

# ENLIGHTENMENT

From Plato to Carl Jung



A Comparative Historical  
Study of Principles and  
Paths to Divine Union

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## Introduction

Over the centuries seekers of truth have developed complex and seemingly very different pathways toward knowledge of God in which the underlying principle is the same for all systems. It is the idea of return to the Creator, the source of all existence, which transcends time and space. The many traditional methods of seeking the divine nothingness, all of which require the sacrifice of self, are like spokes of a wheel leading to the same center. And one may accept as reliable the assertion of Meister Eckhart that “theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language.”

The subjects of this study have been carefully selected. Each is considered to offer the most profound and instructive example of a specific means of approach to divine union. Diverse systems are compared, such as the Greek world’s common use of drugs and meditation to achieve ecstasy, Saint Bernard’s emphasis on the power of love, the self-mutilation of Saint John of the Cross, Abulafia’s brilliantly-complex mantra of Hebrew letters based on the 72 names of God, as well as Carl Jung’s encounter with God as the unconscious.

Enlightenment, often called “The Great Work” involves *Exitus* and *Reditus*—the going forth of the soul born into the material condition and return to the divine nothingness. The process is explained by many Christian theologians as an individual redemption for the “Fall” of mankind brought by the sin of Adam and Eve. Others reject the idea of “original sin” for which everyone must suffer, and argue that return to the Creator—after being perfected through many incarnations—is the divine heritage intended by the Father for his children.

In this regard, Saint Paul’s simple and poetic explanation of emerging self-consciousness is well-known. He says “When I was a child I spoke like child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. (I Corinthians 13:12).

On this road to spiritual maturity belief systems may provide a useful structure, but teachers of mysticism assert that as inner consciousness develops, the restrictions of religions are transcended. The understanding gained through devotion, isolation, pain, suffering, and the inevitable frightening spatial confusion, begins to dissolve the seeker’s ego. The “I,” which masks the true spiritual self, is put aside and the human collective gains.

Those who succeed in passing through extraordinary transformational stages, and who achieve a level of consciousness beyond human thought, are often explained by religious futurists to be an advanced guard of a perfect world that is to come. They are among the first to experience a natural course of human evolution. And, if this is indeed the case, one does not need to actively seek God because divine union will eventually happen to everyone.

This assertion that human consciousness will expand, and that there is a perfect messianic world to come is especially prominent in Jewish Kabbalah. In his brilliant but

little-known *Olam-Ha-Ba* (World to Come) Abulafia relates future perfection to principles of symbolic death, resurrection and to reincarnation. He states that, through his system, divine union can be developed within a person's lifetime. And Rabbi Abulafia called his methods "science," guaranteeing his followers that they will quickly achieve the desired effect using his supervised methods.

More commonly, inner development is considered to be slow and cumulative, but Abulafia's teaching is not the only exception.. A few, including the Sufis, who seek immediate results, assert that their methods expeditiously lead to higher levels of consciousness. Similarly, Saint John of the Cross states that he can help beginners "to reach divine union quickly." And, of course, an immediate effect on consciousness happens with psychedelic drugs such as Ergot (actually LSD) which is assumed by current scholarship to have been used at the yearly initiations in honor of Demeter and Persephone into the mysteries of Eleusis near Athens.

However, not all pursue the divine light. Some seek darkness. Enlightenment is not necessarily a simple progression of individuals following a course of sanctity and goodness for whom Saint Peter swings open the heavenly gates. In fact, many ancient documents (especially Greek and Egyptian) attest that evil seekers of power may achieve low levels of cosmic consciousness and gain some control over a physical world which exists only within the restrictions of human consciousness.

There is a great deal to be said for ancient Dualism, which postulates a creation in which the light and the dark forces are eternally at war, with humanity being drawn to both. But the men and women in this book are revered by tradition as having passed beyond all opposites and to having produced miracles in the physical world while moving effortlessly through multidimensional doorways known to very few.

The resolution of inner opposites is a practical key to ancient thought, especially that of Plato and Plotinus, who established a baseline of the Western mystery tradition upon which the earliest Christians built their doctrines in a hostile Roman world. Indeed, the first few Christian centuries were intellectual war zones in which every other statement of religious principle begins with the word *contra*, against. Fathers of the Church, were on a holy mission as they accused both pagans and disliked fellow Christians, of heresy and righteously crafted a catechism which reconciled many diverse ideas.

Intertwined ancient influences shaping the birth of the Church led, as it did in evolving Judaism, to a mysticism of multiple threads. There is the mystical Neoplatonism of Plotinus as reflected in Augustine, or the Scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas—who taught that the way to God was through Aristotelian reasoning. Moreover, Christians may follow Meister Eckhart's "Wayless Way" which has much in common with Eriugena's teaching about an emptiness similar to Buddhist meditation.

But not all systems of inner exploration are based on traditional philosophy or religion. Of the more interesting of the practices seeking enlightenment is Alchemy. This was a special study for Carl Jung who saw this process as a philosophical one in which spiritual "gold" was created within the Alchemist himself. Of course, everything about Alchemy is confusing. Isolated experimenters created obscure manuscripts which were

atonce records of their own experiences and an attempt to keep secret their work from those who might want to steal their gold. And, not surprisingly, those very few scholars of obscure alchemical Latin, report that the documents often suggest practices which are self-contradictory but still claiming success in their operations..

However it is approached, the study of divine union is obscure ground and there is certainly no easy formula to attain inner knowledge. Nor can mystics use words to explain experiences which transcend human thought and feeling, but must rely upon symbols to suggest hidden forces that are constantly interacting within and without the created universe.

The attempt to explain mystical experience to others allows for only the most simple of symbolic pictures and words. some of which have become traditional axioms. A good example is found in the well-known alchemical Emerald Tablet. The candidate is instructed that: “You must separate the subtle from the gross, gently and with great care,” suggesting that at the required level of subtlety, straying from the emptiness of a contemplative path, whether because of mind-wandering, ego intrusion, or even self-deception, is a risk.

Moreover, all mystics warn their students of real psychological dangers, especially for the person with an unbalanced personality who believes that knowledge is power. The idea of angels at the gates denying passage may be metaphorical, but Saint John of the Cross teaches that seekers of God suffer many Dark Nights of testing in which only faith protects them.

Much the same may be said of the Jewish mystical traditions, which are the most complex and in which, even today, extreme secrecy is maintained by Kabbalist rabbis. It is taught that God created the world through the Hebrew letters, which are not a mere alphabet, but are living energies—aspects of Himself which through their activities brought about creation. And it is asserted that Moses provided, to the most devout rabbis, a secret interpretation of Genesis by which they could unlock the secrets upon which the all creation is based.

One important effort of this present work is to acknowledge the historically significant interaction between Christian and Jewish mysticism over the centuries, an example of which is Gnosticism—considered by most to be a Christian school, but which was primarily a Jewish movement. Another striking example of cross-cultural influence is seen in, *The Zohar*, a revered document of Hebrew symbolic thought written by Moses de Leon in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The city of Leon Spain was on a Christian pilgrimage route and was the center of a cult of the Virgin by which the writer was clearly influenced. He wrote that the *Shekinah*, a female image who is a manifestation of God’s presence, rises daily into the heavens to feed the angels, A similar story is told in *The Golden Legend*, a book popular at the time, which describes Mary Magdalene as having been carried by angels into the sky each day.

Belief in angels and spirits that can be invoked by ritual to do the bidding of a master magician, has brought many to a study of the mysteries. Indeed there has been an inextricable relationship between the quest for divine knowledge and magic. In many

cultures there is an assumption that those who have attained knowledge of God have the ability to change the nature of material reality because they have transcended the boundaries of time and space. In this regard, early Jewish rabbis, masters of Palace and Chariot mysticism, are said to have been powerful magicians and Isaac Luria, the greatest of all Jewish Kabbalists, was known for his supposed ability to disappear and appear at will.

Magic was of special interest during the Italian Renaissance when Christian scholars turned their attention to Jewish Kabbalism and from it developed Christian Kabbalah—a movement which forms a basis for many of today’s esoteric fraternities. These closed groups practice ritual, meditation, and invocations often modified from important historical texts, such as John Dee’s *True and Faithful Relation* (1659) and Barrett’s enormously influential book, *The Magus*, (1801). Contemporary interest in magic is the direct result of the availability of practical enlightenment techniques which have, over centuries, been held in the greatest secrecy. These are core principles asserted by tradition to lead the aspirant through heavily guarded gates. Their understanding involves keys to unlock symbolic ideas, for example, that the frequently referenced angel blocking a gate with a sword is not what it appears. It means something within the seeker that must be overcome.

Traditionally conservative philosophies and belief systems teach that enlightenment, is a product of faith; Plato, like John of the Cross, explains that it is essential and in his *Republic*, Plato allegorically represents the struggle for spiritual freedom through faith. A cave, in which people cannot move from one place or even turn their heads, symbolizes the material world as an oppressively dark place of delusion and sadness. However, one man finds within himself the strength to escape into the spiritual sunlight and gains true knowledge of creation. When he returns, seeking to release others, he is called mad and is threatened by those with whom he seeks to share the truth. Plato’s (extreme and polar) story asserts that knowledge of the truth sets one apart from the rest of society, asking: “If it were possible,” he says, “to lay hands on the man and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?”

Of the many insights to be derived from a comparative study of experiences reported by mystics using different approaches, is the fact that they appear to have three experiences in common. These are: *ego dissolution*, *sudden enlightenment* and *flashbacks*. Dissolution, a melting away of the “I”—that which is believed to be the self—as well as sudden enlightenment, is reported by Plato, by Augustine, and by many of no specific ideology or belief system. Moreover, flashbacks, uncontrollable rebounds into the condition beyond human consciousness, are very common although specifics are never explained.

Today methods of inner development which have for centuries been held in secrecy are openly available—including some of the most avidly protected of early magical formulae. In the Middle Ages an enlightened few asserted that there are really no secrets and that the means of reaching Divine Union should be available to anyone—as is happening. Never in history have formerly hidden documents related to union with God been so openly available for study by those who believe that the most noble pursuit of the created, is the inner search for the Creator.

## 1. Plato and Ancient Initiation

(BCE 428-348)

Plato is the key to Western thought and one must agree with Alfred North Whitehead who said that Western philosophy is but “a series of footnotes to Plato.” His ideas, his categorization of the universe, and his explanation of the nature of enlightenment, remain benchmarks of philosophical thought. And indeed, the history of Western mysticism may be said to have begun with him, although much of what Plato wrote drew upon earlier ideas

Studying Plato one must allow that at least some of his complicated philosophy of the universe may have been passed down through what he describes as ritual initiation into self-knowledge and cosmic consciousness. Plato drew upon Orphic, Pythagorean, Eleusinian and Bacchic ideas, creating a brilliant philosophy structured by Socratic wisdom.

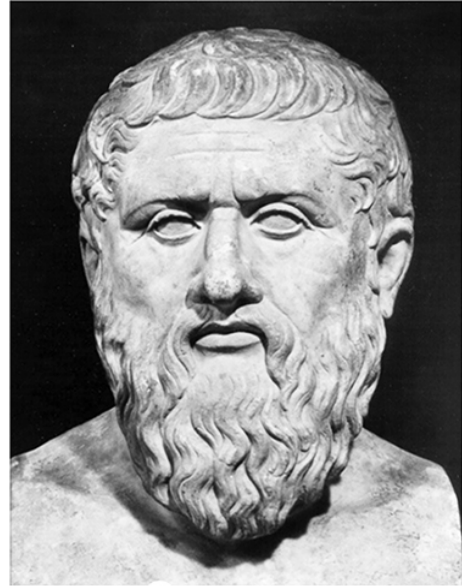
In this regard, a problem inevitably arises with those teachers who report having achieved a condition of divine union. A universal experience which transcends belief systems must be explained through the symbols of a given culture.

Plato describes his encounters with the *Logos* (The Divine Word) through Demeter; whereas Augustine explains his vision of what is assumed to be the same divine energy, as a gift of Christ. And as the Western tradition develops, visionaries inevitably refer to others, such as Solomon or Saint Paul, for corroboration of the validity of their own contemplative ecstasy.

### *Eleusis and the Roots of Platonic Thought*

Scholars assume that the initiation which Plato records in his *Phaedrus* is that of Eleusis, a sacred area about fifteen miles from Athens. There were three degrees of initiation: the *Lesser Mysteries*, the *Greater Mysteries*, and a final degree which was said to confer knowledge of God.<sup>1</sup>

The Lesser Mysteries were an important part of Athenian culture with a yearly celebration that became audaciously rowdy as thousands from all over Greece sought initiation and joined a huge procession from Athens to Eleusis.<sup>2</sup> The rituals began as a



**Plato**

*“The souls of people on their way to Earth-Life pass through a room full of light, each takes a taper, often only a spark, to guide it in the dim country of this world. But some souls, by rare fortune, are detained longer, have more time to grasp a handful of tapers, which they weave into a torch. These are the torch-bearers of humanity, its poets, seers and saints who lead and lift the race out of darkness into the light.”*

recreation of the descent of Demeter into the underworld in search of the daughter abducted by Hades and concluded with the rising of Persephone into the upper world, signaling Spring and the rebirth of all nature.

Beyond this classic story, little is known about the specifics of the Greek mysteries. The secrets were guarded with utmost seriousness, and sense of awe, since Athenian law prohibited revealing anything about what happened in the Eleusian hall of initiation. Fear struck even the world's first travel writer, Pausanias, who says that he was told in a dream to reveal nothing about these mysteries.

Nevertheless, modern scholars of the Eleusian mysteries have discovered a great deal and explain that the candidate drank what was called a *kykeon*, "a mixture" of barley, mint, water and some form of *ergot*,<sup>3</sup> which is essentially LSD. This hallucinogen, well-known in early Greece is a parasitic substance that grows on wheat and rye which in the ancient world was used in very small amounts to produce ecstasies. In larger amounts it is quite deadly and is known to have killed as many as 40,000 people during the Middle Ages because of bread which they did not know was contaminated.<sup>4</sup>

Although Plato's initiation into the Eleusian mysteries is of great cultural significance, he explains that the event, experienced by thousands, is of lesser importance than the enlightenment which comes to the philosopher. Rinella points out that "what we find in the philosophical works beginning with Plato is the imagination of the philosopher setting a new, *visio beatifica* above the Eleusian vision, building on this religious experience, known to almost every Athenian, as an existent self-evident foundation, in a manner that simultaneously attests to the existence of various forms of ecstatic visions, acknowledges their potency, and disparages them as being events of lesser luminescence, of lesser perfection."<sup>5</sup>

Plato's conclusions about the soul are essential to the philosophical continuum of Western mystical thought. When it appeared in Greece toward the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the very concept of a *soul*, and the doctrine of transmigration, its progress through many lives, promoted heated arguments among philosophers. Belief in reincarnation crystalized publicly in the fifth century as Plato, using the language of the Bacchic and Eleusian mysteries<sup>6</sup> taught that the soul's progress is a matter of disciplined ascent occurring over many lives.

The principle of birth and rebirth was first mentioned in the West by Pythagoras, who studied in Egypt where it was part of a very long and secret tradition that may have begun in India and dated back to at least 1200 B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> Secrets were kept by the cult of Pythagoras which passed them down to Plato and so to his academy, where mathematics assumed greater importance than mysticism.<sup>8</sup>

There is little doubt about the path through which the such ideas were transmitted, and Kahn states with certainty that Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* "are supreme expressions of the two central conceptions of Pythagorean thought: the immortal destiny of the human soul and the role of mathematics in unlocking the secrets of the cosmos."<sup>9</sup>

Many such secrets are beyond words and in his pivotal *Self Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, Griswold may provide a useful key to all enlightenment. He focuses on the idea of the soul's *self-motion* as expressed by Socrates and asks the question "might 'soul' and



‘eros’ be the same entity?”<sup>10</sup> In other words: is the soul sex? In this regard, Christian theology argues that self-knowledge means discovery by the individual that he or she is truly the *Word/Logos* which embodies a principle of ceaseless motion. So the question really becomes is God sex? Perhaps this has been the secret that has been revealed in the unwritten Greek tradition acknowledged by all scholars to exist.<sup>11</sup>

In this regard there is a traditional warning of the mysteries that they involve divine forces which may be dangerous. This may suggest that all true enlightenment involves control of a divine sexual energy which Eastern philosophies teach is within the human body, is manipulated through meditative exercises or divine gift, and which, like electricity (a fair analogy) may be abused. That sexual energy is the *sine qua non* of self-knowledge is acknowledged in the East, but seems to be hidden in the most obtuse of language—such as that of the *Song of Solomon*—in the West. Many Christians who claim to have achieved divine knowledge state that there are things of which they must not speak, as will be seen with enlightened theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux, who divides sexual principles into raw passion and spiritual pursuit in such a way as to suggest that he is holding back something very profound that may be approached only by the few.

### *Plato’s Initiation into Divine Union*

Plato explains that the hidden principles of the soul were revealed to him in a ritual initiation, including others, by which they became gods. “How passionate” he says of the goddess Demeter, “had been our desire for her. We beheld with our eyes that blessed vision, ourselves in the train of Zeus, others following some other god, then were we all initiated into that mystery which is rightly accounted blessed beyond all others...pure was the light that shone around us, and pure were we, without taint of that prison house which now we are encompassed withal, and call a body.”<sup>12</sup>

And recalling this initiation in later years he describes it as overwhelming and sudden, it was “like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.” It was, in fact the result of long and intensive study, and Plato is hostile toward those who write about such things but only pretend to have had such experience.<sup>13</sup>

His essential point is that everyone has had a contact with “true being,” but very few remember, In his *Phaedrus* he says that:

Every human soul has by reason of her nature, had contemplation of true being, else would she never have entered into this human creature; but to be put in mind thereof by things here is not easy for every soul. Some, when they had the vision, had it for but a moment, some when they had fallen to earth consorted unhappily with such as led them into deeds of unrighteousness, wherefore they forgot the holy objects of their vision. Few indeed are left that can still remember much. But when thee discern some likeness of the things yonder, they are amazed, and no longer masters of themselves, and know not what is come upon them by reason of their

perception being dim.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Platonic Principles*

A historical understanding of Plato’s background would throw considerable light upon the exact sources of his ideas, but facts about his life are difficult to trace because they are so mixed with romantic fiction—such as his supposed descent from the god Poseidon. The earliest biography, written five hundred years after the death of Plato, is that of Apuleius.<sup>15</sup> He was an African novelist with a very fertile imagination who is best known for *The Golden Ass*, the only Roman novel to have survived intact.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, very little is actually known about the man who has inspired generations with his emphasis on learning as essential to the journey of an eternal soul. In Greek this journey through many lives, returning the soul back to the On from which it originated, is called *metempsychosis*. It is the essential principle of the Neoplatonists, although Christian theologians do not, or pretend not, to agree with the idea of reincarnation. On the other hand, many forms of Jewish mysticism such as Kabbalah (often described as a type of Neoplatonism) do indeed accept the idea of multiple lives.

Presumably this belief was passed on to Plato by his teacher, Socrates, the enlightened philosopher of the dialogues who is a somewhat invented character expressing the ideas of both Socrates and Plato himself. Of course, invention of what has been called the “Platonic Socrates”<sup>17</sup> may be Plato’s way to show great respect for his teacher but the Platonic Socrates is, in some ways, a self-contradictory character. Walter Pater finds it rather strange that “out of the practical cautions of Socrates for the securing of clear and correct and sufficient conceptions...for the attainment of a sort of thoroughly-educated common sense, came the mystic intellectualism of Plato—Platonism, with all of its hazardous flights of soul!”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps curiously, it seems impossible to determine how much of the Dialogues is entirely Plato’s own. But whatever he may have owed to Socrates, Plato’s ideas about the soul superceded those of his teacher with a more sophisticated overview of the soul’s moral experience.<sup>19</sup> Plato’s mystical principles, while merging a variety of influences, are certainly the result of personal contemplative experience which was either reinforced by, or generated by, ritual initiation.

On the other hand there are some who do not refer to Plato as one who has “seen the light” and do not speculate as to whether or not the information which he conveys is *true*. For example, in an introduction to *Plato: The Complete Dialogues*, the editor (although from another era) asserts that “Plato was a philosopher and poet but not a mystic.”<sup>20</sup>

Those great mystics who would certainly disagree include Plotinus, St. Augustine, Meister Eckhart and scores of others who found in Plato’s works profound insights into an inner world unknown to most. These *Neo-Platonists* include Christians, Jews, and many with no religious connections who are in search of God through direct encounter of their own souls. So the approaches to Plato may be divided into the theoretical and the practical. It is the latter which may be of the greatest interest and by which one may compare descriptions of experiences in search of correlations to suggest that an immutable truth has

been experienced.

Plato is unique in that his dialogues are dispassionate by comparison with those who follow him and who attest to the emotional upheaval brought about by the opening of rational awareness of the inherently irrational soul. He expresses none of the intense emotions of discovery that are so common in the reports of other visionaries. Saint Ignatius Loyola, for example, seems to have been in constant tears as he touched upon the divine world. But to Plato the soul must rise above the distractions of pleasure and pain felt by the body as well as the confines of thought.

### *The Soul and the Body*

The word *soul* translates the Greek word *psyche* (*anima* or *animus*<sup>21</sup> in Latin), and in the most general sense it has been used to mean an innermost spirit of self. According to Plato, the soul creates its own body to collect experiences and, in the process, produces its own opposite. The concept is very difficult and obtuse, but he teaches that duality is essential to the correct functioning of the universe and is overcome as the soul seeks to return to its source, the One. It is an inner journey which Plato describes metaphorically as being on wings which is suggestive not only of rising above what is known, but also of *motion*, an important attribute of the manifestation brought about by the Logos.

In Plato's metaphysics, a soul, like a body, can become sick and unbalanced. This may seem a strange idea to those who define the soul as entirely pure and good, but to Plato, the soul deals with whatever the body may experience and has specific features of personality. It is, in fact, what one would generally describe as a "person," with virtues and faults, with behaviors that are both good and bad, and experiencing pleasure and pain.

Plato explains that the immortal soul,<sup>22</sup> which brings life to a body, is composed of three parts:<sup>23</sup> the *rational*, the *spirit*, and the *appetite*. This tripartite soul was later to be taken by Christian Neoplatonists, seeking to reinforce their theology as ultimate, to refer to the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The rational is the thinking part of the soul, the place of knowledge and wisdom which judges what is true and what is not; the spirit involves anger and self-related emotions such as love and self-direction toward an all-important "reasonableness." And the appetite, includes desires such as thirst or hunger as well as sexual passion.

The challenge is difficult and often painful: With rational thoughts the soul tries to balance and control its competing urges toward good and bad, an effort symbolized by Plato's well-known charioteer representing reason controlling two horses: one the noble spirit and the other the base appetite. With such colorful imagery Plato seeks to emphasize the intensity of the soul's conflicts and the necessity of reason in exercising control over the self as it seeks inner balance.<sup>24</sup>

"He that is on the more honorable side is upright and clean-limbed, carrying his neck high with something of a hooked nose; in color he is white with black eyes, a lover of glory, but with temperance and modesty' one that consorts with genuine renown, and needs no whip, being driven by the word

of command alone. The other is crooked of frame, a massive jumble of a creature. with thick short neck, stub nose, black skin and gray eyes, hot blooded, consorting with wantonness and vainglory' shaggy of ear, deaf and hard to control with whip and goad.”<sup>25</sup>

But the soul works with what it has chosen, and “for the triumph of virtue” God appointed that the type of soul be determined by the place where it is born into a body. He “contrived to this universal end the seat of regions which must receive each type of soul as it is formed in their inhabitants, but the causes of formation of either type he left free to our individual volitions.”<sup>26</sup>

To Plato the soul is a complex multiplicity of parts naturally driven to seek self-knowledge, as he explains in his cosmological treatise, *Timaeus*. The soul is more or less trapped in a universe formed by a “Lesser Creator,” the *Demiurge*, who creates an individualized spirit upon which layers of increasing density are added until it is eventually born into the physical world. But the Demiurge is not the omnipotent God of the Bible who must be worshiped. It is a force which acts upon something that it did not itself create.<sup>27</sup> This so-called Demiurge is not a creator god, but is merely a symbol offered by Plato for a process otherwise incomprehensible to the mind.

Theoretically, the Demiurge produces a structured universe, which is “a living creature with soul and reason” after the likeness of an eternal original.<sup>28</sup> First there was the World Soul, but after its creation there was something left over from which the Demiurge fashions the immortal part of the individual soul. The immortal soul enters the human body in incarnation.<sup>29</sup> So the human being, like the universe itself, is created with body, soul, and reason—but the body ultimately dissolves back into the elements, as do two lower parts of the soul. Only *divine reason* does not perish.<sup>30</sup>

Plato teaches all of this with a specificity and authority unlike any who follow. But in seeking the practical as opposed to the theoretical, one must assume that he is speaking from personal experience and is referring to the dialogue between his own mind and aspects of the soul that are understood by very few.

To seekers he describes that which is “unknown” but warns: “Take precautions lest this teaching ever be disclosed among untrained people, for in my opinion there is in general no doctrine more ridiculous in the eyes of the general public than this, nor on the other hand, any more wonderful and inspiring to the naturally gifted.”<sup>31</sup>

That the experience to which Plato refers, and mentioned in the Introduction to this book, sets a person apart from most others, is eloquently expressed in *The Republic*.<sup>32</sup> He writes metaphorically of those who have, from childhood, been bound in an underground cavern so that they cannot turn their heads but can only look forward. Behind them and higher up is a fire before which people and animals move, casting shadows on the wall of the cave in front of the prisoners which they falsely believe to be reality.

Plato then suggests what would happen if a prisoner were to escape and, little by little, sees the light and the true reality outside. But about his return and attempt to tell people what he has seen, Plato asks “would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worthwhile even to attempt the

ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?<sup>33</sup>

Plato repeats, again and again, that not many will ever understand the divine spark which they possess and says “soul is that of whose nature and potency all but a few would seem to know nothing; in this general ignorance they know not in particular of its origins, how it is among the primal things, elder born than all bodies and primal source of all their changes and transformations.”<sup>34</sup>

The search for the soul’s union with the divine was encapsulated in the famous inscription of the school of Pythagoras above the Temple at Delphi which said: “Man know yourself and you will know the universe and the gods.” Such self-knowledge is explained by Plato to mean an understanding of the nature of the relationship between the soul and the body. “The complex of soul and body when once it has come to be, though not eternal is, like the gods, recognized by law, imperishable—for there would be no procreation of living creatures were either of the pair to be destroyed—and since he considered that it is ever the nature of such soul as it is good to work blessing and as such as is evil to work harm.”<sup>35</sup>

Movement is the key. Plato teaches that the soul is the universal source of “revolution and movement” and that good souls create universal movement in the direction of good, whereas the bad souls produce just the opposite. Souls are people. They can be brash or modest, generous or greedy, good or evil, and they ultimately are rewarded or punished according to their choices in incarnation. Almost all souls, however, will eventually be perfected—no matter what pain they may suffer in getting there—because good always triumphs over evil.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, a very few souls are so evil that there can be no redemption and they are lost.

Some later mystics, especially those seeking knowledge of God through a belief system, make no effort to explain the nature of the soul. Many Christian mystics are unconcerned about the complexities of the soul’s composition which Plato describes and see individual enlightenment as a divine gift, rather than something which can be earned as a normal part of development as is taught in the East. Throughout the history of Christianity there has been a debate between those who feel that unity with the divine can be achieved through intellect and those who approach the question through feelings—the intense power of faith. Traditionally this is represented as the difference between Platonic and Aristotelian thought.

In earliest Christianity the soul was considered to be an unknown divine part of the individual, remote from behavior and thinking, but from the 13<sup>th</sup> century many Christian theologians followed Aristotle in considering the soul to be that part of the body involved in behavior and in thinking. As Christianity evolved, the structure of the soul was an increasingly important consideration and Plato’s ideas were useful. Neoplatonists generally accepted his theory of a multi-faceted soul which contemplates itself and which interacts with the body’s feeling of pain and pleasure.<sup>37</sup>

Hendrik Lorenz explains this eloquently: “The soul, for Plato, is not just a principle of psychological states and activities such as thoughts, desires, and emotions. It is not just something that in some way or other enters into explanations of psychological phenomena.

For Plato, the soul is *itself* the subject of all psychological predicates: it is the soul itself that thinks, desires, and experiences emotions.”<sup>38</sup>

Plato emphasizes self-determination and free-will, which is not to suggest that reliance upon God, his “King of All,” is in any way diminished, or that faith is lacking. Belief is essential to Plato’s soul<sup>39</sup> which (defining its parts in even more complicated terms) has four natural impulses (“affections”). These are “*intellection* or reason for the highest, *understanding* for the second, *belief* for the third, and for the last, *picture thinking* or conjecture.”<sup>40</sup> So, to extrapolate from this and to answer the question “what does the soul do?” The soul thinks, it seeks to understand, it has faith, and it imagines in pictures. Imagination, though placed last in Plato’s scheme, is of very great importance to serious meditation and, of course, to what Jung called “active imagination” as a means of self-discovery and enlightenment.

The technique seems as old as humanity and all those who speak of having achieved self-knowledge, refer somehow to prayer and meditation in which imagination is the (often secret) key. An inner conversation with self is essential, and Plato makes clear that inner dialog was in fact integral to the method which brought him to a high level of wisdom. As he says, “thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself.”<sup>41</sup> And indeed the dialog form of asking questions and receiving answers is ultimately with oneself—with one’s own psyche. It is a conversation which must, at first, be assumed to be entirely imaginary.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Soul’s Work*

Learning is the primary work of the soul and learning is movement. “By inactivity, dullness, and neglect of exercise, it learns nothing and forgets what it has learned.”<sup>43</sup> Plato is referring to the principle of *recollection*. This is the idea that the soul understood the meaning of life and death, and divine movements, before it was born, but forgets when it enters a human body. Before it was born into a body the soul understood the principle of *forms*—the ideal nature of each thing<sup>44</sup> that exists in the material world. It is these forms, pure essences, or *ideas*, which created the shadows in Plato’s allegorical cave that were recognized as the source of the patterns of reality by the one who escapes from the trap of material delusions.

Plato’s perfect forms were undoubtedly an inspiration for Carl Jung’s theory of *archetypes*, thoughts which have been built up into a “collective unconscious” that everyone shares. There are archetypes of mother or father, or anything at all which has been the continuous object of group thought. But archetypes are not at all the same as Plato’s forms which the seeker wants to recollect and which represent true knowledge. These are the eternal and unchanging abstractions which are underlying “reality,” existing only in the domain of the immortal from which the soul comes and goes. The catch is that knowledge of forms is lost to most souls at birth, but when it dies the soul remembers and must accept responsibility for what it did in life without the benefit of this knowledge.

With insight into the nature of forms comes an understanding that constant motion, which has been called *sex*, is the essence of the universal plan. Motion is good. Inertia is

evil and is contrary to the universal will. “Soul, once implanted in the body quite naturally imparts motion and revolution to the body and to herself. It is only natural that soul should universally be the cause of revolution and movement, the best soul causing motion and revolution in the direction of good and the other sort of soul that in the opposite direction. Good must be and ever has been triumphant over its contrary.”<sup>45</sup>

Theoretically, the soul traverses the whole universe in ever-changing bodies. But why, then, does it enter into the human condition? Plato’s answer is that those souls who enter a body and give it life are in the process of a divine journey in search of perfection. In the process of being reborn the yet imperfect soul sheds its wings and “sinks down until it can fasten onto something solid, and settling there it takes to itself an earthly body.”<sup>46</sup> However when the soul reaches perfection and spreads its wings it “journeys on high and controls the whole world.”<sup>47</sup>

The idea of the soul seeking a secure foundation is especially interesting in that Carl Jung describes his own experience with the soul’s environment as being frightening in its lack of stability and foundation—with no up or down, no here or there. And Plato agrees that the soul can become disoriented and experience a divine madness within which none of the orderly rules of the earthly condition apply. Those who have achieved self-knowledge seem to agree that the early ecstatic experiences of enlightenment demand a reevaluation of the nature of reality. This is the ultimate and natural course of good souls.

The experience of other, less virtuous, souls is quite different. Some souls, through what Plato calls “mischance” are burdened with “forgetfulness and wrongdoing” and become subject to “the law.” But it should not, however, be supposed that evil souls are destroyed. Although they suffer punishment, they too are immortal. Here Plato emphasizes cryptically that “only a soul that has beheld truth may enter into this our human form,”<sup>48</sup> adding that “every human soul has, by reason of her nature, had contemplation of true being else she would never have entered this human condition.”<sup>49</sup>

And the soul that “loses its wings and falls to earth” (meaning, presumably, everyone in the world) is born into a child that will develop according to how much it has learned in the past. Of course Plato’s specifics about rebirth are certainly built upon an earlier tradition such as those of Orphism, Pythagorean or Egyptian mysticism as he states that “A soul does not return to the place from which she came for a thousand years and if, during that time, she has chosen the philosophical life three times regains her wings and flies away after three thousand years. It may become a seeker of wisdom or a tyrant. But the soul may regain her wings if she has chosen “the philosophical life three times.”<sup>50</sup>

Expanding the metaphor of the soul’s wings, Plato explains that the “fair, wise, and good” souls have beautiful plumage whereas evil souls have plumage that is ugly, “wasted and destroyed.”<sup>51</sup> It is only in enlightened reality, that the true condition of the soul is seen; on the earthly plane goodness and evil are not necessarily obvious, but the inner light shows things as they really are and how the soul is dealing with “toil and struggle.” It reveals their course on a divine path and what they have learned.

Overall, Plato’s description of the progress of souls is poetic but never easy to interpret. He says that “...as soon as they are at the summit, they come forth and stand upon the back of the world, and straightaway the revolving heaven carries them round, and

they look up upon the regions without.” But the ecstasy may be fleeting or may not be understood at all.

The path may be difficult and treacherous, but Plato promises great rewards to the soul which endures righteously, encouraging the seeker that intention and perseverance will be rewarded: “ He who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and true wisdom, and has exercised his intellect more than any other part of him must have thoughts immortal and divine, if he attain truth, and insofar as human nature is capable of sharing his immortality, he must altogether be immortal, and since he is ever cherishing the divine power and has the divinity within him in perfect order, he will be singularly happy.”<sup>52</sup>

The goal of establishment of “perfect order” within the soul—which is beyond thought and feeling---is described by all mystics in terms that are mundane and simplistic but are offered in hope that the truth may be grasped intuitively.

It is with this qualification that one should approach Plato’s remarkable attempts to define the undefinable. He is a teller of a tale that is more than the sum of their parts, as he asserts that the various parts of the soul, over which the divine nature is “sovereign,” must be put into balance in order for the soul to be in such harmony with the divine motion, that it finally knows itself. “When it investigates by itself it passes into the realm of the pure and everlasting and immortal and changeless, and being of a kindred nature, when it is once independent and free from interference, consorts with it always and strays no longer, but remains in the realm of the absolute, constant and invariable, through contact with beings of a similar nature. And this condition of the soul that we call wisdom.”<sup>53</sup> Christian theology describes this as union with the Word.

But Plato warns that “If the soul is immortal it demands our care not only for that part of time which we call life, but for all time. And indeed it would seem now that it would be extremely dangerous to neglect it.”<sup>54</sup> And he makes clear that “since the soul is clearly immortal it can have no escape or security from evil except by becoming as good and wise as it possibly can, for it takes nothing to the next world except its education and training, and these, we are told, are of supreme importance in helping or harming the newly dead at the beginning of his journey.”<sup>55</sup>

In any event, the soul’s recovery of self-knowledge is not the true end of the journey, for there is a point beyond the heavens of which, Plato says “none of our earthly poets has yet sung, and none shall sing worthily...It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul’s pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof.”<sup>56</sup> This is the One, the source of all in which there is unity. It is the condition of the return of the many to the One from which the universe was formed. Later Christian and Jewish philosophers describe a state of nothingness out of which the One, itself, emerges, producing what is called negative theology.

### *The Soul After Death*

There is no question that Plato’s teaching about the salvation of the philosopher, and the terrible destiny of the morally unclean and uninitiated, who are sent to the torture of Hades, is pure Orphism.<sup>57</sup> And Morgan asserts credibly that Plato’s concepts of the afterlife.



are invented, stating that “since the soul’s immortality is associated with myths of different origin and kind, it is not surprising to find Plato in the *Phaedo* constructing his own myth of the soul’s posthumous possibilities. It is a speculative revision of traditional imaginings, a fabulous attempt to push thinking where reason should not tread.”<sup>58</sup> But invented or not, Plato’s ideas about the afterlife are of profound significance to the Neoplatonists and to the Christians who amplified his ideas.

The philosopher Plato constantly emphasizes the importance of opposites in the universal plan, and teaches that without these opposing forces the universe would not continue to exist. Birth and death are opposites in a cycle, the one leading to the other—over and over again. And although he insists that death is simply the separation of the soul and the body, Plato believes that souls do have some idea of what is going on in the world they have left.<sup>59</sup>

Plato writes that a soul remains very much as it was in life, but without the body—everything it has done in life, its experiences, and the learning, is seen very clearly after death as the soul is judged. And although many religions have prayers and rituals for the dead, Plato believes that very little can be done to help the deceased, who must stand or fall on the decisions that person has made in life.<sup>60</sup> There is no escape from the judgment of the soul after death which Plato describes vividly. It is quite a story.

Supposedly, when a person dies, the guardian spirit which has guided that soul in life brings the average person to the shores of the Acherusian Lake, the “river of sorrow”<sup>61</sup> in Hades (final abode of both good and bad) where all must assemble and where each soul is first judged and is then taken to a boat upon the lake where it stays for a very long time. If a soul has been neither good nor bad, but has led an ordinary life, it pays a penalty for wrongs and receives appropriate rewards for benevolent deeds. When the soul has completed what is required it is led by another guide and enters into a new body.<sup>62</sup> Those very few souls who have practiced philosophy and are absolutely pure may attain to the divine nature in a place of holiness.<sup>63</sup>

The fate is more painful for those who have committed great but “curable” crimes (such as murder) but have felt true remorse for their evil deeds. These souls are thrown into *Tartarus* a great pit which is the lowest region below the world. Every year the underground rivers carry the tormented souls, from Tartarus, past the Acherusian lake where they pass by and call out across the expanse to the persons they have killed or harmed, asking forgiveness. If the tortured souls are forgiven, their punishment is ended, if not, they are taken back to Tartarus.<sup>64</sup>

And there is a special category for a soul that is too attached to the body. It hovers over that body and the visible world and, after much suffering, it is led away forcibly by its appointed guide. If this is an evil soul it is shunned by the assembly as it wanders along in desolation and without guidance. But the good soul, one who has lived a life of purity and goodness, is guided benevolently and is welcomed.<sup>65</sup>

There are also wicked souls who become ghosts. These souls, tainted by the weight of the earth, are dragged back into the visible world where they hover around graveyards. They can be seen because they retain some portion of the visible. They are condemned to wander aimlessly as punishment for their bad conduct but, eventually, attraction to the

physical causes them to be born into another body in which they consort with those of similarly evil natures.<sup>66</sup>

At the extreme are those who are guilty of the worst crimes against universal law and who cannot be cured or forgiven. They suffer the greatest and most terrifying of tortures because of their misdeeds, and are suspended eternally as examples in Tartarus, the prison house of Hades.

The general rule is that, in all of the after life situations, the soul interacts with others, whether that mean the company of those who initially gather at the shore of the lake, or a single other soul from which forgiveness is asked. There seems to be no isolation, even in severe punishment where the evil soul is put forth as an example to others.

In his old age Plato warns very specifically that: “We must at all times give our unfeigned assent to the ancient and holy doctrines which warn us that our souls are immortal, that they are judged, and that they suffer the severest punishments after our separation from the body.”<sup>67</sup> But in regard to the fate of the soul, as well as its tripartite nature, scholars are quick to point out inconsistencies and lack of clarity in Plato’s writings over a very long period of time. Speaking of the soul’s immortality and its pre-existence, Taylor concludes that “The source of the difficulty is partly to be found in the fact that Plato’s language on these matters is almost always tinged with a greater or smaller admixture of imaginative myth, partly perhaps in a modification in his views of advancing age.”<sup>68</sup> To this one might reply that changes or inconsistencies in Plato’s ideas, as he aged, may equally well be attributed to advancing understanding.

However his philosophy may be understood and interpreted, Plato sets the stage for discussion of the terrible quest for self-knowledge and its rewards. He establishes principles of individual enlightenment and guideposts of an inner world that seem to be corroborated by all later visionaries. There are, for example remarkable correlations between his cosmology and that of Jewish Kabbalism,<sup>69</sup> as well as universal agreement about the divine madness and pain of giving up “self” described by the most prominent mystics including Saint John of the Cross, Carl Jung, and countless teachers in the Eastern societies.

Of course, any discussion of enlightenment and judgment after death raises the issue of the criteria by which the soul may be judged—each religion setting its own standards and insisting that it is promulgating an ultimate truth. The Catholic church calls itself “the one true religion,” while Jews speak of themselves as the “chosen people.” Even the Aztecs thought that they were right when, in the name of their god they cut out the hearts of willing victims who believed that their sacrifice would bring them special favor in the next world.

History is scattered with religions claiming to offer a sure path to heaven if their behavioral standard is met. But Plato largely transcends all of these with a universal model. His criterion for “goodness” is imbedded in a *reasonableness* which cannot be accomplished by the average person. It is the exclusive work of the philosopher who is a truth-seeker.<sup>70</sup> And although Plato has been criticized for inventing mythologies, his overview invites the philosopher to ignore whatever he says. This may seem a strange idea, but it is undoubtedly Plato’s ultimate message and seems unavoidable by anyone who writes about their own true discovery of self.

Plato’s principles of the cosmos and of the soul are entirely symbolic and were

recognized as such by philosophers in his time—whereas the ordinary person accepted mythologies as true stories about the gods.<sup>71</sup> Plato knew that all but the philosopher would take his descriptive words at face value and that those to whom he really wanted to suggest inner realities would apply a kind of transcendent intuition to his words.

And at a practical level, Plato suggests that there are three significant requirements for the attainment of God consciousness. First is long and intensive study. The second is a trained use of imagination, and the third is the attainment of a perfect balance of the constantly flowing opposite movements within the soul. Moreover, Plato insists that faith is essential to the process by which the soul becomes gradually attuned to a divine ebb and flow of consciousness and begins to “remember.” In this there may be no area of studies which so confirms Nietzsche’s idea that all words are metaphor. Perhaps there is some irony here in that comparing works of those who describe spiritual experiences may really be a comparison of ability to create metaphors.

1. George E. Mylonos, *Eleusis and the Eleusian Mysteries*, Princeton, 1961, 338.
2. Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, London, 2010, 30.
3. Michael A. Rinella, *Pharmakon: Plato, Drug Culture and Identity in Ancient Athens*, Lanham, Maryland 2010, 133.
4. Jerold S. Meyer, Linda F. Quinzer, *Psychopharmacology: Drugs, the Brain and Behavior*, Massachusetts, 2013, 433.
5. *Pharmakon*, 136.
6. Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth Century Athens*, New Haven, 1990, 56.
7. Charles H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History*, Indiana, 2001, 11.
8. *Ibid*, 13.
9. *Ibid*, 49-50.
10. Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, Pennsylvania, 1986, 79.
11. These are mentioned by students of both Plato and Aristotle. Kahn, *op.cit.*, 55.
12. *Phaedrus* 250b-d
13. *Phaedrus*, 241c
14. *Phaedrus*, 250
15. A. E. Taylor, *The Mind of Plato*, Michigan 1969, 1ff.
16. It was of special interest to St. Augustine as were the works of Plato.
17. Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures*, 1983, New York (original 1901) 75.
18. Walter Pater, *op.cit.*, 35.
19. Taylor, *op.cit.* 74.
20. *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Princeton, 1961, xv. The author of this statement, Huntington Cairns, was a lawyer and federal censor who decided for the Treasury Department whether books and objects or art were pornographic. He was at one time Secretary of the National Gallery of Art. Although a celebrated author in his time, he had no

qualifications as a Plato scholar.

21. The Latin gender of the soul: *anima* (breath of life, vital principle) is female and refers to the physical part of soul. *Animus* is masculine and is spiritual. Meister Eckhart says that: “When the soul is directly pointed up toward God it is a man and is one and not two, and when the soul turns down here below, she is a woman. With a single thought and a single downward glance she puts on a woman’s dress.” *Complete Works of Meister Eckhart*, “Sermon Thirty-Two,” New York, 2009, 199.

22. *Philebus* 55b

23. *Republic IV* 435-42 A.E. Taylor comments that “Plato’s great psychological discovery may be briefly condensed into the phrase that the soul is neither a mere undifferentiated unit nor a mere plurality of independent and disconnected activities, but both a One and a Many. Taylor, op.cit, 80.

24. Marc McPherran points out in his essay “The Gods and Piety of Plato’s Republic,” that whereas the chariot of the mortal soul is pulled by two horses of good and bad, the chariots of the gods have horses that are entirely good. *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic*, Oxford 2008, 94.

25. *Phaedrus*, 253d

26. *Laws X*, 904b

27. Francis M. Cornford, *Plato’s Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, 1937, Indiana, 37].

28. 14. *Timaeus* 30b

29. Cornford, op.cit., 142

30. Cornford, op.cit. 38-39

31. *Letters II* 314

32. *Republic VII*, 514ff.

33. *Republic*, VII 517.

34. *Laws X* 892a

35. *Laws X*, 904a

36. *Epinomis* 88d

37. *Philebus* 32c, 50c

38. Hendrick Lorenz, “The Analysis of the Soul in Plato’s Republic,” *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic*, Oxford 2010, 146.

39. The (Kabbalist) Jewish mystic exercises an equal degree of faith but has a much more orderly approach based on a sort of road map of the universe (the *Tree of Life*) as his or her soul travels toward knowledge of God. Plato’s Demiurge, the Lesser Creator, is easily related above the realm of the sacrificed gods on that remarkable plan.

40. *Republic VII* 511d

41. *Sophist*, 363e.

42. In his text on the diaries of Saint Ignatius (*Powers of Imagining: Ignatius de Loyola*, New York, 1986, 31-32) Antonio T. De Nicolas says that: “When we look for the intellect we find certain cognitive skills we learn, use, and repeat. In practice, these skills “read” perception, sensuous imagining, and what is called reason as a result of certain original or primary reading technologies.” And he continues to say that “We take this technology of imagining as being the kind of imagining which heralded Western culture in the form of

Plato's dialectics...this kind of imagining was the one that Plato chose as his primary epistemology and the ground of his dialectics. This kind of imagining has the special feature that it is not based on images derived from sensuous objects, it is rather an imagining which builds images to the degree it is able to cancel the sensuous world."

43. *Theaetetus* 153-6

44. Meno 82b-85d. Walter Pater emphasizes Plato's deep connection to Pythagoras and states that the doctrine of forms derives from the Pythagorean theory describing the relationship of the infinite to the finite. Says Pater: "Let us see as much as possible in his own words, what Plato received from that older philosopher, of which the two leading persuasions were; the first, the universality, the ultimate truth, of numerical, of musical law; and secondly, the pre-existence, the double eternity, of the soul. Opcit.60. Of course, there can be no question that Plato developed his ideas based upon those of many others, but this does not obviate the possibility that what was being transmitted was an ultimate truth rather than merely speculative.

45. *Epinomis* 988d

46. *Phaedrus* 246sq

47. *Phaedrus* 246sq

48. *Phaedrus* 249b

49. *Phaedrus* 249e

50. *Phaedrus* 249b

51. *Phaedrus* 247sq

52. *Timaeus*, 90b

53. *Phaedo* 79d

54. *Phaedo* 107c]

55. *Phaedo* 107c.

56. *Phaedrus* 247c

57. Mylonis, opcit, 267.

58. Morgan, opcit, 56-57.

59. *Letters* II, 311c

60. *Laws* XII, 959b

61. *Phaedo* 107c-115a. The tradition of the Acherusian Lake goes back to Homer who described as part of the landscape of Hades. In the Greek tradition the shades of the dead appear at the Acherusian Lake—a mythical landscape and parallel world to the land of the living. Plato determined that the lake Acherusian lay at the edge of the Elysian fields, the realm of the blessed. The Auscherian Lake is an important theme of Old Testament Pseudoepigraphia which becomes part of the Christian tradition. It is mentioned in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. It has been related to Paradise in Christian tradition. See: Marinus de Jonge, *Pseudoepigraphic of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature*, Netherlands, 2003, 212ff.

62. *Phaedo* 113d

63. *Phaedo* 82b, ff

64. *Phaedo* 114a-b]

65. *Phaedo* 108b

66. *Phaedo*, 81c. ff.

67. Letters VII, 335.

68. Taylor, op.cit., 84

69. Medieval Jewish thought was significantly influenced by both Aristotle and Plato. One of the great difficulties of this present study is separation of speculative thought, and its influences, from reports of direct experience. See: Len E. Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, New York 1992, passim.

70. Hendrick Lorenz, op.cit. 155. Lorenz points out that there is a certain catch in that, according to Socrates, good requires knowledge of the Form of the Good (*Republic* 534b8-534c5) so that wisdom and justice are limited to appropriately trained philosophers. A.E. Taylor amplifies this catch, asserting that “The philosopher is the only type of man who makes it the business of his life to accomplish this purgation and concentration and so to win spiritual independence.” *Plato, The Man and His Work*, London, 1937, 181. Lorenz is the author of “Plato on the Soul,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, Oxford, 2011, 243.

71. What Socrates has to say about the young could certainly be applied to the ordinary person in his time who “cannot distinguish what is an allegory from what is not.” *Republic* II 378d.

## 2. Plotinus: The Neoplatonic Path

(204-270)

....

The influence of Plotinus on medieval thought is inestimable. There is little precedent for the complexities of his *Enneads* which offer, like the works of many who followed him closely, including Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, significant insights into the process of self-realization. Later mystics, Christian and Jewish alike, fully understood that Plotinus' discussions of the nature of soul and of the universe are not to be taken simply at face value. They cannot be effectively "explained" in a linear intellectual way but are best understood as seed thoughts which may stimulate and activate the soul at an unconscious level and point the way toward irrational conditions transcending thought.

