male priesthood of the Christian Church because they “kept true to the original pristine faith in the

\textsuperscript{74} Goodrick-Clarke & Goodrick-Clarke, \textit{George R. S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest}, 68.
\textsuperscript{76} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 2.
\textsuperscript{77} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 1.
\textsuperscript{78} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 3.
\textsuperscript{79} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 11f.
\textsuperscript{80} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 21.
\textsuperscript{81} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 25 and 31ff.
Femininity of the Holy Spirit”. According to her, the last century B.C. and the first two A.D. were similar to contemporary centuries. Religion was forming a dogma which subjugated women and prevented the spiritual evolution. However, there were a few emancipated women, “early pioneers of the liberation movement of their sex”, who were questioning the truth telling and authority of traditional religion. They became part of different mystic communities at the Mediterranean shores and, under a vow of virginity, they devoted themselves to the study of the laws of Wisdom. As women, they longed for children. Not for mortal but for spiritual children which were to be reborn now into the world of manifestation. However, their teachings were suppressed, and their literature destroyed by the early fathers of the Church.

Through Mead, Swiney found out that one of the only writings of the Gnostic gospels left were fragments of the Pistis Sophia, the Coptic translation of the original Greek which was bought by the British Museum and translated by Mead. This “Faithful Wisdom” is, according to Swiney and Mead, “the most remarkable and the most (...) valuable instruction to us in these days of dense materialism.” Pistis Sophia deals with the teachings of Jesus, given by him to his disciples during eleven years after his rising. The first two books narrate the fall and rise of Pistis Sophia, an entity which, in this particular book, is not seen to be a divinity but part of the material world. She is tricked into leaving the thirteenth aeon – the material, current, aeon – and descends into chaos. Since her power – the power of light – was stolen, she is not allowed to return until Jesus comes to her rescue.

In her book, Swiney reinterprets the story of Pistis Sophia within her feminist worldview. According to Swiney, Sophia is not a material entity but the Divine Mother herself – the Feminine Principle in the cosmic development. Pistis Sophia is an allegory not only of the Soul in the cosmic process, its descent into matter, and redemption through Christ; but the female soul in particular. This corresponds with Swiney’s general belief in monism as opposed to the theosophical belief in dualism. She, as many other feminist Theosophists, favoured the feminine principle as the beginning and the end and as superior to the masculine.

All emanations are from that mystery of the Divine Mother, and must return to it, because of it all mysteries exist, and all their regions, or phases of consciousness, for it is their life and substance. Even as science reveals that all life has a feminine origin.

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87 In Meads translation of the Pistis Sophia, the thirteen aeons are phases of the cosmic progress.
89 Swiney, *The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics*, 12. As a eugenicist, Swiney engaged with the biological discourses of her time. In *The Bar of Isis* (1907), Swiney uses this discourse to demonstrate
However, men had lost their belief in the “golden thread of continuity in the Eternal Procession”. Humankind was in the masculine phase on its way to ascending again but “the Oneness of the sublime cause was in danger of being forgotten”: therefore, Christ had to teach the mystery of the Divine Feminine, as it is told in *Pistis Sophia*.

According to Swiney, the allegory of Pistis Sophia is to be taken as

(1), the representation of the cosmic Soul in the aggregate, the Divine Feminine Principle of Life working through all grades of matter and consciousness; and

(2), the history of each monad or disintegrated part of the universal Spirit of Life, the Eternal Mother, from the Human to the Divine through every stage of self-development.

In the pilgrimage of the Soul through the cosmic process, it is confronted with the “triple powers of evil”. These are “Arrogant, the Love of Dominion; Adamus, the Love of Self, or the lower nature; and the lion-faced Power, the Love of Lust”. These powers assail the virgin soul. The original fall is the “degradation of the dual manifestation of the force of Creation in the virgin soul”. In other words, the original fall of the virgin soul is when it is manifested in the dual, sexually differentiated human body. Even though this sphere of dualities is necessary in the cosmic process, the pure soul “loses the sense of oneness” as it passes through this stage and, consequently, fails to reunite with the Divine as a unity.

When Pistis Sophia fell into chaos – into matter – she was beguiled by the power of lust. With it comes the “sensual love, emanating from the lower grades of materialised desires (...) absorbs all the spiritual light (...) and depriving it of all power, renders it a prey to every evil influence of lust and passion and illusion”. Swiney, as other Theosophists and feminists then, was a strong advocate of chastity. In *The Bar of Isis* Swiney blamed “a selfish, lustful, diseased manhood” which “sought in woman only a body” for racial degeneration. As a solution, men should obey to the Law of Nature which is the Law of the Mother. In that the feminine cell came first, as does life as such. The feminine is fertile in itself, since it created the first fertiliser, the male, to produce life. Again, this corresponds highly with Swiney’s interpretation of womanhood as motherhood, and woman’s reproduction in relation to the British race.