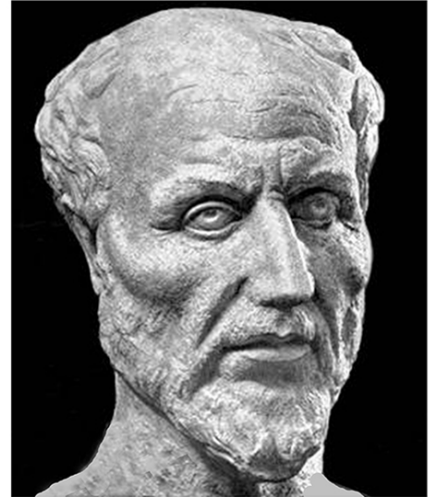
In Plotinus is found, for the first time, as clear a definition of "enlightenment" and its effects, as may be possible. And Plotinus, much more so than his model, Plato, explains how one prepares, and what is required, to attain, God consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

His teaching clearly presents the basics of Neoplatonism and despite the contention of his friend and editor of *The Enneads* that the philosopher did not write well, the words of Plotinus are inspired<sup>2</sup> and brilliantly amplify the principles of his mentor of 700 year earlier.

Plotinus divides the cosmos into three categories: First there is the *One* which produces what he calls the *Intellectual Principle* (also called the Divine Mind or the Logos, Greek for "Word"), from which the multiplicity of human *Souls* evolve. And he reinforces a key idea of Greek philosophy that the One becomes many. Theoretically, from Nothingness comes The One God who contemplates itself into the Intellectual Principle or Word, which contemplates itself as the soul.

This Intellectual Principle from which the soul evolves is not simple thought. It is the central point between the indivisible One and the soul. It is a condition from which the soul descends toward matter, from which it derives its individuality and through which it will pass upward on its ultimate return to the One. In belief systems prayers are addressed to this intermediate Intellectual Principle<sup>3</sup> or Word, which is variously called Christ, or Buddha or Osiris, etc. Whatever may be their religion, the applicability of the cosmology in seeking self-knowledge has been acknowledged by mystics, Eastern and Western, who have over the centuries been profoundly influenced by Plotinus' ideas.

Plotinus took Plato's ideas about God and about the soul and amplified them in a devotional way that appealed equally to Christians like Saint Augustine<sup>4</sup> and to those



**Plotinus**

*"There is one and the same soul in many bodies."*

who formed the ideas of Jewish Kabbalah. His mystery school synthesized earlier ideas and espoused a methodology of ritual purification and training in creative visualization to which his texts refer. And, despite the fact that his was a secret mystery society, the practical methods in his texts are easily recognized by those for whom he was writing. Centuries later St. Bernard taught the same principles, making clear to his monks that he was directing his more obtuse sermons to those few who might understand.

### *A Modest Life*

What is known about Plotinus, “the first Neo-Platonist,” is written in a brief biography of his life by Porphyry<sup>5</sup> a student and friend who described him as a very modest man who “seemed ashamed of being in his body,” and “so deeply rooted was this feeling that he could never be induced to tell of his ancestry, his parents, or his birthplace.”

In a pivotal study, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, Pierre Hadot observes that: “It was as if he refused to identify with the individual named ‘Plotinus’; as if he wanted to reduce his life to his thought.”<sup>6</sup> And Hadot offers a context for the disdain of the body which Plotinus felt. During this period: “Man felt himself to be a stranger in this lower world, as if he had been banished into his body and the sensible world. The popularization of Platonism was, in part, responsible for this collective mentality: the body was considered tomb and a prison; the soul was to separate herself from it because she was akin to the eternal ideas, our true self was held to be purely spiritual...this age was disgusted by the body.”<sup>7</sup>

Plotinus, a native Greek speaker, was apparently born in Egypt and, after some years of wandering in search of spiritual direction found his path in the intellectual and artistic city of Alexandria. This was once a tiny fishing village which Alexander the Great dreamed of transforming into a great city. When he died his provinces were divided and the city of Alexandria fell to Ptolemy, one of his generals who became Pharaoh, and who carried on the work of making Alexandria a center of culture and learning.

In the Hellenistic<sup>8</sup> age which had preceded Plotinus, the city was known for brilliant organizers and classifiers of all areas of thought who came together in the great library. Knowledge, once assimilated chiefly by direct contact from master to student was now externalized in libraries and museums.”<sup>9</sup> So at the time of Plotinus Alexandria radiated a *zeitgeist* which promoted formal learning and the kind of categorization and development on earlier thought that is so typical of his *Enneads*. So this vibrant city itself must be considered one of the key and elusive influences on his work.

Plotinus was a modest man whose primary intention was to explain the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato and the principle of Forms<sup>10</sup> but ultimately he created a new and well-organized system based upon Plato’s ideas. And although he disliked speaking about himself, Porphyry gives some details of conversations in which Plotinus told Porphyry about his early years:

“At twenty-seven he was caught by the passion for philosophy: he



was directed to the most highly reputed professors of to be found at Alexandria, but he used to come to their lectures saddened and discouraged. A friend to whom he opened his heart defined his temperamental craving and suggested Ammonius, who he had not yet tried. Plotinus went, heard a lecture, and exclaimed to his comrade: 'This is the man I was looking for.' From that day he followed Ammonius continuously, and under his guidance made such progress in philosophy that he became eager to investigate the Persian methods and the system adopted among the Indians.<sup>11</sup> It happened that the Emperor Gordian was, at that time preparing his campaign against Persia; Plotinus joined the army and went on the expedition. He was then thirty-eight, for he had passed eleven entire years under Ammonius. At forty-seven, in the reign of Philip, he settled in Rome."<sup>12</sup>

After a decade in Rome he began to be known for privately distributed notebooks, which were to form the basis for his *Enneads*. By then Plotinus had developed a large and extremely devoted following which included the emperor and many members of the Senate.

### *Secrecy: A Mystery School*

It may seem strange today that there was ever a time in history when one could make a living as a philosopher. But in the Classic Greek period through that of the earliest Neoplatonists, Philosophy was an honorable profession and its teachers, held in the highest esteem, were paid well. So ideas had value which the wise philosopher might not wish to be casually shared.

In an era without copyright protection for authors, three students of Ammonius: Plotinus, Erennius and Origen, agreed that they would keep secret the doctrines which they had learned from him. And although Plotinus was true to this oath, first Erennius and then Origen broke the pact and began to expound on the ideas of their teacher. Plotinus, kept prudently silent for some time, but—like Errenius and Origen—began to receive remuneration for conferences explaining the hidden system of Ammonius.<sup>13</sup>

All motives considered, there was integrity in the demands of secrecy which Plotinus made of his own students. He wrote: "This is the purpose of that rule of our Mysteries: 'Nothing divulged to the uninitiate:' The Supreme is not to be made a common story, the holy things may not be uncovered to the stranger, to any that has not himself attained to see."<sup>14</sup>

Plotinus made clear, as did Plato, that only the born philosopher could reach the higher region and has the innate virtue to rise to the presence of God.<sup>15</sup> To Plotinus there were two kinds of people: the philosophers and the common people who were there to provide for the needs of the philosophers.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Philosophy: All is One*

The most astute writers on Plotinus have found a way to explain to contemporary readers the considerable difficulties in his text. Denis O'Brien is particularly eloquent in dealing with the statements about evil. He says that "Plotinus' arguments are highly elliptical, and rely for their cogency on concepts and categories that are alien to modern ways of thinking and that often have only a tenuous relation to the writings of Plato and Aristotle that are quoted, tacitly or explicitly in their support."<sup>17</sup> And Frederick Shroeder underscores hyperbole as he derives from Plotinus that "Language may discuss the One but never disclose it."<sup>18</sup>

Many find Plotinus to be intimidating because in expressing difficult abstract concepts, he gives special meanings to words which are generally understood in more simple ways. To him *Intellect* is more than just human intelligence, and the thinking process. What he calls "Intellection," is a creative act; through the process of intellection something is thought into being.

Plato's "Forms" are a basis for Plotinus' reasoning. To Plato there were two realms of existence: the pure and transcendent world of Forms "above," and the world of material reality "below" which was created from the Forms. Plotinus expanded upon Plato's duality, but he was more specific. He teaches that everything is the *Ultimate One*. The One contemplates itself to create the intermediate *Intellectual Principle/World of Forms*<sup>19</sup> (of which "heaven" is the lowest of its realms) and which proceeds to create (contemplate) the *Lower World of the Soul*. These are dense ideas intended as starting points for deep meditation which surpasses the words.

Giannis Stamatellos tries to clarify, explaining how we may contemplate ourselves from the Intermediate Divine to rise to the level of the Ultimate. First he says that "Intellect thinks in itself the Forms (the real beings) and establishes them in Being...thus, since at the level of intellect self knowledge is the supreme activity of Intelligence directed toward Being, so at the level of human soul, self-knowledge is the only inward thinking activity for the soul's ascent to the intelligible world."<sup>20</sup>

Contemplation is a creative act of the mind (intellect) initiated by directed meditation and visualization, mental exercises, which result in the annihilation of the thought. It is a condition of opening up to a divine power by becoming that divine power. In Western mysticism it is a completely blank mind which allows the entry of God into its own soul. In the East it is called Samadhi.<sup>21</sup>

Stamatellos further discusses the central thesis of Plotinus that "all things are from contemplation and are contemplation," asserting that "Through contemplation a being transcends the limits of its existence and becomes unified with the higher existence which is its source. Since every life is intelligence and the highest form of life is that of Intellect, Intellect exercises the perfect form of intelligence—that of identity of contemplation and object contemplated, the perfect unity of intellect and being."<sup>22</sup> This is the inward journey of the soul—the road to true self-consciousness.

Here one should step back and try to put these baroque descriptions of the nature of the universe into a manageable perspective. Plato and Plotinus, were two men whose inner experience is completely out of the ordinary, and who attempted to express what they "saw" within the context of their own cultural experience. They were well-aware that the

universal plan which they proposed would seem nonsensical to the “non-philosopher,” but they believed themselves to be giving suggestions about an inner reality to those few whose very birth had brought them to the edge of an inner path. God consciousness seems to confer an urge to teach. However with some mystics, for example Jacob Boehme, the passion of the messenger can produce a work so complex that the message may be obscured.

### *All Souls are One Soul*

Plotinus accepted Plato’s description of the nature of soul and its journey through multiple lives—principles undoubtedly confirmed by his own inner explorations (of which he tells us almost nothing). “Every life is some form of thought,” he says “but of a dwindling clearness, like the degrees of life itself.”<sup>23</sup> And he teaches that everything is the *One*; the many which evolve from it being a matter of perspective.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, every atom is the universe; every individual soul is the Ultimate God. But this concept may be no less confusing than the idea of something thinking itself into being. The lower soul is lost in reason, while the upper soul understands itself as divinity far removed from the linearity of thought.

One of the best summations of Plotinus’ views on the soul is offered by John Rist, who explains that “Soul is essentially concerned not only with contemplation, but also with the creation and administration of the world of nature. In this it represents the upward and downward motion which is common to the whole of Plotinus’ system. Nous contemplates the one and creates Soul. Soul contemplates Nous and creates matter.”<sup>25</sup> Plotinus, an arch-compartmentalizer, postulates that the human soul, which is a part of the All-Soul,<sup>26</sup> is itself composed of three parts: First is the human *Intellective* part which is closest to the Divine Intellect, and which has nothing whatsoever to do with the body. It is pure, without any trace of evil.

Beneath the human Intellective is the human *Reasoning Soul* which does the thinking and imagining and remembering, and which can leave the body if it is able to determine how to do so. Finally there is the lowest, the human *Unreasoning Soul* which is basically animalistic and, although it pays attention to the Reasoning Soul, it has no idea that the Divine Intellective Upper Soul even exists.

Now the human Reasoning Soul, which holds its lower part in contempt, would like to know its Divine Intellective part, and does so by being virtuous, by thinking, by imagining and by producing visions which will get the attention of its Divine Intellective.

This is a simple outline of a complex pursuit. The intensity of commitment and faith, the “dark nights,” the rarely-mentioned boredom of meditation with no results, the pain of self-assessment by what Plotinus calls the Reasoning Soul while seeking to know the Divine, cannot be underestimated and has perhaps been best expressed by Saint John of the Cross and by Carl Jung. The *Phaedo* of Plato or the *Enneads* of Plotinus do not deal with the painful realities of inner pursuit which are the essence of the teaching of those later mystics who carry on the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition.

## *Ritual and Realities Surrounding Plotinus*

A question often raised about Plotinus regards the extent to which ritual was involved in his practices.<sup>27</sup> We do know that Plotinus required a ritual of purification which preceded certain “holy celebrations” but on which he does not elaborate. “To those, that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries,” he wrote, “there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of garments worn before and the entry in nakedness.”<sup>28</sup> Judging from the devotional nature of his work, it seems possible that there were seasonal rituals which, and involved invocations, or at least prayers, to the Great God Zeus.

Beyond such sanctified ritual, it seems clear that Plotinus did not share the enthusiasm of his students Porphyry and Amelius for different religious movements, for oracles and for sacrificial rites.<sup>29</sup> It would also seem that Porphyry, in his *Life of Plotinus*, distorted many of Plotinus’ ideas with the same sort of fanciful embellishment that writers of the non-canonical gospels have been shown to have given the story of Christ.

According to Porphyry, Olympius of Alexandria, a former student of Ammonius, became jealous of Plotinus and attempted to crush him “by star spells.” but Plotinus was so powerful that the magic could not touch Plotinus, and bounced the harm back to its sender. And, in another instance, Porphyry describes an Egyptian priest who wanted to demonstrate his magical prowess and offered to evoke a visible manifestation of Plotinus’ presiding spirit at the Temple of Isis—“the only place which the Egyptian could find pure in Rome.” Supposedly Plotinus agreed and the spirit was summoned but the Egyptian was shocked and exclaimed: “You are singularly graced; the guiding spirit within you is not of the lower degree but a God.”<sup>30</sup>

While these reports are certainly apocryphal, they are quite typical of the kinds of stories that evolve around those, usually very unassuming persons who are deemed to be enlightened teachers. Literature abounds with tales of the extraordinary magical triumphs of Jesus, of Krishna, and of Buddha. The same may be said for the lives of most of the Catholic saints, whose exploits often rival those of the great heroes of mythology. The emphasis is either on magic in the physical world or in some starry world above. The true nature and meaning of self-consciousness, cannot be touched upon because that irrational experience is far beyond what most could ever conceive. It seems fair to say that few people surrounding Plotinus really knew who he was. He was seen as the kindly, god-like, mystic whom Porphyry represented, as a man “overlooked and guided by the divine powers.”<sup>31</sup>

And Porphyry describes union with God (called “Term”): “There was shown to Plotinus the Term ever near: for the Term, the one end of his life was to become Uniate, to approach to the God overall: and four times during the period I passed with him, he achieved this Term, by no mere latent fitness but by the ineffable Act.” He goes on to say that “To this God, I also declare that I, Porphyry, was once admitted and entered into Union,”<sup>32</sup> a statement which raises an interesting question: Does direct contact with the Divine confer certain “virtuous” qualities of personality, such as peace, kindness, generosity and self-sacrifice? Certainly these are characteristics that have been generally attributed to great teachers of inner mysteries.

However with Porphyry we find expressed suicidal ideation (see note 5), immodesty, ego-centricity, self-aggrandizing, interest in a variety of religions and rituals of animal sacrifice, as well as what appears to be creative distortions of fact in his *Life of Plotinus*. So the truth of Porphyry's own claim of enlightenment, and much else that he says, seems open to question.

### *Contemplation, Walking in Vision, Leaving the Body*

Plotinus teaches that it is only under the soul that there is order in the universe. And he answers the obvious question of why the soul would ever leave its place in the Divine: "There comes a stage at which they descend from the universal to become partial and self-centered; in a weary desire of standing apart they find their way, each to a place of its very own. This state, long maintained. The soul is a deserter from the totality, its differentiation has severed it; its vision is no longer set in the Intellectual...the Soul has lost that innocency of conducting the higher which it knew when it stood with the All Soul...debarred from itself now through its intellectual phase, it operates through sense, it is a captive; this is the burial, the encavement of the soul." <sup>33</sup>

The key theme, which winds its way through all of mysticism, it is that of transcendence of the physical body and *regaining* a higher level of awareness. Expressed in another way: "The refusal to submit to the limitations of sensory perceptions, as well as the various methods of transferring concrete reality, nullifying it and turning it into something devoid of significance" is "essential in the struggle to create a new consciousness."<sup>34</sup> This might well be Plotinus, but it is, in fact, Hasidic Judaism, a movement in which the influence of Plotinus is evident. <sup>35</sup>

Transcending the (despised) physical body is the aim of *active* "contemplation," an achievement which Plotinus says requires years of training. And when he speaks of this he is referring to what some mystical systems have called "walking in the spirit vision," "rising on the planes," or some other words to describe an internal experience very different from than that of normal waking consciousness.

And Plotinus asks "What this inner vision, what is its operation?" He explains that at first the visions are weak and uncertain. "Therefore the Soul must be trained." And he adds: "Withdraw into yourself and look...cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast,"<sup>36</sup> referring undoubtedly to initial mind wandering of the neophyte. William Inge amplifies this concern: "The mystical state never occurs except as a sequel to intense mental *concentration*, which the majority of human beings are unable to practice except for a few minutes at a time. Our minds are continually assailed by a crowd of distracting images which must be resolutely refused an entrance if we are to bring any difficult mental operation to a successful issue."<sup>37</sup>

Moreover Plotinus explains that, like an adaptation to sunlight coming from the dark, "to any vision must be an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some

likeness to it.” The process of initiation is one of becoming like that which is sought after. In all, it is a long and arduous discipline. The discipline undoubtedly involved mental exercises such as one that he offers in *The Enneads*:

“Make a mental picture of our universe: each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart; yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view, say the outer orb of the heavens, shall bring immediately with it the vision, on the one plane, of the sun, and all of the stars with earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited on a transparent globe. Bring this vision actually before your sight so that there shall be in your mind the gleaming representation of a sphere, a picture holding all of the things of the universe moving or in repose (as in reality) some at rest, some in motion. Keep this sphere before you and from it imagine another, a sphere stripped of magnitude and of spatial differences; cast out your inborn sense of matter, taking care not merely to attenuate it; call on God, maker of the sphere whose image you now hold, and pray him to enter. And may he come bringing his own Universe with all the gods that dwell in it—He who is the one God, and all the gods, where each is all, blending into a unity, distinct in powers, but all one god in virtue of that one divine power of many facets.”<sup>38</sup>

Many scholars have insisted that Plotinus was merely offering a method of prayer and meditation, but McEvilley strongly disagrees. He cites this passage, saying that “Plotinus’ instructions to his students have almost exact parallels to Tantric practices of meditation and visualization.” The goal is a detailed and clear vision of a *mandala* which represents the whole universe. “Plotinus wanted his students to visualize the circular cosmos or mandala, but it is not clear now much of their time he directed them to devote to developing the necessary concentration to do so. Despite the denials by some, there is evidence suggesting formal meditation practice in Plotinus’ school, directed by Plotinus himself, perhaps as part of his instructions in *theoria*, literally ‘seeing.’ Perhaps it is here that the influence of Indian yogins in Alexandria registered itself on this philosopher, who was sufficiently interested to actually set out on the long and arduous journey to India.” And McEvilley asserts that “Like certain passages in Plato’s *Phaedo*, Plotinus’ advice parallels the stages of meditation as set down in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali.”<sup>39</sup> And one principle of yoga is that the immediate effect of a serious program of contemplation is to bring up all the areas of the individual’s imbalance. So seeking the good first emphasizes the bad and can be a painful process.

Beyond multi-faceted exercises in visualization, training certainly included techniques for leaving the body in a contemplative state. This is consistent with Plato’s teaching, and Plotinus mentions his own experience: “Many times it has happened, lifted out of the body into myself: becoming external to all other things and self-centered; beholding a marvelous beauty; then more than ever assured of community with the loftiest order.”<sup>40</sup> Robert O’Connell puts this into a clear historical perspective: He notes that, in

*Phaedo*, Plato “insists on the mind’s ability to leave the body and all its sense-reports completely ‘behind’ it.” And he concludes that Plato’s “claim chimes in with what centuries of contemplative mystics, both Eastern and Western, have insisted is true: that the accomplished contemplative seer comes to leave the body and all its sense-reports and sense-images utterly behind.”<sup>41</sup>

But this must be considered to be very advanced. Plotinus makes clear that in the preparation for “God consciousness,” there are definite levels of development and that during the early stages an inner guide is needed to help the neophyte on the path which would eventually include leaving the body. And his hints would lead one to suppose that part of the initiatory process was to inspire the neophyte to seek this inner guide, such as the “guiding spirit” described by Porphyry, to lead through the dangers of a world of dreams and nightmares where the certainties of space and time do not exist.

Reference to such a guide is found in many traditions ranging from those of the ancient world to those of American Indian shamans. The inner guide could be a person, such as the poet Virgil who led Dante through hell, or it could be an animal such as a snake or the owl (related especially to Athena). In this context, then, what might otherwise be described as obscurely inspiring passages make special sense. Plotinus writes:<sup>42</sup>

“The metaphysician...winged already [*referring to the virtuous Soul*]...in need of disengagement [*from the body*], stirring himself toward the supernal but doubting of the way, needs only a guide. He must be shown then, and set free, willing by his very temperament and long practiced in freedom.”<sup>43</sup> An inner guide leads the experienced mystic to this divine center of Souls: “From the virtues he is led to the Intellectual Principle, to the Authentic Existent; thence therefore he treads the upward way.”<sup>44</sup> This is the highest level which the “Self” can achieve.

Beyond this, all that is known must be left behind and the Soul proceeds on its own: “When you know that you have become the perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being...you perceive that you have grown to this...now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step...you need a guide no longer—strain and see.”<sup>45</sup> He calls for the enlightened seeker to fearlessly cross what the Kabbalists call the *Abyss*, a condition of unspeakable emptiness.

## *Death*

Life is a partnership of soul and body. Death is a dissolution<sup>46</sup> and as the soul grows from the body it remembers former lives, taking the one it has just left to be the present<sup>47</sup> as the guiding spirit leads the soul to judgment. For evil that the soul does its punishment “is to enter body after body—and soon to return—by judgment according to desert...but any outrageous form of ill-doing incurs a proportional punishment under the surveillance of chastising daemons.”<sup>48</sup>

What happens to each soul after death depends upon how each has lived its life. “Some higher souls live in the world of sense, some above it; and those in the world of sense inhabit the sun or another of the planetary bodies; others occupy the fixed sphere (above the planetary) holding the place they have merited through having lived here the

superior life of reason.”<sup>49</sup>

Many souls exist far beyond a body. Some souls are with the Highest; some souls stay in the Intellectual (the realm of memory) and in the Heavens (the “Celestial”) below the Intellectual from which souls descend to enter the body. The information which Plotinus provides regarding the Celestial realm is particularly interesting: “A soul that has descended from the Intellectual region to the Celestial and there comes to rest, may very well be understood to recognize many other souls known in its former state—supposing that, as we have said, it retains recollection of much that it knew here. This recognition would be natural if the bodies with which these souls were vested in the Celestial must reproduce the former appearance.”<sup>50</sup>

Overall Plotinus provides a remarkable philosophy of the human condition and of the multiple layers of the universe and of the individual soul. But if there may be a simple lesson to be taken from Plotinus it is that the journey of the soul through lives, deaths and divine realms is an affirmation of divine unity, that everything is One, and that ultimately, as he says clearly: “Knower, knowing, and known are identical.”

### *Neoplatonism Beyond Plotinus*

In her pivotal book, *Neoplatonism*, Paula Remes sets out the qualities which characterize the philosophy: There is a commitment to a first principle from which everything derives and a hierarchy of layers, a graded reality from one to many—the simplest being the best and most powerful. She explains that “Neoplatonists are metaphysical realists to the extent that reality really does exist independently in any one human mind thinking it. Yet in a particular manner...reality also resides in the mind.” And she adds that “Creation is contemplative in that the created always turns to contemplate its origin. This return or reversal towards the first principle is essential to and distinctive of Neoplatonic thinking.”<sup>51</sup>

After Plotinus, Neoplatonic thought, developing side by side with emerging Christianity, assumed religious qualities and emphasized *theurgy*, classical ritual techniques combining magic and traditional religion with the aim of invoking the gods and allowing them to enter into the soul. Neoplatonism was a continuation of ancient philosophy which became predominantly spiritual and stimulated a great deal of give and take with Christian thought. For Greek Christians, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Platonic influence, through Plotinus, is especially strong. This Eastern branch of Medieval Christian thought was especially developed by the Irish Neoplatonist Eriugena<sup>52</sup> who also found inspiration in works of the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius, a uniquely influential sixth century writer who was mistaken for centuries to be the convert of Saint Paul mentioned in the Bible.

The absorption of Platonism into Christianity was a slow process. Dionysius took many ideas directly from Proclus (412-485), the great synthesizer of Neoplatonism. Proclus helped to spread its ideas, helped to emphasize the importance of religious ritual and added some very creative ideas to the mix. He considered Plato’s work to be sacred, a complete and practical metaphysical system of revelation.

Proclus regards Aristotle’s works as the “Lesser Mysteries,” intended to prepare the



student for the “Greater Mysteries” of Plato.<sup>53</sup> He agrees with Plato that the individual needs faith, calling it a divine force which acts as a mediator between the human soul and the One.<sup>54</sup> And he suggests the use of divine names and transcendental meditative techniques that are used in Buddhism and other Eastern religions.<sup>55</sup> But where Plotinus refers to the One which is above all duality, Proclus emphasizes a *First Principle*, saying that “not even the First Principle is really One; it is superior to the One.”<sup>56</sup>

Overall, Plotinus cast an enormous shadow over the Middle Ages. His Neoplatonic philosophy deeply affected Augustine, of whom it has been said that he converted to Platonism before he converted to Christianity. And had it not been for his encounter with Plotinus and his attempt to reconcile Platonism with Christianity, the structure of Catholic theology to which the church has adhered for centuries, might be very different. The Christian Augustine and the classical Plotinus, although from different camps, are intellectual and spiritual pillars of the Catholic church, raising issues and values that have inspired countless great mystics.

1. Plotinus has been described as “Plato diminished by half,” meaning Plato without all of the politics. Heiser, *Logos and Language in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, Ontario, 1991, 75. He quotes Willy Tyler who refers to Plato as *Plato dimidiatus* Tyler’s article “Plotin zwischen Plato und Stoa,” *Les Sources de Plotin*, Geneva, 1960, 67 generated considerable discussion among academics.
2. John H. Heiser. op.cit., 1, points out that the writings of Plotinus “reflect a philosophy developed through the spoken word, and “reflects an emphasis on oral interchange which was regarded as unusual in his day.” Walter Burkett generally discusses the nature of teaching about inner mysteries and uses the term “mystery metaphor” as a very specific means of communicating such abstract thoughts. *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1987, 80. Thomas McEvelley, in his groundbreaking *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, New York, 2002, 434, observes that “Plotinus...received the *Parmenides* as a demonstration of the semantic collapse that must necessarily attend any attempt to express the absolute.” And, referring to the *Parmenides* he states that Plato had shown that “language must lapse into paradox when it approaches ultimate reality.” 452.
3. As an abstraction it may be suggested that the *condition* of the Intellectual Principle is that of Logos, and that its *function* is that of Nous, intelligence.
4. One of the issues frequently considered is whether Augustine, following Plotinus, believed in reincarnation. Gerald O’Daly provides an excellent summation of the internal evidence of Augustine’s writing and concludes that although Augustine was aware of this problem “it cannot be asserted that the early Augustine ever believed in the human soul’s pre-existence.” However questions still remain based on the ways in which Augustine used Plato’s words: *memoria* and *oblivio*. *Platonism, Pagan and Christian*, Burlington, 2001, 235. Burkett also speaks of “Platonic writers,” and their “addition of a religious dimension to the exercises of philosophical dialectic.” 85. In

5. In his very readable *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads*, Dominic J. O'Meara, 1, shows Porphyry as having had something of his own agenda and wanting to assure that, although others such as Amelius and Eustochius had also prepared editions of the work of Plotinus, Porphyry wanted “to impose his edition as the ‘authorized’ version.” Indeed throughout his *Life of Plotinus* Porphyry underscores his personal significance both as editor and as friend of Plotinus. He expresses a curious tension and insecurity with Plotinus and others and describes a plan to kill himself—an act that would have been totally contrary to the principles of both Plato and Plotinus. Porphyry writes: that at one period he “had formed the intention of ending my life; Plotinus discerned my purpose; he came unexpectedly to my house where I had secluded myself, told me that my decision sprang not from reason but from mere melancholy, and advised me to leave Rome.” Plotinus, *The Enneads*, Porphyry “On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of His Work,” New York, 1992 Porphyry, 11

6. Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus The Simplicity of Vision*, Chicago 1993, 17.

7. Hadot, 23.

8. The Hellenistic period, beginning with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., was a transition between classical Greece and that of the Roman Empire. It was a period of Greek influence and of powerful growth in culture in the arts, in literature, and in the sciences. The general direction of the Late Hellenic is away from earlier emotions of ecstasies found in Greek shamanism, toward a more reasoned approach as is found in Plotinus. But in this regard Mircea Eliade effectively comments that no matter how you get to it—ecstasy is ecstasy: “The enormous gap that separates a shaman’s ecstasy from Plato’s contemplation, all the difference deepened by history and culture changes nothing by this gaining consciousness of ultimate reality; it is through ecstasy that man fully realizes his situation in the world and his final destiny.” Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, 1964, Princeton 1974, 370.

9. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, New York, 1961, 199. The library at Alexandria has been called “the first university in history.” It was a major seat of learning which produced some of the greatest early discoveries in science and mathematics. Its thirteen lecture halls may have held as many as 5,000 students.

10. Porphyry mentions Pythagoras equally stating the Plotinus “set the principles of Pythagoras and Plato in a clearer light than anyone before him on the same subjects.” Porphyry, 20

11. The influence of Indian thought on both Porphyry and Plotinus has been a matter of controversy, although most scholars have agreed with Armstrong that early Neoplatonism is a purely original development of the Greek philosophical tradition. Joachim LaCrosse states “That Neoplatonists owe a great deal to classical Greek philosophy does not prevent them from having also a keen interest in far-off Indian philosophy and way of life. The “Indian dream” of Plotinus and Porphyry must be considered an historical fact, and excepting some cultural preconceptions of the East-West relationship nothing weakens the thesis that this dream may have played an ‘indicative,’ though not principal

role, in some aspects of the shaping of the philosophy created and promoted by early Neoplatonists during the third century AD.” *Late Antique Epistemology*, “Plotinus, Porphyry, and India: A Re-Examination,” New York, 2009, 103.

12. Porphyry, 2.

13. Porphyry, 3

14. *Enneads*, vi.9.11

15. *Enneads*, v.9.2

16. *Enneads*, ii.9.9, 7-12

17. Denis O’Brien, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, “Plotinus on Matter and Evil,” 171.

18. Frederick M. Shroeder, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, “Plotinus and language,” 349.

19. Lloyd P. Gerson astutely sums up a great deal. He says very simply that “Its activity, intellection of all Forms, is the paradigm of life.” *Plotinus*, London, 1998, 45

20. Giannis Stamatellos, *Plotinus and the Presocratics: A Philosophical Study of Presocratic Influences in Plotinus’ Enneads*, New York, 2007, 79.

21. Thomas McEvilley, *opcit.* 182, notes that the “Pythagorean-Platonic tradition seems to have survived till the time of Plotinus, who spoke of experiences of *samadhi* like those described by Patanjali, and who instructed his students in meditation practices identical to some in the Indian tradition.”

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, iii.8

24. H.J. Blumenthal, *Soul and Intellect: Studies in Plotinus and Later Neoplatonism*, Vermont, 1993. III,55.

25. John M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, Cambridge, 1967, 89.

26. Plotinus says in *Ennead IV.3.6.13-15* “ But there is, one might answer a difference between souls, and all the more in that the Soul of the All has not separated itself from soul as a whole but has remained there and put on the body, but the individual souls, since body exists already, received their allotted parts when their sister soul, as we may say, was already ruling, as if it had already prepared their dwellings for them.”

27. A question that will inevitably arise in the study both of Plato and of Plotinus, is the extent to which their activities may have been related to the secret practices of any of the Greek mystery traditions of the time. In fact the stage for individual practice of divine-seeking contemplation may have begun with Socrates who firmly rejected an offer of initiation into the cult of Demeter, the Eleusian state mysteries to which any Athenian could be admitted. Harold W. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration: A Study in the Mystery Initiations in the Graeco Roman World*, Chicago, 1920, 26. Of course, by that time the secret had been debased as Diadgorus of Melos was said “to have told it in the streets to everyone.” See: Walter Burkett, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Harvard 1987, 91.

Questions have also been raised about the possible use of ritual in an ascent toward the divine, but Turner states that “There is no evidence from this period that it was effected by ritual means. After the time of Plotinus, however, many Platonists adopted a form of ritual known as *theurgy*, in which embodied souls were brought into sympathetic resonance with the divine Logoi.” John D. Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism, 83-139 in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism, Themes, Figures, Texts*, Atlanta SBL, 2000. Mazur proposes a general influence of Sethian Gnostic rituals and cites Turner’s suggestion that their tractates “describe a kind of ritual in which the aspirant identifies with successive ontological strata by means of increasingly demanding (inward) acts of contemplation.” Zeke Mazur, *Mysticism, Experience, Metaphysics and Ritual in Plotinus*, online dissertation abstract, University of Chicago, 8. H.J Blumenthal, *opcit.*, adds to the conversation in his book. He says: “Theurgy has long been regarded as one of the undesirable facets of late Neoplatonism, XI, 1. And he adds that “we can safely say that the practitioners either thought they were doing something to the gods, or, as most recent investigators think, making themselves more like them, and so, in a loose sense, making gods.” XI7.

28. *Enneads*, i.6.7

29. O’Meara, 3

30. Porphyry, 10

31. Porphyry, 23.

32. Porphyry, 23.

33. *Ibid.*iv.8.4

34. Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Qabalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, 1993, Albany, 95.

35. See Lenn E. Goodman, ed., *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, New York 1992, *passim*.

36. *Enneads*, i.6.9ff.

37. William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, v.2, New York, 1968, 155. Inge was a broad-based scholar who approached Plotinus from a Christian standpoint. He said: that “Neoplatonism, like Christianity, gives us a clear and definite standard of values, absolute and eternal.” v.2.,229. Inge (1880-1954) was Dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University.

38. *Enneads*, v.8.9

39. McEvelley, *opcit* 289-90.

40. iv.8.1. This is Mackenna’s translation. Armstrong interprets the passage somewhat differently: “ Often I have woken up out of the body and have entered into myself, going out from all other things.” Margaret Miles, in *Plotinus on Body and Beauty*, 1999, Oxford, 68-69, considers Plato’s discussions of the role of the body in the human being to be not only unclear and ambivalent.

41. Robert J. O'Connell, *Plato on the Human Paradox*, Fordham, 1997, 116.
42. *Enneads*, i-6-9
43. *Enneads*, i.3.3
44. *Enneads*, i-3-2
45. *Enneads*, i-6-9
46. *Enneads*, i.7.3
47. *Enneads*, iii.4.6
48. *Enneads*, iv.8.5
49. *Enneads*, iii.4.6.
50. *Enneads*, iv.4.5
51. Paulina Remes, *Neoplatonism*, Berkeley, 2008, 8-9
52. Remes, op.cit., 199.
53. Rodek Chlup, *Proclus: An Introduction*, Cambridge, 2012, 39-40.
54. Ibid., 57
55. Ibid 178-79.
56. Quoted by Chlup, op.cit., 55.

### 3. Augustine: Unexpected Illumination

(354-430)

Augustine was a very complex man whose life, and whose beliefs underwent extraordinary changes between his birth on November 13, 354, at Tagaste in Northern Africa (now Algeria) to his death as a revered bishop of the Catholic Church in Hippo.

As many scholars point out, Augustine's principles are best understood when considered against the background of his remarkable life changes.<sup>1</sup> And, as Gilkey stresses, Augustine was "in many ways, a distant figure...he was not a medieval Christian—even an early Medieval Christian—but a member of the preceding culture: the classical world of Rome, whose formative principles derived from the even earlier Hellenic or Greek culture. He wrote, thought and spoke as a cultured Roman; he was a teacher of rhetoric and a leading candidate for high Roman honors in that role. He was the last great classical mind."<sup>2</sup> But his views were rigid and extreme and, as such, he helped to stabilize and create direction for the often unstable early Church.

During his early years Augustine sought the security of behavioral rules and structures under the life-controlling discipline of the Manichean religion and the ritual forms of expression demanded of a Roman rhetorician. Just as did the Prophet Mani Augustine established inviolate rules for his followers. He explained this discipline in his *De moribus manichaeorum* of 390. At the same time he pursued the rules of Cicero's *De Inventione* which established the five classic canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—with all of the accompanying prescribed gestures.<sup>3</sup> With the requirements of Manichaeism coupled with the classical demands of rhetoric, Augustine lived many years adhering to strict limitations of behavior and performance.

At the forefront of those who consider Augustine's fallibilities, is James O'Donnell, whose brilliant and challenging book, *Augustine* presents an unvarnished overview of the man and his thought. O'Donnell asserts that "Augustine made *The Confessions* because he was afraid. Not just of defeat in local church politics, but of defeat in the eyes of an overpowering master to whom he owed absolute obedience and service,"<sup>4</sup> like a slave. And although Augustine referred to this master as "dominus," but it cannot be assumed that Augustine meant "god." At a time when many gods were being worshiped, "Only the highest-minded had any idea of the identity of a single divine principle crossing all religions,"<sup>5</sup> and Augustine's god is too big to grasp, but he spent fifty



**Augustine**

*"Men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the currents of the stars, yet pass over the mystery of themselves without a thought."*

years trying to do just that.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, O’Donnell proposes that there is a shadow over the nobility of the divine quest.

He describes Augustine as a social climber who had been trained by Ambrose: “It was from Ambrose that Augustine learned how to act the part of a gentleman bishop of a discreet minority church and how to turn that minority into a majority.”

He goes on to say that Ambrose’s tool for unification of the various classical traditions “lay in exploiting the idea of the ‘philosopher.’ His vision was based on one part traditional Greco-Roman reading of classical Greek ideas, one part neo-Platonic reinterpretation of Platonic notions, and one part Christian scripture selectively read, and in particular with the Jewish scriptures reread as a story about a philosopher’s preparation to receive wisdom, the wisdom of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> And, O’Donnell is rather brutal when he speaks of Augustine’s “conversion to ostentatious Christianity and his tendency to curry favor upwards.”<sup>8</sup> And, he asks “So who is Augustine...? He is Don Quixote in a world that *really* takes him seriously.”<sup>9</sup>

In fairness, however, Augustine was highly self-critical and as he wrote in his *Confessions*, “I am a thing displeasing to myself.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed the idea that the strict theology of the Catholic church emerged from Augustine’s own personal hopes and concerns cannot be understated. His enlightenment might be called a story of success of a very unbalanced soul finding an ultimate balance as he rises toward self-knowledge.

### *The Western Path*’

Augustine has been called the “prince of mystics,” the “father of Christian mysticism,” “the first modern man,” and even “The inventor of the inner self.”<sup>11</sup> However, to consider Augustine’s description of an inner self as his original idea is to ignore three thousand years of mystical thinking in the East and its significant interaction with the West. And although the meditative techniques may appear to be different, the inner developmental process must ultimately be universal and based upon “conversation with the soul.”

The East has its own versions of what Augustine describes in his *Soliloquies* where he speaks of “the advantage of soliloquies, or of talking to oneself.” Here he made clear in a characteristically Neoplatonic way, that reason, like mathematics, carries timeless truth.<sup>12</sup> And of his own soliloquies, Augustine says that “the most peaceful and most profitable procedure was for me to question and answer myself, and so with God’s help to search for what is true” which, he says, is “the very reason we have chosen this type of conversation. I want them to be called ‘soliloquies’ because we are talking with ourselves alone.”<sup>13</sup>

Such introspection was part of a long Greek tradition of seeking *henosis*, unity with *The One*, a state which transcends thought or contemplation and produces a blank mind, *a tabula rasa*, of simplicity. It is a dissolution of self into the One (the Nous into the Monad) where the seeker becomes that which is sought after. In the East this is called *Samadhi*.

What Augustine did, essentially, was to create a Western Path to consciousness of the Divine in which Christ is essential: enlightenment is not possible without the grace and intervention of the Divine. It is Christ who is the necessary mediator of consciousness between man and the highest God. He is, thus, synonymous with *The Word, Logos, Krishna, Buddha*, or—in Jewish Kabbalah, *Tiphareth*.

There seems little doubt that Augustine, based upon painful experience, defines a path for the Christian West toward God consciousness. He lays the groundwork for medieval Christian mysticism with his assertion that the path toward knowledge of God is communal and that ascent affects the whole “Body of Christ.”

One of the ideas that seem to be agreed upon by all those who experience a condition of divine consciousness is that moving toward that experience brings about significant upheaval in a person’s life. Augustine quotes Matthew who speaks of “the great struggle in my inner house which I had violently raised up against my own soul in our chamber, in my heart, troubled in both mind and countenance.”<sup>14</sup> But Augustine is the first, in the West, to admit the inner struggle, the personal suffering, that is involved in relinquishing self to a higher principle. His struggles and anxieties are similar to those so pointedly described centuries later as the “dark night of the soul” by John of the Cross, and by Carl Jung in his *Red Book*. So this may be taken to be one of the practical “stages of ascent” on which mystics agree.

### *The Gnostic Augustine*

Until discovery of the *Nag Hammadi Library* in 1945, Gnosticism was known primarily through those who vehemently opposed it as a threat to the doctrinal “purity” of the Catholic Church, and who created an extensive anti-gnostic literature which included: *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus, *Against Marcion*, *Against the Valentinians* by Tertullian, *Refutation of all Heresies* by Hippolytus, and *Against Faustus the Manichaeon* by Augustine. And through these books we know that in Augustine’s lifetime, when emerging Christianity was in a competitive struggle within the Greek-dominated city of Rome, Gnostics were the hated enemy. They were, essentially in the way. In their goal of enlightenment (knowledge, *the Gnosis*) they viewed the miracles of Jesus, including that of resurrection, as purely symbolic, and were branded as “heretics” by Catholics who took the Bible to be literal history.

One school of thought is that the Gnostics represent a secularizing or Hellenizing of Christianity, with their rejection of the Old Testament, and that they are actually the theologians of the first century, transforming Christianity into a system of doctrines.<sup>15</sup> And Elaine Pagels clarifies the reason that many little groups of Gnostics posed such a large threat to the earliest Catholics. She writes that the

“theory that all authority derives from certain apostles’ experience of the resurrection...that only apostles had the right to ordain future leaders as their successors. Christians of the second century used Luke’s account to set the



groundwork for establishing specific restricted claims of command for all future generations of Christians. This theory gained extraordinary success: for nearly 2000 years Christians have accepted the view that the apostles alone held definitive religious authority and that their only legitimate heirs are priests and bishops who trace their ordination back to that same apostolic succession.”<sup>16</sup>

To Gnostics, the resurrection was not a historical event, but was symbolic of the presence of Christ. And they considered belief in the resurrection to be the “faith of fools,”<sup>17</sup> a point of view which obviously did not sit well with the emerging theologians of a church that accepted the gospels as divine record. However, although Augustine promulgated this belief, and taught the harmony of the gospels, the principles of the Church of Mani always seem to be lurking in the shadows of his life. Indeed, many scholars believe that Augustine never moved far away from them. Manichaeism it was his first intellectually serious commitment and it remained a point of reference throughout his life,<sup>18</sup> regardless of his very vocal damnation of the multifaceted religion on which researchers offer remarkably different perspectives..

One scholar refers to Manichaeism as “a new age religion of its time, fashionable, exotic,” and says that “Augustine, falling in with that crowd in Carthage, had the feeling of being just a little ahead of his time and among the elite of the world.”<sup>19</sup> Another asserts that “they were a small sect with a sinister reputation. They were illegal; later they would be savagely persecuted...pagans regarded them with horror, orthodox Christians with fear and hatred...they were bent on infiltrating the Christian church, the bearers of a uniquely radical solution to the religious problems of their age.” And another highly respected researcher insists abrasively that “the Manichaean movement was not a rational philosophy, but a myth. The Manichaean movement was not a way of life, but a sect.”<sup>20</sup>

But the debate has been heated. A primary authority on Gnosticism, Kurt Rudolph, is firm that Manichaeism is “the work of one man who as one of the great founders of religion has passed into the history of mankind. Manichaeism... can be regarded as one of the four world religions known to the history of religions. This means it shares a position with Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, there seems to have been a considerable amount of local interpretation within the belief system. The specific sect of this religion to which Augustine belonged was less interested in the formal principles of Mani than it was in establishing a strict and ascetic “reformed” Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

Manichaean Gnostic Christianity, like all forms of Manichaeism, espoused “dualism,” meaning good and evil which exist in opposition, a position adamantly opposed by Catholic Christianity. The Manicheans did not believe it possible that a good God could be responsible for evil, so they taught that the Kingdom of Light had been invaded an evil force of equal power. Their gospel was that “There are two sources, unborn and everlasting, God and Matter, Light and Darkness, Good and Evil”<sup>23</sup> an idea unacceptable to Augustine who, after conversion to Christianity, adamantly charged that the Manichaeans are “vain takers and seducers of men’s minds” in their assertion that “in

us there are two natures of two minds, one good, the other evil. They think the soul's nature to be that which God is. Thus they are turned into a deeper darkness, for in horrid pride they have turned their back farther from you who are the true light which enables every man that comes into this world.”<sup>24</sup>

Mani instructed that evil includes “fornications and adultery,”<sup>25</sup> a principle which, as Augustine moved toward Christianity and the idea of original sin, would have underscored his fear that a lack of chastity had incurred God's anger. Moreover, Augustine was attracted to Manichaeism because it emphasized rationalism: Reason alone, with its certainty and clarity, could bring understanding.

At nineteen years of age he had joined the Manicheans as a “hearer,” a disciple of the religion which he believed could offer answers about the nature of evil.<sup>26</sup> However, as some have suggested, the principles of dualism allowed him a certain escape from personal responsibility for his own faults,<sup>27</sup> a concern which he apparently felt from a very early age. But the religion of Mani did not bring personal redemption and he became hostile toward its doctrines: “For nine years,” he said, “I wallowed in the mire of the deep and the darkness of error.”<sup>28</sup> And he speaks about the Manichean bishop Faustus who created “a great snare of the devil and in that snare many were entangled by the lure of his smooth language.”<sup>29</sup>

Cicero offered a better answer and Augustine was inspired by his *Hortensius*. This was a book known today only in fragments, written by Cicero at a very unhappy period of his life, which was ultimately instrumental in Augustine's conversion to Christianity. It emphasized reason, moral conduct, abstinence from sensual pleasure, and the importance of religion.<sup>30</sup> And perhaps it is paradoxical that just as Manichaeism led Augustine to Plato and to Plotinus, Neoplatonism ultimately brought him to Christianity.

### *Neoplatonism*

In *Confessions* Augustine relates that he discovered Platonism and experienced what some have called an “intellectual conversion.” Believing that the philosophy confirmed the truth of Christianity, he went to Simplisianus, the father of Ambrose and “recounted the winding ways of my errors.” He was encouraged for “When I recorded how I had read certain books of the Platonists ...he congratulated me because I had not fallen in with the writings of other philosophers, full of fallacies and deceits...whereas in the works of he Platonists God and his Word are introduced in all manner.”<sup>31</sup>

Soon he reached an important conclusion about the soul, one far different from that of the Gnostics, who taught that the soul is, itself, a part of “the light.” He found that: “the soul of man, although it gives testimony of the light, is not the light itself, but the Word. God himself is ‘the true light which enlightens every man that comes into this world.’ ”<sup>32</sup> “The Word” is Christ, encountered directly in contemplation as “the mediator between God and man.”<sup>33</sup> But, although he established points of correlation between Platonism and Christianity, he ultimately turned to Christian scripture.

## *Ecstasy*

Inspired primarily by Plotinus, Augustine writes of a momentary vision:

“Under your leadership I entered into my inmost being. This I could do for you became my helper. I entered there, and by my soul’s eye, such as it was, I saw above that same eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light. It was not this common light, plain to all flesh, nor a greater light, as it were, of the same kind, as though that light would shine many, many times more bright and by its great power fill the universe. Not such was that light, but different, far different from other lights. Nor was it above my mind, as oil is above water, or sky above earth. I was above my mind because it made me, and I was beneath it because I was made by it. He who knows the truth knows that light, and he who knows it knows eternity.”<sup>34</sup>

But this ecstasy was brief and he believed to have been cut short by his own failures:

“You beat back my feeble sight, sending down your beams most powerfully upon me and I trembled with love and awe. I found myself to be far from you in a region of unlikeness.<sup>35</sup>...I was borne up to you by your beauty, but soon I was borne down from you by my own weight and with groaning, I plunged into the midst of those lower things. This weight was carnal custom...in a flash of its trembling sight it came to that which is. Then I clearly saw your invisible things, understood by the things which are made. But I was unable to fix my gaze on them. In my frailty I was struck back, and I returned to my former ways. I took with me only a memory, loving and longing for what I had, as it were, caught the odor of but was not able to feed upon.”<sup>36</sup>

He believed that because of “carnal custom” he had been brought to the “region of unlikeness,” Plato’s abyss of cosmic exile, after what he thought to be a flawed illumination just prior to his conversion to Christianity.<sup>37</sup> He had certainly read what Plotinus wrote in his *Enneads*: “Now, as going upwards from virtue, we come to the beautiful and to the good, so going downward from vice, we reach essential evil, as far as such vision is possible, and we become evil to the extent of our participation in it. We become dwellers in the place of unlikeness, where fallen from all our resemblance to the Divine, we lie in gloom and mud.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, Augustine asked “Oh Lord, will you be angry forever? Remember not our past iniquities...why not at this very hour an end to my uncleanness?” And he said “I believe, Thou, therefore willest that I should fail before I studied Thy scriptures.”<sup>39</sup> God’s answer came in the voice of a small child repeating over and over the words “Take up and read.” He took this to mean the Bible, which he had been reading, and he opened randomly to the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Not in rioting, not in

drunkenness, not in chambering, not in strife and envying but put you on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.”<sup>40</sup>

This was the key point of his conversion to Christianity. It was here that he diverged from the Neoplatonists and, although Augustine said that he had been brought to this experience after “being instructed” by their books,<sup>41</sup> the idea that he could not succeed without divine intervention, and that he was held back by the original sin of Adam would have seemed extremely peculiar to Plotinus and to the other followers of Plato.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, whatever influence may have led him to the initial ecstasy, he found it to be disturbingly brief and, by comparison with the later experience at Ostia, it seemed unstructured and unplanned. This is an important distinction because as he develops skills in meditation he describes his control of imagery: “ascending by steps to them who made me I come into...the fields and spacious palaces of my memory.” Then, he says “I ask that whatever I want be brought forth” and his mind apparently wanders but he skillfully controls the unwanted images. “I brush them away from the face of my remembrance until what I want is unveiled and comes into sight from out of its hiding place.”<sup>43</sup>

The development of confidence in techniques of meditation may have been owed to his mother, with whom he shared this remarkable moment—although Monica’s role in his spiritual education can only be guessed. In any event, there remain the shadowy questions of Indian-inspired methodologies given to his students by Plotinus. These were certainly passed down in the West, and Augustine may well have been in a line of unwritten transmission of Patanjali-like methods. One way or the other the fact remains that the second vision was radically different in tone from the first.

Standing at a window overlooking a garden in Ostia, he speaks of being sprinkled by “the fountain of life” and ascending with his mother to a realm of divine consciousness:

“We proceeded step by step through all bodily things up to that heaven whence shine the sun and moon and the stars down upon the earth. We ascended higher yet by means of inward thought and discourse and admiration of your works, and we came up to our own minds. We transcended them so that we attained the region of abundance that never fails, in which you feed Israel forever upon the food of truth and where life is that wisdom by which all things are made, but it is such as it was, and so it will be forever. Nay, rather to have been and to be in the future, do not belong to it, but only to be, for it is eternal. And while we discourse of this and pant after it we attain it to a slight degree by an effort of our whole heart.”<sup>44</sup>

Initial reference to steps in rising through the body after it has been “sprinkled by the fountain of life,” raises many questions about the means by which this vision was achieved. Augustine and his mother were *active* in this meditation, rather than being passive in receiving divine inspiration. Nowhere in Augustine’s extensive writing does an explanation appear, but there seems to be a parallel to Buddhist and yogic practices in seeking the condition of Samadhi where light, highly charged with energy, is “called

down” and is circulated through bodily centers of activity. Theoretically, the self is momentarily “dissolved” away and becomes the light.

Again, Augustine parts company with the Gnostics who teach that the light of God and of the individual who has achieved knowledge (gnosis) are the same. But, in this regard, some of Augustine’s statements are quite circuitous: “That wisdom which is created, namely an intellectual nature, which through contemplation of the Light is light. For this is also called wisdom, although created wisdom. But just as the difference between the light and that light which is brought, just so great is the difference between the Wisdom which creates and that which is created.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Original Sin*

Augustine’s answer to the problem of evil was that not only had he sinned personally, but that all of humanity bore responsibility for the original sin of Adam. It was largely based upon the simple idea that the very presence of humanity in this “fallen” condition shows that God is imposing punishment for iniquities. And the key to the true vision of God is that it is not from the flesh.<sup>46</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that Augustine developed the idea of original sin, based upon the needs of his personality and the confluence of influences—including the Manicheans and the Neoplatonists. He was in a society that stressed adherence to the Roman idea of *Pudicitia*, a quality of sexual virtue that was of great significance in Roman social and political life described by Cicero as playing a crucial part in the alliance between state, gods, and virtues.<sup>47</sup>

Then, there is the pivotal assertion of Paul, in his letter to the Romans, that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in the way death came to all people, for that all sinned.” Irenaeus, one of the “Apostolic Fathers, supports Paul, saying that “through the disobedience of that one man who was formed out of the untilled earth, the many were made sinners and lost life.”<sup>48</sup> And “In the first Adam we offended God, not fulfilling His commandment.” (The “Second Adam” is obedient)<sup>49</sup> Of the early church leaders, both Tertullian and Origen were in agreement with an original sin interpretation of “the fall.”

Tracing the concept back as far as possible, there is no evidence that the book of *Genesis*, written during the period of Second Temple Judaism, intended to suggest a principle of original sin with the story of Adam and Eve. Rather, it had to do with the good (*yetzer-ha-tov*) and evil (*yetzer-ha-ra*) impulses in man. Nor is there any indication that the synoptic gospels were intended to convey a principle of original sin. Paul, however, raised under Jewish law and tradition, did interpret the gospels in terms of *yetzer-ha-tov* and *yetzer-ha-ra* and stretched them to mean that all of humanity must suffer for the bad impulse of Adam. It is a very extreme point of view to which Augustine was persuaded and which today remains the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* actually quotes Augustine’s *Confessions*, saying that: “Indeed it is through chastity that we are gathered together and led back to the unity from which we

were fragmented into multiplicity.”

But Augustine was not alone in his adherence to the words of Paul. As Harrison succinctly put it “Paul was not only in the air, he blew through Western Christianity like a whirlwind, catching up everyone in its path and exposing them to the conflicting currents of his theological reflections. When the dust settled, the theology was never to be the same again. No other person was as widely read or debated or exercised such a profound and far-reaching influence on the central issues of the faith during Augustine’s lifetime, as Paul.”<sup>50</sup>

In all of this, Augustine was very aware of himself as a transitional figure in a Roman world which was collapsing around him and that everything which had nurtured him was falling into oblivion. He was aware, as John Rist says that “for coming generations he had largely replaced the past, or had at least become its conduit. Augustine wanted, above all, to make sure that what they inherited through him was doctrinally sound, indeed, that it was the clearest and most unambiguous presentation of Christian thinking and the ‘Catholic faith’ that could be achieved.”<sup>51</sup>

### *The Soul*

In *The Greatness of the Soul* Augustine presents seven levels of the soul’s activity which result in union with the divine. His descriptions are extremely vague, but specific activities of the soul seeking self-knowledge can be extrapolated.

On the first level the physical body is brought into a condition of balance, perhaps by fasting and ritual bathing. At the second level the soul asserts control over all of the senses in preparation for deep meditation. The third level is somewhat difficult to understand based on Augustine’s instruction. It involves human creativity. This may mean activation of a will to transcend (creative genius) or appreciation of the very fact that the soul is capable of upward movement toward the divine.

The fourth level is the realm of “goodness and true worth.” Here is the level of struggle at which the soul overcomes the “fear of death.” The humanity of the self accepts that it must be dissolved into the Word and it “most dutifully and confidently commits itself in the difficult task of self-purification.”

On fifth level the soul is now “free from corruption” and “advances toward God, that is, to the immediate contemplation of truth, and it attains that supreme and transcendent reward for which it has worked so hard.” The sixth level is one of the most pure aspiration, “the ardent desire to understand the truth and perfection which it has glimpsed at level five. It is “the soul’s highest vision,” the level at which the light descends.

On Augustine’s Western Path, “the fountain of life,” sprinkles down upon the soul as a *divine gift* through the Body of Christ. The Eastern path, on the other hand, brings light down into the body by an act of will, and circulates it through various physical centers of activity. But Augustine warns that “those who wish to do this before they are cleansed and healed recoil so in the presence of the light of truth that they may think that there is in it not only no goodness, but great evil.”

Level seven is the ultimate vision and contemplation of truth “and here we no longer have a level but in reality a home at which one arrives via these levels.” Beyond this, there is a complete loss of ego-identification as the soul is absorbed into The One, and experiences the Greek *Henosis*, or *Samadhi*. Augustine goes on to say that “in the contemplation of truth, no matter what degree of contemplation you reach, the delight is so great, there is such purity, such innocence, a conviction in all things that is so absolute that one could think he knew nothing when before he fancied he had knowledge.”<sup>52</sup>

It seems worthwhile to compare these levels of soul activity to that of Patanjali’s *Yoga Aphorisms*, viewing Augustine’s ideas as prefatory to the contemplative techniques later presented in medieval texts such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

To seek analogies between Augustine and Indian yoga is more than speculative, considering the correspondence that has been established by McEvilley with Augustine’s classical “mentor,” Plotinus. Moreover, one must acknowledge research in orientalism begun in the nineteenth century by Franz Cumont whose *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, demonstrates a significant spread of religions into Rome from Asia, Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, Persia and elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

Under any circumstances, Augustine’s descriptions of direct experience with the divine are clearly more than the sum of their apparent parts; there is an underlying framework of meditational practice about which he is not exact. And when it comes to some of the sensitive beliefs of Plato and Plotinus concerning the cycle of birth and rebirth of the soul, Augustine answers: “What difference does it make...whether or not it always existed in the past and will always exist in the future, or whether it is now without knowledge and again possessed of knowledge?”<sup>54</sup>

1. Christopher Stead, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Being*, Hampshire, 2000, XV.72.
2. Langdon Gilkey, “Ordering the Soul: Augustine’s Manifold Legacy,” *Christian Century*, April 27, 1988, 426-430.
3. Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome*, Johns Hopkins, 1999, *passim*.
4. James O’Donnell, *Augustine*, New York, 2006, 7.
5. *ibid*
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7. O’Donnell, 54.
8. O’Donnell, 90.
9. O’Donnell, 204.
10. *Confessions*, 10.2.2.
11. Cary says “my own view is that the private inner self is in fact something that Augustine made up rather than discovered...I argue that the inner self is a Christian idea

- that originated in the Platonist tradition...it is particularly fascinating in that it is a Platonist idea invented by a Christian.” Philip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist*, Oxford, 2000 viii-xix.
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  13. Augustine, *Soliloquies*, 14.
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  15. Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vi, 1901, 227-28
  16. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York 1979, 10-11
  17. Pagels, 11
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  19. O’Donnell, 48.
  20. William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine’s Religious Thought through the Confessions Story*, Pennsylvania, 1994, 52.
  21. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, New York, 1987, 326-27
  22. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Los Angeles, 1967, 48.
  23. *The Gospel of the Prophet Mani*, India 2007, 1.
  24. *Confessions*, 8.10.22
  25. *The Gospel of the Prophet Mani*, 5-6.
  26. Brown, 35
  27. David E. Roberts, “The Earliest Writings,” *A companion to the Study of Saint Augustine*, Oxford, 1955, 100.
  28. *Confessions* III.11.20
  29. *ibid*
  30. This book was apparently modeled on the *Protrepticus* of Aristotle, an address urging young men to study philosophy—an illumination of various passages in Plato. John Hammond Taylor, S.J., “St. Augustine and the Hortensius of Cicero,” *Studies in Philology*, Volume LX, 1963, 487ff.
  31. *Confessions* 8.2.3
  32. *Confessions* 7.9.13
  33. *Confessions*, 7.18.24
  34. *Confessions* 7.10.16
  35. *Confessions* 7.10.16
  36. *Confessions* 7.17.23
  37. Margaret W. Ferguson, “Saint Augustine’s Region of Unlikeness: The Crossing of Exile and Language” *The Georgia Review*, Vol 29, No. 4, 1975, 846.
  38. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, VIII, 13.
  39. *Confessions*, 7.20.26



40. *Confessions* 8.12.28-29
41. *Confessions*, 7.20.26
42. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Christian Mysticism*, New York 1991, 233.
43. *Confessions* C10.8.12
44. *Confessions* 9.10.23
45. *Confessions* 10.11-15.20
46. Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*, Harvard, 1969, 75,77.
47. Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge, 2006, 39, 282.
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50. Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, Oxford, 2005, 115
51. John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, Cambridge, 1994, 19.
52. Augustine, *Greatness of the Soul*, 33.70-76
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#### 4. Gregory The Great: Enlightened Soul in An Active World

(540-604)

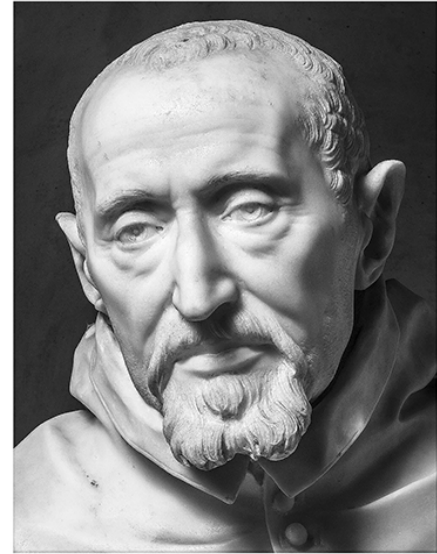
Gregory has been called the “theologian of suffering.” He emphasizes the role that suffering in Christian life plays in self-recollection, the means to which is revealed in the Bible. Drawing primarily upon Augustine, he is the essential bridge between the Roman world and the Middle Ages. The whole of the Middle Ages could be called “Gregorian.”

Gregory’s influence is found in every aspect of the Medieval Christian world, and is seen especially in the art, which was a teaching device for the people. Its creators were deeply immersed in the intellectual environment that resulted from Gregory’s work,<sup>1</sup> producing, especially, figures and scenes from the Old and the New Testaments carved into the churches. These were interpreted in terms that the laity could understand. The clergy and the literate found more complicated instruction in Gregory’s sermons which, more than any previously, offered an explicit description of union with God and how it might be attained.

But Gregory’s overview of divine revelation did not develop in an intellectual vacuum. He built upon Augustine to establish a new direction which mingled the supernatural with ordinary everyday experience.<sup>2</sup> In this he is radically torn between the carnal and the spiritual, saying that the physical world is evil because it represents change, which he finds very disturbing. Reason, on the other hand, rejects change and produces a stability which allows a person to exist more truly, a point of view similar to that of the Greeks. And Gregory differs from Augustine in emphasizing this polarity: the innate goodness of reason on the one hand, and the evil of matter and physical existence on the other. He sees the physical world as completely opposite to God<sup>3</sup> and believes this to be a fact key to inner understanding.

Certainly, Gregory’s teaching on the utility of interactive oppositions, a controlled flow between the spiritual and the physical reflect his acceptance of the way in which his own search for inner peace was shaken by the stark reality of a hostile environment. His inner tranquility was threatened by the outer pain of war, of famine, and of pestilence which defined this period. As a citizen of Rome his life was dominated, for the first twenty-five years, by Byzantium’s often oppressive and demanding rule of the city.

The Emperor Justinian had an ambitious plan. He sought to restore the splendor



Gregory

*“If the word of God could be comprehended by reason, it would no longer be wonderful, and faith would have no merit if reason provided proof*

and glory of ancient Rome from the Eastern city of Constantinople which he created on the ancient site of the city of Byzantium. His power was absolute; his *Codex Justinianus* incorporated aspects of the Roman legal system dating back to Hadrian, and demanded that all persons in the Empire be Christian. Every effort was made to suppress paganism, and to emphatically separate the empire from classical philosophy.

Justinian was far more than a secular ruler. He virtually owned the church and established the importance of dogma, ruling on even the finest of theological questions. So it may be said that Justinian's clarity of rule and detail provided a certain intellectual framework for the theology which Gregory taught, in a way that is strangely disjointed, throughout his many sermons. And although it is clear that his teaching was primarily based upon personal insight, he never invokes the authority of his own experience as do those who preceded him. Every principle is supported by a Biblical passage..

### *Development and Roots in Byzantium*

By Gregory's time, the subordination of Rome to the Eastern Empire was firmly established. This relationship, which underscored the regulation of both secular and spiritual behavior, could only have been strongly felt by Gregory. The Church was a family business. His father had held a high ecclesiastical rank equal to that of a Roman senator and his great-great grandfather was Pope Felix III and Pope Agapetus was apparently a distant relative.<sup>4</sup>

From early childhood Gregory had been taught the subtleties of power. He understood Constantinople to be a place of both brilliance and dark political intrigue, of unbridled power, and of lavish displays of immeasurable wealth—the worst of which was alleged by a counsel to Justinian's general Belisarius, Procopius, in his *Secret History*. This was a lurid attack on the character of both Justinian and his enigmatic former-prostitute wife Theodora<sup>5</sup> underscoring the dark side of the Empire. The polarities of Byzantium were all implicit in Gregory's thought. He was disgusted by the cacophony and deceptive radiance of the city, but managed to maintain the life style of a simple and pious monk.<sup>6</sup>

Gregory was ten years old when he and his family were forced from Rome into the countryside by the invading Ostrogoths. The city was literally deserted and its citizens were dying of starvation until Justinian's forces recaptured Rome two years later.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately Justinian's vision of a Rome rebuilt and restored to former greatness brought peace during Gregory's formative years and he was educated privately—as was typical of the family of a Roman patrician during his time.<sup>8</sup>

For a short period Gregory tried his hand at civil politics, holding the post of Prefect of Rome, a job concerned with defenses, feeding the citizens, and handling legal disputes. But it was one of dwindling significance in the declining city, and, after two years, he withdrew from the office and retreated to a life of silence and prayer.

The monastery of Saint Steven, in which he sought refuge, had been the family home before he inherited and donated it to the church. Such a gift was not unusual, but for

the patron to actually become a monk was indeed uncommon. Nevertheless this was an uncommon time; uncertainties were amplifying the appeal of the Church in which charismatic unordained monks and nuns had previously gained great influence. Now the authority was beginning to rest in the priest, the person who offered the Eucharist and who showed the face of the church to the faithful.<sup>9</sup> This was the beginning of an elevated social status accorded to the priesthood, especially those pursuing the *vita activa*.

In regard to the *vita contemplativa* of the monastery, Andrew Ekonomou points out, in his *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes*, that “Gregory’s monastery, dedicated to Saint Andrew, was situated on the Caelian Hill directly across from the Palatine Hill where Rome’s Byzantine rulers now lived. The form of monasticism that Gregory adopted was thus not based on the eremitic life of the desert, but on an urban model established originally by Athanasius at Alexandria and developed further by Basil the Great in Asia Minor. As he undertook the religious life, Gregory was following a tradition whose roots lay in the East.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, more than one scholar asserts that his monasticism which was the “outward manifestation of a break with the world which was to become de rigueur in Western hagiography, had its origins in Eastern monasticism.”<sup>11</sup>

Gregory was always torn between the silence of the monastery and what he saw to be his duty in the outside world. He accepted as necessary an alternation between the mundane and the spiritual and a balance between *orare et laborare* that had been proposed by Augustine and was encouraged by Benedict for his monks. He was deeply committed to a balance of silent prayer and active good works—all within the context of Roman and Byzantine society. He understood that everyone, including the pope, was subject to the will of the Eastern emperor.

As apolitical reality, the Pope of Rome held office only at the pleasure of the emperor. This relationship, underscoring the enforcement of regulations governing both secular and spiritual behavior, must have been especially felt by Gregory. In 584 he became the pope’s representative to the Byzantine Empire where his primary responsibility was to plead the case of Rome in a situation where he was all too well aware of the dark side of court life with which he would often have to deal.

Ekonomou also offers an insight into the diplomatic life: “Papal representatives who pressed their claims with excessive vigor could quickly become a nuisance and find themselves excluded from the imperial presence altogether.” And he explains Gregory’s favored position at the Byzantine court: “Gregory was able to enter into Constantinople’s aristocratic circles by cultivating his own predilections for rigorous asceticism and personal piety, thereby establishing himself as a spiritual model for the imperial elite.”<sup>12</sup>

During this period of Eastern rule Gregory expressed an often-noted ambivalence towards the Greeks, which might have been due to his Augustinian heritage. And he was certainly aware that Justinian’s plans grand design of renovatio had been a heavy burden on the populace.<sup>13</sup> But after Justinian’s death in 565, there was anarchy. In Gregory’s lifetime the Eastern Roman Empire went from wealthy power under Justinian into irreversible decline. Both Constantinople and Rome were increasingly vulnerable to outside attack and Dudden describes Rome as a “stagnant, already medieval city,” asserting

that “literature, art and culture were dead and buried.” And he emphasizes Gregory’s role as a historical bridge. With Gregory “the patristic age comes to an end and the era of medieval Catholicism begins...he is the last of the great Latin fathers”<sup>14</sup>

Gregory’s fate was sealed as he reluctantly accepted appointment to a class of deacons from which a pope was usually selected and he was more or less in line to become pope when in 590, Pelagius II became one of the first victims of the plague that raged at intervals throughout Gregory’s life. As usual, he expressed great discomfort in accepting he responsibility of the office as a necessary duty of the *vita activa* drawing him, once again, from the silence of monastic life into the stressfully mundane. But another pivotal historian, Conrad Leyser, points out that Gregory was following an accepted pattern, asserting that: “Gregory’s expressions of anguish are...not to be heeded as the distressed cries of an other worldly aesthetic suddenly thrust into the limelight. These declarations of vulnerability form part of what has been called the ‘rhetoric of reluctance’ to power characteristic of all leaders, ascetic and otherwise, in the ancient world.”<sup>15</sup>

But Gregory’s teaching was now crowned with the authority of the papacy. His thoughts about an inner life alternating the pain and suffering of the outside with contemplation leading to knowledge of God, became a theology. The doctrine of the Church was affirmed to be that mankind is in constant flux between sin and compliance with God’s law. The suffering of this world had ultimate value and, like the trials of Job, would be rewarded to those who were of the Body of Christ. So many of the ideas of the early fathers of the church had now crystalized into a firm system of belief that was not to be questioned.

In the biblical Job, Gregory found both an explanation and a corroboration of his own experience, although his predictions for the world were very pessimistic. He had no doubt that the calamities surrounding him were signs of the last days, that the world was ending and he writes of an Italian bishop to whom, in a vision, a martyr foresees that “The end of all flesh is come,” and “corn fields, remain now withered and overthrown: for cities be wasted, towns and villages spoiled, churches burnt, monasteries of men and women destroyed, farms left desolate, and the country remains solitary and void of men to till the ground, and destitute of all inhabitants.”<sup>16</sup>

But, in a rambling commentary in *Dialogues*, he says that there is hope because the closer the end of the world, the closer mankind is to the divine:

For the nearer that this present world comes toward an end, so much more the world to come is at hand, and shows itself by more plain and clear tokens. For seeing in this world, we know not another’s thoughts and, in the next, men’s hearts will be known to all, what better name can we give to this world than to call it night, and what better to the next than to call it day? But as when the night is almost over and the day begins to break, darkness and light are in a certain way joined together until the light of the following day perfectly banishes away the dark remnants of the former night: even so, the end of this world is, as it were, mingled together with the beginning of the

next and with the darkness of this, some light of such spiritual things as be in that do appear: and so we see many things which belong to that world, yet for all this perfect knowledge we have none, but as it were in the twilight of our soul behold them before the rising of the sun of knowledge, which will then abundantly cast his beams over all.<sup>17</sup>

The sun of knowledge is the Bible, when it is properly understood, Gregory believes the Bible to be a practical guidebook to knowledge of God: the validity of every point of his inner journey is confirmed by a biblical passage documenting that visionaries of the past have pointed the way. So he agreed with Augustine's instruction as he wrote: "Let anyone who aspires to raise his mind to spiritual understanding not neglect the reverence due to the historical."<sup>18</sup> Gregory's own contemplation confirmed that those who had gone before had correctly recorded their own true knowledge of God and were due the greatest of respect. However, he warned that the Bible could not always be taken literally and that "spiritual interpretation illuminates what is concealed by the letter of the law."<sup>19</sup>

Gregory argues that those who have received enlightenment have a responsibility to teach, as he did through his many sermons and books. He is assertive that "whomever benefits by beholding spiritual things must, by telling of them, deliver them also to others...the one who has heard the voice of God must break into speech to his neighbors through the office of preaching and thereby call another because he, himself, was called."<sup>20</sup> This admonition was acknowledged by many who followed, although the paradox remains that what is learned is, by definition, inexpressible except through metaphor.

### *First Steps Toward Enlightenment*

Gregory's theology has two main points: that Christians can recover enlightenment lost to Adam in the Fall and that the Church was founded on the Bible which, properly understood, offers the (only) key to knowledge of God. Gone were the equivocations and philosophizing of the pagans. While they may have been well-meaning persons who achieved some knowledge of the Light, it could not be compared to the understanding that came to those who followed the path of the Church and achieved the grace of Christ. He teaches that there is little difference between the truth of the Old and the New Testaments as both are the revelation of God in Christ, whose coming was foretold by the Old Testament in allegory and prophesy.

Salvation is not possible through philosophy, only through Christ. "There are many pagans who cultivate the disciplines of this world's wisdom, who observe what is considered to be right among men, and believe that they will be saved having followed what is right, but do not seek the mediator of God and men, thinking that it is enough for them to have held to the teaching of the philosophers."<sup>21</sup> So Gregory establishes principles of the Catholic faith that are definitive and uncompromising. There is no room for philosophical argument on subjects such as the three persons in one substance, the doctrine of the Trinity that had been passionately debated until "resolved" in the fourth and fifth centuries. It is

Spirit within this Trinity that brings enlightenment: “For to hear the voice of the Spirit, is to rise up to the love of the invisible Creator, by the power of inward compunction.”<sup>22</sup>

To Gregory, redemption means enlightenment and the conquering of sin with which God has permitted Satan to punish mankind (all of nature) for Adam’s transgression. This is perhaps the most interesting argument about the nature of sin prior to Aquinas. Gregory says: “We must know that the will of Satan is always evil, but his power is never unjust, for he derives his will from himself, but he derives his power from God. For what he himself unrighteously desires to do, God does not allow to be done except with justice”<sup>23</sup> And even though the descendants of Adam are cleansed of his sin by baptism, it is a continuing punishment because they must suffer death.

Enlightenment is also a continuing process and an ongoing struggle;<sup>24</sup> as man is burdened with the sin of Adam, overcoming original sin and the frailty of the fallen flesh is extremely difficult and, for the elect, there is constant opposition between the mundane and the spiritual. Pain and suffering are essential to the human condition, but suffering is rewarded by the purification of the soul.<sup>25</sup> This hard-nosed doctrine, promulgated by the Church, was a great support to many during the most difficult times of the Middle Ages which exalted Gregory’s doctrine that suffering is essential to enlightened knowledge of God.

Everything is neatly laid out: Suffering may lead to the initial stage of enlightenment, referred to as *compunction*, a literal “piercing” of the soul. It means sorrow for sin as well as a total commitment to the Christian life and to the pursuit of self-knowledge. Compunction, leads to contemplation and, ultimately, to knowledge of God which cannot be achieved without compunction.<sup>26</sup> Compunction precedes contemplation.

In his *Dialogues*, simply written and addressed to laymen and clergy alike, Gregory speaks in terms that reflect his own personal experience: His definition of each person as having both male and female components is found in his explanation of the two types of compunction, the dual aspects of the soul, astutely clarified by McGinn’s translation of soul as both *anima*, and *animus*.

There are two main kinds of compunction, because the soul (*anima*) thirsting for God, is first pierced with fear and later with love. She first is overcome with weeping because she remembers her sins and fears eternal punishment for them. Then, when fear abates through prolonged sorrow and worry a kind of security is already borne from the confidence of pardon and the intellectual soul (*animus*) is inflamed with love for a heavenly joys...thus the perfect compunction of fear draws the intellectual soul to the compunction of love.<sup>27</sup>

Centuries later, Carl Jung emphasizes this *anima/animus* distinction as Adam’s dual nature (the *Androgyne*) which appears in Christ and in all mankind.<sup>28</sup> Referring to Gregory’s metaphor that Adam is spirit and Eve is flesh, he quotes from Gregory’s *Septum Psalmos* that “Every man has in himself both Adam and Eve. For as in that first transgression of man, the serpent suggested, Eve delighted, and Adam consented, so we see every day that

when the devil suggests, the flesh delights, and the spirit consents.”<sup>29</sup> In Gregory, Jung finds a fellow seeker who recognized the two aspects of the human condition that must be brought into perfect balance to achieve self-consciousness, what Jung called *individuation*—the alchemical gold of true self-knowledge.

But in more human terms this is an important statement in that Gregory defines compunction as a tentative and highly emotional step in a specifically Christian quest for inner understanding. This reflects the youthful Gregory drawn to God, being terrified by the unknown and by the weight of human guilt for sin, then being pressed more deeply into himself by a sense of love for the divine. Yet it remains unclear if such feelings are a universal precondition to self-knowledge. If such heightened emotions and tears do precede enlightenment, it was certainly not expressed by the Greeks or by the Neoplatonist visionaries. It is, however, consistent with the reports of later Christian mystics who, following Gregory’s authority, have accepted fear and agonizing tears, as definitive of progress toward their own enlightenment in which Adam’s sin plays a key part.

Theoretically, before Adam chose to ignore the law of God, he had knowledge to which seekers now aspire, that is “the full contemplation of heaven” which was lost to him in the Fall. But through Christ, it is possible to regain some of what was lost to Adam. Here Gregory is emphatic that whatever knowledge of God is granted to mankind through Christ can only be a partial and imperfect restoration of what was known to Adam in Paradise.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is understood that whatever knowledge may be gained by the individual is to the ultimate benefit of the entire Body of Christ.

Gregory accepts Christ as *The Word*, (Greek, *Logos*) the mediator between man and God who has come to redeem mankind from the Fall that has brought it the burden of original sin. But the idea of a transitional power between God and man appears in most mystical systems. This is a “condition” of sacrificed Gods where the conflict of human opposites of male and female are resolved and the true nature of self is revealed.

A belief system seems useful in initiating this process and there is broad agreement that the experience is one of submission to a pure and inexpressible power and that at the intermediate level, which Gregory calls Christ, it is “seen” as Light. The origin of this Light is in nothingness, a condition without attributes to which reference is made by many mystics.

Gregory is clear that, although the inner road can be arduous and often terrifying, to seek enlightenment is the very reason that mankind exists: “Contemplative vision is that for which humanity was created.”<sup>31</sup> But Gregory explains repeatedly that knowledge of God is not possible without the help of the Holy Spirit and emphasizes the complex principle that, in the experience of enlightenment, God contemplates Himself. Gregory’s forerunners, Plato, Plotinus, and Augustine all express the same idea. Moreover, they are also in agreement that the overwhelming experience of enlightenment is very brief, and that it involves three developmental stages.

The first step is, as Gregory teaches in a model of obscure instruction, “that one call the self back to the self, the second that one inspects what has been recollected; the third that one rise above the self by giving one’s attention over to the contemplation of the invisible Maker. But you cannot recollect yourself unless you have learned to lock out the ghosts of



the images of earthly and heavenly things from the mind's eyes."<sup>32</sup> In order to "rise above self," meaning normal waking consciousness, one must overcome the mental distractions of the physical, which are a temptation. And Christian mystics describe emotional conditions which must be conquered to move "upwards." There are tears supposedly having to do with the guilt of sin and the overwhelming nature of the universe, and then there is *fear*. Gregory says that "as the soul is lifted high by the engine of its contemplation so that the more it gazes on things higher than itself the more it is filled with terror."<sup>33</sup> Emphasis on fear is not especially common among great mystics, and is more a quality of medieval thought where there were reminders everywhere of the fragility of the human soul and the power of divine judgment. The peasants, especially, were easily scared.

### *Knowledge of God*

Gregory describes the effort and the alternations between vision and the "temptation" of the physical that is required for contemplation and the suspension of thought. As we shall consider, in his *Red Book*, Jung records an initial disorientation in which there is no up or down, no spatial anchors. Gregory says much the same thing: "when the mind is suspended in contemplation, when, exceeding the narrow limits of the flesh, with all the power she can exert, she strains to find something of the freedom of interior security, she cannot for long rest standing above herself, because though the spirit carries her on high, yet the flesh sinks her down the yet remaining weight of her corruption."<sup>34</sup> And he says that "after hard labors, after floods of contemplation, the soul is often suspended in ecstasy so that it can contemplate the knowledge of the divine presence, a presence that it can feel but it cannot exhaust. And rightly so tempted, he will see God's face in jubilation."<sup>35</sup> Gregory says that the process, which he explains with the metaphor of a the soul as a ladder,<sup>36</sup> can be quite terrifying. And his instruction that the extreme difficulties of contemplation must be repeated over and over is especially influential to 12<sup>th</sup> century mystics.

Gregory's description of the complexity of attaining divine contact is essential to medieval theologians, who accept that the reward for the suffering and vacillation between the physical world and that of spirit is knowledge of the true nature of creation—from the point of view of the intermediary which is Christ. The soul, as Christ consciousness, rises above itself into the light above the human condition, but is able only to look down upon creation, not upwards to the deity. Moreover, this elevated state of "heaven," a "silence," becomes more difficult to maintain as understanding of the inner reality increases. "Frequently," Gregory says, "the one who is the more caught up in contemplation is the more exhausted by temptation."<sup>37</sup> And the more subtle the experience, the more the attraction of the soul to the "tumultuous noises of thoughts" which "force themselves into the mind, even when steadily fixed on things above."<sup>38</sup> But, seen from "above," Gregory reports that the soul's sobering vision of the world is that it is very small:

"To the soul that sees the Creator every creature is limited. To anyone who sees even a little of the light of the Creator everything created will become

small, because in the very light of the intimate vision reaches of the mind are opened up. It is so expanded in God that it stands above the world. The soul of someone who sees in this way is also above itself. When the soul is rapt above itself in God's light, it is enlarged in its interior, while it gazes beneath it, in its high state it comprehends how small that is which it could not comprehend when it was in a lowly state. Therefore the man who, looking at the fiery globe<sup>39</sup> also saw the angels returning to heaven, without doubt was able to do so only in the light of God. What wonder it is then if he saw the world gathered together before him who was lifted outside of the world in the light of the mind? That the world is said to have been gathered together before his eyes is not because heaven and earth was contracted but because the intellectual soul of the one who saw was enlarged. He who is rapt in God can see everything that is beneath God without difficulty. In the light which shone on his external eyes there was an interior light in the mind which showed the intellectual soul or the one seeing it (because he had been rapt to higher things) just how limited was everything beneath it.<sup>40</sup>

This passage has inspired controversy about Gregory's influences, such as Hellenic mysticism or the early Church fathers. Evans, for example says that "Gregory's systematic theology is shot through with Greek philosophical assumptions at the point where we should expect: where he deals with the divine nature and attributes, with the Trinity and with the nature of created beings. These are the areas where Boethius had found it natural to bring philosophy and Christianity together not long before, in dealing with the subject matter of *theologia* as he defines it."<sup>41</sup> And Markus makes the rather cynical point that "usually he covers his tracks so well as to expunge all identifiable trace of his sources. Their language and their concepts have soaked into his mind to re-emerge subtly transformed, but always his own."<sup>42</sup> In any event, one cannot, with certainty, separate influences from common denominators of religious experience as is especially problematical in dealing with later mystics such as Jacob Boehme or William Blake.

Perhaps most important is the idea that there is a "light of the mind," that is separate from the intellectual soul (*animus*). Presumably, within each person is a divine spark which the intellect seeks to discover and that is of the same essential nature as God. Thus in enlightenment God speaks to Himself and gives to that intelligence which holds the spark of Himself, a vision of what He has created. In this there seems to be general agreement that the level of Christ/Buddha/Logos is as far as the human psyche can proceed. But Gregory's explanation that the limitations of enlightenment are related to Adam's fall is specific to Christianity—although it may be interpreted as a metaphor for something universal that transcends *cultus*. And it is interesting to note that so many mystics after Gregory express their inner experiences with diagrams or as pictures, apparently feeling that words alone are inadequate.

Gregory, however, explains that both intellect and imagery are transcended: "The mind quits bodily images...she forgets things known...acquaints herself with things

unknown..and remembers what has been consigned to oblivion.” The inner reality is “discerned by the longing mind without seeing, heard without uncertainly, touched without bodily substance, held without locality.” It transcends “the mind that is used to corporeal...that is loaded with the phantasms of diverse images.”<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, an introductory experience of Gregory’s enlightenment was the vision of a world of angels as is described in *The Celestial Hierarchy* of the late fifth century Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, so called by modern history because his authority in the medieval period rested on the mistaken belief that he was the Athenian Dionysius mentioned in Acts as Paul’s convert to Christianity.

Gregory’s acceptance of the *Celestial Hierarchy* as consistent with his own inner search<sup>44</sup> raises a question about the commonality of experience of those who achieve inner knowledge. One is drawn to ask whether there exists a definable “hierarchy of angels” (Greek, *aggelos*), unique anthropomorphized divine energies that all mystics encounter but interpret through their own belief system.

In any event, the densely populated Dionysian universe, one profoundly influential to the developing Christian theology, is divided into the human and the angelic: The angelic universe is composed of three triads, each of which contains three orders subdivided into three levels of intelligence.<sup>45</sup> The system is very complex, but rational, emphasizing Jesus as “The Light of the Father...through whom we have obtained access to the Father.”<sup>46</sup> And a hierarchy is explained: “What is meant is certain perfect arrangement, an image of the beauty of God which sacredly works out the mysteries of our own enlightenment in the orders and levels of understanding of the hierarchy, and which is likened toward its own source as much as is permitted.” Moreover, Dionysius speaks very specifically about “*those granting initiation in the sacred things, as indeed for those sacredly initiated.*” He goes on to extol the splendor of the sacred orderings which are “conformed proportionally to each mind.”<sup>47</sup> This statement is of particular importance because it suggests that the means of achieving divine knowledge may be somewhat different for each individual seeker.

In brief, the early fifth century, Pseudo-Dionysius, a Christian Neoplatonist, confirms Plato<sup>48</sup> in saying that there is a specific process of initiation into the condition of enlightenment, and that God-consciousness may be passed from, or stimulated by, an initiator to a seeker.

### *The “Casting Out”*

One of the more frustrating aspects of comparative religions is the fact that being a great mystic seems to require that a person produce long and often painfully obscure lists to make their points. Gregory is less demanding than many as he describes a process of enlightenment in only three distinct phases: First is a peace in which the weight of the world and its arbitrary images are overcome by compunction. Next is the inexpressible exaltation and understanding of divine revelation surpassing all feeling and thought. Finally comes the forceful return to mundane consciousness which Augustine had interpreted as his personal failure.

Gregory devotes considerable attention to the “casting out” that ends contemplation, and explains it to be a natural course of contact with the Divine. Speaking of the enlightenment of Paul, he says:

Being raised up in an ecstasy, which translators have improperly interpreted *as fear*, he saw that he was cast out from the sight of God. For after beholding that inward light, which flashed within his mind with bright rays through the grace of contemplation, he returned to himself; and discerned, by the knowledge he had gained, either the blessings which were there, of which he was deprived, or the evils with which he was surrounded. For no one is able to see the ills of life as they really are if he is unable by contemplation to gain a taste of the blessings of the eternal country. So also he knew that he had been cast out of the sight of the eyes of God. For when he was raised up in a trance, he saw that which, when he fell back on himself, he lamented that he could not of himself behold.<sup>49</sup>

Thus the cycle is ended, and is to begin again when the seeker turns away the material world through compunction, experiences God in contemplation, and is forcibly thrown back into human consciousness. At each new contact with the divine the soul grows stronger and it's self-knowledge and knowledge of a universal plan increases.

### *The Fate of the Soul*

Gregory devoted many sermons to life after death and has often been called “the inventor of Purgatory,” although he has basically taken this idea from Augustine. He says in his *Dialogues* that judgment for small sins happens *before* the final judgment. “In such state as a man departs this life, in the same way he is presented in judgment before God. Yet we must believe that before the day of judgment there is a Purgatory fire for certain small sins: because our Saviour says of he who speaks blasphemy against the holy Ghost, that it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in the world to come. Out of which sentence we learn, that some sins are forgiven in this world, and some other may be pardoned in the next.”<sup>50</sup> This passage by Gregory is an official part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which was confirmed at the Councils of Florence (1429) and Trent (1563). Today's catechism accepts that *Purgatory* is “the final purification of the elect” and that prayers to assist the dead used help the deceased to “attain the beatific vision of God”<sup>51</sup> were a part of the Jewish tradition.

Gregory is in agreement with Plato that after death a person remains much the same as in life. He also suggests that after death one discovers that in sleep there has been interaction with many others: “When his soul wakes up at the dissolution of the flesh, it learns, assuredly, that it was in a sleeping state that it saw the partial regards of men around it.”<sup>52</sup>

1. Celia Chazelle, "Instruction, Worship: Gregory's Influence on Early Medieval Doctrines of the Artistic Image" in *Gregory the Great: A Symposium*, Ed. John C. Cavadini, Indiana, 1995, 181.
2. Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great*, Los Angeles, 1988, 9
3. Straw *op.cit.* 32.
4. R.A. Marcus, *Gregory the Great and His World*, Cambridge, 1997,8
5. According to Procopius, *Secret History*, 9, Theodora became well-known for her portrayal of Leda the Swan. She removed her clothes and lay on her back while attendants scattered barley on to her groin and geese picked it up with their beaks. She was also said to have had 40 men in one night. Although this may rank as prurient historical gossip, the idea that the Empress of a powerful Christian court might ever have behaved in this way underscores the extremes of behavior and thought which were characteristic of the Byzantine Empire.
6. F. Holmes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, London , 1905, 139
7. Andrew J. Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes*, Maryland 2007,2.
8. Ekonomou,6.
9. John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great*, New York, 2005, 35
10. Ekonomou 7
11. Ibid.
12. Ekanomou, 10
13. Ibid, 22
14. Dudden, 285.
15. Conrad Leyser "Expertise and Authority in Gregory the Great: The Social Function of Peritia," John C. Cavadini, ed., *Gregory the Great: A Symposium*, 38. Indiana, 1995.
16. *Dialogues* 3.38.3-4
17. Ibid, 4.41
18. *Moralia*, 1.37.56
19. Ibid, 18.39.60
20. *Homily on Ezekiel*, 2.2.4
21. *Moralia*, 18.45.73
22. Ibid. 27.21.41
23. *Moralia* 2.10.17
24. Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, New York 1994, 45
25. McGinn, *op.cit.*, 47

26. Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great*, London, 1980,48-49
27. *Dialogues* 3.34.2.
28. *Mysterium Conuinctionis*, section 404
29. *Ibid*, section 582
30. McGinn, *opcit*, 51
31. *Moralia*, 31.49.99
32. *Homily in Ezekiel*, 2.5.9
33. *Moralia* 5.31.55
34. *Ibid*, 5.34.61
35. *Ibid*. 24.6.12
36. *Moralia*, 5.34.62
37. *Homilies Ezekiel*, 2.2.3
38. *Moralia*, 5.30.53
39. McGinn notes those scholars who suggest that the idea of a fiery globe ascending to heaven may relate to both Cicero and Macrobius, *opcit*, 73
40. *Dialogues* 2.35
41. *The Thought of Gregory the Great*, Cambridge, 1986
42. Markus, *op.cit.*, 17
43. *Moralia* 5.34.62
44. *Homilae in Evangelia*, 34.12.13.
45. *Pseudo-Dionysius, the Complete Works*, “Preface,” René Roque, New York, 1987,5
46. Pseudo-Dionysius, 45
47. Dionysius 154
48. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 241c
49. *Moralia* 23.21.41
50. *Dialogues*, 4.39
51. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican 1997, Sections 1031-1032
52. *Moralia*, 2.15.6

## 5. Eriugena's God Who is Not

(815-877)

John Scotus Eriugena is unlike any who came before him. He has been called “The greatest speculative mind of the Early Middle Ages, the most original and subtle thinker in the West between Anselm and Augustine.”<sup>1</sup> And he has been described as “isolated in intellectual superiority amongst his contemporaries.”<sup>2</sup>

Eriugena was one of the very few in the ninth century with a knowledge of Greek; he is credited with bringing Christian Neoplatonism into the West and, specifically, with trying to reconcile the mystical ideas of the Greeks with those of Augustine whom he called “the master of the highest authority.”<sup>3</sup> In so doing, one scholar concludes that Eriugena is not merely adding to earlier theology but presents “a radically different philosophy.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he cannot be called either Latin or Greek, but presents a point of view different from both. And whereas the Western philosophical tradition focused on *being*, Eriugena's work centers on *non-being*.<sup>5</sup>

He has been called one of the founders of *Scholasticism*, the study that combines philosophy and theology which dominated Medieval thought between 1100-1500, and which reached its pinnacle in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. Eriugena's work is *speculative*—meaning that it is a realm of enlightened assumptions. And he is very clear that he is expressing his own opinions, and that he is writing what, he said, “seemed to us likely to be true,” based upon the “irrefutable conclusions of true reason.”<sup>6</sup> But, while expressing personal insights, the Scholastics insist that their complex theologies, which include rules of behavior, present absolute truth and are the most profound path toward knowledge of God.

### *Escaping Ireland to France*

Little is known about this Irish teacher whose goal was to resolve the traditional learning of the Latin West and that of Byzantine East. Certainly the depth of his knowledge of both was considerable, but it is unclear what Eriugena's background may have been. He might have been a deacon or a priest, but there is no evidence of any rank in the Church.



**ERIUGENA**

*“We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not because He transcends being.”*

What can be said is that he was certainly educated in a school attached to a monastery which, under the influence of the Carolingian revitalization of education, had added the study of Greek to the normal Latin-based curriculum—focusing especially on the Neoplatonists. His enthusiasm for the mysticism of the Eastern Fathers was undoubtedly encouraged by monks who taught him the rudiments of the Greek language<sup>7</sup> as well as the Liberal Arts which were so essential to education in the Middle Ages.

Ireland was a cradle of scholarship during the ninth century. Outside of the control of the collapsing Roman Empire, it maintained its own tradition of austere and spiritual Christianity, embracing the Greek Fathers<sup>8</sup> as well as a high level of culture.<sup>9</sup> But it was not a safe place.

In 795 Viking conquerors landed on the Irish coast, brutally pillaging helpless monasteries and overwhelming quiet farming communities. The great monastic centers of Bangor and Armagh were left in ruins<sup>10</sup> and such violent attacks continued throughout Eriugena's early life, becoming increasingly intense in the 840s. So it is assumed that when he arrived at the Court of Charles the Bald in France, about 845, he had left Ireland to escape the Viking slaughter.<sup>11</sup>

Charles was the grandson of Charlemagne (Charles the Great), the Frankish King who, on Christmas day of the year 800, was crowned Emperor of a new, and Christian, Holy Roman Empire. His mandate was at once theological and political; his duty to protect the Church was as great or greater than that of the Pope as he ruled over what has been called "The first Europe."<sup>12</sup>

Thus began the *Carolingian Renaissance* which brought new life to cities left barren by the slow and painful collapse of the Roman Empire. And, seeking to reinvent the earlier days of Rome's intellectual brilliance, Charlemagne had seen education as essential. He enforced study of classical culture, emphasizing writing, the arts, architecture and the moral regeneration of society. But perhaps his greatest contribution was the requirement that every cathedral and monastery have a school, and it was those cathedral schools which ultimately evolved into the universities which we know today.<sup>13</sup>

The passion for learning was carried on by his grandson, Charles II who had become King of West Francia at the age of seventeen and who was later to become Emperor. It was Charles who brought Eriugena to his court and asked him to translate the works of Dionysius from Greek into Latin. Dionysius was patron saint of the Carolingian monarchy, was considered to be the greatest of Christian Neoplatonists, and remains one of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity.

Eriugena thus found himself in a dynamic cultural environment where his efforts, though viewed as abrasive, even heretical, by some, were wholeheartedly supported by the intellectual young King. His translation of Dionysius, used for centuries, was one of the most significant achievements of the Middle Ages, and brought him to the attention of Pope Nicholas I.<sup>14</sup>



## *Liberal Arts as “The Arts of Liberation”*

Eriugena says that the Liberal Arts are key to the liberation of the soul, and it is most likely that when Eriugena came to the court of Charles it was as a teacher of those arts.<sup>15</sup> So to understand Eriugena’s classroom, one must consider the two works which were essential textbooks in the Middle Ages. First is *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, a fifth century Roman who, like Eriugena, knew Greek and who is often called “The last of the Roman philosophers and the first of the scholastic theologians.”<sup>16</sup> His (Neoplatonic and not exactly Christian) book, written in prison while awaiting execution, provides a philosophical overview that encapsulates the thought process of the Middle Ages. Medieval minds symbolically personified the virtues as well as the vices, and philosophy appears to Boethius in the form of a woman. It is through their conversation that he develops a philosophy of the nature of humanity and of God.

As did every teacher at that time, Eriugena enthusiastically embraced the work of Boethius, with its emphasis on the classical past, as well as the very strange *Marriage of Philology and Mercury* by Marcellinus Capella, another fifth century Roman on whom Eriugena wrote a commentary. As is typical of medieval teaching through symbol and allegory, Capella weaves the Liberal Arts into a story of courtship and marriage among the pagan gods

This *Marriage* is quite bizarre by modern standards. For example, speaking of *Dialectic* personified, bringing an approach that reconciles the tension of opposing views, and one of the most important to Eriugena, Capella says: “Into the assembly of the Gods came Dialectic, a woman whose weapons are complex and knotty utterances. Without her, nothing follows, and likewise, nothing stands in opposition...this was the woman, well-versed in every deceptive argument and glorying in her many victories.”<sup>17</sup> The lesson must have had a dynamic appeal for students who, in cold monastery rooms, visualized these figures as living beings.

These two poetic and textbooks, especially that of Capella, were the primary focus of education in the Liberal Arts. Both books are assertive of higher powers behind human knowledge and weave philosophical and theological principles in and out of symbolic poetry and prose. Symbolism, what Jung called the language of the unconscious, promoted imagination, fantasy, and dreams and prepared the groundwork for meditations which he called “active imagination.” The medieval thought process fostered acceptance of the irrational—at worst superstition, at best divine contemplation.