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Swinney’s opinion, semen were the source of pollution and disease; any physical sexuality was unnatural and would only serve the agenda of male dominance. Continence, Swiney maintained, was the conservation of vital forces within the female body which should not be wasted. Therefore, any kind of sexual activity was created by men to subjugate women, in the same manner as in the cosmic allegory of Pistis Sophia in which she was degraded by the power of lust:

Violence, self-interest, self-assertion, and love of possession were the most baneful manifestations of the Soul’s fall into lust, giving rise to fear, distrust, hatred and aggression. And as the soul makes the body, man’s material desires brought evil and sorrow, pride ruled his will.

For Swiney, the matter was represented by the male and the divine by the woman. So, the degradation of women by men illustrates the cosmic degradation of the divine by the matter.

For the masculine materiality has ever striven to overcome the feminine spirituality. It is ever at war with it, until it understands the unity underlying all things.

Furthermore, the male who has become separated from the female divine “lost his true light” and, consequently, started to abuse women who are “the objective spiritual power of man”. The most effective way the male, or matter, subjected the female was by binding her to the flesh so that her soul could not rise to the light. The material substance of woman was “debased and impregnated with evil” so that her whole divine soul and its potentialities were weakened. Moreover, since the Holy Spirit of life is feminine, according to Swiney, anything other than the virgin birth would have infiltrated the Holy Spirit and Christ with evil matter, through the masculine. Any children produced by male sexual gratification “are children of darkness, not children of the light”. This would be in accord with modern biological science “which conclusively demonstrates that reproduction is another name for death”.

Therefore, feminism’s goal in order of the cosmic process was to set woman free from the imperfect element of creation: the man. Swiney concluded that this feminist underlying of the Gnostic writings was the reason for their destruction. The early church fathers could not allow to have the teachings of

“the mystery of the oneness of the sex, the limitations of the masculine element (...), the supremacy of the Divine Feminine, and the absolute necessity of chastity in the path to the Higher Life” circulated.\textsuperscript{108} However, humanity would need the Gnostic teachings to proceed with its cosmic procession to “transcend man himself, when he recognised where he had disobeyed and deviated from the natural Law of order and harmony”.\textsuperscript{109}

Conclusion

This article has examined Frances Swiney’s interpretations of Gnosticism for her evolutionistic and eugenic feminist argument. Bound to the contemporary discursive conceptions on motherhood, race, and reproduction, Swiney, like other feminists at that time, reversed the negative connotations of womanhood and motherhood and used it for her own argumentation, to argue for equal rights legitimised through cosmic principles. Moreover, Swiney not only had to argue within a religious framework, she also used esoteric ideas and, to a large extent, Gnosticism to support her argument. This illustrates her agency within an esoteric discourse which made possible for her to reverse these negative connotations of womanhood as well as to use the restrictions of a religious and esoteric discourse for her feminism. As a Theosophist, Swiney was mainly influenced by the writings of G. R. S. Mead, in particular \textit{Pistis Sophia} (1896) and \textit{Fragments of a Faith Forgotten} (1900). In her book, \textit{The Esoteric Teachings of the Gnostics}, Swiney re-narrated the story of Pistis Sophia using her example to illustrate the cosmic process of the fall of the soul and its ascension and reunification with the Divine Feminine, the Mother of the whole creation. Swiney used the story of \textit{Pistis Sophia} as an allegory for the subjugation of women by men which was necessary in the cosmic development. However, it is feminism, and esoteric feminism influenced by the teachings of the Gnostics in particular, which had to bring humankind back on its way to become part of the oneness of the Divine. According to Swiney, the two most important aspects humanity had to learn from the ancient Gnostics were chastity, since the male sexual urge subjugated women (as matter did to the divine), and the unity between their teachings and modern science. Swiney’s interpretation of the Divine Feminine correlated with her other major feminist interest: eugenics. As this piece has shown, Swiney believed that within both the superiority of the female over the male is the biological as well as spiritual evolutionary progress of humankind.

The case of Frances Swiney is one example for how deeply related the discourses of feminism and esotericism, in particular occultism, were in Victorian times. Therefore, I have argued that neither one can be analysed without the other. Gender is an important tool for societal analysis, especially


\textsuperscript{109} Swiney, \textit{The Esoteric Teaching of the Gnostics}, 80.
in relation to spirituality and occult movements. Since it is feminism that challenges contemporary conceptions of gender, it is through a gendered lens where these conceptions are articulated most clearly. Religion and gender are deeply connected to each other, since they are both major forces in structuring culture and society. Therefore, one cannot examine modern interpretations and adaptations of Gnosticism without taking into account the changing cultural conceptions of gender by feminism.

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