Many monks and nuns, some well-known, seem to have achieved self-knowledge for which three reasons may be suggested: First, the Church placed heavy emphasis on the goal of awakening to unity with Logos/Word as Christ. Second monastic isolation and constant meditation produced a mental openness that was uniquely conducive to spiritual development. And third, the medieval thought process emphasized the importance of the symbolic in transcendence of the individual mind into a collective. As Boethius wrote so poetically, “Earth overcome grants you the stars.”<sup>18</sup>

Expressed in the most simple way: Eriugena teaches that the path to enlightenment

is through the seven Liberal Arts, providing the basis for correct study of the scriptures which he says (agreeing with Augustine) God intends to be taken both literally and figuratively.<sup>19</sup> And he repeats the well-known assertion that “No one enters heaven except through philosophy”<sup>20</sup> saying that the arts are different branches of philosophy which only exist in the mind.<sup>21</sup> He explains that:

*Grammar* is the art which protects and controls articulate speech.

*Rhetoric* is the art which carries out a full and elaborate examination of a set topic.

*Dialectic* is the art which diligently investigates the rational common concepts of the mind.

*Arithmetic* is the reasoned and pure art of the numbers which come under the contemplation of the mind.

*Geometry* is the art which considers by the mind’s acute observation the intervals and surfaces of plane and solid figures.

*Music* is the art by which the light of reason studies the harmony of all things that are in motion that is knowable by natural proportions.

*Astronomy* is the art which investigates the dimensions of the heavenly bodies and their motions and their returnings at fixed times.<sup>22</sup>

Although to Capella these arts were personified as women, they are described by Eriugena as living forces within the individual, rather than as external subjects of study. He says that the Liberal Arts are integral parts of the mind, providing specialized discipline and skills that are more or less latent and are activated in the pursuit of divine knowledge. Moreover, he teaches that, properly understood, they provide direction for the soul’s difficult inner quest for self-understanding<sup>23</sup> and bring the mind back to unity with God. In this regard, although Augustine placed the arts higher than the mind, Eriugena believes that they are one with the mind—neither above nor below.<sup>24</sup>

### *Eriugena’s Challenges*

Eriugena asserts that he reaches conclusions about the structure of creation by the application of reason. “We are taught,” he says, “both by the authority of the Holy Fathers and by the Truth itself when reason is applied to it.”<sup>25</sup> So as with all great mystics of the Christian tradition, he raises the issue of how much of what he says reflects personal experience of union with the divine, and how much is participation in an intellectually developing theology. And although he does not refer to himself, it seems clear that, when he speaks of “Truth,” he means that which has entered his own expanded consciousness.

Whether his sources be truth or tradition, his theology opened a floodgate of ideas which deeply influenced Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhardt, Nicholas of Cusa and countless others. But the popularity of *The Periphyseon* (Division of Nature) caused the church a serious problem. The Neoplatonic idea that God evolves outward (*exitus*), and

that return (*reditus*) to God is a natural course, did not fit with the orthodox view that God is in Heaven, human beings are on the earth, and that they are quite separate.

In Eriugena's philosophy all of nature comes from one primordial source and it will ultimately return to that source. Moreover, in all multiplicity there is an underlying unity: Human beings and the Word are the same. Mankind is the Word and the Word is mankind. And between the Word, which *is*, and the Ultimate Creator which *is not*, there is constant interaction.

These ideas, unorthodox in the ninth century, so attracted attention, especially in convents and in monasteries, that the Church became alarmed and repeatedly condemned *The Periphyseon* as heretical. This was done first in 855 by the Third Council of Valence,<sup>26</sup> again in 859 by the Council of Langres, and then in 1225 by Pope Honorius III who ordered the destruction of all copies of the book and flamboyantly called it "a work teeming with the worms of heretical perversity."<sup>27</sup>

In 1684 *The Periphyseon* was placed on the index of prohibited books,<sup>28</sup> following a heated encounter with conservative theologians—no doubt reflected in the fanciful story that he was killed by his own students attacking him with their quill pens,<sup>29</sup> and in his own complaint that "Nothing is more tedious than battling against stupidity."<sup>30</sup>

The Church was not satisfied by Eriugena's references to the authority of the Fathers of the Church and to scripture. His unique openness and sense of universality, were interpreted as pantheism—a clear conflict with Church teaching—which raises an important question about the relationship of individual enlightenment to belief systems.

One may assume that those who attain enlightenment, knowledge of self and what is called the Word, have an experience of universal truth that transcends *cultus*. And certainly a person who has attained this truth will explain the experience to others in the terms of an accepted belief system. So it may be argued that the idea of a Christian God, a Buddhist God, or a Jewish God are all structures to explain something universal to the unenlightened. Eriugena promotes this kind of thought. His *Periphyseon* is inspirational, brilliant, quirky, and with far less built in protection against critical authority than any other Christian writer of the Middle Ages.

John O'Meara points out the reasons that Eriugena's work was unacceptable to Western Church authority. First, "Eriugena thought in terms of God, not in terms of man: this way of seeing things was uncommon in the ninth century. Secondly, his insistence that sin and death are simple deficiencies not made by God, was equally an uncommon view at the time."<sup>31</sup> But also very challenging to Catholic orthodoxy was the idea that "There is no intermediary between the human being and the Word, save the primordial causes of all things."<sup>32</sup>

Until Eriugena, the Latin West thought in specific terms of the *creator* and the *created*. But he speaks of direct access to God<sup>33</sup> through *theophanies*, moments of union with the divine, and the mind of mankind, which is itself God that creates all of nature. This principle is found among the Greek Fathers of the Church, including John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa, but Eriugena is the first to expand this idea into the Latin West. His importation of the ideas of Dionysius into Europe, and his instructions for

attaining enlightenment, are milestones in the development of Christian theology.

### *Dionysius and Christian Neoplatonism*

Eriugena relied primarily upon Augustine and upon Dionysius who is today called *The Pseudo-Areopagite* because his medieval authority rested on the mistaken belief that he was the Athenian Dionysius mentioned in Acts as Paul's convert to Christianity.<sup>34</sup> It was not until 1895 that two German scholars established that the belief was mistaken, although many doubts had been raised previously.<sup>35</sup> But at the time when King Charles asked Eriugena to translate the work of Dionysius from Greek, everyone believed him to have been an essentially apostolic figure—as did Thomas Aquinas and other later mystics who used Eriugena's translation.<sup>36</sup>

Dionysius was a very mysterious figure who, generally believed to have been a Syrian monk living in the late fifth century, was revered throughout the Middle Ages as a great spiritual authority. But his writing is not easily approached. McGinn describes his ideas as “Baffling...written in an idiosyncratic almost incantatory style filled with neologisms... difficult to grasp and controversial.”<sup>37</sup>

But his books, such as *The Divine Names* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, stand apart not only in their complexity, but in that he does not speak of personal experience as do others. He seems to write from so complete an understanding of the continuous action of the Divine Word as to suggest that the momentary ecstasy and visions of which so many speak is only the introductory experience of enlightenment and that there are unimaginable heights beyond the limitations of human intellect. In *The Divine Names* he presents all of creation as ordered in hierarchical and ranked order through which the human mind can move.<sup>38</sup>

In essence he adds a Christian interpretation to ideas formed by the school of Proclus, the disciple of Plotinus. He explains the outflow of the universe from the creative God into very specific hierarchical patterns, from God through angels to humankind, all in a trinitarian way.<sup>39</sup> Eriugena expanded on Dionysius, saying that the hierarchy is a product of mind and that it is transcended by enlightenment. Of course, he never questioned that this work came from a disciple of Saint Paul.<sup>40</sup>

At a personal level, Eriugena's encounter with Dionysius seems to have been a very pivotal and broadening experience. He was deeply moved by the man who created the term “mystical theology,” and who was the first to develop a Neoplatonic overview of Christianity. From Dionysius Eriugena drew the principle that the ultimate creator cannot be known, and that positive and negative theologies are useful tools. He accepted the primary consideration of Neoplatonism—that the whole universe is an expansion of the mind of God which will naturally return to its origins.<sup>41</sup> Dionysius also emphasizes that God can only be found through the Bible and through Christ and was thus a significant contributor to the doctrinal absolutism of the Middle Ages.

It is in following Dionysius that Eriugena develops his speculative theology, an intellectual attempt to go beyond the mind, which is part of the God the Son, to form

theories about the Father which cannot be known. He is very clear that: “The Divine Essence is comprehensible to no intellectual creature.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately it is nothing. And it does not know itself, because there is nothing to know about.<sup>43</sup>

### *Attaining Enlightenment*

If there is one consistent idea to be drawn from those who describe self-knowledge and knowledge of God, it is that there are many different roads to the same understanding and, as Dionysius expresses it: “We behold the divine light in a manner befitting us.”<sup>44</sup> The emotion of intense desire seems to bring the rewards of spiritual insight to many, whereas it is the path of intellect that leads others to the edge of self-knowledge. Dionysius describes the divine love as *eros* and ecstatic, a union which transcends intellect.<sup>45</sup> But the desire is not for the mundane. It is a “divine yearning for that immaterial reality which is beyond all reason and intelligence. It is a hunger for an unending, conceptual, and true communion with the spotless and sublime light.”<sup>46</sup> Humanity seeks the Light which he says “has a primary and causal knowledge of darkness.”<sup>47</sup>

Eriugena stresses that whatever can be known about the power behind visible reality is learned through symbols. He agrees with Augustine and Dionysius who depend on Paul’s statement that “All that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made.”<sup>48</sup> And Eriugena says “there is no visible or corporeal thing which is not the symbol of something incorporeal and intelligible.”<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately self-knowledge is considered to be a complex process in which reason, driven by faith, leads to theophany—the appearance of some aspect of God to the seeker. Dionysius expresses this in another way. He says that “We cannot know God in his nature since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of the mind or of reason. But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from him, and this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms...he is known to form all things, and he is known to no one from anything...this is the sort of language we must use about God.”<sup>50</sup>

In the spirit of ancient mystery religions, Dionysius suggests that his Christian Neoplatonism has been passed down with an extreme secrecy that may have included ritual initiation performed by the Hierarchs (chief priests). He states that

The hierarchic order lays it on some to be purified and on others to do the purifying, on some to receive illumination and on others to cause illumination, on some to be perfected and on others to bring about perfection, each will actually initiate God in the way suitable to whatever role it has.”<sup>51</sup> It is most fitting that the sacred and hidden truth about the celestial intelligences be concealed through the inexpressible and the

sacred...knowledge is not for everyone.<sup>52</sup>

And in a letter to Timothy, whom he addresses as a “Fellow-Elder”, Dionysius discusses a secret initiation:

“The first leaders of our hierarchy received their fill of the sacred gift from the transcendent Deity...in their written and unwritten initiations they brought the transcendent down to our level...I am giving you this gift of God. I do so because of the solemn promises you made, of which I am now reminding you, promises never to pass to anyone except sacred initiators of your own order the hierarch’s superior sacred words”<sup>53</sup>

And Dionysius describes what he calls a “rite of illumination” to which the candidate is introduced by a sponsor. First a hymn drawn from scripture is sung and the postulant kisses the “sacred table.” Then he admits his lack of knowledge and asks the Hierarch to intercede with God on his behalf. The man’s sandals and clothes are removed, he faces West, and holds out his hands in rejection of Satan. Following this are complex prayers and anointing with oil. Finally the candidate is immersed in water three times.

The process seems more like a baptism than an initiation, but this is what Dionysius calls “a sacredly initiating Eucharist” and appears intended to be introductory to an advanced level of consciousness. The individual is now an initiate whom Dionysius emphatically asserts “may travel from one divine reality to another.”<sup>54</sup> Here he is asserting that knowledge of God confers the ability to move between dimensions, an idea which is consistent with the speculation of contemporary physicists that each individual exists on multidimensional levels.

Eriugena understands all of this and, in *Periphyseon*, adding to the authority of Dionysius that of Maximus the Confessor, who speaks of knowledge which is handed down from those “who were the followers and ministers of the Word and thence directly instructed in the knowledge of these things,” (presumably speaking of Paul and others) and those who received knowledge “by transmission through those who have preceded them.”<sup>55</sup>

The whole question of this use of the language of the *disciplina arcani* has been addressed by a number of scholars, none of whom seem to feel that the text means what it says.<sup>56</sup> However, the emphasis suggests that the possibility of Eriugena having himself been the recipient of a laying on of hands, in some highly spiritual monastic environment, cannot be summarily dismissed.

In any event, Dionysius says that a change of consciousness results from this ritual. And Eriugena teaches that enlightenment is a slow process that happens in measured steps. “The deified,” he says “shall ascend through an innumerable number of stages,”<sup>57</sup> agreeing with Dionysius who speaks of the soul following the pattern of probation, illumination, and perfection suggested by Proclus.<sup>58</sup> And Eriugena insists that the path of spiritual search does not end with death, but is carried on infinitely—meaning that each

person is on a continuum of growth toward understanding which is active even before birth. Thus enlightenment of the individual is a natural part of a collective return into the non-being of the Creator.

According to Eriugena, enlightenment comes about through resolution of the constant tension between two points in dynamic opposition of being and non-being. The result for the seekers is that “Everything which in this life they accepted by faith they now see face to face...but each shall behold that Vision in his own way.”<sup>59</sup> And he speaks of visions “appropriate to the capacity of each one” which depend upon “the height of the contemplation attained.”<sup>60</sup> Eriugena makes clear that a moment of contact with the divine is different for each person, and that for the individual it differs on each encounter, developing upon the statement of the gospel of John that “In my father’s house there are many mansions.”<sup>61</sup>

And he is very encouraging to those who enter onto the very difficult path toward self-knowledge:

“Be patient, for light will come to the mind whereby the hidden places of the darkness are illuminated, obscure things are made plain, things hitherto unknown are revealed, elusive things recalled, the unlimited restrained, the indefinite defined, ambiguities are brought into some kind of sure option.”<sup>62</sup>

Eriugena also points out that “He who undertakes to find the solution by himself surpasses his own powers. For if it is found it is not he who searches but He Who is the light of our minds who finds it.”<sup>63</sup> This reiterates the principle that God is both the seeker and the sought, that there is no division between the divine mind and the human mind. But the apparent separation of seeker and sought is a delusion created by the Fall which is maintained by human emphasis on what it believes to be real but which, in fact, is not. Moreover, humanity is self-imprisoned by intellect. Place and time do not exist; heaven is a condition of Christ, the Word, in which mankind may share.

So the soul, which is defined by Eriugena as mind, seeks to transcend this delusional vision. In this his theology seems complementary to modern psychology, as is underscored by Moran’s critical comment that

“Eriugena sees the human subject as essentially mind. Everything is the product of mind—material reality, spatiotemporal existence, the body itself...matter is a commingling of incorporeal qualities which the mind mistakenly takes to be corporeal; spatiotemporal reality is a consequence of the seduction of the mind by the senses...the body itself is an externalization of the secret desires of the mind. But more than that, the true being of all things is their being in the mind...the whole of nature, which includes God, proceeds or externalizes itself in its multifarious forms through the operation of the human mind, which is pursuing its own course of intellectual development or enlightenment.”<sup>64</sup>

Dionysius calls the process of rising above mind *unknowing*. He says that “The most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, where mind turns away from all things, even from itself.”<sup>65</sup> But ultimately the complexities of speculative theology lead to knowledge of a God which is inherently simple. And he is emphatic that Christian truth is “more simple and more divine than every other.”<sup>66</sup> This argument assumes special significance for later Scholastics who assert that it is only through Christianity that one can achieve true knowledge of God.

### *The Speculative Search*

It was through dialectic reasoning, which seeks understanding through the reconciliation of opposites in constant interactive motion, that Eriugena sought to find common ground between the very logical Latin Church and the mysticism of the Byzantine Greek Church so influenced by Platonic thought. His key principle is that the opposition of God and mankind is only apparent. The One appears to become many. Theoretically, the Father creates the continuous action of the Word, the Son, who thinks Himself into a multiplicity of minds. And as a man or a woman seeks God, they are focusing on themselves because they are God. Everything is mind and as Eriugena says; “Man is a certain intellectual concept formed eternally in the mind of God.”<sup>67</sup>

This raises the question of why, as Eriugena says, enlightened knowledge may be different for each person. And here a few possible explanations, beyond the obvious framing of ideas to a specific belief system, can be suggested: First, that the experience of the unseen universe is so subtle that many rational interpretations of a mystery, even apparently ones contradictory, are possible. Second, beyond a core experience of God-consciousness, a vision of the universe may be a matter of perspective that is different for each person. And, third, a mystic may accept the intellectual explanation of another as consistent with his own ecstatic vision which cannot be called merely an “influence.”

Added to all of this is another complication. It was understood in the ancient world that a teacher could be promoting two doctrines, one secret and esoteric and the other exoteric, i.e., for those who could not understand the truth. In such a case two opposite philosophies might be presented.<sup>68</sup> Certainly, the potential for confusion is considerable. To the idea that God at the same time exists and does not exist, that creation is real but not real, one may add that what teachers say about the nature of the universe may be true—or intentionally false.

Beyond this, one must again ask if the carefully structured universe of Dionysius as well as Eriugena’s complex and reasoned divisions of nature, have been encountered in their direct vision. The question becomes especially interesting in dealing with those enlightened persons who, like Jacob Boehme, are uneducated and outside of the stream of a developing theology. Boehme describes the most complex universal patterns, and the manifestation of all from an unmanifest—speaking of these as divine revelations. In any event, Eriugena is in agreement with the pattern that Dionysius is describing, and that it is



an inner reality with which he seems to be completely familiar.

### *Negative Theology*

Negative theology addresses what God *is not*, the God which is negative and uncreated that stands even above God who is the Father and Creator, a very difficult concept. In the way of negation, the mystic rises above knowledge (the Nous), completely denying the individual self to know one's own true nature as The Word. But Eriugena says that "No man, nor any of the celestial powers, can know of the generation of the Word from the Father. It is possible to know God as creator, but not as no thing, the ultimate source.

In all of this it might be argued that both positive and negative theologies are meaningless and self-contradictory. And Carabene expresses this circuitous problem succinctly. She says that: "Whatever is said about God can be contradicted. God is nothing; God is something; God is not nothing; God is not something."<sup>69</sup>

An important source for Eriugena's negative theology was Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century bishop who had been prominent in the court of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius and who developed ideas from Plotinus. Gregory was another whose work Eriugena translated from the Greek and whom he considered to be the Greek counterpart of the Latin Augustine. He borrowed liberally from Gregory in his *Periphyseon*.<sup>70</sup>

Eriugena's main influence was the assertion by Dionysius that the divine nature is without limit and is unknowable. But Dionysius himself was strongly influenced by Gregory of Nyssa who created, in fact, the first systematic negative theology in Christian history.<sup>71</sup> So the development of ideas is from Plotinus to Gregory of Nyssa, to Dionysius to Eriugena.

### *Periphyseon: The Division of Nature*

This book is brilliant and demanding; the whole of the text being essentially devoted to clarification of one obtuse paragraph. Using Plato's dialogue form, the "Teacher" explains to the "Student"<sup>72</sup> that

It is my opinion that the division of nature by means of four differences results in four species, (being divided) first into that which creates and is not created, secondly into that which is created and also creates, thirdly into that which is created and does not create, while the fourth neither creates nor is created. But within these four there are two pairs of opposites. For the third is the opposite of the first, the fourth of the second; but the fourth is classed among the impossible, for it is of its essence that it cannot be."<sup>73</sup>

And the teacher asks his student: "Does such a division seem right to you or not?" Since Eriugena is assuming both roles of the Platonic conversation, his answer is, of

course, “Yes. Certainly.” For others this may not be so simple

. At first encounter of this text, one may feel like Alice falling down the rabbit hole hoping that something will make sense, but the arguments that follow present a remarkable, though difficult, theological system unique in the history of ideas, and based in large part upon Dionysius.

Essentially Eriugena presents nature as progressing in a rational order out of nothing and being created by the human mind. Adding to the idea that enlightenment is the natural course of humanity, Eriugena advances the remarkable idea that cosmology is based upon human insight. His *natura* is a rational universe that is logically divided and in which reason is the primary tool of mankind’s return to its original source—a very bold assertion in the ninth century which almost predicts the humanism of the Renaissance

To Eriugena everything has its place: “there is no creature, whether visible or invisible, which is not confined in something within the limits of its proper nature.”<sup>74</sup> But the place of nature itself cannot be defined because it includes the unmanifest creator which the mind cannot grasp. The root of nature cannot be defined because the human intellect cannot grasp the idea of nothingness. This is another stumbling block for those who seek to approach the *Periphyseon* rationally. Eriugena’s work seems purposely to be more than the sum of its parts.

To a more or less accepted path of transmission of ideas to Eriugena Deirdre Carabene adds a very interesting argument for the influence of Pythagorus, who had his own mystery school. She says that “While scholarly detective work has uncovered a number of unlikely sources for Eriugena’s divisions, I believe Pythagorean number theory to be the most likely because of a rather explicit passage in the writings of Philo of Alexander that reflects the division of nature as outlined by Eriugena. Some numbers beget without being begotten; some are begotten without begetting’ and one neither begets nor is begotten.”<sup>75</sup>

### *The Enlightened Future of Humanity*

The Word, from which nature emanates, has the task of returning humanity to the origins from which it fell. Eriugena speaks of a vision of primordial causes and says that “it was to bring human nature back to this vision that the incarnate Word of God descended, taking it upon Himself, after it had fallen in order that he might recall it to its former state, healing the wounds of transgressions, sweeping away the shadows of false fantasies, opening the eyes of the mind, showing Himself in all things to those who are worthy of such a vision.”<sup>76</sup> And Eriugena points out that each person has within him or herself the ability to know God using the fundamental attributes of the seven Liberal Arts.

There will be stages to the return.

On return to the cosmic darkness from which humanity emerged, there will be unity of all (“He will make all creatures one creature”<sup>77</sup>) and the division of sexuality will be transcended. “There will be neither male nor female when human nature shall be restored to its pristine state. For if the first man had not sinned, he would not be suffering

the division of his nature into the two sexes.”<sup>78</sup>

Neoplatonic Christianity argues that, although it may appear to be so, enlightenment is not truly individual. It happens, as Eriugena teaches his student, in a dissolution of the self into the unity of a greater consciousness. In Christian terms it is said that those who know that they are Christ improve the Body of the Church or, as Greek scholar and poet Claudius Ptolemy expressed it: “A sagacious mind improves the operations of the heavens as a skillful farmer, by cultivation, improves nature.”<sup>79</sup>

And Eriugena completes his summa, *The Periphyseon*, with a line which could admirably end a Shakespeare play. He says: “Let every man hold what opinion he will until the Light shall come which makes the light of the false philosophers a darkness and converts the darkness of those who truly know into light.”<sup>80</sup>

1. Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, New York, 1994, 80
2. John J. O’Meara, *Eriugena*, Oxford 1988, viii. O’Meara mentions that the current interest in Eriugena was stimulated by Maëul Cappuyns’ 1933 book, *Jean Scot Eriugène: sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée*, which he calls “an unsurpassed source of information. opcit ii.
3. John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon: The Division of Nature*, I.493
4. Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena*, Cambridge, 2004, 93i
5. Moran xii.
6. *Periphyseon* III.619A
7. O’Meara, 2-8
8. Ibid., 8
9. Moran, 2
10. Dierdre Carabine, *John Scotus Eriugena*, Oxford, 2000, 9
11. McGinn, *Growth*, 81
12. Carabine, 7 It should be noted that Charles the Great had an profound interest in everything Byzantine., O’Meara, opcit, 10.
13. Margaret Deansely, “Medieval Schools c. 1300,” *Cambridge Medieval History*, v.5, 1968, 773.
14. Moran, 50
15. Carabine, 15
16. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Harvard, 1978, xii.
17. Martianus Capella, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, v.2 327, 331]. This is a very peculiar book mixing prose and poetry summarizing the importance of the seven which were sometimes called the seven disciplines. Capella provided a formula for education from the fifth through the twelfth

- century and was especially important to the Carolingian renaissance.
18. Boethius, 383.
  19. *Periphyseon* IV. 857A.
  20. O'Meara, *opcit*, 30.
  21. *Periphyseon*, I.275B.
  22. *Periphyseon*, I.475A-B.
  23. O'Meara, 27.
  24. Moran, 206.
  25. *Periphyseon*, III.619B
  26. Henry Denziger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, New Hampshire, 2010, 320ff. Translation of thirtieth edition, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1954.
  27. *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, Trans. Myra L. Uhlfelder, Jean A. Potter, 1976, xiii. This is not a complete text. It contains only selections from the *Periphyseon* and was published long before the current interest in Eriugena.
  28. Carabine, 23.
  29. O'Meara, 37. This story is found in the *Chronicles* of William of Malmesbury a monk and an important twelfth century English historian.
  30. *Periphyseon* I.489C.
  31. O'Meara, 47.
  32. He qualifies this saying: "the reason that I added 'save the causes of all things' was lest anyone should suppose that the celestial essences are immediate, that is, that they have no intermediary between themselves and the cause of all things." *Periphyseon*, III.668B.
  33. *Periphyseon* III.668B
  34. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, New York, 1991, 158
  35. Carabene 16.
  36. Omeara 217.
  37. McGinn, *Foundations*, 158.
  38. Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Aeropagite*, New York 2007. 65, 83. This is an extremely good study of a difficult subject. O'Meara points out that "While the universe of Pseudo-Dionysius is a spiritual universe of intelligences, it adapts itself as far as possible to the cosmological theories generated by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Gnostics and the Neoplatonists and the notions already inherited from the Fathers of the Church.
  39. Moran, 51
  40. The first to raise questions about Dionysius was Nicholas of Cusa. Moran, 49.
  41. *ibid*.
  42. *Periphyseon* I.446D
  43. Carabene 59,

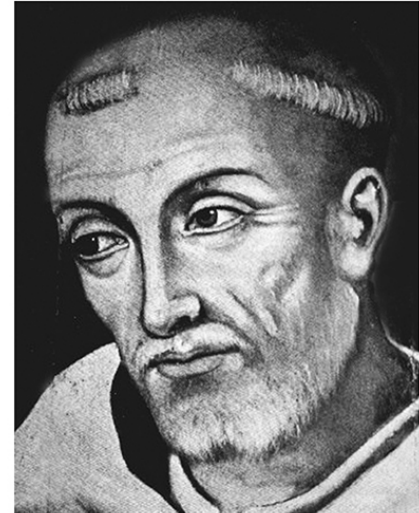
44. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 589B
45. Perl, 96.
46. Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 144A.
47. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 689B.
48. Romans I:20.
49. *Periphyseon* V.865D-866A
50. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 869C-872A.
51. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 165B-C.
52. Dionysius, *ibid*, 140A-B.99
53. Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 376-377.
54. Dionysius, *ibid*, 393C-397A
55. *Periphyseon*, II.529D.
56. McGinn, *Growth*, 159
57. *Periphyseon*, V.246A
58. Moran, 146.
59. *Periphyseon*, V.945C.
60. *Ibid* V.945D.
61. John 14:2-6
62. *Periphyseon*, V.924C]
63. *Periphyseon*, II.572B.
64. Moran, viii.
65. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 872A
66. *ibid*, 873a]
67. *Periphyseon*, IV.768B
68. O'Meara, 43
69. Carabene, 59.
70. O'Meara, 75-77
71. McGinn, *Foundations*, 141]
72. In the ninth century manuscript the two people conversing are indicated by the letters N and A. which has been assumed to mean *Nutritor* and *Alumnus*. In some later manuscripts these are replaced by M and D for *Magister* and *Discipulus*. Eriugena, *Periphyseon, De Divisione Naturae*, Book I, Ed. and Trans. I.P Sheldon-Williams, Dublin, 1999, 222.
73. *Periphyseon*, I.441-442. In section 443A Eriugena offers five modes of interpretation the first division. Michael Fournier argues that the five modes are not independent but are in an ordered sequence following the first division and was borrowed from Dionysius. "Eriugena's Five Modes (*Periphyseon* 443A-446A)," *The Heythrop Journal*, Halifax, 2009, 581-2,

74. *Periphyseon*, II.590A-B
75. Carabene , 31.
76. Op.cit. III 684A
77. *Periphyseon*, II.535A.
78. Op.cit., II 532B.
79. Claudius Ptolemy, *The Centiloquy or Hundred Aphorisms*, appendix to the *Tetrabiblos*, California, 1976, 153.
80. *Periphyseon*, V.1022C.

## 6. Bernard of Clairvaux: The Way of Love

(1090-1153)

Bernard of Clairvaux was unquestionably the most significant figure of twelfth century Europe: He established one hundred and sixty monastic houses. He single-handedly chose Pope Innocent II over another contender for the throne of Peter. He reconciled the claims of those seeking the German crown. He brought together the Italian Republic. He ended the war of Robert of Sicily against the Pope. He squelched the rationalist “threat” of Peter Abelard. He wrote the constitution of the Knights Templars. He ended a program of persecution of the Jews and, beyond all of this, achieved enlightenment and wrote sermons which describe an inner path more explicitly than any Christian mystic of the Middle Ages.



**Bernard**

*“Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a sceptre but a hoe.”*

Bernard’s work is a unique turning point in the literature of enlightenment, clearly describing his own experience of union with the Word and, although often misunderstood, he is more open in his explanations and encouragements than any who came before. He points the way toward the psychological approach of Carl Jung and others, being an integral part of continuum of those who have attained self-knowledge. It may be said that, as a historical trend over centuries, what was hidden behind symbols is discussed more and more openly and becomes available to anyone who can put the pieces together.

Bernard pointed the way to enlightenment for those monks who understood the subtle layers of his sermons and was, in his own time, considered to be a man of true holiness. Two hundred years later his legendary sanctity was celebrated by Dante in the *Divine Comedy* where, in Paradise, it is Bernard who obtains the intercession of the Virgin Mary for the poet Virgil, leading him to the vision of God.<sup>1</sup>

Bernard was born in 1090 at Fontaines les Dijon, the family castle of a devout and wealthy knight of the Burgundian court which was one of the ideological centers of the Crusades. When he was five years old the First Crusade began. He must have watched the heroic defenders of the faith leave on their march into the East to free the Holy Lands from the grasp of the infidels and one can only imagine the excitement of a child witnessing the colorful and hopeful pageantry of a castle’s preparations for war.

The crusade and its Christian righteousness dominated the next three years of his childhood. He grew up quite literally surrounded by knights in shining armor.<sup>2</sup> And when the Knights Templar were founded almost thirty years later, Bernard wrote in *Praise of*

*the New Knighthood* and, looking back to these days he says: “This is a new kind of knighthood and one unknown to the ages gone by. It ceaselessly wages a twofold war both against flesh and blood and against a spiritual army of evil in the heavens.” And to the knights he says: “Go forth confidently, you knights, and repel the foes of the cross.”<sup>3</sup> It was with this same fervor and confidence that he directed his monks to overcome their own interior warring factions and achieve the victory of self-knowledge.

Bernard was educated by the Canons of St. Volles de Chatillon<sup>4</sup> a new and experimental school which no doubt planted the seeds of his anti-rationalism and relentless search for monastic purity. He was a remarkable scholar who acquired such skill in Latin that he was called the “mellifluous doctor” for the beauty and flow of his Latin sermons. However, his detractors used the same words to suggest that Bernard’s principles of love are saccharine and shallow, an example of which is the comment by the popular early twentieth century philosopher Bertrand Russell, who quipped of Bernard that “his sanctity did not serve to make him intelligent.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, although Bernard is opposed to rationalism, his ideas about love and God are considerably more complex than some may appreciate. He was an idealist who, as he showed his monks the way to self-knowledge, asked that they live by precepts established earlier by Benedict in his *Holy Rule of Saint Benedict*. This is, beyond eliciting sanctity in the monks subject to the rule, a very efficient framework for practical monastic socialization.

Beyond simple obedience, silence, humility, and the routines of prayer, it was plan for the organization of the whole monastery. Its topics ranged widely, including: What kind of man should be Abbot, whether monks ought to own anything, how monks should dress and cover their feet, what to do if a monk is late for dinner, whether monks should get letters, why monks should not hit each other, how a monk should behave if asked to do something impossible and how strangers were to be received. The Rule ends with wise insight, saying: “Whoever you are who are hastening to the heavenly homeland, fulfill with the help of Christ this minimum Rule which we have written for beginners; and then at length under God's protection you will attain to the loftier heights of knowledge and virtue.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1098, seeking a life that was more in accordance the *Rule*, Robert of Molesme and twenty others left the Benedictine abbey at Molesmes, where he was prior, to found a monastery at Cîteaux—a pilgrimage which has assumed mythical proportions. In his *Great Beginning at Cîteaux*, a compendium of more or less official stories, Conrad of Eberbach writes that the monks arrived at a place which was “seldom approached by human beings because of the woods and dense briars and inhabited only by wild beasts.” It was, he said “a place of horror and vast solitude...quite suitable for the sort of religious observance which they had long had in mind.”<sup>7</sup> But despite hardships, these Cistercians, (taken from *Cistercium*, Latin name of the town) became the first true religious order, with a constitutional form of government.<sup>8</sup>

Bernard was ten years old and living in a castle when Robert established the small house in the middle of nowhere. But at nineteen Bernard’s life of comfort and privilege came to a sudden end with the death of his mother as he with other young Burgundian



noblemen, including four of his brothers, were sent to the Cistercian order at Cîteaux. Remarkably, and clearly because of his learned background, a few years later the young Bernard was directed to lead a new monastery which, with great hope for the future, he named Clairvaux.

However, from the very beginning there were problems. The youthful and inexperienced Abbot was insecure and easily angered. He applied Benedict's regulations with such severity that the monks turned against him and the stress brought physical illness and mental breakdown. Fortunately, he was rescued by his friend William, later to be abbot of St. Thierry. William retreated with Bernard to a small cloister outside the abbey and somehow managed to persuade the demanding ascetic Bernard that a life of moderation was better than one of rigid self-denial.<sup>9</sup> And finally—after reflection and solitude—he became more realistic in his expectations. Upon returning to his monks Bernard became a shining example of reasonableness.

Much through Bernard's efforts, the new Cistercian form of monasticism became a dynamic force that shaped and stabilized twelfth century Western society. The monasteries were centers of learning and, with the launch of the First Crusade a principle of papal monarchy began to emerge as did a uniform code of Canon Law.<sup>10</sup> Behind all of this were the Cistercians who, while calling for a rebirth of traditional (largely Augustinian) Christian values, became the leading political force in Europe. By the end of Bernard's time there were nineteen Cistercian cardinals and one hundred-fifty two Cistercian bishops and archbishops.<sup>11</sup>

Bernard was very aggressive in persuading others to enter the monastic life and an abbot who saw him preaching in Rome observed that "In his coarse habit and emaciated by mortification he was in all respects a virtuous man of God."<sup>12</sup> And it was Bernard's friend William of St. Thierry who said in jest that "mothers kept their sons, wives their husbands, and men their friends, hidden from Bernard to save them from this world."<sup>13</sup>

Because of Bernard and his Cistercian example, living a most simple kind of monasticism became fashionable and the order began a period of unparalleled expansion across Europe. Cistercians, adhering strictly to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, were dedicated to simple prayer, to contemplation, to manual labor and to the maintenance of silence. The houses were very plain, as were the vestments. There were no vessels of precious metals<sup>14</sup> nor any of the ostentatious displays that were typical of some of the higher clergy in the twelfth century.<sup>15</sup> Through Bernard thousands of monks now came to believe that simplicity in all things leads to God.

### *Faith vs. Intellect in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.*

Cistercian thought was, for the most part, anti-intellectual and was isolated from the mainstream of Scholasticism that was emerging in universities at Paris, Bologna and Oxford—although there was a concerted, though not very effective, effort to incorporate Bernard's thinking into the newer ideas.<sup>16</sup> There was also considerable support for Bernard's impassioned attack on Peter Abelard, a teacher of rhetoric and dialectic at the

Cathedral School of Notre Dame in Paris.

Abelard was highly charismatic and attracted students from all over Europe with his charm and reasoned philosophy. He became a champion of the trend toward logic which had taken hold in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, adding to the heritage of Aristotle and Boethius.<sup>17</sup> But, under the influence of William of Saint Thierry,<sup>18</sup> Bernard charged that Abelard's book *Theologia* with its rationalist approach to the trinity was a threat to orthodoxy.

This was a war of words about the parts of the trinity and the nature of one God. It was a very heated debate in which Bernard insisted that Abelard was abusing reason with arguments so dangerously complex that few could understand, and that he was creating a threat to the simplicity of faith by proposing that reason can do more than faith.<sup>19</sup> Bernard won the argument and Abelard's work was declared to be heretical and he was dramatically forced to burn his own book.

But although Bernard claimed victory in this particular contest, Abelard, who brought Arab philosophy into the discussion, was part of a wave of opposition to Bernard's uniquely devotional approach. It was a new and radical shift away from the traditional toward a theology which incorporated many foreign ideas and which was not to be stopped.<sup>20</sup>

### *Bernard's System of Enlightenment*

Despite his stand against Abelard and a distaste for the Scholastics, it would be wrong to assume that Bernard completely dismisses the use of reason. He writes that "Holy contemplation has two forms of ecstasy, one in the intellect, the other in the will; one of enlightenment, the other of fervor, one of knowledge, the other of devotion."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Bernard insisted that monks be well-grounded in the seven liberal arts as well as in classical studies and in the fathers of the church.<sup>22</sup>

Although based primarily upon Augustine and Saint Paul, he was inspired by Eriugena and by Maximus.<sup>23</sup> In his hundreds of sermons Bernard offers a creative and accessible road to self-consciousness and divine union: his principles are, however, elitist. They are directed to a select few who have chosen the monastic path and who have declared their inner search for truth.

Bernard's sermons *On the Love of God* and especially his eighty-six sermons *On the Song of Songs* are both literary and theological milestones. And once it is understood that these were not actual sermons, but were intended to be read and carefully studied as part of a monastic meditative discipline, his methods and intentions become clear.<sup>24</sup> He has produced a carefully-crafted system directing the monk toward enlightenment through the action of Christian love. God is charity and God is love but to reach God is not simple.

In teaching this, Bernard is conflicted. It is with great reserve that he hints that his sermons reflect personal experience of a dimension beyond the mind. He touches on the subject with caution, saying "There may be someone who will go on to ask me, What does it mean to enjoy the Word?" then he adds cryptically that "I may have been granted this

experience, but I do not speak of it.”<sup>25</sup>

On some days he is more open than on others. In another sermon. Speaking of himself as “foolish” he says “I admit that the Word has come to me...many times...But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived the presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me...but I was never conscious of his coming and going.”<sup>26</sup> And Bernard clarifies not only those to whom he is really speaking, but the reason for silence in such refined spiritual matters:

“Shall the wise understand these words, that he may rightly distinguish and mark off each from the other, and explain them in a way that men will be able to grasp? If you expect this from me, I should prefer you to hear it from an adept, from one accustomed to and experienced in these things. A person of this kind however chooses to hide in modest silence what he has perceived in silence, to keep his secret to himself as the safer course. But as one bound in duty to speak, as one who may not be silent, I relate to you whatever I know on this subject from my own or from others’ experience. Since many can easily verify it, I leave deeper truths to those competent to comprehend them.”<sup>27</sup>

Here Bernard is suggesting that divine union, unquestionably very rare in a general population, is not uncommon among monks. Indeed, he spoke of mystical contemplation only in terms of monks, although the fruits could be shared with others. To this end, in the monastic environment, every thought, every prayer and every action was directed toward divine union. Bernard repeated, over and over again, the biblical promise of encouragement by both Luke and Matthew: “Seek and you will find.” The search, of course, included careful study of the teacher’s words as well as humility, which Benedict taught was achieved in stages and that “having ascended all these degrees of humility, the monk will presently arrive at the love of God.”<sup>28</sup> This statement may seem clear but, as in all of Bernard’s sermons, it can be interpreted in many ways.

Evans points out that “In Bernard’s time everyone took it for granted not only that there are several significations to be attached to given passages, but that some of them had to be searched for, because they would not be immediately apparent on the surface.”<sup>29</sup> But beneath the words are concepts that have been agreed upon throughout the ages. Bernard does, for example, suggest that unification of the self with the divine can happen in an instant, agreeing with Plato, Augustine, and others that the rapture described by Paul as a sudden light from heaven (Acts 9.3) may last for only a brief moment.<sup>30</sup> But Bernard knew full well that not many would understand what he was trying to teach. “If you are holy,” he said “you have comprehended and know; if you are not, be holy and you shall know by your own experience.”<sup>31</sup>

The experience is universal, and if Bernard is read carefully, it becomes clear that imbedded in his often criticized “sweetness and light” and apparently poetic words, is some very practical information. This is true of Bernard’s comment about the saints who “seem

to melt (Latin: *liquescere*) and pass away into the will of God,”<sup>32</sup> The same term, melting, is used by Maximus in his *Ambigua*, where he teaches that “this liquification, or fusion of the soul in ecstasy does not involve its destruction. For the substance of the soul remains intact, and the ecstasy indeed confirms in its own nature.”<sup>33</sup> The language is not only colorful, but is descriptive. Many speak of this feeling that the self is dissolving and agree that this a specific stage in return to divine consciousness. Bernard is saying to his monks: as you become more and more like God, as did the saints, this will be among your experiences.

Indeed, Bernard speaks with certainty of the changes in the perception of reality brought about a person’s movement toward divine unity. And although he must do so symbolically, Bernard addresses the complete readjustment of what has been known as reality by the self.<sup>34</sup> Christ is called upon for support as bizarre and unsettling experiences of an “awakening” begin to happen and as Plato’s teaching about phases of divine madness prove to be accurately descriptive. There are some thoughts which touch upon a reality that is so complex and disorienting that they are terrifying. The mind seems to be approaching a place where it was never meant to go.

In this, mystic teachers, such as Saint John of the Cross, offer encouragement and warnings of painful and isolating experience as the self begins to remember itself. As it regains more and more of the *likeness* to the divine, which Christianity describes as having been lost in the Fall, dark aspects are driven to the surface and must be resolved. But Bernard teaches that in reward for its long struggle fear is replaced by the holy spirit and he says in *On Loving God* that “To reach this state is to become godlike.”<sup>35</sup>

### *Self-Knowledge and the Physical Body*

All mystics agree that the soul is weighed down by the perishable body,<sup>36</sup> and for Bernard the journey to God must begin on the carnal level, raising issues that are among the most complex of Christian theology. Christian tradition is cautious in linking human sexuality to sin and to “The Fall,” and draws a very distinct, if not problematical, line between love which is carnal and love which is (acceptably) spiritual. Bernard often reflects Augustine, for whom sexual pleasure is always somehow sinful.<sup>37</sup> But, challenging his refined theology, in an all male monastic environment Bernard had to accept the pitfalls of human behavior and enforce the Rule of Benedict which says “Let the younger brethren not have their beds beside each other, but mingled with the older ones.”<sup>38</sup> Sophisticated readers may draw their own conclusions about how this actually worked.

However Bernard explains the theological principle: In his *On Conversion: A Sermon to Clerics*, he teaches that: “As long as we are in the body we are in exile from God, not indeed that this is the body’s fault, but it is the fault of the fact that there is still a body of death, or rather that the flesh is the body of sin in which God does not exist but rather the law of sin.”<sup>39</sup> But through the love of Christ the carnal becomes spiritual love.<sup>40</sup> Under the layers of Christian theology is the simple statement in John (1:14) that the “Word became flesh,” implicit in which is the idea that the flesh will become the Word,

just as in the Greek idea of the many evolving from the One is the principle that the many will return to the One.

In this process Bernard clearly suggests that discovery of the hidden nature of carnal love is part of the whole complex and difficult, process of understanding the meaning of the physical. When it is appreciated that Bernard is speaking about the importance of a sexual energy in the soul's rebalancing to a new sense of reality, all that he has to say about the carnal makes broad sense. Beyond the simple physical act of sex is the mind's manipulation of the same divine energy throughout the body as is done in Eastern yogic exercises.

### *The Song of Songs*

The essence of Bernard's mystical teaching, including those things of which he says he cannot speak directly, are to be found in his sermons on this book. The Song of Songs, attributed to Solomon, is a curious collection of love songs, monologues between a man and a woman. The question will always remain whether the *Songs* were originally intended to convey a complex spiritual message, or whether interpreters found in them a convenient vehicle for symbolic ideas about divine sexuality. It would appear that the latter is correct but the questions arise with these songs or poems, because of their simplicity and frankly curious descriptions. It is easy to relate to the lines of the poem which say "Behold you are beautiful, my love, behold you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil" but it is somewhat more difficult to come to terms with an ancient peasant aesthetic describing a Bride who has "hair like a flock of goats," teeth "like a flock of shorn ewes"<sup>41</sup> and a nose "like a tower of Lebanon overlooking Damascus."<sup>42</sup>

The fact that there is nothing specifically religious about these verses had led many scholars to conclude that they are simple and erotic ancient love poems. But its interpretation as sacred scripture was established in the first century. History records that at a council of rabbis, Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph declared in a passionate speech that "For all the world there is nothing to equal the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are Holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."<sup>43</sup>

From that time on, the book was considered to affirm God's love for the Jewish people, and tradition accepts as symbolic its attribution to Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, teaching that it is the most sacred of all Jewish books. The Groom is viewed as God, and the Bride as the "Children of Israel." This idea was discarded by Paul who asserted that Judaism was prelude to the birth of Christ, and who established the Christian rules for interpretation of the Old Testament. Paul brought a new overview of Bible stories with his assumption that all scripture has both an obvious and a hidden meaning.<sup>44</sup>

It is with a somewhat conciliatory use of this principle that the first commentary on The Song of Songs by a Christian, Hippolytus a third century martyr, explains the book as an allegory of the relationship between Israel, the Church and Christ as the Logos.<sup>45</sup> During those early centuries, reinterpretation of the Hebrew books through Christianity became an essential doctrine to the emerging Church. The *Old Law* had prepared the way

for the *New Law* and theologians now demonstrated that the Jews had never known the true meaning of their own sacred books. It was taught that the Song of Songs, the “holy of holies” had always been referring to Christ and the first Hebrew line of The Song of Songs reading “The Song of Songs, *which is Solomon’s*” was simply eliminated in the Latin Vulgate Bible, the essential and correct document of the Middle Ages.

Origen (184-253) wrote the first truly Christian commentary on The Song of Songs, to which Bernard referred. Origen was a brilliant and ascetic figure in the fourth century Church whose supposed self-castration “for the kingdom of heaven,” following Saint Matthew’s suggestion<sup>46</sup> may have been to avoid temptation while teaching in a school for boys and girls. Or the act which was so emphasized by his critics, may have been invented by detractors. But the fourth century Church historian Eusebius believed the story and wrote that Origen had taken the Bible in “an absurdly literal sense” and called the act “proof of a mind youthful and immature, but at the same time of faith and self-mastery.”<sup>47</sup>

Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* has been called the first great work of Christian mysticism and, without doubt, Origen was one of the most extraordinary figures of early Christianity. It was he who established, once and for all, the Song of Songs as a book referring not to a Jewish God, but to Christ and the Church. He was a master of scripture in the original languages whose commentary (only fragments remain today) on the Song of Songs set the tone for all such commentaries that followed. The work was drawn upon by Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory the Great, Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux and many others who describe personal knowledge of God using the analogy of consummation of marriage.

But Origen had his detractors. In his *History of the Church*, the fourth century Church historian Eusebius conveys the intensity of the effort to undermine Christian interpretations of the Old Testament by quoting Porphyry’s attack on Origen. The Neoplatonist Porphyry says of the Christians that “In their eagerness to find, not a way to reject the depravity of the Jewish scriptures, but a means of explaining it away, they resorted to interpretations which cannot be reconciled or harmonized with those scriptures” And Porphyry becomes quite vitriolic, saying that “Enigmas is the pompous name they give to the perfectly plain statement of Moses, glorifying them as oracles full of hidden mysteries, and bewitching the critical faculty by their extravagant nonsense.”<sup>48</sup>

All of this was fairly typical of the first few centuries when everyone seemed to be writing a treatise “against,” someone else. The period can be confusing. Eusebius likes Origen but criticizes him for taking the Bible so literally, and he dislikes Origen’s teacher, Ammonius who “lapsed into paganism.” Moreover, Eusebius quotes Porphyry who dislikes Christians and Jews equally, but especially Origen for his Christian interpretations of The Old Testament. The whole Early Christian period was like musical chairs in which the ideas of the last person seated become accepted theology.

One way of the other, Origen remains a key figure in the development of Christian theology and, assuming Eusebius to be correct, the purposeful neutralization by Origen of his own sexuality (which he later regretted) makes his choice to comment on the erotic Song of Songs especially interesting. Since it is clear that both Jews and Christians were in

agreement that the Song of Songs holds the key to the greatest of secrets, it may not be coincidental that, over the centuries, there have been so many commentaries on the text by persons who record experience of union with God.

Certainly, the Song of Songs lends itself to the idea that some ancient author is presenting stages of marital intimacy as symbolic of steps toward the “kiss on the mouth” which is union with God. To many Christian theologians and Jewish rabbis the secret is the ecstatic union of self with the Word, a completion of the “liquification” of self into the pure sex which is God. Separateness is lost in an orgasm of momentary union in which the created becomes the creator.

But, Bernard makes clear that love is not always sweetness and light; it may be forceful and violent as it is related to the process of union with God. In this regard, McGinn underscores the difficult aspect of the encounter of the soul with the Word of which Bernard warns and comments that “What would seem like a paradox to the natural mind, Bernard would say is something well-known from the book of experience to those who have actually sensed the presence of the Bridegroom.”<sup>49</sup> And Bernard teaches that the experience of the Bridegroom may come to anyone.

In an unusually populist comment on The Song of Songs, Bernard says that the “*Nuptials of the Word*,” is available to every person, no matter how sinful they may have been: “Every soul, I say, standing thus under condemnation and without hope, has the power to turn and find it can not only breathe the fresh air of the hope of pardon and mercy, but also dare to aspire to the nuptials of the Word, not fearing to enter into alliance with God or to bear the sweet yoke of love with the King of angels.”<sup>50</sup>

However, despite Bernard’s apparent religious populism, it must be emphasized that he was addressing a very elitist group of seekers, medieval monks who were trained to look behind every word for hidden meaning and for whom the Nuptials of the Word were the primary goal.

This allegorical method of interpreting scripture seems to have waxed and waned in the first centuries of Christianity. The Neoplatonist Gregory of Nyssa, whose *On the Making of Man* (c.372-378) was translated by Eriugena, wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs of which Richard Norris argues that despite a fourth century Greek trend against allegory, Gregory tries “to cleanse away or purge or trivialize its marked, and cheerful, sexual eroticism.”<sup>51</sup> The document had to be approached with gravity and there can be no doubt that Bernard was reading the earlier commentaries on the Song of Songs as he developed his own interpretations.

Of course, one must be judicious about symbolic interpretations during a period when the Church was still fine tuning its theology. In the twelfth century climate of hyper-symbolism that the question was asked: “Why is Christ like a lobster?,” the answer being: because both are more beautiful in death. And, indeed, *The Song of Songs* was the subject of sermons by many who did not share Bernard’s experiential understanding but whose thought ran more in the direction of boiled lobsters.

To Bernard the most important part of the symbolic marriage is the consummation suggested in the first line in which the Bride says “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his

mouth.” In his interpretation the sleeping Bride is the *perfected* soul and the Bridegroom who is Christ, the Word, comes to her in an ecstatic sleep. “It is,” he says, “a slumber which is vital and watchful, which enlightens the heart, drives away death, and communicates eternal life.”<sup>52</sup> This union is the essence of Bernard’s theology of love: “I would count him blessed and holy to whom this rapture has been vouchsafed in this mortal life, for even an instant to lose yourself, as if you were emptied and lost and swallowed up in God, it is no human love; it is celestial.”<sup>53</sup>

The preoccupation of twelfth century mystics with divine union had been brought about through the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, of Maximus, and of Eriugena. However, although experience of unity with God was a key focus, interest in the Song of Songs as allegory for an ecstatic moment of enlightenment was beginning to diminish.<sup>54</sup> In fact it was not until four hundred years later that the next great interpreter of the book appeared. This was John of the Cross, a Spanish monk who suffered greatly at the hands of a vicious monastic Inquisition. He wrote a translation and commentary on the Song of Songs, as well as a poem, *Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom of Christ*, which emphasized the analogy of the process of unity with God as a marriage.

Medieval approaches to the Song of Songs are complex and often opaque, but the fact is that medieval mystics in search of divine union were clearly circling around the same question asked by contemporary scholars of Plato’s mysticism: Is God sex?

### *Jewish and Christian Interpretation of The Song of Songs*

The great Jewish mystic Maimonides, born during the last years of Bernard’s life, argued that the secrets (the “divine intention”) of the Torah, especially that of the Song of Songs, should be hidden from the masses. Judaism has always been protective of its mysteries and draws a sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane. Tradition isolates holy objects, holy books, holy persons, and holy ideas in ways that may not be entirely comprehensible to Christians. In any event, it seems unlikely that Bernard would have had any interest in the Jewish interpretation of these verses or the Jewish restrictions on dissemination of their symbolic interpretations.

Jewish belief that the Song of Songs represents a divine path to self-knowledge gathered strength in the Middle Ages and was a secret held for hundreds of years by the most devout of rabbis. But by the time of the philosopher and mathematician Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344), who wrote what may be called the definitive medieval Jewish commentary on the Song of Songs, so much had been published that his work could be forbidden only on the basis that it might be misunderstood.<sup>55</sup> So he taught openly, beginning with the most simple of premises, arguing that although perfection is unlikely, it is possible. He represented the knowledge of God taught by The Song of Songs to be a sacred legacy of every child of Israel which is meant to be studied with the utmost care and reverence.

The reasoned and cautious detail of the Jewish interpretation is very different from that of the Christians who emphasize that the New Law was built upon the Old Law and



that the only true understanding of this book is *a gift* given by Christ to each person who is a part of His Body—that is, of the Church. The Christian position on the Song of Songs is formalized by Origen writing that the Bride “is the Church who longs for union with Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

Bernard amplifies this idea, stressing the ecstasy of the ultimate kiss between the divine and incarnate mankind: “The mouth that kisses signifies the Word who assumes nature...the one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Jesus Christ.”<sup>57</sup> And his friend William of Thierry says the same thing although he tends to be more verbose: “Christ, the Bridegroom, offered to his Bride, the Church, so to speak, a kiss from heaven, when the Word made flesh drew so near to her that he wedded her to himself; and so wedded her that he united her to himself, in order that God might become man and man might become God.”<sup>58</sup>

Such arguments have value that is at once theological and historical. The Jewish and Christian explanations of divine passion in the Song of Songs fit equally well with the interpretations of scholars who describe the fragments of the Song of Songs as ancient erotic love poems. In any event, the book is unlike any other in the Bible and the philosophies of enlightenment which it has inspired are legitimate in their own right. The Song of Songs was a provocative topic of discussion to early Christianity, and throughout the Middle Ages, as it is to many theologians today. To Jews it remains the Holy of Holies and is traditionally read at Passover.

### *William of Thierry and Hildegard of Bingen*

In the background of Bernard’s lifetime there are two figures of major historical and spiritual significance. The first is his best friend, William of St. Thierry considered to be one of the great theologians of the twelfth century who offered immeasurable emotional and intellectual support and influenced many of Bernard’s political actions. The second was the Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), known for her extraordinary and detailed visions.

William of Thierry (c.1085-1148) was born in Lieges and like Bernard, was from a noble family. His early life is unclear, but he was certainly well-educated in classics and in the fathers of the church and, prior to becoming a Benedictine Monk, may have been taught by Anselm of Laon who supported the theology later to be called Scholasticism. He met Bernard at Clairvaux in 1118 and a year later was elected Abbot of the monastery at St. Thierry, a position which he would have declined had it not been for the insistence of Bernard.

William’s earliest writings were dedicated to Bernard who had dedicated two of his works to William who reciprocated with *Contemplation of God*, and *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*. He also wrote several treatises attempting to integrate the mysticism of East and West, including the ideas of Origen, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa. William of St.Thierry’s ideas have been called “an articulate restoration of the central principles of Neoplatonic philosophy in the twelfth century” which brought to mysticism a certain

orthodoxy and universality.<sup>59</sup>

William's "Golden Epistle," a letter written to assist in the education of novices is considered to be one of the great Medieval works on the value of contemplation. It is a summation of his theology, describing the stages of the soul's spiritual growth,<sup>60</sup> and William also wrote an extensive commentary on the Song of Songs. Ironically, however, although he struggled throughout his life in pursuit of divine unity, following the same course as Bernard, he reports that his prayers for enlightenment were unanswered.<sup>61</sup>

Hildegard of Bingham was another of the important religious figures in Bernard's lifetime. The "Sibyl of the Rhine," was a visionary, a musician, and a theologian whose works were inspirational and were unique to a woman of the Middle Ages. She worked for ten years on her book *Scivias* (a contraction of the Latin words *Scito vias Domini*, meaning *Know the ways of the Lord*). It is a very long illustrated record of her experiences in an inner world where the mysteries of the Old and New Testament were acted out before her. These visions, which dramatically framed Christian beliefs, were officially confirmed by the Church to be a divine gift. But she had critics. Some found her visions to be a simplistic and too-convenient promotion of the Church's party-line. Others accused her of creating a convent of lesbians. She was certainly a social climber.

Hildegard wrote a rather unctuous letter to Bernard saying "O venerable father Bernard, I lay my claim before you, for, highly honored by God, you bring fear to the immoral foolishness of this world and, in your intense zeal and burning love for the Son of God...I beseech you in the name of the Living God to give heed to my queries. Father, I am greatly disturbed by a vision which has appeared to me through divine revelation, a vision seen not with my fleshly eyes but only in my spirit. Wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition, I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express, but which the Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe."<sup>62</sup>

Many have suggested that the letter is a very astute move on the part of the Abbess, who would clearly benefit from the support of the Cistercian hierarchy, and that Bernard's reply was diplomatic under the circumstances. Putting her off quickly he wrote: "I am filled with joy at the Grace of God which is in you...since you have the inner knowledge and the anointing which teaches all things, what can I teach and counsel you?"<sup>63</sup>.

Church politics notwithstanding, Hildegard's remarkable and detailed Catholic visions represent a well-known stage in spiritual development. They are undoubtedly the product of a visual meditative discipline that is encouraged by many spiritual systems such as Tibetan Buddhism. In the West, Carl Jung described the practice as "active imagination," and others have encouraged techniques of controlled dream-like traveling in the mind through an "astral" realm above the normal waking condition. If there is some hesitation on Bernard's part in responding to Hildegard (whose visions were becoming very famous) it could be because, as he describes it, true unity with God is a spiritual state transcending thought and all of the senses, including inner sight and sound, upon which such visions are based.

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2. James Cotter Morison, *The Life and Times of Saint Bernard Abbot of Clairvaux*, London, 1884, 1-4. This is generally useful although, like most nineteenth century studies of Bernard, it incorporates questionable material written in support of petitions for his sainthood.
3. Bernard, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, I.1.
4. G. R. Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, Oxford, 2000, 7
5. McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, New York, 1994, 200.
6. Benedict, *The Holy Rule of the Most Holy Father Benedict*, LXXXIII. 30.
7. Conrad of Eberbach, *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux, A Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order, The Exordium Magnum*, trans. Benedict Ward and Paul Savage, Kentucky, 2012, 76.
8. McGinn, op.cit., 159.
9. Evans, op.cit., 10-11
10. McGinn, op.cit. 151-53
11. Evans, op.cit., xxx.
12. Adrian H. Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History*, Michigan, 1996, 195.
13. Bredero, op.cit., 196.
14. Evans, op.cit., 9.
15. Evans. op.cit., 166.
16. Boltterill, op.cit., 27.
17. Steven P. Marrone, "Medieval Philosophy in Context," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge, 2003, 24.
18. Evans op.cit., 87.
19. Evans, op.cit., 46-47.
20. Marrone, op.cit., 26-27.
21. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons On the Song of Songs*, 49.4.
22. John R. Sommerfeldt, *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Michigan 1991, 33, 40
23. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*, reprint 1939, Michigan 1990, 26.
24. Adrian H. Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux, Between Cult and History*, Michigan 1993, 4.
25. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 85.14.
26. Ibid, 74.5-7.
27. Ibid. 57.5
28. Benedict, op.cit., VII. 230.

29. Evans, opcit., 56.
30. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 52.6-7
31. Ibid, 5.14.30.
32. Bernard *On the Love of God*, X.28.
33. Maximus *Ambigua*, II, CXXII, 1202B. This condition of liquification is discussed at length by Gilson, opcit, 26-27.
34. Evans, op.cit. 54.
35. Bernard, *On Loving God*, 10.28.
36. Sommerfeldt, *Spiritual Teachings*, 17.
37. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 82.5.
38. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 23.20
39. Bernard, *On Conversion*, 17:30.
40. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 43, 3-4
41. Ibid. 4.1-2.
42. Ibid, 7.4.
43. Mishnah, Yadayim, III.5. Supposedly the speech took place at the first century Council of Jamnia where Jewish leaders were gathered to discuss the Canon of the Bible (books ruled authoritative) Also: Levi Ben Gershom (1288-1344) *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Yale, 1998, 113,n6. For an excellent discussion of the council see: Robert C. Newman, *The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon*, Westminster Theological Journal 38.4, 1976, 319-348.
44. Richard A. Norris, Jr., *The Song of Songs*, Michigan, 2003, x-xiv.
45. The only English translation of the fragmentary *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is included in a doctoral dissertation by Yancy Warren Smith, *Hippolytus Commentary on the Song of Songs in Social and Critical Context*, University of Texas, 2009.
46. Matthew 19:12: For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake.
47. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, New York 1965, 247.
48. Ibid, 258.
49. McGinn, op.cit, 203.
50. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 83.1.
51. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Trans and intro by Richard A. Norris, Jr., Atlanta, 2012, xxiii.
52. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 52.3.
53. Ibid, 10.27.
54. McGinn, opcit, 214.
55. Gershom, opcit, xxix.
56. Origen, *The Song of Songs, Commentaries and Homilies*, I.3.

57. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 2.3.
58. William of St. Thierry, *Exposition of the Song of Songs*, Massachusetts, 1968, 25.
59. Thomas Michael Tomasic, "Neoplatonism and the Mysticism of William of St. Thierry," *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed Paul E. Szarmach, Albany 1984, 53.
60. M. Basil Pennington, intro and ed. *William of St. Thierry: The Way to Divine Union*, New York 1998, 123ff.
61. Gilson, *op.cit.*, 69.
62. *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (Oxford University, 1994), 27-28, ep.1.
63. Bernard, Letter 366.

## 7. Chariot, Throne, and Kabbalah

The influence of Jewish mysticism cannot be overstated. It has been a powerful and largely secretive undercurrent of Western civilization from at least the first century BCE to the current era. Today these traditions are being widely published and are often promoted as part of fringe belief systems. In any event it is impossible to understand medieval developments without considering the groundwork established in the ancient world.



Late medieval Jewish mysticism is built upon two separate schools of thought. The first is *Chariot* mysticism, where the adept is carried upward to a vision of God as was Ezekiel. And the second is the tradition established by *The Sepher Yetzirah (Book of Formation)* offering a path to God consciousness through the power of the Hebrew letters. These were two different and distinct secret disciplines, with neither school being openly aware of the teaching of the other and with every effort being made to keep them separate.<sup>1</sup>

In the twelfth century the many diverse facets of the Jewish mystical tradition, oral and written, were brought together by a few men in France who called their new school of thought *Kabbalah*—meaning *tradition* or *oral law*. It was largely based upon the mysterious *Sepher Yetzirah* which, with its microscopic interpretation of holy scripture, proposes that there are ten developmental centers of energy of the Cosmos out of Nothingness into the material condition. To know God is to experience each of these ten energies which are mirrored in the human condition

This cosmology is a Jewish form of Neoplatonism with some roots in ancient astrological thought which, with its emphasis on number, has certain parallels in the teaching of Pythagoras: Numbers and Hebrew letters are explained as doorways; they are not merely symbols of forces, but are themselves forces which the mystic learns to use through exercises of contemplation.

Christianity offers no program of meditation comparable to the structure and specificity of esoteric Judaism. Whereas, in the Middle Ages the solitary monk may have reached the *unio mystica* through contemplation of the Christian mysteries, a few Jewish rabbis developed a complex system that they claim presents a roadmap to creation of the universe and to creation of the individual.

Theoretically, the Kabbalistic method is one of magical cause and effect: Using words of power one travels an inner road from one center of energy to another, reaches a specified condition of consciousness, and acquires knowledge and control of a level of spiritual energy. That the mystic must become a magician in the process is only incidental on the path of unity with the Divine.

The principle of ultimate Neoplatonic<sup>2</sup> return of the created to the creator is echoed

in the Talmud, which speaks of a future world of unimaginable peace and beauty, in which humanity will know something of God—but not all—since only God can know Himself.<sup>3</sup> This belief is a keystone of Jewish Mysticism and Aryeh Kaplan explains the limitations of enlightenment in the human condition:

God's ultimate goal in creation was the World to Come, where man could perceive a vision of God, not God himself, of course, but a vision. Perhaps through many filters, but still, a vision of God...the bliss of the Future World will be endless...everything about this Future World is totally beyond our powers of description. Even the visions of the greatest prophets will pale in comparison. It is something that no human mind can possibly imagine in this life. It cannot come through human understanding but only as a gift from God.<sup>4</sup>

Kaplan also teaches that “in order that we may approach Him, God created a dimension of nearness to his Being. By moving through this dimension, we are able to come closer and closer to God, even though we can never actually reach Him. This is what we call the Spiritual World.”<sup>5</sup>

Most religions suggest that within this Spiritual World there is some form of “Heaven”—a reward for those who have pursued the righteous path of a given belief system. But many visionaries suggest a profound evolutionary change in which what is now considered to be enlightenment will be the norm for humanity in the future. One Talmudic sage says that “In the future world there is no eating nor drinking nor propagation nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the divine presence.”<sup>6</sup>

The prediction is utopian, but Jewish mystics, such as Abraham Abulafia, say that one may reach some knowledge of this future perfection now. According to his teaching this may be brought about through special techniques with the *Seventy-two Names of God* and other Divine Names. And visions may be achieved by *weeping*, which has been used from the ancient world to the present day.

Also very common is self-hypnosis, for which Jewish tradition offers elaborate techniques said to free the mind from thought. For example, Scholem quotes from a text of about the year 1000 instructing that the adept “must fast a number of days and lay his head between his knees and whisper many hymns and songs whose texts are known from tradition.” And he adds that “The typical body posture of these ascetics is that of Elijah in his prayer on Mount Carmel. It is an attitude of deep self-oblivion which...is favorable to the induction of pre-hypnotic autosuggestion.”<sup>7</sup>

### *The Jewish Roots of Gnosticism*

Until recently it has been assumed that Gnosticism, which has been called “The most radically dualist of the ancient cults of salvation”<sup>8</sup> is primarily an early Christian

heresy. Today, however, Gnosticism is understood to have been a product of Judaism that actually predated Christianity. This is the conclusion of a scholarly debate begun in the late nineteenth century by the German scholar Moritz Friedländer who argued that the earliest Gnostics were Egyptian Jews.<sup>9</sup>

It is now accepted that Gnosticism is a form of Jewish heresy that emerged within the considerable Jewish population of Alexandria and spread out in the *diaspora* of the early first century. There was a schism between “conservatives” and “philosophers” whose principles had been developed in Egypt. And, although Hellenistic and early Christian ideas were grafted onto the movement, it was specifically Jewish and may even have helped to establish Judaism as a world religion.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the connection between Hebrew and Egyptian thought had existed for centuries, but it was especially significant as Alexandria became a central hub of Neoplatonism, of Coptic Christianity and of Jewish mystical thought. Between the first and the fourth centuries the tools of enlightenment and of magic tended to merge and the line between meditative exercises and magical spells was blurred. However common, magic was never quite acceptable. The Roman historian Suetonius reports that in the year 13 B.C.E. Augustus ordered the destruction of 2,000 magical papyri, a practice of burning books about magic and, not incidentally, the magicians that was continued for hundreds of years in the Christian era.

Like Judaism itself, the techniques of Hebrew mysticism and magic were not completely suppressed, but were carried with great reverence from one rabbi to the next through a secret oral tradition. These ideas have continued underground from the ancient world to the present without interruption. And for these many centuries there has been a quiet understanding among the priests of Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Christian religions that Jewish meditative exercises and invocations offer a powerful and unique doorway to individual cosmic consciousness. The irrepressibility of the exercises using the twenty-two Hebrew letters appears to stand as an affirmation of their effectiveness.

Fortunately, a few pieces of ancient magical formulae have been saved<sup>11</sup> and belief in the powerful significance of the Jewish mystical/magical tradition shines through.<sup>12</sup> In fragments of Greek papyri from the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, instructions draw upon many religions, but the Jewish, IAO, the Greek form of the Hebrew YHVH (יהוה) was of special importance.<sup>13</sup> For example, the greatest respect for Jewish magic is found in a recipe which warns: “Keep yourself pure, for this charm is Hebraic and is preserved among pure men.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, an undercurrent of Jewish mystical teaching, continuing unbroken from the ancient world into the present, has profoundly affected all other major forms of mystical expression.

### *Chariot and Palace Mysticism*

Realistically speaking, a person encountering these materials for the first time is



likely to find them frustrating and confusing. Palace Mysticism, Chariot Mysticism, Sepher Yetzirah and Kabbalah are systems which may take years of study to truly appreciate. The symbolic materials are very dense. Moreover, Jewish mysticism is an area in which there is great detail and frequent disagreement. Arguments among rabbis can be as heated and as difficult to follow as they are elegant—and the fact is that those who wrote these documents did not want them to be easily understood. They were conveying secrets.

In any event, the system of thought which came to be known as Kabbalah, and often referred to as the “hidden books” is the product of a very slow merging of Chariot (*Merkabah*) mysticism, Jewish Gnosticism, and the Hebrew letter correspondences of the *Sepher Yetzirah*.

The “Ascent to the Chariot” is the mystic’s attempt to experience the same vision as did Ezekiel, who saw a fiery chariot of “four living creatures” beside each of which was a wheel that “went in any direction without turning.” Above this was a Throne upon which God was seated (Ezekiel 1:4-26). and of which *The Greater Palaces* says that it “does not rest its feet upon the firm ground” and that “Like a bird it flies yet stands still.”<sup>15</sup>

So here again are statements which transcend simplicity of thought and which deny logic. The *God which is, yet is not* sits on a Throne which *flies, yet stands still*, carried by wheels *which turn, yet do not turn*. Such self-contradiction is the nature of mystical experience as “truth” is said to be constantly changing.

Closely linked to Chariot mysticism is Palace (*Hekalot*) mysticism, where the seeker must pass through six chambers of the heavenly palace to reach the Throne, a process which is cryptically called a *descent*. What this means is that before one can comprehend the nature of the Throne one must first reach a level of contemplation which transcends thought.

The descent and then ascent to the Chariot requires that the adept be a magician because at the doorway of each Palace stands a *Gatekeeper* angel who can only be passed if he holds the appropriate magical seals and demonstrates expertise in the Torah. Moreover, there are *Intercessor* angels whose role is both to protect the divine sphere from the impure and to aid those who are worthy to enter it. And, finally, at the doorway of the Seventh Palace, the adept must show the “Great Seal of the Frightful Crown.” Overall it seems clear that whatever these angelic gatekeepers may be, they represent forces which are a powerful impediment to the soul attempting to reach this high level.

All of this refers to conditions of subjective consciousness as the soul encounters refinements of objective spirit. The individual’s initiation into the “many mansions” (John 14:2) could be viewed as analogous to a computer game where the player acquires the “magical tools and weapons” required to navigate each level. So every new “Palace” requires new “tools.” Moreover the readjustment of consciousness to each experience may demonstrate that a great deal of what is assumed to be symbolic description (such as the idea of magical seals) is actually pointedly descriptive.

There are three fragmentary Jewish documents offering symbolic guidance on the mystical path, all based upon an ancient initiatory tradition. These books are: *The Greater*

*Palaces* describing the enlightenment of Rabbi Ishmael, *The Lesser Palaces* devoted to the ascent to God of Rabbi Akiva, and the *Hebrew Book of Enoch* (*Enoch 3*).

Enoch is a Biblical figure who represents the ideal of enlightenment and complete union with God. He is the messiah, the chosen one, the mediator between Israel and God. The Book of Genesis (5:23) says of him: “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.” And the story is amplified in *The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, alleged to be the work of Rabbi Ishmael Ben Elisha describing his own ascent to the Chariot. In this book Enoch himself explains to Ishmael how he was carried into heaven in a fiery chariot and how he became the all-powerful man/angel Metatron.

Metatron is the lesser embodiment of the “unpronounceable” Hebrew name of God, YHVH.<sup>16</sup> But God has many names which he teaches the mystic to use. In his *Hidden and Manifest God* Peter Schäffer sums up the principle saying that “Through the names hidden in the Torah, man has God at his disposal, as a result he has been given precisely the means by which he becomes master of the earth and heaven.” The adept learns to use the magical power of the divine name.”<sup>17</sup>

Assertions such as this must have generated extraordinary, though discreet, curiosity among Catholic theologians, especially during the Middle Ages. But the result of Christian and Jewish mystical paths are identical. The Jew is ultimately the YHVH as the Christian is the Word. YHVH and Word both mean Logos, the Lesser Creator. Moreover, as the *Body of Christ* is the spiritual collective of those who accept Christ as the messiah, *Israel* refers to the spiritual body of Judaism.

Enoch tells Ismael, the seeker, about his own introduction to the mysterious *Shekinah*, the “Holy Spirit” of God. Enoch is the initiator as he explains to Ismael that, although the *Shekinah* was taken from humanity at the “expulsion” into matter, he regained the lost knowledge of Her as he became the lesser YHVH and now rises and falls beside Her in a continuous flow of divine energy. The idea is not that the adept suddenly becomes the man/angel, but that, through contemplation, the mystic earns self-knowledge, an understanding that he is the YHVH (*Ha Shem, Spirit of Ruach*) and an integral part of flow the of opposites which eternally regenerate each other.

As in Christianity, *The Greater Palaces* underscores the necessity of the soul becoming like the divine which it seeks. It says, “Who is like our King, who is among all the lofty ones who lay hold upon kingship; who is like the Lord our God?” And it reinforces the idea found in both Pseudo-Dionysius and Bernard, that contact with the divine brings about a dissolution of what is believed to be the self. This can be painful. There is agreement among all mystical systems that approach to God can be traumatic—something like splicing two electrical wires together without the precaution of wearing gloves. But the directions for cautiously wiring into the energies of the universe, such as are given in the *Greater Palaces*, demand a certain willing suspension of disbelief about the details.

The *Greater Palaces* teaches that the seeker hears the voices of six servants who carry the Throne: One voice brings pain and confusion, while another causes the seeker to

“pour himself out like a pitcher and to be utterly *dissolved* into blood. Then his bile is *dissolved* and becomes like water.”<sup>18</sup> Saint Bernard says the same thing but much less colorfully and with assurances that the love of Christ will get the soul through the inevitable rough spots.

If there is a problem with such traditional texts it is that they were never intended to be passed down dispassionately. They were given by teacher to student with hand-holding and kind encouragement or rebuke, within the context of a specific tradition. The humanity of a shared path toward God consciousness may be missing when the written word is taken by itself—especially in fragmentary condition—as are all of the early Jewish mystical texts.

Nevertheless, increased popular attention to Jewish mysticism is bringing many, who in the past would never have discussed the personal effects of inner encounters, to provide significant psychological clues to the process. Eliahu Klein offers a useful insight about the initiation of the Palaces. He says “*Warning for the Reader!* A reader must know how to sift all the layers that are happening simultaneously.” He advises the reader to “hold your head in one place,” and to “keep your wits about you” And he states that a person “must intuit these secrets within the reading,” adding that “This is how I have been taught and how my teachers have been taught.”<sup>19</sup>

Klein is suggesting that the experience of the mystic is not linear, but is one of *multiple dimensions at once*, an idea underscored in *The Hebrew Book of Enoch* as Rabbi Ishmael, in the role of High Priest explains: “I ascended on high to behold the vision of the Chariot and entered the six halls, *one within the other*.” Each of these halls was a “heaven”—presumably a condition of consciousness—the seventh of which contained the Throne.

And to all of this, Peter Schäffer adds his interpretation that Palace initiation fulfills the primary goal of the Jewish mystic which is to pronounce the unpronounceable Name of God. He asserts that: “The adept who is instructed by Akiva does not enter into a state of ecstatic rapture that transforms him psychically or even physically into the seventh palace, but at most falls into a trance and is thereby able, without incurring injury to himself or his environment, to utter the ineffable name of God; that is, to use the magical power of The divine name”<sup>20</sup>

### *Sepher Yetzirah, The Book of Formation*

*The Sepher Yetzirah* is a very curious book often claimed to be pre-biblical and to have been written by Abraham.<sup>21</sup> It presents the essential core of the Jewish mystical cosmology upon which twelfth century Kabbalah was based but which, as Idel says “remains an enigma for modern scholarship.”<sup>22</sup> The book undoubtedly derives from an oral tradition and is generally explained as a manual of instruction in magic and meditation. Indeed, in the ancient world mysticism and magic usually went hand in hand although purists tend to distance themselves from the magic and emphasize the system as one of sequential meditative exercises which build toward the experience of union with the divine.

In *The Sepher Yetzirah* ten centers of energy called *Sephirot* (sing. *Sephira*) emerge from Nothingness and are connected by twenty-two *Paths* which are the living Hebrew letters. By use of these numbers and letters, it is said that the mystic may find not only the means for initiation into the experience of multiple dimensions but the ability to change the nature of perceived reality.

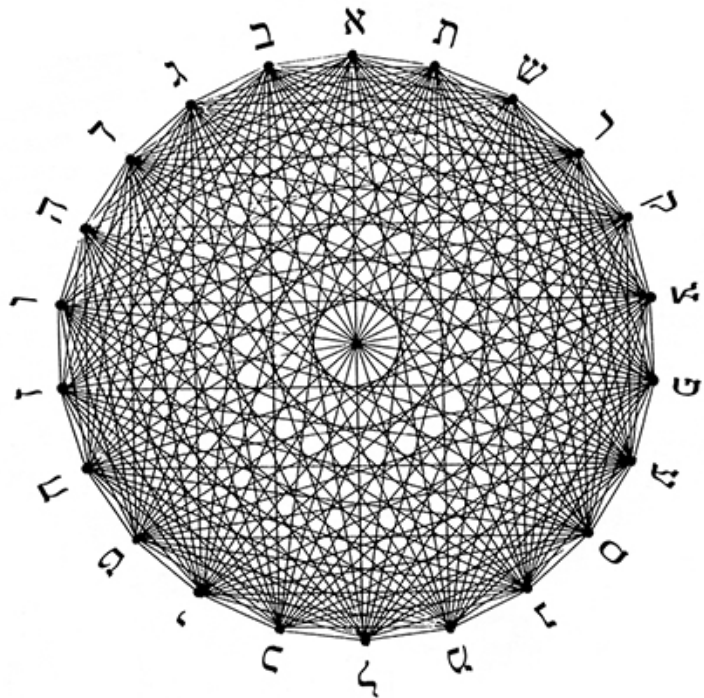
Aryeh Kaplan provides some explanation of the experience of the mystic. He refers to the “Lightning flash” by which the Sephirot were created (mentioned in Ezekiel 1:14) and, agreeing with Plato and others about the subtle and momentary nature of the *unio mystica*. He says that

“The Sephirot can only be visualized for an instant, and then they vanish...a clear vision of the Sephirot would be possible in theory, but only if the mind were absolutely still and calm. The slightest exterior thought, however, destroys the image completely. When the mind is in a state where it can visualize the Sephirot, it is disturbed by the most minute distractions.”<sup>23</sup>

Kaplan further explains that the 32 paths are paralleled in the human nervous system and that through the use of these paths one may achieve inner knowledge. And he brings a human perspective, emphasizing that the ways to self-knowledge are “private paths which must be blazed by each individual. There is no open highway to the mysteries—each individual must discover his own path.”<sup>24</sup> So by this measure, and, despite the claim of each initiatory system to hold the perfect key to enlightenment, the quest for self-knowledge is ultimately completely personal.

However, the intellectual stimulus of the *Sepher Yetzirah* is not easily translated into individual terms. It presents a seemingly endless number of interactions between Hebrew letters, the directions of the compass, the parts of the body and the significance of each in the scheme of the divine emanation out of Nothing. The individual’s contemplation happens within a five dimensional continuum: three dimensions of *space*, a dimension of *time* and a fifth dimension of *spirit*, which is the soul.<sup>25</sup>

On the right an illustration, adapted from Kaplan’s *Sepher Yetzirah*, shows the symbolism and intricacy of Kabbalistic initiatory methodology. Each of the 22 letters



of the Hebrew alphabet, connected to all the others and forming 231 lines, is an object of meditation. The line connecting two letters is called a “Gate.” The Sepher Yetzirah says cryptically: “Twentytwo foundation letters. He placed them in a circle like a wall with 231 Gates. The circles oscillate back and forth.” There is no parallel in Christian mysticism to the abstraction of such meditation on the energies taught to be continuously forming the cosmos. And Kaplan explains the initiatory process with a candor that is unique

“When a person enters into the mysteries he must parallel the sequence of creation. First he enters the Universe of Chaos (Tohu). His mind is filled with confused transient images...The Sephirot are perceived as disconnected images, where no relationship between them can be seen... The initiate can then enter Universe of Rectification, where the Sefirot are connected...there one must combine all of the Sephirot to form a single body.”<sup>26</sup>

Although on the surface, this explanation appears obtuse, it echoes the intent of all enlightenment systems. The question of the Greeks was: “How does the one become many?” And the question of all the mysteries is: “How do the many become one?”

### *Kabbalah*

Kabbalistic thought is deeply rooted in the different names of God and in the centers of energy through which the universe and the individual are being continuously created. God is the *Macrocosm*, the Greater Cosmos, while each person is a *Microcosm*, a Cosmos in Miniature. And while the God of Augustine is primarily loving and merciful, the God of Abraham is almighty and is to be obeyed and feared. But God protects his children and will reveal His many names to those who ask reverently, and although most will fail, the one who learns to use them will rule the world.

The catch is that to “pronounce” a name, the individual must become what the name represents. So, moving from name to name is to move from one dimension of consciousness to another—each more advanced and challenging than the last.

The Kabbalah crystalizes the idea of *Sephirot* first encountered in *The Sepher Yetzirah*, and teaches that they interact in a way symbolically expressed as “Father, Mother and Son.” This is repeated at different and simultaneous levels of density: a Sephira of masculine *force* stimulates one of feminine *form* and produces a third Sephira that balances these opposites.

The Son, who is both resolution and perfection of the energies of the “male” Father” and the “female” Mother, rules over the outward expression (Kingdom) of the manifest universe. It is a pattern familiar to world mythology. It is an archetypal trinity in which Carl Jung found the key to human nature and addressed in psychological terms. Returning upwards on the path toward enlightenment through resolution of inner opposites, the individual soul strives to regain the self-consciousness that was lost with a “fall” into the density of matter.

Before the twelfth century a few very small groups held the Kabbalah with such secrecy, that many of the greatest rabbinical leaders had no idea that it existed. The first to reveal the principles of this mysticism were the Kabbalists of Provence<sup>27</sup> including Isaac the Blind who has been called the “Father of Kabbalah.” Perhaps ironically, these men were free from the restriction on dissemination of Jewish esotericism because they were not officially considered to be experts in Jewish law.<sup>28</sup>

The earliest Kabbalistic thought, associated with the Jewish Gnostic tradition and with Chariot mysticism<sup>29</sup> was in the circle of Isaac the Blind where the term Kabbalah first came into use.<sup>30</sup> Isaac, who wrote the first commentary on *The Sepher Yetzirah* stresses the book’s meditative aspects and set a tone for the new movement.

He is the central figure of Kabbalah in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was among those who believed that the Kabbalah should never be revealed to the public. Isaac was certainly outraged by the very explicit books being made public by Spanish Kabbalists, and Scholem points out that “From the very beginning two opposing tendencies appear among the Kabbalists, the first seeking to limit the Kabbalah to closed circles as a definitely esoteric system, and the second wishing to spread its influence among the people at large.”<sup>31</sup>

With those who followed Isaac the Blind, and in favor of openness, was the brilliant and prolific Abraham Abulafia, (1240-1291). He taught that at the highest levels of concentration it is indeed possible for the mystic to alter the laws of nature but was opposed to the practice and insisted that the philosopher should seek only spiritual enlightenment. He was founder of a school that has been called “ecstatic” Kabbalah to separate it from rationalist approach that was to appear in the Zohar centuries later.

To a considerable extent Abulafia synthesizes earlier ideas, including Sufi principles and time-honored Eastern meditative practices.. His system includes techniques consistent with Yoga in which a sort of radiant electrical energy (which the Hindus call *Shakti*) is moved throughout the body by the mind. This involves 1) A controlled use of breath 2) A word which is *vibrated* to enervate a particular center of activity in the body 3) Control of the Inner light, the divine essence and source of manifestation, which creates a vision from the unconscious, or which completely stills the mind from all thought and feeling—leading to a higher level of consciousness.

The pronunciation of the names of God is to be accompanied by specific head motions, such as the actual tracing of a Hebrew letter, and by certain hand motions. Moreover, Abulafia taught that the ways of *singing* the God Names and letters were relative to a division of years, months and days and that correct pronunciation was linked to these divisions of time.<sup>32</sup> Some of his meditative practices involved concentration on sexual union.

The influx of divine energy, resulting from his contemplative exercises, produced in Abulafia a significantly increased sexual drive—and he confessed that he was taken to frequent masturbation. “For fifteen years,” he said “Satan was at my right hand.” He was deeply pained by the “spilling of the seed” which the Talmud likens to murder. And following scripture, Aryeh Kaplan points out, disapprovingly, that the task of the Kabbalist is to use the intellect and the imagination to reach the highest levels of the Divine and that

this process is disrupted when imagination is used to conjure up sexual fantasies.<sup>33</sup>

Despite some personal diversion from accepted practice, Abulafia's work was an inspiration for a Christian form of Kabbalah which first appeared in fifteenth century Italy and which ultimately turned into Rosicrucianism and other forms of modern occultism. The influence of his very detailed methods of fasting, recitation of Divine Names, with controlled breathing and movement of the head and hands, was very widespread.<sup>34</sup> Moreover Abulafia's ideas appealed to the creative temperament: letters are to be sung and imagined in a flaming circle with varying colors.<sup>35</sup> Such a variety of techniques and emphasis on imagination, are in stark contrast to the teaching of most mystics of his day who insisted that there was only one way to reach divine union.

Among the more important of Abulafia's contributions were his descriptions of elaborate visions in the form of circles, Kabbalistic *mandalas* which seem to be identical in psychology and in symbolism with those later proposed by Carl Jung.<sup>36</sup> In this regard Moshe Idel calls these circles archetypal, and comments on the "mandala or circle which forms the central object of meditation in Buddhist and Hindu practice...from this point of view one may see in Abulafia's vision additional evidence for the appearance of the archetype of the mandala; like it, the sphere reveals both the structure of the universe and of man and of those powers acting within them."<sup>37</sup> In Christianity this archetypal mandala is found, as has been mentioned, in the drawings of Hildegard of Bingen and in the rose windows of the medieval Christian churches.

The circle is the perfect symbol of the *unio mystica*. It represents what Abulafia describes as a fusion of the divine and human intellect that happens through the *reduction* of the human being to its intellectual faculty.<sup>38</sup> This reduction or simplification to the Intellectual Self has more often been described as a "dissolution" of all that which surrounds it.

Pursuing what he believed to be a divine calling to teach the techniques for attaining ecstasy to anyone who would listen, Abulafia roamed from city to city preaching to Jews and Christians alike with what Idel calls "prophetic and messianic pretensions."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Abulafia's autobiographical writings are unusual in the extent of their egocentricity and assertions of his own divinity. While many followed him as the prophet which he claimed to be, others found him to be annoying and abrasive.

In fact, Abulafia describes persecution by fellow Jews for his interpretations of the revered Jewish philosopher Maimonides and his *Guide to the Perplexed*, which were considered odd, as well as for his peculiar statements about his intention to meet with the Pope. Such a meeting was to fulfill the demands of a vision which he experienced in 1270, at about the same time he began studies of the Kabbalah, telling him that he must meet with the Christian pontiff. Abulafia was not discouraged by the fact that his requests to meet with the Pope had been answered with the dire threat that if he should ever dare to appear at the Vatican he could be burned at the stake.

In 1280, a full decade later, Abulafia made his well-known trip to Rome. of which he wrote:

“I had been inspired by the Lord to go to Rome and there to convert Pope Nicholas III to Judaism...My plans were to look up the Pope the day before Rosh Hashana, 1280. The Pontiff, who was then in Suriana, a day’s distance from Rome, upon being informed of my coming, arranged for a stake to be erected near the inner gate of the town so as to be spared the inconvenience of an audience with me.”<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, Abulafia traveled to Suriano in search of Nicholas III and reports that

“Just as I was passing through the outer gate a herald came running toward me and announced that the Pope had died suddenly during the preceding night. Returning to Rome two days later, I was seized by some Franciscan friars and imprisoned for twenty-eight days, being finally released on the first day of Hevshan. Such are the glorious miracles that the Lord has wrought with me and his faithful servants.”<sup>41</sup>

One year later, after his miraculous escape from being burned alive, he was in Sicily carrying on his teaching and messianic activities.<sup>42</sup> Abulafia continued his preaching and collected a large group of devoted followers as well as some very verbal opponents. But, overall, he emerges as one of the greatest and seminal figures of the Kabbalah. He was a prolific writer whose work formed much of the framework for *The Zohar*, and for the modern Kabbalah which emerged in sixteenth century Safed (Northern Israel).

### *The Zohar*

The “Holy Zohar,” often called the Greatest of all Kabbalist works next to the *Sepher Yetzirah*, was long accepted as having been written in ancient Palestine and was for centuries approached by the uninitiated with a sense of awe and trepidation because of its “magic.” It was even believed that the author entered a paranormal state during which the books were dictated to him by deceased sages.

For centuries The Zohar was assumed to have been written by a second century rabbi, Simeon ben Yohai who, in the book, describes a conference of rabbis discussing a key principle of Jewish mysticism: it is asserted that when Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai, God gave him secrets to the interpretation of its words, and that these secrets were known to the ancient prophets. So, theoretically, there are two meanings to each word and letter of the Five Books of Moses: that which is literal, and public, and that which is the true key to the creation and machinery of the universe.

The Kabbalah, with its Sephirot and Paths and its endless permutations of Hebrew letters, all derived from the Torah, is explained as the gift of God to Moses—the secret way to enlightenment. Today, however, the Zohar is understood to have been written by a thirteenth century Spaniard, Moses de Leon, under the influence of Isaac the Blind’s perspective on the *Sepher Yetzirah*. Facts notwithstanding, the confusing nature of its



texts certainly added to the sense of mystery surrounding The Zohar. In his introduction to the first English translation, by Sperling and Simon in 1934, J. Abelson wrote that:

“The Zohar is a congeries of treatises, texts, extracts or fragments of texts, belonging to different periods, but all resembling one another in their method of mystical interpretation of the Torah as well as in the baffling anonymity in which they are shrouded. The ways in which these component parts are pieced together strikes one as arbitrary in the extreme. They often appear to bear little or no relation to that which precedes or follows...And yet, with all faults, the Zohar appeals to many Jews in a way that makes them regard it was the most sacred of sacred books. For it mirrors Judaism as an intensely vital religion of the spirit. More overpoweringly than any other book or code, even more than the Bible, does it give to the Jew the conviction of an inner, unseen, universe—an eternal moral order.”<sup>43</sup>

*Zohar*, which literally means *splendor* or *radiance*, is not easily approached. Its texts are so strangely random that there have been many treatises attempting to explain them, as well as dictionaries of Zoharic language and of symbolism to help those who find the work confusing.<sup>44</sup> The books discuss the nature of God and of man, of creation, of the hidden worlds of angels and demons, of reincarnation, and the wisdom of those who have attained the *unio mystica*. The text runs the gamut from the impossibly complex symbolism of the individual hairs on the beard of Macroprosopus (the anthropomorphized creator), to a story about God’s creation of the Hebrew alphabet charming enough to delight any child.

But, underlying the Zohar’s circuitous commentaries on the five books of Moses, is the idea that, correctly understood, the Torah is the preeminent path to enlightenment. The Torah, God’s gift to Israel, offers initiation. It affirms that the Creator wants the created to seek Him out and all mystery schools agree that Divine Light will ultimately be seen by those who struggle faithfully in the dark. At the end of the search for guidance is the radiant Zohar, the origin of all creation which was made to shine by the Most Mysterious.<sup>45</sup>

With its recurrent emphasis on Kabbalistic principles (although the word “Kabbalah” does not appear in the Zohar) it acquired an extraordinary following. Nevertheless, what has been described as the Zohar’s “aura of supreme sanctity” was not associated with it until long after it was written.

Originally the work was unknown outside of a small group of Spanish Kabbalists.<sup>46</sup> But it attained almost universal recognition among Jews after the expulsion from Spain. This is of particular interest in that one of the earliest arguments among Kabbalists, continues, even into the present day, between those who would limit such knowledge to a select few, and those who believe that it should be freely available to everyone<sup>47</sup> as did Abulafia and Moses de Leon. The issue remains basic and asks whether or not the path of enlightenment should be accessible, or even possible, for everyone.

In the thirteenth century the question became more than academic, for as rationalist Spanish Jewry declined, the esoteric doctrine of Kabbalah began to be viewed increasingly

as the last hope for the spiritual salvation of a decimated people. Thus knowledge of the Zohar which had begun with a small and closed circle of scholars, became increasingly available to the masses. The book, accepted as being very ancient, became shrouded in mysterious sanctity. Isolated and anxious Jews saw in the Zohar a light which would lead them spiritually, as well as a secure reinforcement of the idea that a messiah would soon appear, and that their suffering would thus be eased. Among the Jews, Talmud and Zohar were considered to be two aspects of divine revelation, one open to all and the other hidden.<sup>48</sup>

The Zohar suggests that in the process of individual enlightenment the Shekinah plays as significant a part as it did in the initiation of Enoch (embodiment of the perfected human). Among the most powerful symbolic figures of The Zohar, the Shekinah is “The Bride,” (certainly a reference to the *Song of Songs*) the “Mother of the World,” and the consort of God who walks the earth. She was separated from God by the emanation of the material world and thus shares the exile of Israel.

According to The Zohar she ascends daily into the heavens and feeds the angels, a story undoubtedly taken from that of Mary Magdalene appearing in *The Golden Legend*, written slightly earlier than the Zohar and quite famous at the time. In that book Mary Magdalene is described as carried by angels into the sky each day.<sup>49</sup> And one must also observe that the complex iconography of Shekinah bears remarkable similarities to non-canonical symbolism being promulgated about the Virgin Mary at the same time and in the same geographical region of Southern France and Northern Spain from which the Kabbalah emerged.<sup>50</sup>

The author of the Zohar, Moses de Leon, was born in Leon, Spain, a town at dead center of the pilgrimages established by the Cluniac order, from France to the Shrine of Saint James at the Spanish church of Santiago de Compostela. The priories along the pilgrimage route in Northern Spain were deeply involved in the Cult of the Virgin which had been established by Saint Anselm and was emphasized by Saint Bernard in the mid-twelfth century. So in the thirteenth century anyone, whether Jew, Muslim, or Christian would have known the details of the Virgin’s mythology.

Certainly the initiatory principles of the Zohar, such as the ubiquitous mention of *Divine Light*, or the cosmology of the Sephirot drawn from the *Sepher Yetzirah*—though presented in the context of traditional Jewish culture and laws—cannot be divorced from the Spanish Christian culture in which Moses de Leon combined and interpreted the various texts.

Despite the questions of sources and the complexity of its structure, the Zohar encapsulates the most important idea of Jewish mysticism, which is that the Torah is the gift of God to the soul of the Jewish people, *Israel*, and that everything needed to see Him face to face, is hidden in the Torah.

1. Aryeh Kaplan, *Sepher Yetzirah, The Book of Creation*, Massachusetts 1997, ix.
2. The relationship between Kabbalah and Neoplatonism is explored in an article by Moshe Idel, "Jewish Kabbalism and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," in *Neoplatonism and New Jewish Thought*, ed. Leon E. Goodman, New York, 1992, 325ff.
3. Aryeh Kaplan, *Sepher Yetzirah*, 248.
4. Ibid, 249,
5. Ibid, 248
6. Babylonian Talmud: Berakoth, Folio 17a.
7. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Jerusalem, New York 1977 (orig)1941, 49.
8. *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* ed. Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, Princeton, 1999, 59.
9. Wendy E. Helligman, *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*, Maryland 1994, 320.
10. The entire debate and Friedländer's arguments are presented by Berger A. Pearson in *Gnosticism, Judaism and Egyptian Christianity*, 2006, 12-28.
11. See: *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Chicago, 1992, passim.
12. Gershom Scholem examines the relationship between Palace Mysticism and the Magical Papyri in "The Theurgic Elements of the Lesser Hekhaloth and the Magical Papyri," *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1965, 75
13. Betz, vlvii. Among the incantations are calls to "The mighty ADONAIOS," "Setting and rising ELOAIOS," Betz,11.
14. This is in an invocation to the great SABAOTH Betz. 97.
15. *Hekhalhot Rabbati* 98.
16. Peter Schäffer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Albany, 1992, 149.
17. Ibid, 50.
18. In the ancient world blood (air), yellow bile (fire), black bile (earth), and phlegm (water) were the humors essential to life.
19. Eliahu J. Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation: The Mysticism of Isaac Luria*, Berkeley, 2005, 28.
20. Schäffer, 154.
21. Kaplan, ix.
22. Moshe Idel "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in Middle Ages and Renaissance," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Leon E. Goodman, New York 1992.
23. Kaplan, *Sepher Yetzirah.*, 52.
24. Ibid, 10.

25. Ibid, 44
26. Ibid, 141
27. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Maine, 1982, 117.
28. Joseph Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, trans. and intro. Avi Weinstein, San Francisco, 1994.
29. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York 1974 (orig 1944) 42.
30. Ibid, 6.
31. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 50
32. Kaplan, *Meditation*, 79.
33. Ibid, 63-4.
34. Idel, *New Perspectives*, 101.
35. Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, New York, 1988, 14ff.
36. Idel, *New Perspectives*, 102.
37. Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 112.
38. Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, New York, 1988, 18.
39. Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 3.
40. Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, *The Path of the Names: Writings by Abraham ben Abulafia*, ed David Meltzer, Berkeley, 1976, 13-14.
41. Ibid.
42. Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 2-3.
43. *The Zohar*, Intro. Dr. J. Abelson, New York, 1973, xi-xii.
44. Idel *New Perspectives*, 216.
45. Zohar 15a.
46. Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, v.1, Oxford, 1991, 23.
47. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 50.
48. Tishby v.1, 26. It was Christians in Renaissance Italy and Germany who set the Talmud and the Zohar against each other. Christians found in the Zohar a book that embodied the most pure of spiritual teaching of Judaism which they believed was identical with Christianity. The Talmud was, on the other hand, filled with error and deception. The practical result was that in the Renaissance at the same time some Christians were ordering that the Talmud be burned, other Christians were helping to see that the Zohar was printed and widely disseminated. Tishby 25.
49. Jacobus de Voragine *The Golden Legend*, New York 1941, 361, The Latin original is from the thirteenth century.
50. The effect of Christianity on the Zohar is discussed by Yehuda Liebes in "Christian Influences on the Zohar," in his book *Studies in the Zohar*, New York 1993, 139-161.

## 8. Meister Eckhart: The Wayless Way

(1260-1328)

The negative theology of Meister Eckhart is at the same time the most rewarding and the most obscure in all of Christian mysticism. One cannot say what God is, but one also cannot say what God is not. Moreover, nothing is exactly nothing and there are nothings within nothing.

Eckhart taught that all human knowledge is transitory although what he, himself, knew was truly encyclopedic. He was intimately familiar with all that preceded him—with Plato and Aristotle, with Plotinus and with the seminal schools of Alexandria that merged Christian and Jewish mysticism. Moreover, he was heir to the theological principles of Pseudo-Dionysius and to the negative theological complexities of John Scotus Eriugena.

Eckhart brought the negative mysticism of the Greek Church into the Latin mainstream, but his teaching is far more personal and goal directed than was that of Eriugena, whose *Periphyseon* presents a very classical and theoretical point of view. Eckhart's emphasis was more on the human values needed for the soul to recognize its place in humanity's ultimate return to an inexplicable nothingness.

Despite differences, Eriugena and Eckhart were both Christian Neoplatonists, a philosophy based upon a principle of enlightened return to the divine source which has been better known in the East than in the West. In this regard Dom Bede Griffiths, a British Benedictine monk living in India explained that: "Neoplatonism, as found in Plotinus and developed by St. Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite, is the nearest equivalent in the West of the Vedantic tradition of Hinduism in the East."<sup>1</sup>

Meister Eckhart was well-informed about both Eastern and Western thought, expressing special respect for the Arab philosopher Avicenna and for the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. He was a brilliant and curious Scholastic who, while following the initiatory tracks of Pseudo-Dionysius, must have been aware of Kabbalistic methodology and its emphasis on individual work toward the "negative limitless light."



**Meister Eckhart**

*"Theologians may quarrel,  
but the mystics of the world  
speak the same language."*

### *The Dominicans*

Monastic innovations in the thirteenth century, which has been called the "Golden age of medieval civilization," have been explained as a reaction against the political

corruption and decadent display of wealth by the twelfth century Catholic hierarchy. They have also been explained as the result of urbanization, the movement of a population into the cities and towns from what were small farming communities. In fact, medieval society was largely agricultural until the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Church faced the attack of dualist heresies, such as Manichaeism, which were being imported from the East and which by 1200 represented a serious threat.

The solution was the creation of a new order of friars with unique freedoms and abilities geared to solving the problems of the times. These were *The Friars Preachers*, later to be called *Dominicans*, after its Spanish founder, Dominic de Guzman.

Bennett points out that they developed three new methods of dealing with problems of heresy. The first was diplomacy: compromise with the enemy using arguments of reasoned theology. The second was a revival of preaching which was “an almost forgotten art, setting orthodox truth clearly before those who had fallen into error.” And the third method, should all else fail, was the dreaded Inquisition.<sup>2</sup>

The Dominicans were a dynamic and intellectually creative group that was instrumental in the development of the modern university. Their well-reasoned sermons were a new tool of the Church and—following in the footsteps of fellow Dominicans, Albert and Thomas Aquinas—Meister Eckhart became one of the great evangelists of all time. His sermons, in Latin and in German run the gamut from the mundane and entertaining to the most complex and brilliant of thoughts.

In their efforts to forcefully underscore the truth of Christianity, the Dominicans not only collected vast knowledge, but they organized formal debates, “disputations,” aimed at showing the truth of Christianity and at demonstrating the arrogant failure of all challenging belief systems. The best known of these intellectual confrontations were those in which the greatest of Jewish Rabbis and Christian theologians rationally argued against one another. These debates are milestones of medieval history.

Beyond supposedly demonstrating that Christianity was a gift of God to mankind, these debates made clear the special value to the Church of *Scholasticism*. This was not a philosophy, but was a method of learning in which students were taught to argue all aspects of a question and to take sides to which they might be fundamentally opposed.<sup>3</sup> But not everyone approved the “reasoned disputation,” which Aquinas and then Eckhart advocated. The approach was opposed by some who had been taught in the conservative Augustinian tradition and who refused to accept the new Aristotelianism of Aquinas. Such harsh criticism ultimately caused a great deal of trouble for both Aquinas and Eckhart.

But in the thirteenth century, the pendulum swung. The new reason was almost stylish, as Paris became the center of intellectual and political power for the Dominicans. Here they established a school at the Convent of St. Jacques—eventually becoming the order’s first *studium generale*, an independent corporation of masters and students, answerable only to the Pope. The Studium provided the formal structure of a university education in the liberal arts.

## *A Dominican Life*

Eckhart von Hochheim was born about 1260 in a village in Northeastern Germany. Little is known about his family, although his father was probably a knight and Eckhart was certainly raised in a very comfortable Christian environment.

At about fifteen, he entered the Dominican noviciate at Ehrfurt and upon completion of his studies five years later, was sent for further study to the Dominican House of Studies at Cologne. The House was then a major center of learning and a hub of mysticism where Eckhart would have known Albert the Great, the elderly and venerable teacher of Thomas Aquinas, who was absorbed in the ancient mystical tradition of Christian Neoplatonism<sup>4</sup> and Aristotelian logic.

In 1293 Eckhart was ordained a priest and was sent to Paris. Nine years later, he became a *Magister in Theologia*, the greatest academic honor of the thirteenth century and one which led to Meister Eckhart being appointed to some of the most important positions in the Dominican order. At forty-two years of age he was considered to be one of the greatest teachers of Catholic principles and was entrusted with the training of youth, and of the nuns, many of whom memorized his sermons and later committed them to writing.<sup>5</sup>

Eckhart was considered to be a legendary spiritual guide who at one point even occupied the same chair in Paris that had been held by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>6</sup> Thus it seems impossible that the hierarchy, including Pope John XXII, could have turned against him and convicted him of heresy.

But in those days no intellectual was really safe. These were very volatile times as Church politics took its toll and jealousy ruined many a career. Even so, it is surprising that a few powerful bishops felt so threatened by the prominence of a monk with unique ideas holding such high posts. The accusations against him were devastating for Eckhart who had felt a responsibility to convey a truth as he experienced it, but in what he was proposing there seemed to be the possibility of the Church playing a less than central part in the contact of the faithful with God.

Eckhart's populist negative theology underscores the key question about those who have reached enlightenment through a specific belief system: Does mystical union eclipse the cultus? If so, how does one "return" to the world of the uninitiated? Plato talks about the man who has experienced the light and returns to the cave of darkness: "Would he not provoke laughter...and were it possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them up, would they not kill him?"<sup>7</sup> The question was not hypothetical in Eckhart's time, when those who espoused philosophies differing from orthodoxy were burned at the stake. So Eckhart was walking a very thin line, despite the arguments of his supporters that what he taught was the most pure Christianity. At least he sounded Christian as he emphasized that the way to God was to become like Christ. But not everyone was convinced.

## *Roots of Christian Mysticism in Alexandria*

Meister Eckhart expands and personalizes the tradition of negative theology begun in first century Alexandria. That city, founded by Alexander the Great, was one of great wealth and learning, which under the Ptolemies, developed as a center of science, the arts, and philosophy. It has been said that Alexandria was the source of the modern world. It was certainly the cradle of Jewish and Christian mystical thought, both based upon Platonic principles about the creation of the world and its ultimate return to an unmanifest unknown.

The key figure in early Neoplatonism is *Philo Judaeus* (20 BCE-50 CE) whose form of Hellenistic Judaism significantly influenced the development of Christian mysticism. And, says Bernard McGinn: “I am convinced that to neglect the Jewish roots of Christian mysticism, and to see it, as many have done, as a purely Greek phenomenon, is to risk misconstruing an important part of its history.”<sup>8</sup>

In any event, Philo introduced allegorical interpretation of the Bible and argued that hidden meanings, going back to earliest Jewish tradition, is one of the bases of oral law.<sup>9</sup> So for him, linking to the past is the key, and it has been persuasively suggested that many of the Alexandrian Jews may have actually been initiated into the Greek Mysteries.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Philo, himself, often declares that he is speaking to a specially initiated sect and warns his hearers not to divulge his teaching, a statement that is to be made throughout the centuries by his followers. The idea (still asserted by many Kabbalists) is that Moses supposedly gave a profound and secret interpretation of the Bible to those few who were worthy and that the secrets have been passed down for centuries.

Philo claims that ultimate truth was revealed to his soul “which was accustomed frequently to be seized with a certain divine inspiration, even concerning matters which it could not explain even to itself.”<sup>11</sup> Essential to Philo’s thought is his idea of the *Logos/Word*. He wrote that “God fashioned the world, being an incorporeal idea, comprehensible only to the intellect.”<sup>12</sup> This “Word” is an eternal utterance of God, described by Christians as the Son. It is an “indestructible wisdom” which mankind has the capacity to know through the intellect.

The movement begun by Philo was carried on by the Christian Gnostic Clement of Alexandria who echoed Philo in teaching that correct interpretation of the Bible brings enlightenment, and by Origen, also of Alexandria. So there is a clear succession of ideas: Philo, Clement and Origen were followed by Pseudo-Dionysius and then Eriugena and then Eckhart, who was familiar with them all. In fact, he became such an integral part of this stream of negative theological history that one cannot avoid speculating that he was the, recipient of at least some practical methods that were not public.

Philo’s teaching that enlightenment requires the focusing of the mind on a piece of the soul which is the intellect, was especially developed upon by Plotinus (who called the intellect the *Nous*) and is taught by Abulafia and other Jewish Kabbalists to be the true means of achieving inner knowledge. And Eckhart agrees that it is only through this



intellect that humanity reaches its roots in the timeless and eternal Logos, which he calls “The Ground.”

Unfortunately for Eckhart, and much as he tried to explain it away, in studying his work one might well conclude that it is possible to reach the Logos/Word without the Church—even though Eckhart followed accepted doctrine in teaching that the incarnate Word itself established the Church to teach divine knowledge.

### *Eckhart’s Sources*

Part of the Dominican experience and goal was the summation of broad knowledge in a search for universal truth. This was especially true of Aquinas’ Teacher, Albert, who tried to find unifying principles in Eastern and Western ideas, and whose synthesis of key elements of Hellenic, Jewish and Islamic philosophy has been credited with the revival of Neoplatonism. Albert provided an overview, a structure, which framed the way in which Eckhart considered the works of Pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>13</sup> Gregory of Nyssa and Eriugena as well as Jewish and Arabic scholars, such as Maimonides and Avicenna.

Nonetheless Eckhart minimizes the value of external knowledge (referring to the authority of both Plato and Augustine), saying that the soul already has everything she (anima) needs to achieve knowledge of God: “The soul has in herself by nature all knowledge; therefore she has no need to draw knowledge into herself from without...thus, whatever is conveyed inward by the senses of images and forms does not give light to the soul but merely prepares and purifies the soul.”<sup>14</sup>

It is a system which does not fit neatly into the history of mysticism. And as, C.S. Kelly notes: “Contrary to widely accepted opinion, the doctrine expounded by Eckhart is not to be found in the study of mystical experience or even in what is normally understood as mysticism” It is, he says, “a purely metaphysical doctrine, transcending all experience, all abstractions or conceptual graspings of the mind, all individual manifestation and determined mystical states.”<sup>15</sup>

Eckhart resists categorization. He found unity in all systems of ideas about God. And to him philosophy, theology, and the lessons of scripture are one and the same. Moreover, he emphasizes that the keys to Divine union are to be found in the Bible as did Maguerite Porete, whose *Mirror of Simple Souls* many believe to be a source of Eckhart’s principles. Certainly, her ideas are similar to those of Eckhart, and he may have based some of his sermons on her *Mirror*, which is today considered to be one of the great works of speculative mysticism. It is described by one scholar as “equally and emphatically Dionysian in its insistence on the Nothingness of God and the Soul brought to nothing in God.”<sup>16</sup>

Porete was a leader of the *Beguines*, a term intended to be derisive by the Church hierarchy for this significant movement of women—one completely outside of the control of the Bishops.<sup>17</sup> The Beguines were a powerful group of lay women who wore religious habits and who lived in a largely cloistered environment. They were especially known for experiencing visions and ecstasies, including, for some, the stigmata. Foreman

describes them as having “intense, often emotional, spiritual experiences, frequently laced with sexual overtones.”<sup>18</sup> Thousands of extremely devout women joined the communities, taking no monastic vows and being very conspicuously free from the authority of the Church. Eventually the church authorities turned on them, and they were forced into the Dominican order.

Marguerite Porete bore the brunt of the hostility of the bishops, and was charged with heresy by a panel of twenty-one theologians.” They convicted her of the crime of *antinomianism*, a word from the Greek meaning “lawless.”<sup>19</sup> What it really meant was that she had aggressively challenged the authority of the Church by refusing to stop preaching and to discontinue the dissemination of her very popular book. Perhaps not surprisingly, she became the first person to be burned at the stake in the Paris Inquisition.

### *The Sermons*

Eckhart was an extremely well-liked preacher who adapted his lessons to the listeners: To clerics he spoke in Latin and to the common people in German. His sermons could be playful and clever, often weirdly misquoting and embellishing scripture to convey his ideas, or they could be profound and thoughtful while showing little interest in the historical facts of Christ’s life.<sup>20</sup>

In his most difficult sermons, those embracing negative theology—what God is not—he is heir to the negative or *apophatic* discipline of the Early Christian community in Egypt that spread through the Greek-Speaking Mediterranean Church.<sup>21</sup> This was a difficult theology to communicate in sermons to those accustomed to hearing what God *is*, and no doubt some were uncomfortable as he preached that God *is not* goodness, being, or truth, or one, and asked: “If God is neither goodness, nor being, nor truth, nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that. If you think of anything He might be, He is not that. So where will the soul find truth? Will she not find it there, where she is in-formed in one unity, in the primal purity, in the impress of pure beingness—will she not find truth even there? No, she will not be able to grasp truth there—rather does truth come thence and descend from there.”<sup>22</sup>

This seems to be a fairly clear statement, but it is probable that very few, except a handful of like-minded clerics, had any idea what he meant—although interest in this sermon must have picked up as Eckhart continued and spoke of St. Paul being carried into the third heaven. The real point was to suggest to seekers of Divine knowledge what they might experience: “Observe that there are the three heavens. The first is detachment from all things, the second is estrangement from all imagery, and the third is a bare understanding in God without intermediary.”<sup>23</sup> The “without intermediary” part is what got him into trouble.

A lay person or novice monk might have found these words about imagery confusing, even disturbing. Images were essential to the belief system: churches were filled with pictures and statues of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. Meditation on the stations of the cross was encouraged and a dependency on the intercession of saints as

“intermediaries,” between God and man, was doctrinal. In fact, Eckhart’s point of view was elitist, as was the mystical theology of Alexandria upon which it was based. And part of the curious uniqueness of Eckhart’s mysticism is that such complicated principles were expressed openly in public sermons. So his message is called populist, even if not many understood it.

On the other hand, the core of Meister Eckhart’s message is elegantly simple. He rejects any complexity which stands between the higher human intellect, which is of the creative Logos, and the Divine Nothingness. He seems pointedly disinterested in the suffering of Christ, in liturgy, or in the church as mankind’s salvation for original sin and even rejected the necessity of prayer, which undoubtedly raised many eyebrows. But he considered himself to be devoutly Christian, explaining that to know God one must become Christ, the formative Word by which one may be led back into the One and then to the Ultimate Nothing. Here McGinn points out the extent which Eckhart’s principles are at odds with a traditionally conservative view of Christianity.

“Eckhart’s view of Christ had little to do with the new Christological views that shaped the later Middle Ages. The importance of innovative forms of devotion to Christ’s humanity that developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is evident in the mention of names like Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi...Eckhart’s writings show almost nothing of this. There are no pictures of the infant Jesus or meditations on the bleeding Christ on the cross. There is little consideration of the historical events of Christ’s life.”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, many found the absence of the ordinary to be quite disconcerting—especially Eckhart’s teaching that there is a hidden power behind all powers. But, for a time, he was safe under the authority in the Dominican order and because his ideas were carefully built upon scripture, and upon the theology of Albert the Great and of his student Thomas Aquinas (later to bear the scrutiny of the Inquisitorial Church)

Of course, while there were some detractors, the Dominican Scholastic community generally appreciated the poetry and creativity of his language. The common word “poverty,” for example was elevated to a high spiritual level. He speaks of the divine poverty as an attribute of one who “wants nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing,” saying that “He must be as free of his created will as he was when he was not.” And, more pointedly he says: “If the soul is to know God, she must have nothing in common with anything,”<sup>25</sup> an idea on which he expands with his own experience, saying that:

While I yet stood in my first cause, I *had* no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth...and thus I was free of God and all things. But when I left my free will behind and received my created being, *then* I had a God. For before there were creatures, God was not

‘God’: He was That which He was. But when creatures came into existence and received their *created* being, then God was not ‘God’ in Himself—He was ‘God’ in creatures. Now we say that God, inasmuch as He is ‘God,’ is not the supreme goal of creatures, for the same lofty status is possessed by the least of creatures in God. And if it were the case that a fly had reason and could intellectually plumb the eternal abyss of God’s being out of which it came, we would have to say that God with all that makes him ‘God’ would be unable to fulfill and satisfy that fly! Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there where the highest angel, the fly, and the soul are equal, there where I stood and wanted what I was and what I wanted.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Way To That Which is Not*

Eckhart proposes nothing as the way to Nothing—rather like the Buddhist *koan* of one hand clapping. He gives very little indication of how knowledge of God may be achieved, and was opposed the sort of imaginative meditative exercises to be later formalized by Ignatius Loyola and others. And Eckhart stood almost alone in his fundamental opposition to any structured approach to divine knowledge.

His “living without a why,” the “wayless way,” seeks a permanent change in the mystic as opposed to the fleeting ecstasy which he said was to be achieved by the more devotional approaches. And he challenges the traditional Christian view of divine union, questioning the relationship between “creator” and “created,” while offering little help to the student seeking a clear path toward knowledge of God. Indeed, generations of scholars have combed Eckhart’s work seeking a structural pattern of experiences, but without much success.

Eckhart may be occasionally trying to offer a more defined point of view for those who need it, although pinning down any aspect of his wayless way is like trying to catch running water. In this regard Robert Foreman writes that “I have counted at least seventeen separate passages in which Eckhart enumerates the divisions or phases that a mystic might undergo. No two are identical; it is no wonder that there is so much disagreement among scholars.”<sup>27</sup>

The confusion may have to do with the “many mansions,” of personal discovery. In this Richard Woods, points out that “To the program of his Dominican Neoplatonic predecessors, which built upon the Augustinian theme of divine descent and return culminating in the intellectual vision of God, Eckhart added the theme of the birth of the Word in the Soul of the just and the dynamic vision of successive ‘breakthroughs’ as the soul ascends ever higher levels of awareness and immediacy in her return to God.”<sup>28</sup> But these breakthroughs are on an individual path which is layered. As Eckhart says: “Each gift that we receive prepares us to receive yet another gift, indeed a greater one, and every divine gift increases our receptivity and the desire to receive something yet higher and greater.”<sup>29</sup>

## *Detachment*

In the Middle Ages, following ancient classical tradition and as taught by Origen, a monk was expected to decide between an active life ( the *vita activa*) or the contemplative life (the *vita contemplativa*) In practical terms, this meant the choice of monastic community and its lifestyle. Augustine, Gregory and Bernard had all stressed contemplation. But the Friars Preachers, having been created to solve social problems, were exemplars of the active life as they went from place to place passionately teaching the rules of the Church to whomever would listen.

On the other hand, Meister Eckhart taught the necessity of a balance between activity and the passivity of contemplation. He said that it is through *detachment* that the soul is moved beyond these behavioral poles and becomes truly engaged in life. Truth is to be found by embracing the temporal world. We are, he said, “set down in time so that our sensible worldly activity may make us closer and more like to God.”<sup>30</sup> The concept is difficult to grasp but, ultimately, he is explaining that the seeker of divine knowledge must be “in the world, but not of it.”

Detachment requires intense mental training to exclude all thoughts, images, and the tendency of the mind to wander. It also depends upon divine assistance, defined in Catholic doctrine as a state of *grace*. Here one recalls Plato’s insistence on the importance of faith—certainly never forgotten by Eckhart’s students, whom he must have gently guided. But in his public teaching he was not specific. The most that he says openly are a few classic understatements, such as “It is true that it is a little difficult in the beginning in becoming detached.”<sup>31</sup>

When he does offer practical advice, his suggestions are not unlike that of Buddhist teachers calling for a mind that is absolutely blank. Eckhart says that “The most powerful prayer, one well-nigh omnipotent, and the noblest work of all is that which proceeds from a bare mind. The more bare it is, the more powerful, worthy, useful, praiseworthy and perfect the work. A bare mind can do all things.”<sup>32</sup>

In describing the emptying of the mind and progress toward knowledge of God, Eckhart frequently uses the same word as do all great mystics. He speaks of *dissolution*, which mystics describe as being actually felt and understood: And according to many who have traveled this path, the subtle dissolution is felt, not merely symbolic. Here Eckhart advises the student that “You should wholly sink away from your youness and dissolve into His Highness.”<sup>33</sup> He says that the action of the Word become man (Christ) is the only way to achieve an *indistinct* identity.

The principle is that in order to know God requires pulling away from everything that one knows as self. It is the ultimate sacrifice. And Eckhart asserts that “The higher peak of the soul stands above time and knows nothing of time of the body.”<sup>34</sup> In this birth everything that is known to the individual is surrendered: “all good works that man every did, or ever will, as well as the time in which they occur—works and time, are totally lost, works as works, time as time...evil and good are equally lost for they have not

resting place in the spirit...God has no need of them. And, so, in themselves they are lost or perished.”<sup>35</sup> And he is clearly speaking from personal experience as he advises that the detachment

“requires a mighty effort to drive back the powers of the soul and inhibit their functioning. This must be done with force; without force it cannot be done. But when the mind strives with all its might and with real sincerity, then God takes charge of the mind and its work, and then the mind sees and experiences God. But since this enduring vision of God places an intolerable strain on the mind while in this body, God accordingly withdraws from the mind and that is why he said “A little while you shall see me and a little while you shall not see me”<sup>36</sup>

Eckhart taught that, in this lifetime, the experience of mystical unity comes and goes. This is a traditional theme which McGinn describes, recalling *The Song of Songs*, as “The Game of love that God plays with the soul through the succession of moments of delightful presence, followed by painful absence.”<sup>37</sup> It cannot be permanent, and thus the knowledge conveyed to the mystic must be limited and may have no understandable structure.

It is the fluidity of his teaching that separates Eckhart from others, and he came to the “wayless way of detachment” by carefully studying those who went before. He says “I have read many writings by both the pagan teachers and by the prophets in the Old and in the New Law...and as I scrutinize all these writings, so far as my reason can lead and instruct me, I find no other virtue better than detachment from all things because all other virtues have some regard for created things, but detachment is free from all created things.”<sup>38</sup> And he asserts that “Detachment is receptive to nothing at all except God—that I prove in this way: Whatever is to be received is to be received by something, but detachment is so close to nothingness that there is nothing so subtle that it can be apprehended by detachment, except God alone.”<sup>39</sup>

Eckhart explained that the uniquely individual stages of ecstatic withdrawal have to do with the mystic’s understanding of the nature of “I.” Rejection of the personal “I” means the complete dissolution and annihilation of what has been known to be the self. Eckhart argued that the only true “I” is God. Here, the words is Exodus 3:14, in which God reveals his name to Moses, may be regarded as the most profound line of the entire Bible. It is אהיה אשר אהיה, I am I.<sup>40</sup>

### *Imagery*

Eckhart uses the word “images” in a way that is unfamiliar. He is not referring only to pictures, but all of those senses through which an individual communicates with the outer (and often inner) world. It means sights, sounds, smells, touches and even movement, all of which exist in space and in time and all are the tools by which human

consciousness interacts with all that is created. Eckhart's whole point is for the mind to discover that these images are generated from the "ground." The discovery of the mind of the soul's Higher Intellect is a birth, similar to that by which the Divine Father creates the Son.

Eckhart teaches that imagery, with which the mind is filled, presents a stumbling block to true knowledge of God. But sensory meditative experiences were encouraged by the medieval Church, especially through meditations on the Stations of the Cross. This is perhaps best represented by the experiences of Hildegard von Bingen whose visions were taken to be an affirmation of the truth of Catholic dogma. She reported that she saw the Word as Christ bleeding on the Cross, that she walked with angels and figures of the Bible and that she observed the masses with the holiest of priests offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist.<sup>41</sup>

But to Eckhart, this sort of imagery does not lead toward the enlightenment of unknowing because the images of the world are not truth; they are only a reflection of truth, a false reality in which most of the soul is wrapped up. Eckhart teaches that the mystic who would truly know God must reach beyond the images of time and motion and emphasizes that "God works without means and without images, and the freer you are from images, the more receptive you are for His inward working, and the more introverted and self-forgetful, the nearer you are to this."<sup>42</sup>

### *Beyond Time*

Seventeen hundred years before Eckhart, Plato, in his *Timaeus*, writes of the Father Creator who "resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time."<sup>43</sup> And he adds that "Time, then, and the heaven came into being at the same instant in order that, having been created together, if ever there was to be a dissolution of them, they might be dissolved together."<sup>44</sup>

Neoplatonists who represent that they have achieved the *unio mystica* are in agreement. Plotinus, for example, teaches that time is a created image of Eternity,<sup>45</sup> and explains that "The whole question turns on the distinction between being in Time and being in Eternity."<sup>46</sup> Time, and an image of truth which is in perpetual motion, work together to produce the illusion of creation which the mystic may in this lifetime, transcend.

Thomas Aquinas also spoke of time as to be overcome. He said that "We reach to a knowledge of eternity by means of time."<sup>47</sup> Time is an essential quality brought into manifestation by the Word, and it is to be overcome by the seeker of truth. To do so involves the dissolution of self which so many mystics report by which, as Plato suggests, time and all that is created is overcome.

So Eckhart follows a long tradition in teaching of enlightenment that "All time must be gone when this birth begins, for there is nothing that hinders this birth so much

as time...for God to be born in the soul, all time must have dropped away from her., or she must have dropped away from time with will or desire.”<sup>48</sup>

For the mystic this means a multidimensional experience as the structures of time and space are overcome. And Plato explains that time and motion and image are overcome *together*: Time is overcome when the continuous motion of self-creation stops.

Eckhart speaks of creation, which must be considered at both the personal and cosmic level, as essentially a “Big bang:” He says that “God performs all His works, whether within Himself or outside of Himself, in a flash. Do not imagine that God, when he made the heaven and earth and all things, made one thing one day and another the next. Moses describes it like that, but he really knew better. He did so for the sake of people who could not conceive or grasp it in any other way.”<sup>49</sup>

### *The Divine Intellect’s Hidden Place in the Soul*

One may be easily confused by Eckhart’s interchangeable terms. He speaks often about the *Ground*, which is the point of origin of all creation. It is the *Logos*. It is the *Word*, it is the *Son*. It is the *Divine Intellect* from which all things emerge and to which they will return. It is a small part of the soul of each person which is unknown to the waking consciousness of the mind.. And he makes a clear symbolic distinction between the “upper” and the “lower:” “The soul with her higher powers touches eternity which is God, while her lower powers, being in touch with time, make her subject to change and bias toward bodily things which degrade her.”<sup>50</sup>

At incarnation this Higher Intellect is hidden under all of those things which the Logos, “The Son,” creates to produce a physical world for the mind, including time and space and motion. But, through an act of faith, believing that this Divine Intellect exists and is the True Self, the mind (the thinking process) can slowly begin to detach itself from those aspects of the physical world which are hiding its True Self. And God helps by offering *grace* which activates the pure intellect aspect of the soul. About this Eckhart teaches that “The simple intellect is so pure in itself that it comprehends the pure bare divine being immediately,”<sup>51</sup> emphasizing that the “Birth of the Son in the soul is the same as the Birth of the Son in the Father.

Once the self is annihilated it is understood that the Higher Intellect of the soul actually *is* the Son which is being eternally created by the Father. Moreover, Eckhart teaches that beyond the soul’s Higher Intellect, there are other powers of the soul which are “tools and instruments to bring the intellect to its maximum lucidity.”<sup>52</sup>

Essentially, the whole of Eckhart’s teaching on enlightenment is based upon Genesis 1:27, in which God says “Let us make man in our own image,” following which, philosophers often speak of man as the “Microcosm,” the cosmos in miniature. But Eckhart is saying is that there is no Microcosm or Macrocosm but that “To know the Father, we must be the Son.”<sup>53</sup>

Eckhart clearly knew that his most profound words could not be taken at face value but was passing along a spark of mindless insight to those who could use it. This is



especially true as he dealt with abstract ideas such as constant motion as the essence of creation, and his teaching that “The eternal Father is ever begetting his eternal Son without pause.” He does his best to simplify, explaining that the birth of the Son is motion or that the Father who creates the Son is Stillness, beyond which there is Nothing. Eckhart must have seen himself in the tradition of Moses, who explained the creation of the world in seven days to those who could not understand a greater truth. The bottom line, and the reason that most people find Eckhart’s work to be so difficult is that what he tries to convey is not rational. His effort is to lead beyond the simplicity of thought into something that makes no sense whatsoever.

### *Condemnation*

Many prominent Church leaders felt threatened by Eckhart’s theology which seemed not only to minimize their authority, but to de-emphasized the historical Christ and the Eucharist itself. McGinn describes a “democratizing and secularizing”<sup>54</sup> which was aggressively contradictory to the theological and political structure of the Church.

Eckhart was especially vulnerable when he spoke of an ultimate unknown power far above that of the Trinity, and called for a way that was very different from the traditional Augustinian underpinnings of medieval Christian mysticism. In fact, Eckhart questioned the very nature of prayer with statements such as “He who prays for anything prays badly.”

Perhaps most damaging was his statement that one can come to “a bare understanding of God *without intermediary*,”<sup>55</sup> which can only have been considered abrasive by a Church that stressed the importance of the saints as divine intermediaries and taught that the Church brought the individual salvation from the Fall. Of course, Eckhart was extremely careful to back up whatever he taught with either Biblical passages, or with the words of saints, but this was not enough. He had a powerful enemy in the Archbishop of Cologne.

In 1325 Eckhart was called before the Archbishop’s Inquisition and accused of heresy. It was a devastating charge which he devoted the last two years of his life to answering, and had he not had such remarkable stature in the Dominican establishment, there can be no doubt that he would have been burned at the stake as was Margarete Porete who expressed many of the same ideas.

At the age of 68 Eckhart and fellow friars made a 500 mile walk to appeal directly to the papal court in Avignon. The appeal lasted for a year,<sup>56</sup> and Eckhart defended himself vigorously, saying that the charges “demonstrate the mental weakness and spite of my adversaries.” And explaining that “They think that everything they do not understand is an error and that every error is a heresy.”<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, on March 27, 1329, and two years after his death, many of Eckhart’s propositions were condemned in a papal bull by Pope John XXII. They were described as “evil sounding, rash, and suspect of heresy.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the Pope did not mince words in saying that Eckhart’s work was inspired by Satan. The official document of

condemnation said that “The man was led astray by that Father of Lies who often turns himself into an angel of light.” And it stated that Eckhart “Presented many things as dogma that were designed to cloud the true faith in the hearts of many, things which he put forth especially before the uneducated crowd in his sermons.”<sup>59</sup> The ruling meant that Eckhart’s chances of being declared a saint by the Catholic church were significantly reduced.

### *Eckhart’s Influence*

The Church found heresy at every turn, and support for Eckhart’s work could be a risk. Among his defenders was Henry Suso, a student and one of the so-called “Rhineland School of Mysticism” who is known for a devout mortification of the flesh that is effectively self-mutilation. Writing in the third person in his egocentric autobiography, *The Life of Blessed Henry Suso*, he records that “In order to bring his body into subjection to his spirit, he wore for a long time a hair shirt and an iron chain, until the blood ran from him.” And he boasts that “He secretly caused an undergarment to be made for him, and in the undergarment he had strips of leather fixed into which were a hundred and fifty brass nails...and the points of the nails were always turned toward the flesh.”

To make things worse, he adds that he was covered with “vile and hateful insects,” which made the tacks stick into him.<sup>60</sup> And he did not bathe. Overall he paints a truly disgusting picture, which is interesting because he was close to Eckhart on a daily basis. But Eckhart apparently did not object—although he did say that “God does not need or require fasting, praying, or any self-mortification nearly so much as rest.”<sup>61</sup>

For all of his bizarre behavior, Suso is remembered for the significance and quality of his mystical books. The *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, heavily dependant upon Eckhart’s principles, is one of the classics of doctrinaire Catholicism. And his *Little Book of Truth*, describing his own enlightenment through the principles of “self abandonment,” is a powerful defense of Eckhart, calling upon unimpeachable sources.<sup>62</sup>

Half a century later, reflecting Eckhart’s influence, was a small and anonymous, English book entitled, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It attained great popularity and emphasized the sort of direct and personal approach to divine union for which Eckhart was condemned.

The book was probably written by an English monk who, in these tumultuous times, felt great concern about being considered to be a heretic. The author speaks of the experience of “Nothing,” and pain which may be required to achieve it. The author says that “A man is wonderfully changed by the spiritual experience of this nothing when it is accomplished nowhere.”<sup>63</sup> And he underscores the importance of detachment from all that is created: “Labor hard, therefore, in this nowhere and turn away from your outward physical senses and all things with which they deal.”<sup>64</sup>

*The Cloud of Unknowing* is encouraging to those who seek the wayless path. It asserts that:

“Some consider this undertaking to be so difficult and so awesome that it cannot be achieved without much heavy labor. They claim also that it can be comprehended but very rarely and then only in moments of ecstasy. To these men I answer as humbly as I can and say that it all depends on the degree and the disposition of God. This grace of contemplation and spiritual work is given according to the capacity of the soul...There are some who cannot achieve it without great and lengthy spiritual exercise, and even then it is very rare, and only by a special calling of our Lord that they can experience the spiritual perfection of this work; and this calling is referred to as rapture. There are, however, also some who are so discerning in grace and in spirit and are so familiar with God in this grace of contemplation that they may have it whenever they wish in the ordinary state of man’s soul.”<sup>65</sup>

### *The Ultimate Return of Mankind*

Eckhart teaches that in all things, the end is implicit in the beginning. He speaks of the “hidden darkness of eternal containment” and asks: “What is the final end?” His answer is, of course, cryptic: “It is the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead, which is unknown and never has been known and never shall be known. God abides there unknown in Himself, and the light of the eternal Father has ever shone in there, and the darkness does not comprehend the light.”<sup>66</sup>

1. Jean Leclerc, “Influence and Non-influence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages,” *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, New Jersey, 1987, 32.
2. R. F. Bennett *The Early Dominicans*, 1937 reprint, 2013, 8..
3. Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation*, Philadelphia, 2013, 133-34.
4. Richard Woods, *Meister Eckhart, Master of Mystics*, London 2011, 2.
5. op.cit., 3..
6. Robert K.C. Foreman *Meister Eckhart, The Mystic as Theologian*, Massachusetts, 1991, 46.
7. Plato, *Republic* 7.517.
8. Bernard McGinn *The Foundations of Mysticism*, New York, 1991, 22.
9. Norman De Mattos Bentwich, *Philo-Judaeus of Alexandria*, Philadelphia 1910, 37-38.
10. Bentwich, op.cit., 59
11. Philo, *On the Cherubim*, 27.
12. Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham*, 103.

13. The importance of Pseudo-Dionysius cannot be overstated and is transmitted to Eckhart through Aquinas. The topic is handled with skill by Fran O'Rourke in her *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, Indiana, 2010, passim. She says "Aquinas appropriates from Dionysius the entire method of his natural philosophy, of knowing and not knowing, while yet transforming and transfiguring, however subtly, certain elements in accordance with his own theory of knowledge and being." 3.
14. Walshe No. 39. References to Eckhart's sermons are generally to the translation and numbering established in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O.C. Walshe, New York, 2009.
15. C.S. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, Berkeley, 2009, 1-5.
16. Maria Lichtman, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart," *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. Bernard McGinn, New York 1994, 73.
17. Margarete Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, intro Ellen Babinsky, New Jersey, 1993, 7.
18. Foreman, op.cit., 38.
19. Lichtman, op.cit., 66.
20. Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, New York, 2005, 95. McGinn points out that early sermons were modeled on the works of Cassian (360-485) an Eastern saint who brought the idea of monasticism to the West.
21. Woods, op.cit., 119.
22. Walshe 54
23. Ibid W54
24. McGinn, *Harvest*, 151.
25. Walshe 69, 354.
26. Ibid 87
27. Foreman, op.cit., 59.
28. Woods, op.cit., 39.
29. Walshe 2, p.44.
30. Eckhart PS 9, p.85.
31. Walshe 69.
32. Eckhart, *Talks of Instruction*, No.2, Walshe, 487.
33. Walshe 96, 463
34. Walshe 11, 95.
35. Ibid 15, 119-20.
36. cf. John 6:16, Walshe 3.
37. McGinn, *Harvest*, 220.
38. Eckhart, "On Detachment," Meister Eckhart, *Essential Sermons*, New Jersey, 1981, 285.
39. Ibid, 286.

40. This is also translated as “I will be.”
41. *Hildegard von Bingen’s Mystical Visions*, Vermont 1986, *passim*.
42. W1, p.34.
43. Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d.
44. Ibid, 38b.
45. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, III.7.1 ff.
46. op.cit., III.7.11.
47. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q10.A1.
48. Walshe 29, p.178.
49. Ibid 1, p.34.
50. Ibid 52, 275.
51. Ibid 51.
52. Ibid 36, p. 214.
53. Ibid 11, p.97.
54. McGinn, *Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, intro,11.
55. Walshe 54, vII, p.72.
56. Woods, op.cit., 4.
57. Meister Eckhart Sermons, Commentaries, 75-76.
58. Woods, op.cit., 1.
59. *Eckharts Sermons, Commentaries*, 77.
60. Henry Suso, *The Life of Henry Suso*, London, 1865, 48-49.
61. Walshe 45.p.247.
62. Henry Suso, *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth*, New York 1953, *passim*.
63. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Intro. and trans. Ira Progoff, New York, 1957, 226.
64. Ibid 228.
65. Ibid.232-33.
66. W54, 283, Cf.John : 5

## 9. John of the Cross: Dark Nights of Suffering

(1542-1591)

John of the Cross, a man of great spiritual power, has been so surrounded by mythologies and bizarre church infighting that his message is often blurred. And unlike other great religious figures, John's biographers have been almost exclusively Carmelite and Anglican priests whose works are more devotional than accurately biographical.

Among the books about John of the Cross, is that of a pope—John Paul II. His doctoral dissertation, presented at the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, published as *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*<sup>1</sup> is a very scholarly work which avoids the difficult questions about John's personality and sexuality.

Of course many of these biographers may be defended as belonging to an era that wrote uncritically and with great "feeling" about the saints, but John McGowan is certainly correct in his observation that "John's mythology has been very much shaped by well-intentioned, but bad, biography."<sup>2</sup> He offers something of a corrective with a biting but fair overview of John of the Cross, saying that:

He is a brilliant person, whatever his faults. However, he is, ultimately, a most austere, severe, ascetical and inhuman person, someone who is insensitive to the normal feelings, urges and distractions that incurably haunt the rest of us. He is pathologically single-minded, not given to any nonsense, distractions or humor. He is heavy, the mystic of darkness, suffering and the cross. He's deep, that we admit, but scary too! Despite this depth, he, in the end, lacks balance. He is a spiritual



**John**

*"When a soul has advanced so far on the spiritual road as to be lost to all the natural methods of communing with God; when it seeks Him no longer by meditation, images, impressions, nor by any other created ways, or representations of sense, but only by rising above them all, in the joyful communion with Him by faith and love, then it may be said to have found God of a truth, because it has truly lost itself as to all that is not God, and also as to its own self."*

masochist, counseling us to choose always pain over pleasure, what is more difficult over what is more pleasant, and life after death over life after birth. As well, his system comes from his mysticism, namely, from some extraordinary revelations from God which are the prerogative of certain spiritual athletes like himself and other great mystics.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the Carmelite community’s long history of promoting John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila in a way that could be described as cult-like, it seems ironic that when John’s less than perfect human aspects are considered openly and objectively, he comes across even more clearly as a seductively profound and truly inspired mystic.

Although deeply rooted in the Bible, in Aquinas, in Augustinian Neoplatonism and in Rhineland mysticism,<sup>4</sup> John can only be called unique. No one before him has proposed such extreme pain and suffering as a way to divine unity. No one has stated that he can demonstrate “how to reach divine union quickly.”<sup>5</sup> No one has ever written about enlightenment with such homoerotic intensity.

### *The Darkest Night of the Church*

Rejection of the authority of the Catholic church and its pope by Martin Luther, a German Augustinian monk, marked the beginning of one of the greatest revolutions in human history. The Protestant “Reformation,” cast a deep shadow across the life of John of the Cross and of all others who accepted without question the established order of the Church. Luther’s idea that the individual must be guided by conscience was dangerous and the response of the Church was especially harsh in Spain under an Inquisition directed especially at the conversion of Jews. Much earlier, in 1215, the Church had demanded that Jews wear special dress to separate them from Christians.<sup>6</sup> And in some places (centuries before the Nazis) Jews were required to wear yellow badges. So it is not surprising that Jewish roots in John’s family, like that of St. Theresa, were carefully hidden.

The brutality of the Inquisition in Spain is perhaps surprising in that medieval Spain had been the most tolerant county in Europe, with Muslims, Jews and Christians living comfortably and peaceably beside each other.<sup>7</sup> John was three years old when The Council of Trent, which issued decrees upon which the Inquisition was based, opened with the majestic assertion that it was: “For the increase and advance and esteem of the faith and Christian religion, for the uprooting of heresies, for the peace and unity of the church, for the reform of the clergy and the Christian people, and for the crushing and complete removal of the enemies of the Christian name.”<sup>8</sup> This meant the Protestants. For

eighteen years bishops at this council examined and determined the correctness of every detail of Catholic belief and demonstrated that God did not like those who opposed his true Church.

The result was a Church which, unlike earlier times, suppressed dissent and rational arguments in a way that would not change until the mid-twentieth century. The Church taught that it had been established by God the Son as the *only* intermediary between God and humanity. And John of the Cross, who was known for his early strictness in following rules (Brenan calls him “one of the greatest and uncompromising of the Catholic mystics”)<sup>9</sup> carefully framed his ideas to fit whatever the Church hierarchy determined to be the will of God.

John’s campaign for a return to the simplicity and sanctity of the earliest monasticism was certainly consistent with the political needs of a church fighting to protect its territory. Nevertheless, his conservative fellow monks strongly opposed reform, and the leaders of the Inquisition, apprehensive about mysticism because it was beyond its control, were convinced that John was a heretic but could never prove it.

### *Suffering and Sexual Ecstasy*

There seems little doubt that John was homosexual, although certainly not in practice. Nevertheless, sexual orientation is defined by psychologists not by overt behaviors, but according to private sexual fantasies: A man who fantasizes about other men is considered to be homosexual. And although the traditional Church position has been that homosexuality is inherently evil (overlooking centuries of monastic behavior), the more enlightened attitude of science has ultimately prevailed.

Among the many prominent saints whose sexual orientation has been questioned are Jerome, Augustine, John of the Cross, and Theresa. All of these are celebrated as doctors of the church, and all are revered by the Church as having achieved union with God. So one is inevitably drawn to the important conclusion that homosexuality is not an impediment to enlightenment.

John’s sexuality is complicated by that fact that his homoeroticism, clearly related to suffering, is often described as *masochism*. Arousal linked to suffering—either inflicted by others or self-inflicted by binding, by sticking with pins, or by self-mutilation, is considered to be a sexual disorder.<sup>10</sup> However, to be fair, categorization of John in this way does not take into account the Medieval encouragement of the Church to self-mutilation and the reemphasis of such “saintliness” during his lifetime by the Council of Trent. The principle was that brutally self-inflicted pain was a sacrifice which God appreciated and would ultimately reward with abundant blessings.

To the Christian tradition of sacrifice John adds the mystical idea that the most severe pain and suffering suppresses *self* and may lead to the ecstatic condition of *non-self*. And although some may seek to strictly follow the difficult path which he discusses with such candor, others, who consider the methods to be extreme and excessive, have been led by his teaching to question the very mechanisms of enlightenment. Is it “a gift of



faith” as Catholic theology declares, or could a contemplative’s “sacrifice” of physical and emotional suffering activate some physiological trigger to understanding beyond ordinary thought?

This is the mystery, and although the path toward unity appears to be quite variable and individual, John reinforces the candid reports of all mystics claiming enlightenment, that the moment of “ecstatic” union with the Divine involves sexual arousal—pointing back toward the ancient Greek philosophers and the principle that “God is sex.”.

### *Early Years*

Juan de Yepes was born in 1542 in an area of Old Castille. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, lost both of his parents at a young age, and was raised comfortably by two uncles, affluent and influential silk merchants with connections into the hierarchy of the Church. It was assumed that Gonzalo would marry a woman of wealth and prominence and carry on the business, but Gonzalo deeply shamed the family when he married a poor young weaver, Catalina Alvarez. They were horrified, and Gonzalo suddenly found himself dispossessed.

The truth may have darker than was obvious. Generations earlier, the Yepes family had been *conversos*, meaning Jews who, in a society hostile to their faith, only pretended to be Christian. Such conversos were always considered suspect, and even more so now in the dangerous rumor-driven climate of the Inquisition. Moreover, it was said that Catalina had either been the daughter of a Jewish slave or someone who had been burned at the stake for Judaizing. In any event, it is speculated that the prominent Yepes family could not risk an investigation that might reveal their own secret Jewish roots.<sup>11</sup>

As punishment for marrying Catalina Gonzalo had been cut off, and after two years of very painful illness and the stress of his well-known family’s rejection, he died, leaving his wife and children in extreme poverty.<sup>12</sup> Catalina had nowhere to turn and, believing that the family would take pity on her, traveled with the children to ask the help of Gonzalo’s uncles, who summarily rejected her pleas. So she and her children moved to a run-down Muslim neighborhood of Medina and returned to her profession as a weaver. It was a brutal life. Often there was no food, and John developed childhood rickets which left him frail and only 5 feet tall.<sup>13</sup> One of his two brothers, Luis, apparently died from starvation.<sup>14</sup>

In despair, Catalina sent John to the Colegio de los Ninos, an orphanage, where children were given an elementary Christian education and the opportunity to apprentice in a trade—although it turned out that John was in no way suited for manual labor. He tried his hand at being a carpenter, a tailor, a wood-carver, and a painter, but failed miserably at all of these—somehow always knowing that he belonged to the Church. He was undoubtedly relieved to be among four selected to serve as acolytes at Mass and to clean the nearby church of the Convent of La Magdalena. There John was well-liked and was singled out by the nuns for his intelligence and diligence.<sup>15</sup>

Chance brought John special attention. While playing, he was accidentally pushed into a deep well. His friends cried out in fear that he was drowning, but when they looked down they saw that John was floating on the water and was calling for a rope. As he was pulled out, onlookers described this as “A miracle of the Virgin Mary.” In some versions, the Virgin Mary actually appears to him. However it may have happened, this was something of a turning point which brought John to the attention of some who could help him.

Alonso Alvarez de Toledo, administrator of the Hospital de la Concepcion, which treated victims of plague and other incurable diseases, heard the story about the industrious young man worthy of a miracle and moved John from the orphanage to the hospital. At first, John was a messenger and then a very effective street beggar raising funds for the charity-supported hospital. He was well-liked and eventually began to care for patients who had the greatest respect for this young man who treated them with such kindness and gentility.

There can be no doubt that John’s experience at a 16<sup>th</sup> century hospital for victims of plague and venereal disease was one of the key formative events in his life. Nothing could be worse than what he saw as a teenager. Surrounded by cries of anguish and the smell of rotting flesh and syphilitic ulcers, he could only have been deeply affected and have begun to search for answers about the meaning of human suffering.

It was the administrator’s plan that John would eventually become the hospital’s chaplain, and he arranged for him to pursue studies at the newly formed Jesuit College in Medina del Campo while still working at the hospital.<sup>16</sup> There John received a strong classical education in Latin and Greek, but was never comfortable with the idea of becoming either a Jesuit or a hospital chaplain. So upon completion of the four year course, he secretly left the hospital, walking only a few blocks down the Medina street to a very primitive newly-formed monastery where he accepted an invitation from the friars to join them. It was an abrupt turn from a secure intellectual path with the Jesuits to an uncertain one in an order which placed greater emphasis on feelings. As he became a Carmelite he changed his name to Juan de Santa Maria.<sup>17</sup>

Believing that he had great potential, the Carmelites sent John, already certified as master of Latin, to the University of Salamanca, then ranked with the great universities of Bologna, Paris and Oxford. The school’s philosophy was Scholastic, meaning Aristotle and Aquinas with some emphasis on Plato and Augustine.<sup>18</sup> But Salamanca was the site of great debates, and especially of passionate arguments between the scholastics and the *scripturists*—literal interpreters of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> The university campus which in its sixteenth century prime had over seven thousand students was a crowded and unique mix of colorful robes and of languages.

The Carmelites, as did each religious order, had its own college or *Studium*. Students attended main university courses which included theology, philosophy, canon law, music and Hebrew, and then returned to their own Studium for the order’s specialized classes which emphasized a return to the basics of the Fathers of the Church and placed severe restrictions on the behavior of students. Crisogno de Jesus writes that:

“They were absolutely forbidden to go out of the college unless it were to attend classes at the university. Even then they had to go in pairs, wearing their white cloaks and walking with religious gravity. Those who broke this rule were imprisoned for eight days.”<sup>20</sup> For many, this highly structured environment was unpleasantly restrictive, but here John was happy and felt safe.

Unfortunately, his fellow students saw him as a starkly peculiar figure who had no sense of belonging and of intimacy. He spent much of the night in prayer, sacrificed and fasted with great devotion, and frequently scourged himself so forcefully that blood was drawn. Unlike others, he did not make friends or engage in light conversation, and was so strict about the breach of rules that it made others uncomfortable. His sanctity and devotion were admired, but he was avoided whenever possible.<sup>21</sup>

The isolation, although of his own making, was felt deeply and clearly added another dimension to John’s psychological complexity. He seems to have found in Christ the friend and lover that he could not find among those peers who did not understand him. It was here, at Salamanca, that he began to focus his energies and prayers in a way that would eventually lead to enlightenment.

In 1567 John of Santa Maria was ordained a priest and returned to Medina to say his first mass. There he encountered Theresa, a powerful and magnetic woman, a soldier in the war of the Church against heresies, a crusader who had come to the city to establish a reformed community.<sup>22</sup> Having heard much about John, she was attracted by his reputation for solitude and simplicity and arranged for them to meet. She was seeking support for her effort to reform the Carmelites and to establish small communities which would return to the pure principles of the Order’s “original rule.” And from the first meeting John and Theresa understood each other, joined forces, and worked tirelessly toward the goal of creating the Discalced (barefoot) Carmelites.

Their efforts toward Carmelite reform, often clashing with powerful figures in Spain and elsewhere, were effective, but since the Black Death there had been an increasingly anti-intellectual and anti-mystical trend and the work of these two devoted mystics was not without risk. John and Theresa often found themselves responding to charges ranging from outright heresy to irritating some well-placed Cardinal.

Their efforts involved some difficult political maneuvering which brought them into positions of great power within the Church. But they were also profoundly spiritual. As one Carmelite Priest, asserts: “From her he received so much as he gave in those years of profound and open conversation, a conversation that once on Trinity Sunday so soared that the two of them not only went into ecstasy but were soon elevated from the ground.”<sup>23</sup> It should also be noted that John was very famous for his skills in casting out demons.

The pair had many detractors and there were efforts to link both John and Theresa to Jewish mysticism, in which magic played an especially secret part. In his introduction to the works of Ignatius Loyola Antonio de Nicholas makes some interesting, though speculative, assumptions about the paths by which the two Carmelites may have come into contact with Jewish ideas.<sup>24</sup>

Jewish mystical sources were most obviously predominant in authors like Teresa de Avila, Luis de León,<sup>25</sup> and Juan de la Cruz. They are all connected and came from a “converso” background. A knowledge of Jewish mysticism came to them surely through their families...Juan de la Cruz probably died without knowing his origins. They all, however, knew such key documents as León Hebreo’s *Dialogues of Love* (1533)...In this volume a Spanish Jew exiled to Naples, proposes a philosophy of love as a means of obtaining union with God. The book is Neoplatonic and reveals familiarity with Philo the Jew and Plotinus. It also contains references to Ben Gabirol, Maimonides,<sup>26</sup> and Kabbala.

### *The Curious Carmelites*

The Carmelite order derives from *The Rule of Saint Albert*, Patriarch of Jerusalem in the twelfth and early thirteenth century. This is a very simple document referring to Christian hermits<sup>27</sup> then living in the tradition of the prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel. How long the group remained on Mt. Carmel is uncertain but, apparently under attack, members of this early “Carmelite” group migrated to Europe<sup>28</sup> where the order began to expand significantly and developed a very romantic tradition.<sup>29</sup>

The Carmelites achieved credibility in 1317 when Pope John XXII allowed them full exemption from episcopal jurisdiction, and in 1326 granted the same privileges as the Franciscans and the Dominicans.<sup>30</sup> This was a major victory, but legitimacy required more, and as Joachim Smet, preeminent authority on Carmelite history explains: “Apart from scholastic writings, Carmelite authors occupied themselves with three areas of concern, often contested by outsiders: the origin of the order, its approval by the popes, and its Marian title...from the beginning the Carmelites were concerned with establishing their credentials in a hostile Europe.”<sup>31</sup> There was conflict on every front as the rough mountain hermits were incorporated into the official Catholic network of monastic friars.

In 1385, during this period of Carmelite development, Felip Ribot wrote his *Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites*. It is among the most intriguing hoaxes in religious history, and was promulgated as fact by the Carmelite order for five hundred years.

In the *Ten Books* the prophet Elijah is claimed to be the father of Carmelite monasticism. Expanding on the biblical, Ribot says that: “When Elijah, by God’s order, had returned to Israel from the cave on Mount Horeb...he immediately gathered his disciples together on Mount Carmel and strove to lead them in observing the monastic life according to the form given to him by God”<sup>32</sup> This was the supposed beginning of the Carmelite Order and Ribot continues, asserting that “Already at the time of Elijah the Order became so numerous that, both in the deserts and in the suburbs of the cities, there were many bands.”<sup>33</sup> Among those Carmelites of Biblical times supposedly taught by Elijah were Elisha, Jonah, the Prophet Micah, and Obadiah.”

The story becomes even more preposterous. According to *The Ten Books*: “John

the Baptist was an outstanding member of the Order.” He was “the first to baptize the members of this Order, and prophesied to them not only the coming of Christ but revealed His presence and predicted that they would be baptized by the baptism of Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

And even the authority of the apostles was invoked: “The Carmelites, having been instructed by the apostles in the teachings of the gospel and the prophecies contained in the Old Testament, preached the faith of Christ throughout Phoenicia and Palestine.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the Carmelite form of dress is said to be very ancient: *The Ten Books* states that originally the disciples of Elijah worn skins,<sup>36</sup> then sackcloth, and finally white cloaks identifying them as Carmelites.<sup>37</sup>

*The Ten Books* leads to reality with a claim that “Aymeric, the patriarch of Antioch, was the first to gather the members of the Order together under a vow of obedience to a prior. And at their request Albert, the patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote a “Rule of Life” and built a monastery on Mount Carmel.”<sup>38</sup> It is true that the Carmelites did develop from a small community of hermits living on Mount Carmel and followed a simple rule written by St. Albert, but the rest is fantasy.

### *Physical and Mental Trials*

John’s capture and torture by fellow Carmelites who wanted to maintain a *status quo* in the order, has a special place in the history of Christian mysticism. John’s own writing, and descriptions of contemporaries, corroborate that he was treated with unimaginable cruelty to which he responded with grace and extraordinary inner strength. His remarkable poetry attests to the pain and suffering that he endured and is his uniquely personal description of an achievement of union with God.

The story is told that on the night of December 2, 1577, a group of opposing friars broke down the door of the cell at the Convent of the Encarnación in Avila where John and his companion Germán de San Matías were sleeping.<sup>39</sup> Germán was taken to a town outside of Avila and eventually escaped. John, however, was brought to the Carmelite monastery in Toledo and was thrown into a room that had been well thought-out to torture him into agreement to abandon his efforts at reform, which were radically changing their communities. John’s reforms were threatening mainstream Carmelites who were willing to take any measure to stop him. His brother friars began to inflict ruthless pain on John, which he claimed to have anticipated and, at least at first, he seems to have welcomed as a penance.<sup>40</sup>

John had been found guilty of grave disobedience by the order’s superiors, and among those torturing him there was a tacit assumption of that he would either desist in attempting reforms, or he would die. It is difficult to believe that such torture was inflicted by one friar on another, but those involved obviously believed that the righteousness of their cause justified any means, however brutal. Disobedience could not be tolerated.

The room in which John was housed had been a lavatory for guests of the monastery. It was ten feet wide and six feet long, the only light being from a small upper

skylight. There was no air. The stench made him sick and over nine months of captivity, his habit began to stick to his flesh and he was infested with worms. In summer he could hardly breathe. In the cold Toledo winter he had frost bite.<sup>41</sup>

Regularly, in the dining hall, as the friars were eating, he would be forced to kneel on the floor in the middle of the refectory. Then came the accusations and demands that he recant, and, finally, the blows of one friar after another, so painful that blood flowed from his shoulders. Although some of the younger monks felt great sympathy, John was alone. His jailor was forbidden to speak to him or even to empty the chamber pot.<sup>42</sup>

The intention of his vicious isolation and torture was simple. He would either back away from his attempts to change the Carmelites or be completely destroyed in mind and body. No doubt that John would often have welcomed death and, as many studies of prisoners of war have demonstrated, few human beings could resist the demands of such relentless and barbaric torture. The strength which John derived from his faith seems miraculous.

Perhaps the worst pain was psychological. Although he never gave in to the relentless attempts of his captors to force him to turn from the reformed path of simple faith, there were periods of grave doubt. He began to wonder if his support of the primitive rule had been an act of “presumption and folly” and that he might face death in mortal sin.<sup>43</sup> John writes that at the very edge of life, with all that he knew as self driven out of him, his soul was united with Christ. As he explained in his *Sayings of Light and Love* that “The further you withdraw from earthly things the closer you approach heavenly things and the more you find God.”<sup>44</sup>

He records the ecstasy of his unity with God by paraphrasing the poetic passion of *The Song of Songs* with his *Spiritual Canticle*.<sup>45</sup> However, he speaks as the Bride seeking the love of his Bridegroom in a way that certainly brings into question the usual argument that this is not homosexual because it is his soul (*anima*, female) that is interacting with the Bridegroom.

The Bride is dying of love and can only be saved by the kiss of the beloved Bridegroom. “Our bed,” John says “is in flower<sup>46</sup>...there he gave me his breast; there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge; and I gave myself to him, keeping nothing back; there I promised to be his Bride.”<sup>47</sup> And he goes on to say that “The Bride “has entered the sweet garden of her desire, and she rests in delight, laying her neck on the gentle arms of her Beloved.<sup>48</sup>” And, as in *The Song of Songs*, John’s breasts grew: “Upon my flowering breast, which I kept wholly for him alone, there he lay sleeping and I caressing him.”<sup>49</sup>

John’s highly charged and emotional interpretation is very different from any other who offer explanations of *The Song of Songs*. For example, in his commentary Bernard emphasizes a Christian symbolism in the relationship of the Bride and Bridegroom: The expansion of the breasts of the Bride after the kiss means that she will conceive the Christ consciousness which is the intermediary between God and Man. It is, Bernard explains, a cosmic event transcending the personal. This is of significance in that, although Bernard had presumably experienced the same ecstasy as did John of the Cross, his interpretation was unemotional:

“The mouth that kisses signifies the Word who assumes human nature, the nature assumed receives the kiss; the kiss however, that takes its being from both the given and the receiver, is a person that is formed by both, none other than “the one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Jesus Christ...This holy kiss was of necessity bestowed on the world.”<sup>50</sup>

John, on the other hand, humanizes what Bernard expressed as the impersonal cosmic. The sensuality of his union with Christ brings the kiss of Bride and Bridegroom into a perspective unlike that of Bernard and others who have achieved such union. For John of the Cross, although having resolved elements of self and become momentarily cosmic, it is an ecstasy of personal sexual intensity. John seems to significantly expand upon the theologically distant way in which those who have previously achieved such unity explain their experiences.

### *The Dark Night of the Soul*

John of the Cross is completely secure in his belief that he can lead others into the experience of union with God. In *Ascent to Mount Carmel* he writes: “This treatise explains how to reach divine union quickly. It presents instruction and doctrine valuable for beginners and proficients alike that they may learn how to unburden themselves of all earthly things, avoid spiritual obstacles, and live in that complete nakedness and freedom of spirit necessary for divine union.”<sup>51</sup>

He describes the purification of the soul as a dark night and says that “We are using the expression “night” to signify a deprivation of the gratification of the soul’s appetite in all things.”<sup>52</sup> And he explains that “The necessity to pass through this dark night of sense...to attain divine union with God arises from the fact that all of a person’s attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God’s sight.”<sup>53</sup>

The first night is “*passive*,” a terrible purging of all that is sensual in the soul.. The second is an “*active*” spiritual process so painful and devastating that it cannot be described. It is an experience known to very few in which every aspect of humanity is left aside from the soul and only that which is God remains.

This may be a very slow process, and the beginning of the passive Dark Night does not immediately follow the completion of the active one. There may be years before the trials of the most spiritual Dark Night begins.<sup>54</sup> For many it may never happen at all. But for those able to continue, John teaches that the process is brutal.

In all of this, it is important to emphasize that John was addressing only a few individuals among those already devoting their lives to the reformed Carmelite path: “My main intention is not to address everyone, but only some of the persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns.”<sup>55</sup> And he knew that some would misunderstand his message, making clear to Inquisitorial critics seeking to trap him that “I will not be intending to deviate from the true meaning of Sacred Scripture or from the doctrine of our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church.”

His thought is consistent with those who have asserted that union with God is a condition of unknowing—a state beyond consciousness in which there is nothing to be known. He explains that, in building toward this unknowing, there are stages of growth, not unlike the rungs of Bernard’s ladder. John asserts that the stages involve the sequential rejection of much that seems natural and writes that “A person who wants to arrive at union with the Supreme repose and good must climb all the steps which are considerations, forms, and concepts, and leave them behind.”<sup>56</sup> This was the path which John himself had followed and, as Cavanaugh points out, John “sought to transmit something of his own intimate experience of God’s mystery so as to awaken a similar experience in his readers.”<sup>57</sup>

John of the Cross has been criticized for teaching that the most brutal physical and emotional pain is essential to the developmental process. He rejected normal human values and certainly took pleasure only in that which related to Christ and wrote what he felt: “The appetites weary and fatigue a person...Torment and affliction is the second kind of damage the appetites cause to an individual. The affliction they engender is similar to the torture of the rack.”<sup>58</sup> And he says that “The third kind of harm the appetites bring on a person is blindness and darkness<sup>59</sup>...and because of the darkening of the intellect, the will becomes weak and the memory dull and disordered.”<sup>60</sup> This is perhaps the most harsh assessment of the human condition offered by any mystic.

At every turn John finds ways to say that this path will make a person absolutely miserable. The seeker must detest everything that could bring pleasure. He warns that “To come to enjoy what you have not, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.”<sup>61</sup> And self-deprecation is essential: “First, try to act with contempt for yourself and desire that all others do likewise. Second, endeavor to speak in contempt of yourself and desire all others do so. Third, to think lowly and contemptuously of yourself and desire that all others do the same.”<sup>62</sup> Reading John of the Cross, one might well wonder why God bothered to create human beings at all, a question which the Christian system of belief claims to answer.

John justifies this contempt for *self* by separating it from *soul*, arguing that although God created the soul in his perfect image, it is because of the Fall that the soul became “captive” to passions and to selfish desires. The key principle underlying John’s extreme point of view is that pain and suffering drive out the terrible blemishes on the soul brought about by Original Sin, and return the soul to its original divine state as the pure image of God.

### *Intellect*

Many mystics point to the intellect as profoundly significant in the path toward divine union. But John of the Cross asserts that intellect, as a part of the soul, must be cleansed of what it processes because “The intellect knows only the natural way, that is, by means of the senses.”<sup>63</sup> And he says that “Nothing in this life that could be imagined or received and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means of union with God.”<sup>64</sup>



Beyond these cautions about the limitations of the intellect in the quest for divine union, he warns about taking visions (presumably with people such as Hildegard von Bingen in mind) too seriously. He taught that accepting such visions as pointing the way to an “absolute” could be a hindrance to progress toward true union.<sup>65</sup> Effectively, he warns that meditations based upon thoughts and visions are an impediment.

*The Profundity of John’s Poetry*

The unique value of John’s poetry is that, through this form, he seems to have come closer to a reflection of the ecstasy of divine union than most others. He is straightforward in asserting that what he has experienced cannot be explained in any usual sense, but his stanzas are inspirational and may convey something irrational. The *Stanzas Concerning an Ecstasy Experienced in High Contemplation*<sup>66</sup> are some of the most remarkable passages in the history of mysticism. William Blake and many others have been moved by these elegant poems.

I entered into unknowing,  
and there I remained unknowing  
transcending all knowledge.

1. I entered into unknowing,  
yet when I saw myself there,  
without knowing where I was,  
I understood great things;  
I will not say what I felt  
for I remained in unknowing  
transcending all knowledge.

2. That perfect knowledge  
was of peace and holiness  
held at no remove  
in profound solitude;  
it was something so secret  
that I was stammering,  
transcending all knowledge.

3. I was so immersed,  
so absorbed and withdrawn,  
that my senses were left  
deprived of all their sensing,  
and my spirit was given an  
understanding while not

understanding  
transcending all knowledge.

4. He who truly arrives there  
cuts free from himself;  
all that he knew before  
now seems worthless,  
and his knowledge so soars  
that he is left in unknowing  
transcending all knowledge.

5. The higher he ascends  
the less he understands,  
because the cloud is dark  
which lit up the night;  
whoever knows this  
remains always in unknowing  
transcending all knowledge.

6. This knowledge in unknowing  
is so overwhelming  
that wise men disputing  
can never overthrow it,  
for their knowledge does not reach  
to the understanding of not  
understanding,  
transcending all knowledge.

7. And this supreme knowledge  
is so exalted  
that no power of man or learning  
can grasp it;  
he who masters himself  
will, with knowledge in  
unknowing,  
always be transcending.

8. And if you should want to hear:  
this highest knowledge lies  
in the loftiest sense  
of the essence of God;

this is a work of his mercy,  
to leave one without  
understanding,  
transcending all knowledge.<sup>67</sup>

### *Uncontrolled Ecstasy*

In one of the most useful studies of John of the Cross, Gerald Brennan writes about John's propensities to fall into ecstatic states and raptures:

“To say mass had become an extreme joy to him, but also a torment because he was afraid of being transported while he was saying it. Once this actually happened and the congregation saw him stand motionless with the chalice in his hand for a good while and then walk off into the sacristy as though the mass had been completed.”<sup>68</sup>

It is possible that this particular story is merely another of the many fantasies woven around John's life. There is, however, tacit agreement among mystics that ecstatic flashbacks can occur without warning, so the story might well be true..

### *Later Years*

John of the Cross, rose in stature and then fell into disfavor. In later years he had been stripped of every privilege and responsibility in the Carmelite order. He had been repeatedly denounced by an Inquisition always put off by mysticism which the inquisitors found impossible to control. But neither Ecclesiastical authorities nor the Carmelite hierarchy could overcome the strength of an extraordinary popular belief in his sanctity. Thousands knew of the miracles attributed to him, such as an ability to drive away storms and exorcize demons. But powerful enemies in Rome circulated damaging stories, such as that of a young nun in Málaga whom he had kissed through a grate. This was a mild accusation compared to the vicious rumors circulated about Theresa, including one believed by several cardinals, that while supposedly opening new convents, she was actually bringing women from town to town to prostitute them.<sup>69</sup>

Such were the risks of encouraging change in a highly entrenched Catholic bureaucracy. The Inquisition never harmed John, much as it tried, but the burdens of his life were extreme; the physical pain, which he accepted as healing his soul, was excruciating. He suffered from Erisipelas (also known as St. Anthony's Fire) a streptococcal skin infection which required that areas of infected and dead skin be scraped and cut out—in an age lacking anesthetics. And as the condition grew more serious in his last days, the skin was literally rotting off of his body. He bore it all with a gruesome silence which has become legendary.<sup>70</sup>

When he died there was hysteria among the crowds in the streets, and as word of his death passed through an enormous throng seeking his blessing, the grief was

overwhelming. People burst into the priory, crushing to kneel at his bed and pulled out swabs soaked in pus that had been put over the sores covering his body. Someone bit off his toe, others pulled off his fingernails and took clippings from his hair. A Dominican priest was stopped while trying to remove a finger.<sup>71</sup> This terrible scene is no doubt a result of the edict of the Council of Trent emphasizing the power of relics of saints.<sup>72</sup> And even without the formal process, beautification of John of the Cross had already happened in the minds of his thousands of worshipers.

John of the Cross has often been called the most difficult of saints, but it is fortunate that a truly honest picture of his life is beginning to emerge as scholars increasingly balance what some have considered to be major flaws in his personality against the brilliance of his mysticism.

1. John Paul II, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, Oregon, 1981.
2. John McGowan, ed., introduction to *A Fresh Approach to St John of the Cross*, Ireland, 1993, 12.
3. op.cit., 15.
4. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, trans Kieren Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez, Washington.D.C., 1991 Collected Kavanaugh. 35.
5. John of the Cross. Ascent of Mount Carmel, *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, 113.
6. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown 1990, v.I, 266. See also Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition, A Historical Revision*, Yale, 2014,15.
7. *The Collected Works of Theresa of Avila*, v.1, translation and introduction Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilo Rodriguez, Washington, D.C., 1987, 22.
8. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, v.ii,660. The Council of Trent was especially significant for its promotion of censorship and burning of books, a practice which Christians traditionally used against its enemies. The Council's greatest single influence on Catholic thought was the establishment in 1564 of the Index of Prohibited Books. See: Kamen, op.cit., 129.
9. Gerald Brenan, *St. John of the Cross" His Life and Poetry*, (orig. 1997), Cambridge, 2011, 3.
10. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Washington, D.C. , 1999, 529.
11. Richard P. Hardy, *The Search for Nothing*, New York, 1982, 7.
12. Crisógono de Jesús, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, New York, 1958, 3.
13. Antonio de Nicholas, *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, New York 1996, 19.

14. Crisogno, 6.
15. Ibid 12-13.
16. Ibid, 14. The school was founded in 1551. The Jesuits had only been an official order, having been approved by Pope Paul III in 1540. There was a wave of interest in Ignatius Loyola, who was alive for the first fourteen years of John's life.
17. De Nicholas, 21-22.
18. Brennan, 7.
19. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 12.
20. Crigogno, 20-27.
21. Brennan, 8, also Richard P. Hardy, *John of the Cross, Man and Mystic*, Boston, 2004, 23.
22. Desmond Tillyer, *Unity with God: The Teaching of St. John of the Cross*, Oxford, 1984, 8.
23. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 16,
24. Introduction to *Powers of Imagining: Ignatius of Loyola* trans. Antonio de Nicolas, Albany, 1986, 19.
25. A mystical poet and Augustinian friar who taught at the University of Salamanca and was known for his translation into Spanish of the Song of Songs.
26. Solomon ben Gabirol, Jewish mystic and one of the first teachers of Neoplatonism in Europe. Maimonides, born in Spain, was a physician and philosopher who considered to be one of the greatest interpreters of Torah. He combined Arab and Jewish thought. His *Guide to the Perplexed*, originally written in Arabic, was influential to St. Albert and to the Scholastics.
27. Joachim Smet, *The Mirror of Carmel: A Brief History of the Carmelite Order*, Illinois, 2011,5.
28. Ibid, 9.
29. Ibid, 18.
30. Ibid 10.
31. Ibid 19.
32. Ten Books, 31.
33. Ibid 33.
34. Ibid, 70.
35. Ibid, 78.
36. Ibid 96.
37. Ibid, 98-103.
38. Ibid, 110.
39. It is an odd coincidence that in the 1300's the orchard on which the cell was built, had been a cemetery for heretical Jews where Moshe de León author of the Zohar (1250-1305) had been buried. Lorenzo Jiménez, *Poesia, St. Juan de la Cruz*, Madrid, 1982, 26.

40. Crisogno -97.
41. Nicholas 27
42. Crisogno, 104.
43. Brennan, 32.
44. Sayings of Light and Love 159.
45. John wrote the *Spiritual Canticle* making the ideas of the *Song of Songs* available to contemplatives at a time when Ecclesiastical authority had forbidden the circulation of any parts of the Bible except in the original Greek and Hebrew or in Latin. *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul*, trans. David Lewis, intro Benedict Zimmerman, Wincaton, 1909, 2.
46. Ibid 15
47. Ibid 18
48. Ibid 27
49. *The Dark Night* 6.
50. St. Bernard on the Song of Songs 9.7.
51. Ascent to Mount Carmel, intro to Prologue.
52. Ascent I.3.1.
53. Ascent I.4.1.
54. Dark Night, II.3.1.
55. Ascent to Mount Carmel, Prologue 4.
56. Ascent, II.12.5.
57. Cavanaugh intro *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* 37.
58. Ascent, I.6.6-I.7.1.
59. Ibid I.8.1.
60. Ibid I.8.3.
61. Ibid I.13.11.
62. Ibid I.13.9.
63. Ibid II.3.2.
64. Ascent II.8.4. John of the Cross refers specifically to “la inteligencia natural.” In this it may be noted that the Latin *intellectus* may be understood to refer specifically to knowledge and discernment gained through the senses.
65. Ibid.16.10.
66. *Spiritual Canticle*, IV.
67. Ibid IV.
68. Brennan, 47-48.
69. Ibid, 76-77.
70. Richard P. Hardy, *Search for Nothing*, New York, 1982, 108.
71. Hardy, 115.

72. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, v.II, ed. Norman P. Tanner, Georgetown, Session 25, December 1563, 1990, 774-75.

## 10. Developed Kabbalah: The Cosmic Tree

Over the centuries several very different systems of Kabbalah have emerged, each claiming authority in the secret interpretation of the Torah provided by God to lead the Jews back to the ultimate source of creation. In this regard it may be appreciated that Kabbalists do not consider themselves to be following a belief system. They consider The Tree of Life to be a true representation of forces which are continuously creating the universe.

Abulafia, particularly, makes the claim that his system is “scientific” and that through his methods the mystic can reach “divine frequencies.” Abulafia’s assertion is very straightforward and seductive: follow my plan and you will achieve unity with the divine.

His “Ecstatic” or “Prophetic” method is intensely demanding, using random combinations of Hebrew words and letters: Through an arbitrary interaction of Hebrew words and letters which eventually blur and become nonsense, one takes the first step, passing into a dream state that is beyond self, beyond waking thought and feeling. It is a purposeful, often frightening, and potentially very dangerous, path through many levels of darkness and potentially irreversible madness as the “self” is increasingly dissolved.

This is in contrast to the highly rational, intellectualized Lurianic Kabbalah, a complex quasi-magical approach which emphasizes the *Tree of Life*. This diagram represents both the *Creator* and the *created*, following the passage in Genesis 1:27 that “God created man in his own image.” Often described with the words “As above, so below” which, in Kabbalistic terms, is to say that every person is a Tree of Life and that each body part, emotion and intellectual quality, as well as the very soul, is a manifestation of some aspect of the Creator.

The Tree became popular in the fourteenth century when mystics were attempting to diagram the words of the *Sepher Yetzirah* about the creation of the world and its divine energies. It was a time of trial and error as great Kabbalists offered their own interpretations of the Tree. And it was during this period of development that many complicated diagrams and texts believed by some, even today, to be essential to Kabbalah were deliberately distorted to confuse and to keep curious outsiders at a distance from materials that were considered sacred.<sup>1</sup>

Both Ecstatic and Lurianic Kabbalah require at least basic understanding of the Hebrew language and sometimes the withholding judgment on ideas such as the principle that the Hebrew letters do not just represent specific forms of energy, but that they are the energies and that the combination of the Hebrew letters (energies) can have a powerful effect that is more than the sum of their parts.

Hebrew letters also represent numbers. So combinations of letters, however apparently arbitrary, carry meaning for the Kabbalist, and underscore the idea that the entire created universe is based upon mathematical formulae imbedded in the Hebrew alphabet. Moreover, to Jewish mystics a Hebrew word has always held the spirit of whatever it designated and simply writing a word could have a unifying effect on mind and body, bringing the seeker into touch with something higher.<sup>2</sup>



Over the centuries, practical methods involving Hebrew letters and phrases have been passed down in secret. This is confirmed by the highly respected Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in the preface to his book, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, stating that he writes “By authority from my masters” and saying that “So much information has already been published that it is virtually imperative that an authentic account be published. It is for this reason, as well as other reasons which I am bound by an oath to conceal, that the great living masters of Kabbalah have voiced their approval that such a book be published.”<sup>3</sup>

Kaplan separates Kabbalah into three types. First is the *Theoretical Kabbalah*, a description of the spiritual world of immense complexity. Second is *Meditative Kabbalah* which he says “deals with the use of divine names, letter permutations, and similar methods to reach higher states of consciousness, and as such, comprises a kind of yoga.”<sup>4</sup> And finally there is the *Magical Kabbalah* about which almost nothing significant has been released publically by reclusive Kabbalist rabbis, but which has been the claimed source of speculative occult ideas since the sixteenth century when the worst sort of charlatanism emerged. One particularly egregious twentieth century Kabbalist group, claiming to be a guardian of a magical tradition, offered for sale a “Red string kabbalist bracelet,” claimed to have “the power of protection” and to be “an antidote for the evil eye.”

On a more legitimate note, beginning with Abulafia, key figures in Kabbalistic mysticism have been willing to describe some of the actual mechanics of the changes in consciousness and inner experiences along the path to divine unity. The Jewish approach is highly structured and detailed, whereas that of the Christians and of Buddhism is devotional and contemplative. However, one must speculate that similar key experiences may be effected by different techniques. In any event, it seems that, the closer one comes to the modern era, the more explicitly serious Jewish Kabbalists have been willing to talk about meditative practices and their effects.

### *The Tree of Life*

The Tree of Life has been an object of interest for four hundred years. It has been a source of spiritual inspiration and guidance for some, while many others have become lost in the infinite complexity of its symbolism and become self-deluded that they have made inner progress. This is a special trap of Kabbalah as many details of its systems have been made open to the public.

The Tree represents a personal and universal evolution that is *continuous*, forever flowing outward and then inward again—like a divine breath. And control of breath (often combined with inner imagery) is a key to most mystical systems. As Mircea Eliade observes: “Breath control is part of every form of yoga. It is used to enable the Yogin to detach himself from the world and even in some measure to destroy it. Because yogic liberation is equivalent to breaking all ties with the cosmos...a return to the non-differentiated state that existed before creation.”<sup>5</sup>

It was not until the fourteenth century that Kabbalists began to experiment with designs of the *Tree of Life* showing the ten centers of energy (Sefirot), as described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and connected the twenty-two *Paths*. In all these are called the *Thirty-Two*

*Paths of Wisdom*, each of which is considered to be a different stage of consciousness.

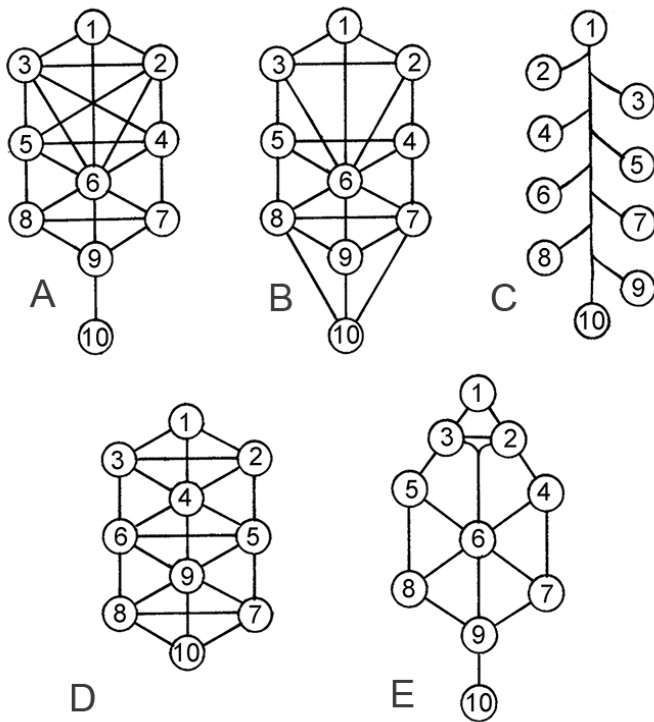
Theoretically, the idea is that one may return to the source of all by returning upwards on the path of creation. The more one “rises on the Paths,” and becomes like the Creator, the more the separate individuality is dissolved. And there is overwhelming agreement among those who describe having achieved enlightenment, that the human self must be wilfully given up to achieve unity with the Sefirotic aspect of God.

The Sefirot are the objective forces of the created universe, while the connecting Paths are the subjective emotional, physical and intellectual experience of rising from one center of energy to another. These are discrete stages of development in which a person may be said to “dissolve” what has been known as self into the unity of the no-self of the Creator. It is taught that the process can bring overwhelming changes to perception but not without risk of significant psychological imbalance if approached incorrectly.



The Tree of Life went through a period of slow development as is illustrated by a manuscript page of *The Gates of Light* written by Joseph Gikatilla, Abulafia’s teacher,<sup>6</sup> which shows the names of the Sefirot without connections.

A comparison of diagrams over a long period of time suggests not only disagreement on the form of the Tree, but a transition and crystallization of modern Kabbalist thought. Figure A shows the type adopted by Isaac Luria about 1517. Figure B was published by the Jesuit scholar and Christian Kabbalist Athanasius Kircher in his encyclopedic *Oedipus Aegypticus* of 1652 and has become the most common form of the Tree of Life among Christians. Figure C appears in Robert Fludd’s *Complete Works*, 1615. Figure D is that proposed



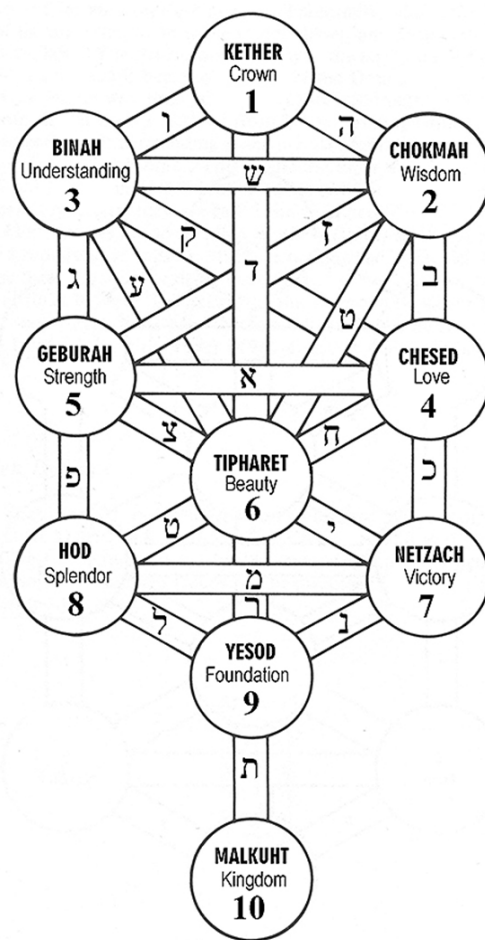
by Allah of Vilna in the 1700s. Figure E is a misleading form of the Tree as printed with the 1516 Latin publication of *The Gates of Light*. Judging from the manuscript page shown above, this would have come as quite a surprise to Gikatilla. Until Isaac Luria, Kabbalists showed little interest in the Tree of Life. It was not a significant part of Abulafia’s methods.

### The Sefirot

Kabbalah is perhaps the most difficult mystical system ever proposed. Many are attracted to its study, but few are willing to devote their lives to unraveling the relentless detail. However, for true seekers, Aryeh Kaplan’s *Innerspace*<sup>7</sup> offers a unique bridge to understanding..

Kaplan explains that the Sefirot are stages of objective consciousness, and that the goal of their individual “initiation” by the mystic is union with God. He points out how the Sefirot may be achieved, writing that “Only when one makes the mind completely blank can the Sefirot be experienced,” adding that “all such techniques of Kabbalah meditation involve the recitation of a mantra-like device or various types of contemplation...such techniques, however, are only a means through which the mind is cleared of all thought. The actual experience of the Sefirot only comes after one stops using the technique and remains absolutely still, with all the thought processes hushed.”<sup>8</sup>

Following are the divisions of the Tree of Life which Kabbalists teach are centers of energy and on which the mystic focuses in meditation. Sefirot are assigned planets, parts of the body, astrological signs, etc. but primarily, each is defined by the interaction of the Hebrew letters which form its title. The Tree is a system of correspondences (Netzach, for example, represents the nature gods of all pantheons—East and West) and of form and force in perfect balance at all levels.



1. Keter, The Crown. The ultimate Creator
2. Chokmah, Wisdom. The Father. The principle of force.
3. Binah, Understanding. The Mother. The principle of form.

These are what is called the *Supernal Triangle*, which emerges from Nothingness and

establishes the *Will to Force* and the *Will to Form*. It is a divine realm separated by an *Abyss* below which creation begins.

4. Chesed, Mercy. Love, The framework of manifestation: time and space.
5. Geburah, Severity., Destroyer of the useless. Fierce judgment.
6. Tipharet, Beauty. Self-consciousness. The Son, The Word, Christ and Buddha.
7. Netzach, Victory. Nature. The group mind. Feelings and instincts.
8. Hod, Splendor. Reason, the individual mind.
9. Yesod, Foundation. The storehouse of images. Cyclic energies underlying matter.
10. Malkhut, The Kingdom. Physical earth, The Inferior Mother. Deter below.

### *Abulafia's "Scientific" Kabbalah*

Although Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291) created his method of enlightenment almost 800 years ago it remains one of the most advanced and profound of all practical Kabbalistic systems. Abulafia was ahead of his time in defying his contemporaries by making openly available all of the most secret techniques of Kabbalah. His book *Chaye Ha-Olam Ha Ba (Life in the World to Come)* is considered to be one of the most important books on Kabbalistic initiation ever written.

Abulafia's method requires intense concentration, but followers have reported for centuries that the results are astonishing. It is a system which Abulafia describes as "scientific" and explains that as one touches certain "divine frequencies" something is going to surely happen."<sup>9</sup>

A preface to *Ha-Olam*, describes the Abulafian School as "different from every other type of Kabbalah, because it does not talk about Sefirot, divine emanations, worlds, etc. but concerns itself with the inner transformation of self and the direct experience of God." In fact, Abulafia's methods of intellectual transformation of the human psyche is completely different from medieval Kabbalah and from the theoretical Kabbalah of others.

A brilliantly clear explanation of Abulafia's complex and often confusing method is offered by Perle Epstein in her *Kabbalah, The Way of the Jewish Mystic*:

"The meditative technique known as *tzeruf*, permutation of letters, uses language to cut through its own structure and enables the mystic to reach the suprarational realm very quickly. The Kabbalist who practiced this extraordinary form of contemplation studied a biblical phrase until it lost its rational meaning and in the disorientation following repeated pronunciation of the now meaningless phrase, there suddenly thundered forth 'a meaning beyond meaning.' Combined with special breathing techniques and contemplation of body centers, meditation on the letters produced ecstasy almost immediately."<sup>10</sup>

And she expands this explanation, saying of Abulafia

“All language became for him one language. His technique separated and reunited phrases and letters, divested words of their ordinary meaning, indeed, spun them out of recognition until their informing spirit electrified the body and mind. His methods took the disciple in stages through *mitva* (articulation of the letters) to *mikhtav* (writing them) and finally to *mashav* (contemplating them). Moving from gross material visualizations to finer spiritual ones, the Abulafian mystic reached a state of ecstasy in which he was actually confronting the premanifest ‘spirit’ behind each formed letter.”<sup>11</sup>

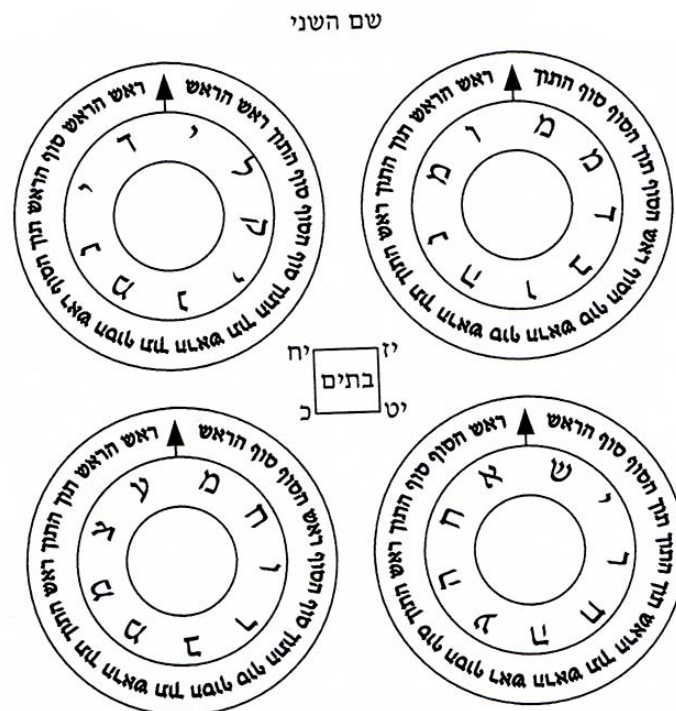
In another groundbreaking book *Kabbalah, A Neurocognitive Approach to Mystical Experiences* Arzy and Idel explain that “The theurgical understanding of the role of the commandments is absent in his writings. Symbolism, at least in the manner that it was defined by scholars of the Kabbalah, is also irrelevant for Abulafia’s Kabbalah. In lieu of the centrality of nomian practices the magical-mystical status of the Hebrew language and its components come to the fore.”<sup>12</sup>

Abulafia claimed to have discovered, through his own experience and that of his students, that a formula of specific meditative techniques using the 72 Names of God (an expansion of the YHVH, the *Tetragrammaton*) led

consistently to an inner awakening. This method depends upon circles—noting that Sefirot in the *Sefer Yetzirah* were first diagrammed in circular rings or as cups, one inside the other.

Abulafia’s circles involve letters and words based upon the Tetragrammaton which, he says, cryptically, “will change the nature of its creations according to its pronunciation.” And asserting that the whole system revolves in a circle, he teaches that “The roots of the trees of the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life are derived from its fruits,”<sup>13</sup> asserting as well that “the holy wheels become the wheels of the sacred *Merkava*, the Divine Chariot that God rides when He will come to manifest.”<sup>14</sup>

Within these circles, he says, “the correctly applied Seventy-Two names of God provide a means of entry into hidden worlds of the mind.”<sup>15</sup> And he offers the secret of pronouncing the Name that is traditionally called unpronounceable, saying that “The Tetragrammaton pronounced in full is the foundation of all the Names and the beginning of all upper and lower creatures that were created by the Name...This honorable and terrible Name teaches us the existence of the object that it called the Primal Cause of all that exists.



He is God who, in his wisdom and according to His will, created all.”<sup>16</sup>

Abulafia states that “when an individual completely enters the mystery of prophesy, he suddenly sees his own image standing before him. He becomes totally unaware of his own essence, as if it were concealed from him. Then he sees his own image standing before him and telling him of the future.”<sup>17</sup>

In his masterpiece, *Life in the World to Come*, Abulafia’s demands are strict, offering pages and pages of obscure diagrams and charts and increasingly complex exercises to lead the mystic into an irrationality in which consciousness expands. Self is dissolved away, and the selfless soul begins to touch upon a previously hidden reality.

Such rigorous methods are very different from visionary experiences through the Tree of Life. Abulafia was, in fact, critical of “all the imaginary physical attributes which are considered important at first because of the power of imagination that misleads the human intellect and keeps it afar from any real attainment.”<sup>18</sup> And lest anyone should take his words lightly, he offers dire warnings: “Be very careful my son, as your forefathers warned you against the fire that might scorch you, the water in which you might drown, and the wind which might harm you. Do not make a worldly use of the crown, [The first Sefhira] and remember that he who uses the ineffable Name transgresses the *Mitzvah* [commandment] of God.”<sup>19</sup> Any use of a Divine Name requires caution, and more than one biographer of Abulafia has used the word *dangerous* in reference to his system.

For example, Abulafia claims that if a man pronounces the names of the letters that are supposedly carved on each of his organs in the body, the letter will reply. “But if he mispronounces a letter, God forbid, while mentioning it in his head, the letter that reigns over this organ would be immediately displaced, its nature would be changed, and the consequences of a break would occur, and the man who made the mistake would become a deformed person.”<sup>20</sup>

Abulafia boldly claimed that by using his methods, one could produce a direct opening up to the infinite Creator (the *Ain Soph*, Nothingness) and he was willing to teach this to Jews, to Muslims and to Christians alike. But Abulafia was clear that for his formula to produce a positive result it must be followed precisely, adding that “I would like to advise any man who reads this book, not to err, God forbid, not in a letter and not in a dot, as it is written.”<sup>21</sup>

Abulafia’s claim that he could teach union with God, is similar to the assertion by John of the Cross that he could very quickly promote enlightenment in a seeker. Moreover, seeking parallels, it is certainly possible that St. John’s inner conversations with God, in a heavenly “place,” may provide effects similar to Abulafia’s passing through a Hebrew letter onto a higher plane.

The use of Hebrew letters as doorways into an inner world requires powerful visualization of the letter with “vibrated” sounds and special movements of the head and body. Abulafia also explains a complex process by which the mystic leaves his body and creates a “second body.”

Not unexpectedly, his description of this process is difficult to follow. He says that the second body is formed “through the grouping together of the forces and humors that were dispersed throughout the body, and through separating them from the first body, and

combining with another body, until they are further completed and entirely separate from one another and become one body again, persisting independently as a complete entity.”<sup>22</sup>

A person seeing a double of himself is often described in psychiatric literature as *Autoscopy* and *heautoscopy*.<sup>23</sup> Arzy and Idel define the terms as “characterized by the experience of a realistic double appearing in front on the mystic,” and they refer to Abulafia’s comment that you must ‘go back as if the one standing opposite you in answering you, and you, yourself, answer, changing your voice.’”<sup>24</sup> The whole idea may seem weird or, generously, something that makes sense to the person having the experience. But Abulafia offers a sort of *deus ex machina* for the confused: “The prophet knows that the imaginary body that he sees during his prophesy does not really exist physically, for it is an entirely spiritual thing that took a physical shape at the time of the attainment, since the corporeal body of the prophet knows the truth by his spiritual intellect that acts on this occasion.”<sup>25</sup>

## **Cordovero**

Moses Ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570), also known as the *Ramak*, is perhaps the greatest name in post-Zoharic Kabbalistic thought. He was either born in, or settled in Safed, an ancient town in what is now Northern Israel which, in the sixteenth century, became a major center of Jewish Kabbalism. There he founded his “School of Safed” teaching a modern form of Kabbalah, centered on the Tree of Life, inspired by the *Zohar*, the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Bahir*.<sup>26</sup> Intense spiritual work was supported by a system of moral and behavioral values, based upon the Sefirot, about which he wrote in *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, a book that attained considerable popularity.

But it was Cordovero’s book, *Pardes Rimmonim, The Orchard of Pomegranates* that changed the direction of Kabbalah studies forever. It is a work consisting of thirteen “gates,” divided into chapters. To enter the garden of pomegranates through these gates is to enter into the divine mysteries as was explained in this first clear and systematic presentation of Kabbalistic ideas, based primarily upon the Zohar and reconciling ancient ideas of Kabbalah and Merkabah with later developments such as those of Abulafia. Cordovero’s brilliant work of synthesis created an ideological foundation which has been accepted, and built upon, by all later Kabbalists.

He was, in fact, among the first to propose that all of human and divine interaction is based upon the Sefirot. And in an interesting reflection of the Platonic God/Demiurge or Christian Father/Son (Word), Cordovero teaches that there are really two aspects of God. The first is God who is the ultimate and unknown divine creator, and there is the God which is the Sefirot and can be known by mankind.

Cordovero’s principle that God is revealed to humanity through the Sefirot and that individual perfection of the Sefirot is to become like God is not for everyone. Cordovero explicitly teaches that the Sefirot can only be understood by Jews who are the guardians of the cosmos. And as Cordovero scholar Ira Robinson explains: “The responsibility of the individual Jew for the well-being of the cosmos was coupled with a belief that events and actions in the human sphere indicated corresponding processes in the sefirotic realm. Thus

each earthly action had its sefirotic counterpart. For the kabbalist this meant that literally everything was to be related to the divine and was to be understood in a sense beyond its surface meaning.<sup>27</sup>

The Safed Kabbalists believed that they were living just prior to a new era in which the Messiah was to appear; they felt an obligation to open up the secrets of the Kabbalah to every Jew—trusting that the effort would hasten the coming of the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> It was on this basis that Cordovero wrote with such clarity. He wanted to pull aside the Kabbalah’s traditional curtain of secrecy and make the principles clearly understandable.<sup>29</sup>

Cordovero belonged to a mystic brotherhood of pious and austere men who dressed in white on the Sabbath, and went out into fields on the holy days. They would often visit the graves of great Kabbalists around Safed, believing that being close to the last resting place of these sages would inspire their mystical ideas and generate spiritual insights.<sup>30</sup>

The visiting of graves, linked to the principle of reincarnation, was essential to the Safed Kabbalists. Moreover, invocations and spells were pursued actively at the grave sites which were the center of teaching activity—especially by Luria and his followers..

As did Abulafia, Cordovero refers frequently to the “Science of Kabbalah,” and Robinson explains that “Cordovero consistently refers to Kabbalah as *Chokhmah*, the word medieval Jews used for ‘science, asserting that “Kabbalah could provide a ‘scientific’ key by means of which it would be possible to understand the secrets of the universe.”<sup>31</sup>

Cordovero was very much a man of his times. The Sixteenth Century was the era of dawning science which produced Copernicus, Galileo, Leonardo da Vinci and many others. It was an environment that encouraged both Cordovero and Abulafia to keep careful records of their mystical “experiments.” Cordovero, especially, in his attempt to clarify and to classify kept detailed records of conversations and events in his diary called “The Book of Divorces,”<sup>32</sup> suggesting the Jewish document of divorce, but meaning separations from the demonic and impure.

## Isaac Luria

Isaac Luria (1534-1572), known as the “Ari” (the Lion) was born in Jerusalem. Very little is known about his parents. His father may have come from Germany or Poland and was Ashkenazic; his mother was Sephardic. When his father died, his mother took the family to Cairo,<sup>33</sup> and in Egypt at the age of 23 Isaac joined an important rabbinical circle. He was later to base the rules of his Kabbalistic fellowship in Safed on principles taught by this group.<sup>34</sup>

The real spiritual turning point for Luria was in the 1560’s when for six years, he isolated himself on a small island in Egypt belonging to his family, and began lengthy experimentation with contemplation. Fine calls this “his first attempts at Qabalistic creativity.”<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, his contributions were to include an extraordinarily complex explanation of the origins of the cosmos, an emphasis on innovative ritual which was





unusual in Jewish society, and an emphasis on the significance of moral and ethical behaviors. He was a brilliant interpreter of mystical Jewish texts and Kaplan says: “Without the Ari’s teaching, the Zohar does not make any sense at all...the Ari’s teaching could be called the atomic theory of the Zohar: everything begins to make sense.”<sup>36</sup>

Claimed by tradition to have arrived in Safed on the same day as Cordovero’s funeral, Luria joined the procession and supposedly saw a pillar of light which the Zohar described as indication that leadership is being passed on from a deceased. Six months later Luria accepted the role of spiritual primacy among the Safed Kabbalists and began to build upon Cordoverian Kabbalah to create his own Lurianic Kabbalah. And although the extreme secrecy surrounding these principles in the Middle Ages was put aside by Abulafia and by Cordovero, modern Kabbalah is anything but opaque as is evidenced by Kaplan’s statement that he writes with authority from the “great living masters of Kabbalah.”

Although the theories of Kabbalah has been widely disseminated, the practical Kabbalah, which is interwoven with magical Kabbalah, has been a closely guarded rabbinical tradition until Luria’s time when his disciple, Chaim Vital, wrote *The Gates of Holiness* with its (widely suppressed) fourth chapter that offers “Instructions for the attainment of Ruach-Ha-Kodesh/”<sup>37</sup> The book openly explains practical methods. However, in response to many who may obsessively focused on occult ritual and so-called “magic,” Luria taught that success in all Kabbalistic work requires an attitude of kindness and sensitivity to the feelings of others, as well as maintenance of a positive and joyful attitude.

Luria took seriously the admonition of Leviticus 19:18, that “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Not only was this principle essential to balanced inner exploration of self, but it was in contrast to an attitude of self-reproach and guilt that was prevalent among Safed Kabbalists.<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note that although Luria attracted others through what has been described as “exceptional supernatural abilities.” Chaim Vital, wrote of Luria that:

“He knows all of the deeds that people have performed or will perform in the future; he can discern the thoughts of individuals even before they are carried out. Moreover, he was able to determine the transmigrations through which the souls of individuals had passed.”<sup>39</sup> And he is said to have gained knowledge through a vision of Hebrew letters on a person’s forehead,<sup>40</sup> one of many reported skills which must have left his followers in awe.

Luria created the first and most historically influential community of Kabbalists, men who believed that by purifying themselves, they were making a powerful contribution toward the ultimate return of humanity to its divine source. Moreover, their efforts were considered to be for the greater good of Judaism and its “chosen people,” a selfless theme also taught by Cordovero to his followers. And like Cordovero, Luria’s teaching was primarily centered on visits with his students to the graves of the enlightened prophets of the Talmud which surrounded Safed, The students practiced a form of meditation aimed at binding their souls to those of the sages and allowing new secrets to come into the world through the practice that was called “surrendering upon the tombs.”<sup>41</sup>

The idea of reincarnation, *metempsychosis* of the soul, was integral to the Jewish mystical tradition and was found in the oldest Jewish mystical text, the *Sepher Bahir*. The idea gained significance over the centuries, and by the sixteenth century was discussed

by many authors of whom Luria was the most prominent.<sup>42</sup>

The Ari believed that he was, in fact, the reincarnation of Moses,<sup>43</sup> saying that the prophet Elijah had appeared to him in a vision to initiate him personally.<sup>44</sup> Luria also asserted that his disciple, Chaim Vital, had lived as Rabbi Akiva ben Yosev, to whom the Talmud referred as “The Chief of Sages.” Theoretically, knowledge of earlier incarnations was essential to the process of purification or “soul healing,” carried through many lives until a soul is worthy to be absorbed back into the divine.

Luria changed the direction of Kabbalistic studies with two contributions: The first was a highly complex and creative cosmology compiled from many ancient sources. He explains that in a primordial development out of Nothingness, there was a Limitless Divine Light, and into this endless light, in an act of Self-Creation, God made an empty space. He did this by shrinking and contracting light in a process called *Tsimtsum*. And inside of this new space, the Creator produced a raw mass out of which He modeled the Cosmos as ten lights (*Sefirot*), “vessels” through which Divine Light constantly ebbs and flows and with which the mystic participates. Purification of the individual soul is progressive and rises through each pattern and form of the light within each Sefira. It is a process of *repair*, *tikkum*, by which the soul of the individual—having first become aware of all previous incarnations—returns to the divine source.

Of this process Vital emphasizes that the description is symbolic, explaining that “There are not really any vessels. We use the term ‘vessel’ only in comparison with what is inside it. Indeed, these vessels are pure and bright, of the utmost purity fineness and brightness.” And Vital underscores the idea that he and Luria were guardians of deep secrets, He says: “We are not permitted,” he says, “to say any more about a place as high as this.”<sup>45</sup>

Of course, not everything was perfect. As creation developed from the most simple to more complex and dense aspects on the Tree of Life, lights which flowed into the vessels below Tifaret (the sixth Sefira, Beauty) were too powerful for the vessels to hold, and they shattered, leaving the “shells,” or “shards” which are called *Klippot*. However some divine light (which Luria called “imprisoned”) was retained by each of the shards, and forms the basis of the imperfect human condition. The shards are the source of evil and imbalance, which is to be overcome.<sup>46</sup>

The goal of the mystic is to eventually rise above the human condition to the level of Tifaret, realm of sacrificed gods (including God the Son, and the Logos/Word) and then be lifted to realms where the restrictions of time and space do not apply. To do what has been called “rising on the planes” raises the question of “vibrations” to which there is a measurable scientific basis. For centuries mystics, from East and West, have described inner development based upon attaining different “vibratory states” through contemplation or special forms of meditation. Such vibrations are also claimed to be essential to ritual magic and to the casting of spells by a religious community.

Luria brought individuals together through new and creative rituals which apparently continue to be practiced today by closed rabbinical fellowships. Whatever the mechanisms involved in ritual be, it involves an individual’s move from self-centering to absorption into the group and acceptance of control of ideas which are not their own. Group ritual seems to

de-emphasize focus on self and, over time, may encourage its dissolution. The process is called decentering.

McNamara's overview of the effect of ritual is insightful: "When decentering is triggered, the ritual itself takes over control of the behavior of the individual. The participant effectively puts himself into the hands of the ritual. Here ritual constitutes a safe holding place for the individual's identity. When things go right, religious ritual takes this identity, transfigures it, and then 'hands it back' to the individual who is enriched by the process." All of this sounds very clinical, but for Luria's devoted followers, participating in dark-night, candle-lit, rituals at the graves of prophets, the effects must have been profound and reminiscent of Plato's introduction into the Eleusian mysteries.

One of Luria's most interesting rituals, mentioned by Epstein, was called "Putting on the Names," in which the mystic was clothed in a robe covered with the Names of God, suggesting that he was in control of the greatest of cosmic forces which the Hebrew letters represent.<sup>47</sup> And in this regard one may assume that many of Luria's rituals were, in fact, highly theatrical.

Luria's Kabbalah is often described as "mythological," but current investigations by particle physicists might suggest the value of a willing suspension of disbelief about religion-based cosmologies. Luria's description of a universe of Sefirot which appeared suddenly out of time, is surprisingly similar to the mathematical and theoretically derived Big Bang Theory." And whereas he spoke about the creation of light in the universe, scientists refer to an afterglow of energy (light) from the Big Bang called the "cosmic microwave background."

## Chayyim Vital

There has always been a thin line between the intense contemplative techniques (*Hitbodet*) of the Kabbalists and magic. The controversy about magic was raging in the 1200's when the great philosopher Maimonides (a primary influence on Abulafia) emphatically condemned these practices. Three hundred years later the question remained, and Luria made an effort to abolish (at least publically) any form of Magical Kabbalah in his group. On the other hand, magical formulae (some of great antiquity) were widely used, and his disciple, Chaim Vital was among those who established rites and activities which can be called "occult."<sup>48</sup> His world, which was much smaller than that of Luria, was filled with angels, demons, and forces over which he claimed control.

Because most of Luria's teaching was through discussions with students at the graves of great prophets, Luria wrote very little, and Chayyim Vital's introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, *The Tree of Life*,<sup>49</sup> is the primary source of Luria's Kabbalistic system. Vital also wrote an elaborate and self-aggrandizing *Book of Visions* about which Fairstein raises a caveat, regarding Vital's credibility. "It is," he says "significant that virtually all the events described are related to magical practices of supernatural events," noting that, Vital dwells on spells, divination, geomancy, and the conjuring of angels and demons with mirrors.<sup>50</sup> And despite Luria's disdain for such practices, Vital seems to represent him as surrounded by the magic which he so openly rejected.

Vital describes Safed as a mysterious and highly refined spiritual environment filled with unseen forces—spirits and angels and demons—all of which can be called upon to fulfill the demands of the mystic. And although making use of magical practices for his own purposes, he asserted that his primary goal was that of Luria and his Safed community, repair of each person’s soul and its return to its supernal root.

The principle is that a soul has lived as many different people through the centuries and in each life may have transgressed against a divine commandment. In this regard, Vital describes sins of his own previous lives, asserting that if each of these sins was not repaired, it would lead to more serious sins in the next transmigration—following the rabbinical principle that “one sin leads to another sin.” Repair of an earlier fault means that one must, in the current life, emphatically embrace observance of the commandments previously violated.<sup>51</sup> In principle, a soul begins a new life because of a need to repair a defect of a previous incarnation and Vital knew his own previous incarnations, end their faults, because his *The Art* had explained them to him.

1. Perle Epstein, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic*, New York 1978, xvi.
2. *ibid*, 93.
3. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Maine 1982, 1.
4. Aryeh Kaplan *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation*, Massachusetts, 1977 ix.]
5. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*: Princeton 1972, 413.
6. Ms. On paper, 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman empire, collection Leiden Library.
7. Aryeh Kaplan, *Innerspace: Introduction to Kabbalah, Meditation and Prophecy*, Jerusalem 1991.
8. Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, 66.
9. Abraham Abulafia, *Ha-Olam Ha Ba (Life in the World to Come)*, Providence University, 2008, ix.
10. Epstein, 76.
11. Epstein, 77
12. Shahar Arzy, Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: A Neurocognitive Approach to Mystical Experiences*, Yale, 2015, 144.
13. *ibid*, 25.
14. Abulafia, x.
15. *ibid*, 15.
16. Abulafia, 15.
17. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Maine, 1982, 109—with comments from the the Chaye Ha-Olam Ha-Ba.
18. Abulafia, 13.
19. Abulafia, 27.
20. Abulafia, 27.
21. Abulafia, 1.

22. Abulafia, 78.
23. From the Greek words *heautou* “of oneself,” and *skopeo* “I am looking at.”
24. Arzy, Idel, 71,
25. Abulafia, 9.
26. Ira Robinson, trans. *Moses Cordovero’s Introduction to Kabbalah: An Annotated Translation of His Ne’erav*, New York, 1994, xxxi.
27. *ibid*, xix.
28. *ibid*, xxv.
29. *ibid*, xxiii.
30. Moses Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, trans and intro Louis Jacobs, New York 1974, 11.
31. Cordovero, *Introduction to Kabbalah*, n.1, 3.
32. Cordovero, *Palm Tree*, 11.
33. Laurence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship*, California, 2003, 28-29.
34. *ibid*, 31.
35. *ibid*, 38.
36. Aryeh Kaplan, *Inner Space*, Jerusalem, 1991, 6.
37. Chaim Vital, *Ktavim Chadashim: New Writings*,
38. Fine, 91.
39. Chaim Vital, *Shaar Ruach ha Kodesh*, Trieste, 2018, 155-201.
40. Fine, 153.
41. Klein, xxv.
42. Morris M. Faienstein, trans and intro, *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies: Book of Visions and Book of Secrets*, New York 1999 [Jewish Mystical Autobiographies, 25].
43. Fine, 329.
44. Epstein, 19.
45. Chayyim Vital, *Tree of Life*, t New York, 2008, 27.
46. Fine, 131-35.
47. Epstein, 39
48. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 255.
49. Chayyim Vital, *The Tree of Life: Chayyim Vital’s Introduction the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria*, trans, and into. Donald Wilder Menzi and Zwe Padeh, New York 2008. First published 1999. Extensive charts and diagrams. This is the primary source of Luria’s teaching.
50. Faienstein, 23.
51. Faienstein, 25

## 11. Carl Jung: Enlightenment “Science”

(1875-1961)

For decades Carl Jung, known as the “father of analytical psychology,” has been the subject of controversy regarding the scientific validity of his ideas about enlightenment, which he calls “individuation.” He presents two interactive points of view: The first is a corpus of scholarly studies seeking to establish parallels between all religious and mystical programs in which knowledge of God is the aim. The second is a meditative program, with no set rules, which evokes intense visions that arise from the unconscious.

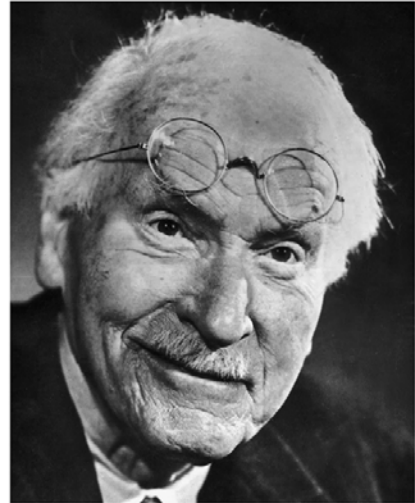
Jung’s groundbreaking study of the mind was analogous to the encounter of Egyptian and Greek physicians to the workings of the human body and their enthusiastic speculation about the role of each organ. His complex terminology for the relationship of the conscious and the unconscious is a first modern attempt to apply scientific rationality and to define what he himself experienced over many decades. His ideas are dense, often difficult to follow, and make assertions which range from the speculative to the incisively factual.

His visions were collected into a large medieval manuscript-like book called the *Red Book (Liber Novus)*, which he called a record of the stages of his own enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> The book is colorful, splashy, imaginative, and completely unlike anything that has ever been offered as part of a system of enlightenment. The connection with modern art therapy, which may also explore unconscious themes, is clear.

Unfortunately, the family kept the book from publication for years after his death, and when it was finally published in 2009, the reviews were mixed. While some called the book a brilliant new direction in modern psychology, others truly believed that Jung was insane.

### *Early Years*

At the age of eighty-three Carl Jung began a journey into the past, his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* is a bitter-sweet recollection in which he wrote: “My life is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious.”<sup>2</sup> But one might suggest that his twenty-volume studies as well as his “*Red Book*” are, in fact, also



**Carl Jung**

*“There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”*

autobiography. They are a record of everything he read, everything he thought, and the methods by which he sought to reach divine knowledge.

From age four Carl experienced strange visions and psychic phenomena, such as disembodied floating heads, which were common to his mentally-ill mother.<sup>3</sup> At the same time he began to see himself as two different people. One was a schoolboy, the other was “an old man who lived in the eighteenth century, wore buckled shoes and a white wig and rode in a coach with high wheels with a suspended box.” He believed himself to have been a well-known physician in the city of Basel.<sup>4</sup>

Reincarnation became an early part of Jung’s perspective on the human condition and, although not accepted by most in the West, belief in transmigration of the soul through many lives, was consistent with the earliest Christianity. It continues to be a principle of Jewish Kabbalism.

Such ideas were encouraged by social attitudes during Jung’s childhood. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was profound interest in spirit worlds and to those whose fashionable parlors offered regular seances, his elaborate visions, and belief that we live many lives, would have seemed quite usual.

Although the young man understood that his mother was seriously ill, he was inexorably drawn into her world of ghostly phantoms. On the other hand, he found himself in painful conflict with the solidly-built faith of his Protestant minister father.

Paul Achilles Jung, who began to teach Latin to his six year old son,<sup>5</sup> assumed that Carl would follow in his footsteps. But that was not to happen. Under pressure to accept Protestant Christianity without question, Carl began to feel that the rituals and demands of a church were not the way to God. Looking back he wrote that “Everywhere in the realm of religious questions I encountered only locked doors and, if ever one door should chance to open I was disappointed by what lay behind it.”<sup>6</sup> And he spoke harshly of his father and the theologians of his church: “They had,” he wrote, “blocked all avenues by which he might have reached God directly, and then faithlessly abandoned him”<sup>7</sup>

During this period of youthful despair with Protestant Christianity, Carl escaped alone into an experience of “the other,” where he found a personal realm of peace and dream-like phantasies. This was the hidden place, the realm of God into which he would pass over when he was alone. “It was,” he said, “as if the human mind looked down upon Creation simultaneously with God.” And as he tried to understand what God expected from him, he began to grasp the astonishing secret that God wanted him to sin. He came to believe that God was telling him “to think abominations in order to experience His grace.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is nothing new about this. It is the traditional requirement of the mystic to control the human opposites of good and evil, to descend into Hell, to die and to be reborn. In this regard Jung found, at a young age that the search for inner balance requires not only the experience of divine goodness, but the encounter of frightening and dangerously unbalancing forces that seek to hinder self-realization. Moreover, the history of mystical thought teaches that escape from Plato’s cave of human illusion does

not promise a happy life.<sup>9</sup> Jung's own suffering, as he advanced spiritually, is well-known because as a "self-experiment" he faithfully recorded the complex stages of his soul's search for perfection

### *Dreams*

Jung explains that the *psyche* is a balance of conscious and unconscious, and that a link is established between them through symbols—especially those encountered in dreams. And although the Self includes both conscious and unconscious, consciousness is only a very small part of the whole.

Theoretically, the unconscious communicates through what is called an "emotionally charged pictorial language." This happens in deep meditation as well as in dreams, which Jung believed to be the most accessible path into the unconscious. This was an interest shared by Sigmund Freud who proposed one of the first theories of dreams, which he believed were wish fulfillment—an unconscious expression of sexual and aggressive fantasies which would be forbidden while awake.

Modern scientists are equally interested in the question of sleep and memory, and a study of comparative enlightenment would be incomplete without mention of the attempts of scientists to measure the various stages of consciousness involved. Modern brain imagery has offered inspiration and hope, but current research is yielding very little information of significance because, at least for the time being, scientists are unsure of just what it is that they are measuring. And Susan Sara, writing in *The Journal of Neuroscience* summarizes past research. In her article, "Sleep to Remember" she points out that "Despite nearly a century of investigation with a waxing and waning of interest, the role of sleep in memory process remains controversial and elusive."<sup>10</sup>

### *The Self (Psyche)*

It may not be obvious, but Jungian psychology is essentially about Carl Jung and his personal and isolated quest for self-knowledge. His work stands as a record of a spiritual quest, in which he believed he could perfect the Self by bringing the conscious and unconscious into a perfect balance. At the center of these two dynamic opposites, is the *Ego*, which is dissolved by the resolution of the conscious and unconscious, creating a separateness of the I, a decentering, which may be the first step in all methods of enlightenment.

Jung explains two forms of unconscious: the *personal* and the unknown *collective*, to which many names have been applied, including "First Matter," or "The Philosopher's Stone." The collective is the source of all, as opposed to the personal unconscious which involves a dark and potentially dangerous side of each individual, that he called the *Shadow*.

The collective unconscious is the realm of *archetypes*. These are universal forms which have been built up by humanity since the origins of life. They are "the primordial



images which have always been the basis of man's thinking; the whole treasury of mythological motifs."<sup>11</sup> And Jung make an especially interesting assertion. He says that "The archetypes of the unconscious can be shown empirically to be equivalent of religious dogma."<sup>12</sup>

Jung invented many terms for traditionally understood experiences. Deep contemplation became "active imagination," and he called enlightenment "individuation," to emphasize the process of perfection of the self. And through his investigation of the human psyche Carl Jung found a common denominator of all mystical experience. His extensive study of religions and mythologies led him to conclude that all roads to enlightenment, whether ancient Platonism, mystical Christianity, Hebrew Kabbalah, or Alchemy, lead the seeker through a similar progression that brings about the dissolution of the ego.

Jung explains in great detail how mythologies and religions have approached the process of unification: In the past, knowledge of God has been sought through a wide variety of meditative systems each of which has the effect of allowing the mind to slowly resolve conflicts of intellect and feelings and to pass through the seemingly endless experiences of the unconscious. *Union with God*, the *Coniunctio*, *Divine Ecstasy*, *Entry into the Light*, the *Mystical Marriage*, all have the same meaning insofar as they represent experience and knowledge beyond normal human consciousness.

But, to reiterate, not all mystical paths require, as does Jung, that the seeker devote years to meditative preparation. Saint John of the Cross and Abulafia both offer unique assertions that their methods will quickly lead the aspirant to decentering and to divine knowledge. Abulafia does this through a mantra of random Hebrew letters; St. John does the same thing using a special form of contemplation which produces the effect of getting the ego out of the way.

Saint John's process is described in *The Ascent to Mount Carmel*, a treatise which "explains how to reach divine union quickly" and perhaps surprisingly, Carmelite Father Ernest Larkin states that "John of the Cross expected his novices to reach at least a state of initial contemplation by the end of the one year novitiate." Larkin also suggests that this method has something in common with Jung's "active imagination."<sup>13</sup>

But there are caveats regarding Jung's technique. The practical method of spiritual development which Jung cautiously proposes is essentially one of trial and error. It is an unstructured meditative approach in which symbolic images are allowed to freely enter the mind—presumably rising up from the unconscious.

Jung was emphatic that this method could potentially lead to union with the divine—although he was very frank in admitting that it could also kill you or could lead to a mental illness. But, by comparison with traditional religious mysticism, divine protection seems more of a possibility than is found in Jungian psychology. Starting with a strong belief system may be easier than the Jungian method of more or less stepping off of a cliff into the unknown. In fact, some might argue that Jung's quasi-scientific approach may be far more dangerous than those anchored to a religious system in which the believer is trained to accept that the individual is the creation of God and is

completely subordinate to the will of the divinity.

Nevertheless, and whatever the methodology, all forms of Eastern and Western mysticism agree that enlightenment demands a “death” of the individual, a gradual withdrawal of the ego followed by a “resurrection.”

### ***The Unconscious***

Jung wrote: “From the beginning I had conceived my voluntary confrontation with the unconscious as a scientific experiment which I myself was conducting...I might easily say that it was an experiment which was being conducted on me<sup>14</sup> And he warned that “Self-recollection is about the hardest and most repellant thing there is for man, who is predominantly unconscious. Human nature has an invisible dread of becoming more conscious of itself.”<sup>15</sup>

There seems little doubt that purposeful encounter with the unconscious runs some risks, especially for a neophyte following Jung’s lead. Jungians do, however, assert that the system is best conveyed to a “patient” by a qualified therapist whose role is that of a guide into a perilously unknown inner world. And as Jung’s friend Barbara Hanna explains: “Both Freud and Adler...regarded the unconscious as a kind of rubbish heap onto which all that is found inconvenient is thrown, and that it therefore consists of material that was once was conscious.”<sup>16</sup>

Of course Jung disagreed, and slowly developed his own theory of both a collective and a personal unconscious, the key to which, he claims, is the female aspect of the soul, *Anima*. It is she who forms unconscious imagery and brings symbolic ideas to be interpreted by the conscious mind. It is she who communicates the images of the unconscious to the conscious mind.”<sup>17</sup> And as Jung’s colleague Marie-Louise Von Franz asserts “The *Anima* stands between good and evil, she is just the breath of life and is a vehicle, or an organ, of the *Animus* or the spirit, just as the body is the organ of the soul.”<sup>18</sup>

Jung explains that he developed his ideas about a *collective unconscious* through the dreams of his patients:

“I noticed to my amazement that European and American men and women coming to me for psychological advice were producing in their dreams and fantasies symbols similar to, and often identical with, the symbols found in the mystery religions of antiquity, in mythology, folklore, fairytales, and the apparently meaningless formulations of such esoteric cults as alchemy...From long and careful comparisons and analysis of these products of the unconscious, I was able to postulate a ‘collective unconscious,’ a source of energy and insight in the depth of the human psyche which has operated in and through man from the earliest periods of which we have records.”<sup>19</sup>

Jung’s life is imbedded in the thousands of pages of his collected works. They are

a history of his search for an inner path which he never wanted exposed to the world because he feared that few would accept him as a scientist—and he was right. His detractors included religious leaders, scientists, and members of his own profession who did not accept the premises of his new approach to psychotherapy and who viewed Jung’s psychology as something of a “New Age” religion. In this, one cannot ignore a brilliant academic study by Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*. Of Jung he says “At the present time a resilient cult of personality very much akin to Carlyle’s hero worship is in evidence and occludes the historical Jung,”<sup>20</sup> a well-documented point of view which has elicited hostility and curses against Noll by much of the Jungian community.

### “Active Imagination”

Before turning to Jung’s process of imagination, so essential to his method, one might consider a recent study which changes almost everything that has been previously thought about the nature of imagination, and the belief that creativity takes place only on the right side of the brain. The study reveals that imagination occurs over a wide network of neurons which has been called a “mental workspace” in which images, symbols, and ideas are consciously manipulated.<sup>21</sup>

From the standpoint of Jungian psychology this discovery is useful because it seeks to explain the mechanisms by which the brain creatively handles ideas and imagery (actively imagines). The same neural network could also be involved in the reception of images (visions) which the unconscious (God) may address to the individual.

Neural plumbing notwithstanding, there are those who are very cautious about Jung’s methods of imagination and visions. Saint John of the Cross warned that visions could be dangerous and said that “Even though visions and locutions from God are true, we can be misled by them.”<sup>22</sup> In this regard, it seems that many people (especially those attached to occult belief systems) can become trapped in visual and auditory fantasies of the so-called “astral,” and think that they are making spiritual progress. Such a mind trap might serve to explain why St. Bernard maintained a polite distance from the pluperfectly pious Hildegard of Bingham and the suspiciously doctrinally-correct Christian visions which brought her such popular fame.

Jung, too, has gained fame for an unsurpassed record of elaborate visions, although he avoided teaching a specific method, and one is left to more or less cut and paste his few practical reports of self-examination. “We are,” he says, “so greatly tempted to turn everything into a purpose and a method that I deliberately express myself in very abstract terms in order to avoid prejudicing the reader in one way or another.”<sup>23</sup> But, overall, Jung was extremely private and only toward the end of his life did he make public his most personal thoughts, which are found especially in his *Red Book*.

The curiously elaborate visions of *The Red Book*, are a record of meditations which led him to the mystical stage of decentering. He says that “Sinking down into the self” requires putting aside the intellect and feelings as a preliminary step toward

the difficult balance of the mind's opposites." And, like all legitimate mystics, he teaches that enlightenment takes a person beyond the restrictions of time, of thought and of feelings.

Jung describes sitting at his desk thinking about his fears, and then letting himself drop into a dark chasm. "Suddenly it was as though the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic,"<sup>24</sup> while trying to gain control over disorientation and fleeting visions. He explains that "In order to seize hold of the fantasies, I frequently imagined a deep descent. I even made several attempts to get to the very bottom. The first time I reached, as it were, a depth of about a thousand feet, I found myself at the edge of a cosmic abyss...I was in the land of the dead."<sup>25</sup>

Jung's emphasis on the role of imagination in the search for inner knowledge is not new. Ideas about imagination are part of all human history. It is a somewhat murky piece of Aristotle's philosophy, referred to in Greek as *phantasia*. And imagination is a significant aspect of the methods of Avicenna, the Arab philosopher who sought to reconcile the ideas of both Plato and Aristotle.<sup>26</sup> His philosophy was profoundly influential to medieval Latin thought and is reflected among modern mystics who have applied imagination as a bridge between the world of matter and the spiritual.

There are many parallels to Jung's visionary process in primitive descriptions of "walking in the spirit vision" and in the would-be shaman's encounter of the darkest and most frightening of forces balanced against the pure ecstasy of divine goodness. The experience of the primitive mystic seems identical to Jung's overview of conscious vs. unconscious: The ego is confronted with terrifying images and thoughts, akin to madness, which are eventually overcome and lead to what Jung describes as "an ecstasy so great that the tremendous strain of it is at times erased by a storm of tears."<sup>27</sup>

Mystics throughout history have written about such divine ecstasy, but Jung's perspective is unique. He was a pioneer of modern psychology whose colorful visions are from a dimension of fairy tales and myths filled with demons and dragons and magical figures. But nothing is truly random and, theoretically, what Jung called "active imagination" leads to progress that is not known to the seeker and may result in a sudden flash of inner knowledge that has been recorded by mystics for centuries.

Jung's earliest visions were quite spontaneous and he understood them to be a divine gift. "When I endured these assaults of the unconscious I had an unswerving conviction that I was obeying a higher will, and that feeling continued to uphold me until I had mastered the task." It was only in later years that he termed the process "active imagination" and describes his "unimaginable, complex and diverse"<sup>28</sup> journey as an encounter with frightening and unbalancing dark forces of self seeking to block him from a truth beyond thought and feeling.

On his spirit travels Jung encountered a curious guide, Philomon whom, he says, taught him about the nature of consciousness: "I saw that it was an old man with horns of a bull. He had a bunch of 4 keys, one of which he clutched as if it were about to open a lock. He had the wings of a kingfisher without its characteristic color."<sup>29</sup> Philomon guided

Jung through a maze of magical figures and images— some ecstatically beautiful and some terrifying—which Jung understood to be symbolic aspects of the unconscious produced by his soul, the Anima (female aspect) whom he called the “mouthpiece of the unconscious.”

And, explaining the process, Jung uses the same word as do earlier enlightened mystics. He speaks of a *dissolution* saying that “The ego is dissolved in the self, unbeknown to itself, and with all its inadequacy and darkness, it has become a god.”<sup>30</sup> The personality is dissolved into the collective psyche,<sup>31</sup> and many who have experienced this decentering describe, over time, a strange feeling of being dissolved.

## *Alchemy*

In 1926 a series of dreams led Jung to study alchemy.<sup>32</sup> He explained that “As I worked with my fantasies, I became aware that the unconscious undergoes or produces change. Only after I had familiarized myself with alchemy did I realize that the unconscious is a *process* and that the psyche is transformed or developed by the relationship of the ego to the contents of the unconscious.”<sup>33</sup> An intensive study of medieval and ancient alchemy brought Jung to conclude that a meditative process paralleled the physical process begun with fire in the furnace and that the spiritual gold of divine union was slowly developed in the alchemist himself.

Jung views the history of Alchemy as a story told in symbols, and symbols are the mainstay of his philosophy. They are, as Jung, said, the language of the unconscious and are often interchangeable, as are “Sun” and “Moon” which mean, at the same time, fire and water, male and female, conscious and unconscious. And there are endless animal symbols representing stages in the process, perhaps the most significant of which is alchemical symbol is the *Uroboros*, the serpent with its tail in its mouth meaning that all things will return to their spiritual source.

Medieval alchemy, the first steps toward modern chemistry, is often thought to be a fanciful story about charlatans claiming to turn lead into physical gold, a metal which has historically been connected with the idea of immortality (Egyptians believed the flesh of the gods to be gold).<sup>34</sup>

The seductively mysterious process is often illustrated with an elderly philosopher in his workshop surrounded by symbolic animals and keys to the art such as the sun and the moon, which are the human opposites that the philosopher seeks to unite. The secret aim of the process was not physical but spiritual. And speaking of early alchemists Mircea



The Alchemist in his Workshop  
The Twelfth Key of Basil Valentine  
“Unity is Achieved in the Golden Flower”

Eliade explains that “without a shadow of doubt, the Alexandrian alchemists were from the very beginning aware that in pursuing the perfection of metals, they were pursuing their own perfection.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in his book, *The Arts of the Alchemists*, C.A Burland refers to the principle of the distillations and the reconciliation of opposites, as a process of enlightenment.

Something incredible occurred for the true alchemist. The opposites in nature had been reconciled. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water were at one in a mysterious object, which had the divine power added to it could transform base metal into its noble perfection as gold and silver, the representation of sun and moon, the dual powers of male and female in the work of creation...Thus the philosopher, overwhelmed by his unknown discovery, had something which is common to mankind of all periods; but it was the jewel attained by few, and cannot be adequately explained. For those who had this jewell there was no easy life. The further path seems to have been of suffering and obscurity”<sup>36</sup>

The complex distillations and the process taking place in the oven was so subtle that even slight deviation could bring harm to the operator, who monitored the transformation with intense prayer and meditation. But the real process was taking place in the mind of the philosopher himself.

Burland confirms an idea, often expressed, that enlightenment happens without warning. “The final revelation,” he says, “of the secret knowledge came with suddenness. The alchemist firmly believed that a power from above had enlightened him at the moment when he was at last fit to receive the knowledge.”<sup>37</sup>

The *Lapis Philosophorum*, the Philosopher’s Stone is described as the key to the perfection of the soul. It is also called First Matter, Mercurius, and the unconscious. It is theoretically, through the stone that one may achieve immortality and divine union which is the goal of “The Great Work” of returning humanity to its divine source. Of course, the idea of making gold from lead created a popular mythology, but the spiritual nature of the quest was understood by very few. Jung was a pioneer in explaining alchemy in modern psychological terms, as a process of achieving the Unio Mystica .

Alchemy can be described as four stages, (although some refer to as many as twelve) each represented by a color. The “first matter” is represented as “hunting of the Green Lion” which, in seeking perfection, strives to absorb the “gold” of the Sun.

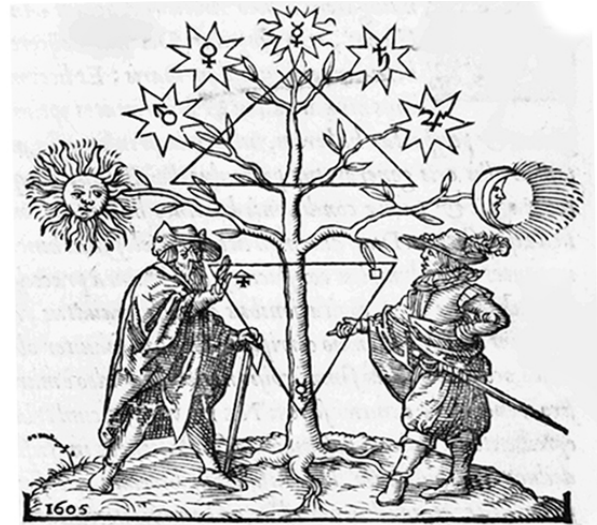


The Greene Lion Absorbs the Sun  
*Rosarium philosophum*  
Frankfurt, 1550

The first stage is the *Nigredo*. It is the same blackness and painful isolation of the dark night as described by John of the Cross. It is the mind's encounter with what Jung called the Shadow—a chaotic touch upon deeply buried inner conflicts and the beginning of pushing aside the “I” as described by all great mystics. Then follows the *Albedo*, the whiteness. This is the dawn after a long and terrible night. Hope follows the despair. It is the achievement of what neuroscience calls the decentering, a movement away from the ego.

The next stage is the *Citrinas*, or yellowing. It is the “Chemical Wedding” of male and female, of Sun and Moon. Their conjunction results in a hermaphroditic offspring which brings knowledge of the divine Mercurius which has always been guiding the process within the individual. Finally comes the *Rubedo*,<sup>38</sup> Redness, the triumphal achievement of the Philosopher's stone, divine union.

Jung's colleague Marie-Louise von Franz, an analyst expert in alchemy and in medieval philosophy, warns that behind the many colors and symbolic animals, the alchemical path is a very intense psychological experience which requires a long-term commitment. Her comments offer insights into the practical complexity faced by one who engages in this “Great Work.”



*Aurellae Occultae Philosophorum*, 1605  
Basil Valentine, Cover illustration  
showing the “as above, so below”  
of *The Emerald Tablet*.

“In practice one sees that the longer people work on this road, the more subtle the indications of the unconscious become and the worst one gets punished or thrown off if one makes a slight mistake. In the beginning stages, people can commit the most horrible sins of unconsciousness and stupidity without having to pay much for it. Nature does not take revenge. But when the work progresses over the years, even a slight deviation, a hint of the wrong word or a fleeting wrong thought can have the worst psychosomatic consequences. It is as though it became ever more subtle, moving on the razor's edge. Any faux pas is an abysmal catastrophe, while previously one could plod kilometers off the path without one's own unconscious giving one a slap or taking its revenge in any way.”<sup>39</sup>

Jung defined the unconscious materials approached by the alchemist as God, the source of all, and of his encounter of the Shadow,<sup>40</sup> as a young child. It is his key to enlightenment and to the production of spiritual gold. He explains that “The problem of opposites called up by the Shadow, plays a great—indeed, the decisive—role in alchemy,

since it leads in the ultimate phase of the work to the union of opposites in the archetypal form of the hierosgamos or 'chemical wedding.' Here the supreme opposites, male and female (as in the Chinese yang and yin) are melted into a unity purified of all opposites and therefore incorruptible."<sup>41</sup>

On the right is a cover illustration for the *Aureliae Occultae Philosophorum* (1605) by Basilius Valentinus, one of the truly great documents of alchemical knowledge. The manuscript is among the most significant, and contains the main principles of the alchemical process hidden in symbolic language. It includes *The Emerald Tablet* which first appeared in Arabic c. 800 and which supposedly gives the secret of the Mercurius/Prima Materia, the essential life-force and divine spirit to which Jung refers as the unconscious.

*The Emerald Tablet* offers the raw data of Alchemy. It is considered to be the primary document of Alchemy and of Hermetic philosophy:

It is true without falsehood, certain and most true: that which is below is like that which is on above, and that which is above is like that which is below; by these things are made the miracles of one thing. And as all things are, and come from One, by the mediation of One, So all things are born from this unique thing by adaption. The Sun is the father and the Moon the mother. The wind carries it in its stomach. The earth is its nourisher and its receptacle. The Father of all perfection of the universal world is here. Its force, or power, remains entire, if it is converted into earth. You separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, gently with great industry. It climbs from the earth and descends from the sky, and receives the force of things superior and things inferior. You will have by this way, the glory of the world and all obscurity will flee from you. It is the power strong with all power, for it will defeat every subtle thing and penetrate every solid thing. In this way the world was created. From it are born wonderful adaptations, of which the way here is given. That is why I have been called Hermes Trismegistus, having the three parts of the universal philosophy. This, that I have called the solar Work, is complete.<sup>42</sup>

Another key passage from the *Aurelia Occultae* is unique in that Mercurius (the unconscious), calling itself a poisonous dragon, speaks directly to the alchemist-seeker. Mercurius is that incomprehensible something, the *sine qua non*, which turns lead into gold and which brings about perfection of the Self. This dark passage which has been, over the centuries, interpreted in various (often mutually-exclusive) ways, is among the most typical of alchemical documents. Jung found in this a perfect description of the resolution of opposites of conscious/sun and unconscious/moon so essential to attaining divine knowledge. Here the unconscious is daring the seeker of knowledge to approach:



I am the poison-dripping dragon, who is everywhere and can be cheaply had. That upon which I rest, and that which rest upon me, will be found within me by those who pursue their investigations in accordance with the rules of the Art. My water and fire destroy and put together; from my body you may extract the green lion and the red. But if you do not have exact knowledge of me, you will destroy your five senses with my fire. By the philosophers I am named Mercurius. My spouse is the gold; I am the old dragon found everywhere on the globe of the earth, father and mother, young and old, very strong and very weak, death and resurrection, visible and invisible, hard and soft; I descend into the Earth and ascend into the Heavens, I am the highest and the lowest, the lightest and the heaviest. I am dark and light. Often the order of nature is reversed in me. I am known yet do not exist at all. I am the carbuncle of the sun, the most noble purified earth, through which you may change copper, iron, tin and lead into gold. A waxing poison comes from my nose, having brought to death many people. Therefore, with the art, you have to separate the course from the fine, if you don't want to delight in poverty. I give you the power of the male and the female, even that of heaven and earth. With bravery and broadness of understanding, the mysteries of my art are to be done, if you want to conquer me with the power of the fire. From which many have suffered in their potential and work. I am the egg of nature, that only the wise man knows, who by piety and modesty let the microcosm arise out of me, what is destined to people by the most high God but what is given only to a few, while most long for it in vain: that they do well to those in poverty from my treasury and that their soul will not cling to the transitory gold. I am called Mercurius by the Philosophers; my mate is the philosophical gold; I am the old dragon, present everywhere on earth, father and mother, young man and old man, very powerful and very weak death and rebirth, hard and soft; I descend into the earth and ascend into heaven. I am the highest and the lowest, the heaviest and the lightest; often the order of nature in color, number, weight and measure is being reversed in me, I contain the light of nature (lumen naturale); I am the dark and the light, I come forth from heaven and earth; I am known but do not exist; all colors radiate in me and all metals by the sun's rays. I am the solar carbuncle, the most refined, glorified earth, by which you can change copper, iron, tin and lead into gold.”<sup>43</sup>

## ***Mandala***

In Tibetan Buddhism the Mandala is a symbolic picture of the universe in which Jung found an important tool. In his investigations of the collective unconscious, he discovered an apparently universal symbol...the mandala and after more than a decade of study he announced his conclusions to the public for the first time. “The mandala is an

archetypal image whose occurrence is attested throughout the ages. It signifies the *wholeness of the self*. This circular image represents the wholeness of the psychic ground or, to put it in mythic terms, the divinity incarnate in man.”<sup>44</sup> The mandala has a fascinating history, but it is of special importance to Jung who saw mandalas as a measure of his spiritual progress. And indeed, there is very little in his voluminous studies of mysticism and religious symbolism which does not somehow relate to his own personal development.



Jung painted his first mandala about 1918 and, looking back, describes the utility of such magic circles, saying that “With the help of these drawings I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day.”<sup>45</sup> So the creation of a mandala became a significant part of Jung’s enlightenment process.. It tracked progress toward the perfection of Self over many years. “My mandalas were cryptograms concerning the state of the self which were presented to me anew each day. In them I saw the self—that is—my whole being—actively at work...I had the distinct feeling that they were something central, and in time I acquired through them a living conception of the self. The self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents the monad and corresponds to the macrocosmic nature of the psyche.”<sup>46</sup>

But dreams led him to believe that he had reached the end of what would be learned by this means. “I obtained confirmation about my ideas about a center and the self by way of a dream. It represented its essence in a mandala which I called ‘Window on Eternity.’<sup>47</sup> Then a year later, a dark dream of rainy city. This dream brought with it a sense of finality. I saw that here the goal had been revealed. One could not go beyond the center. The center is the goal, and everything is directed toward that center....out of it emerged my first inkling of my personal myth. After this dream I gave up drawing or painting mandalas. The dream depicted the climax of the whole process of development of consciousness.”<sup>48</sup>

### ***Jung’s Science***

Jung brought the overview of a scientist to a study of the mysteries, although some consider that he created a belief system which is cult-like. He does, however, demand respect for the integrity of an experimental methodology (albeit heuristic) in which he himself was the subject of the investigation. And as he observed himself falling into a perilously complicated dreamland, he explained that:

“My science was the only way that I had of extricating myself from that Chaos. Otherwise the material would have trapped me in its thicket, entangled me like jungle creepers. I took great care to try to understand every single image, every item of my psychic inventory, and to classify them

scientifically—so far as this is possible—and, above all, to realize them in actual life. That is what we usually neglect to do. We allow images to rise up, and may be we wonder about them, but that is all. We do not take the trouble to understand them.”<sup>49</sup>

Jung is very precise in his use of terms. In his autobiography he speaks of “God” and of the personal relationship which he developed, but in his detailed psychological studies he cautiously refers to “The God image in the human psyche.” He was painfully aware that many of his colleagues did not take his work seriously and looked askance at his 1902 doctoral dissertation, *On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena*. He wrote this while working at a psychiatric hospital under the guidance of the distinguished psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler who had invented the term *schizophrenia*. Jung, himself is credited as the father of analytical psychology, a school which emphasizes the relationship of the conscious and the unconscious.

Jung’s theories of personality, published in the 1921 book, *Psychological Types* in which he defined the “introvert” and “extravert” were influential. But despite the fact that his very complicated ideas were embraced by many who saw him as offering a bright light on the path to self-knowledge, some influential scientists and philosophers dismissed his work as having little value. Jung felt this as a deep and personal rejection; the failure of many to understand the underlying significance of his ideas brought a deep depression and a period of intense self-isolation.

On a more positive note, Anthony Storr, a key Jung biographer, is supportive and writes that “Jung’s notion of the mind as a self-regulating system accords well with modern ideas...yet Jung’s importance tends to be underestimated. Some dismiss him as a visionary mystic whose work is so out of line with experimental psychology that it can be safely ignored. In fact, as his early research demonstrates, Jung had a competent grasp of scientific method; but the bulk of his later work is concerned with areas in which scientific method cannot be applied.”<sup>50</sup>

Around 1905 Jung expressed hostility toward the materialistic challenge that he understood to be the *Zeitgeist* of the period, insisting that “the development of natural science brought with it a general view of the world—that of scientific materialism which, considered from the psychological standpoint, is based on an excessive overvaluation of principle causation. Scientific materialism axiomatically refuses to acknowledge any other causal connection to the physical one.”<sup>51</sup> And in a lecture of 1935 he made some effort to show that his work could be considered equal to that of his critics. “There is nothing mystical,” he insisted, “about the collective unconscious. It is just a new branch of science.”<sup>52</sup>

Jung is very clear in asserting that “we are all alike,” because “the universal similarity of our human brain leads to the universal possibility of a uniform mental functioning. This function is the *collective psyche*.”<sup>53</sup> The brain contains instincts and primordial images which have been passed down and which are the basis of human thought.<sup>54</sup> The individual consciousness is built up over a lifetime and, according to Jung,

dissolves upon death as it returns to the collective unconscious from which it was born.

Moreover, Jung's mystical point of view is deeply imbedded in his explanation that "The psyche does not exist in its own right; it is nothing in itself, but is the mere expression of process in the physical substrate...these processes have the quality of consciousness...consciousness, therefore is taken as the *sine qua non* of psychic life, that is to say, as the psyche itself."<sup>55</sup>

Jung's convictions about the role of the brain in the psyche changed radically over the decades. Whereas he had once said: "We must completely give up the idea of the psyche's being somehow connected with the brain,"<sup>56</sup> he was clearly influenced by early advances in neuroscience although his own observations add a rather fanciful veneer of mysticism. For example, in the "Mystic Marriage," he speaks of the "divine thalamus" as the "bridal chamber,"<sup>57</sup> an explanation which is strange at best.

Ultimately the value of Jung's contribution will be assessed both by science and by comparing individual results of his ideas with those of traditional mystical and religious thought. His system of categories, artfully avoiding endorsement of any mystical or religious system, essentially proposes that the essence of all mystical systems is to be found in the unification of the consciousness with the unconscious, which is the enlightened *Self*. Although tradition asserts that this is something which very few will ever experience, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and other belief systems claim a long history of men and women who have reached divine union.

Having long suspected that the relationship between the psychic and physiological processes happens subcortically in the brainstem, Jung offers an unconvincing opinion that this is the area in which archetypes of the collective unconscious are organized. He mentions, specifically, the *Mandala*, which he considered to be the primary symbol of the unconscious. He explains that "The reason that led me to conjecture a localization of a physiological basis for this archetype in the brain-stem was the psychological fact that, besides being specifically characterized by the ordering and orienting role, its uniting properties are predominantly affective. I would conjecture that such a sub-cortical system might somehow reflect characteristics of the archetypal forms in the unconscious."<sup>58</sup>

As a futurist, Jung is in agreement with the mystical tradition that "The reality of the earth will not forever remain veiled,"<sup>59</sup> And although he acknowledges that "It will assuredly be a long time before the physiology and pathology of the brain and the psychology of the unconscious are able to join hands,"<sup>60</sup> he believes that humanity will overcome the restrictions keeping the created from the creator. "This life," he says "is a segment of existence which is in a three-dimensional box-like universe especially set up for it."<sup>61</sup>

1. Carl Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Nobis*, New York 2009, 219r.
2. Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, New York, 1963, 3. Richard Knoll, a contemporary critic of Jung points out that most of this book was written by Jung's close associate Aniela Jaffê and that Jung himself wrote only the first three chapters on his early life and schooling, and a final section on "metaphysical speculation." The finished book was the work of many, including the editors. Richard Noel, *The Jung Cult*, Princeton, 1994, 13.
3. Op cit, 18
4. Op cit, 35
5. Op cit, 43
6. Op cit 62
7. Op cit, 93
8. Op cit 42-45
9. In this regard the Bible says: "I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain." Ecclesiastes 1: 17-18.
10. Susan J. Sara, "Sleep to Remember" *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 18 January 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0297-16.2017>
11. Carl Jung, *Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Princeton, 1977, 589.
12. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton, 1977, 20
13. Ernest E. Larkin, O.Carm, "The Carmelite Tradition and Centering Prayer Christian Meditation," June 27, 2017, <http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin014.pdf>. Centering, in Christian prayer preceding deep meditation is synonymous with the psychological term decentering, meaning moving away from focus on the ego.
14. *Memories* 178
15. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, Princeton, 1977, 400
16. Barbara Hannah, *Jung: His Life and Work, A Biographical Memoir*, Boston 1991, 16.
17. *Memories*, 187
18. Marie-Louise von Franz, *Alchemical Active Imagination*, Boston, 1977, 60.
19. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton, 1977, v.
20. Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, Princeton, 1994, 7.
21. Alexander Schlegel, Peter J. Kohler, Sergey V. Forelson, Prescott Alexander, Depeepya Konuthula, Peter Ulric Tse, "Network structure and dynamics of the mental workspace," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 110 no. 40, 16277–16282, October 1, 2013
22. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 2, Chapter 19, 212, *Collected Works of John of the Cross*, Washington DC, 1991.
23. *Alchemical Studies*, 19.

24. *ibid*, 179.
25. *ibid*, 181
26. *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Abramson and Taylor, Cambridge, 2005, 92].
27. Carl Jung, *Psychiatric Studies*, Princeton, 1983,184.
28. *ibid*, 399.
29. *ibid*, 183.
30. Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, 446.
31. *Red Book* 201r.
32. *Memories*, 202.
33. *ibid*, 209.
34. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The origins and Structure of Alchemy*, Chicago, 1978, 79.
35. Eliade, *op cit*, 158.
36. C.A, Burland *The Arts of the Alchemists*, New York, 1967, 72-73.
37. *ibid*, 1.
38. The Red Lion is the same as the Green Lion, but it is mixed with gold and represents the control of nature.
39. Von Franz, *op cit*, 114.
40. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton, 1977, 32.
41. *ibid*, 37.
42. Basilius Valentinus *Aureliae Occultae Philosophorum*, Pars Secunda: Tabula Smagardina Hermetis, 1613, 51]
43. *ibid*, 57.
44. *Memories*, 334.
45. *ibid*, 195.
46. *ibid*, 196.
47. *Ibid*, 198.
48. *Ibid*, 198-199.
49. *ibid* 192.
50. Anthony Storr,, *What Jung Really Said*, intro E.A. Bennet 1983, New York, 1.
51. Carl Jung, *The Psychogenesis of Mental Diseases*, Princeton, 1976, 467.
52. Carl Jung, *The Symbolic Life*, Princeton, 1960, 84.
53. Carl Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Princeton, 1978, 235.]
54. *Ibid*, 589.
55. *ibid*, 610
56. *ibid*, 947
57. *Memories*, 202

58. *Structure and Dynamics*, 582.

59. Carl Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, Princeton, 1976, 81.

60. Carl Jung, *The Psychogenesis of Mental Disease*, Princeton, 1976, 584. Refer:  
Penfield and Jasper.

61. *Memories*, 295.