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The Spiritual Life: Christian

Because Dante is Right

The incomparable greatness of the *Divine Comedy* shows itself not least in the fact that, in spite of the exceptionally wide range and variety of its influence—it even shaped the language of a nation—its full meaning has seldom been understood. Already in Dante's own lifetime those who ventured out upon the ocean of the spirit in the wake of his ship (*Paradiso,* II, 1ff) were to remain a relatively small company. They more or less disappeared with the Renaissance; the individualistic mode of thought of this period, tossed to and fro between passion and calculating reason, was already far removed from Dante's inward-looking spirit. Even Michelangelo, though he revered his fellow-Florentine to the highest degree, could no longer understand him.[1] At the time of the Renaissance, however, people did at least still debate as to whether Dante had actually seen Heaven and hell or not. At a later date, concern with the *Divine Comedy* dropped to the level of a purely scientific interest that busied itself with historical connections, or of an esthetic appreciation that no longer bothered about the spiritual sense of the work at all. Admittedly, it was known that the verses of the *Divine Comedy* contained more than just the superficial meaning of the narrative; Dante himself pointed this out in several places in his work and also in his *Convivio* (II, I), where he talks about the multiple meanings of holy scripture, and quite undisguisedly makes the same remarks apply to his own poem; the symbolical nature of the work, therefore, could not be overlooked. However, excuses were made for the poet, and his artistic mastery was even credited with enabling him to bridge over poetically "this scholastic sophistry" about multiple meanings. Thus, people fundamentally misunderstood the source upon which the poet drew for his work of creation, since the multiplicity of meaning in it is not the result of a preconceived mental construction grafted onto the actual poem; it arises directly and spontaneously out of a supra-

1. How greatly Michelangelo revered Dante can be seen from certain of his own sonnets. That he was not really capable of understanding him is apparent from the titanism of his sculpture: if Michelangelo had known the law of symbolism according to which higher realities are reflected in lower ones, his creations, in all their corporeality, would not have attempted to take heaven by storm.

mental inspiration, which at one and the same time penetrates and shines through every level of the soul—the reason, as well as the imagination and the inward ear. It is not "in spite of his philosophy" that Dante is a great poet; he is so thanks to his spiritual vision, and because through his art, however caught up in time it may be as regards its details, there shines forth a timeless truth, at once blissful and terrifying—in short, it is because Dante is right.

The most profound passages of the *Divine Comedy* are not simply those where a theological or philosophical explanation is placed in the mouth of one of the characters, nor those which possess an obviously allegorical nature; it is above all the most highly imaged and the most "concrete" expressions that are most highly charged with meaning.

How a spiritual truth, without the slightest degree of mental involvement, can congeal into an image, can be seen most easily in the metaphors that Dante uses in his description of hell, as, for example, the metaphor of the wood composed of dried-up, barren thorn bushes, in which the souls of those who took their own lives are shut up (*Inferno,* XIII): it depicts a situation devoid of all freedom and all pleasure, an existence bordering on the nothingness that corresponds to the inner contradiction implied by suicide, namely a will that denies the very existence that is its own basis and substance. As the ego itself cannot cast itself into nothingness, it falls as a consequence of its destructive act into the seeming nothingness that the desolate thorn bush represents, but even there it still remains "I", riveted to itself more than ever in its impotent suffering.

Everything that Dante says about the infernal wood serves to emphasize this truth: how the tree from which he unsuspectingly breaks off a branch, cries out at the wound and scolds him mercilessly; how, pursued by dogs, the souls of the dissolute—they, too, despisers of their God-given existence—break through the thorn wood, making it bleed; and how the tree, bereft of its branches, implores the poet to gather the broken pieces together at the foot of the trunk, as if the powerless ego imprisoned within still felt itself united with these dead and severed fragments. Here, as in other places in the description of hell, everything in the representation possesses an uncanny sharpness, never in the slightest degree arbitrary.

Dante's images of hell are so veridical precisely because they are fashioned from the same "stuff" as that out of which the passional human soul is made. In the description of the mount of Purgatory,

a different and less immediately graspable dimension is introduced: the soul's reality now opens out on a cosmic scale, embracing the starry heavens, day and night, and all the fragrance of things: at the sight of the earthly paradise on the summit of the mount of Purgatory, Dante conjures up in a few verses the whole miracle of spring; the earthly spring turns directly into the spring of the soul, it becomes the symbol of the original and holy state of the human soul.

In representing the purely spiritual states belonging to the celestial spheres, Dante is often obliged to make use of circumlocutions, as for example when he explains how the human spirit, by penetrating more and more deeply into the Divine Wisdom, becomes gradually transformed into it: Dante looks at Beatrice, who herself keeps her eyes fixed on the "eternal wheels", and as he becomes more deeply absorbed in his vision of her, he experiences something like what befell Glaucus, who was turned into one of the seagods through consuming a miraculous herb:

> Trasumanar significar per verba
> Non si porìa; però l'esempio basti
> A cui esperienza grazia serba.
>
> *To pass beyond the human state is not to be described in words; wherefore let the example satisfy him for whom grace has reserved the experience* (*Paradiso*, I, 70–I)

If in this way the language of the cantos of the *Paradiso* sometimes becomes more abstract, in their turn the images that Dante uses here are even richer in meaning: they possess an inscrutable magic, which shows that Dante has seen in spirit what he seeks to express in words, and that he is to an equal degree poet and spiritual visionary, as for example when he compares the uninterrupted ascension of blessed souls, moving in response to the power of the Divine attraction, to snowflakes that are floating upwards instead of downwards (*Paradiso,* XXVII, 67-72).

The simpler an image is, the less restricted is its content; for it is the symbol's prerogative, thanks to its concrete and yet open character, to be capable of expressing truths that cannot be enclosed in rationalized concepts; which, however, in no way implies that symbols have an irrational and permanently "unconscious" background. A symbol's meaning is completely knowable, even though it does transcend reason as such; it comes from the Spirit, and opens itself to the spirit or intellect, which Dante speaks of as the

highest and innermost faculty of knowledge, a faculty that is fundamentally independent of any form, either sensory or mental, and is capable of penetrating to the imperishable essence of things:

> Nel ciel che più della sua luce prende,
> Fu' io; e vidi cose che ridire
> Nè sa nè può quai di lassù discende:
> Perchè, appressando sè al suo disire,
> Nostro intelletto si profonda tanto
> Che retro la memoria non può ire.
>
> *In that heaven which most receiveth of His light, have I been; and have seen things which whoso descendeth from up there, hath neither faculty nor power to re-tell; because, as it draweth nigh to its desire, our intellect sinketh so deep, that memory cannot go back upon the track* (*Paradiso,* I, 4-9).[2]

True symbolism lies in the things themselves, in their essential qualities, which belong more to being than to becoming. This explains how Dante, in his description of the hierarchical degrees of the spiritual world, was able to relate it to the structure of the visible universe, as it appears from the earthly standpoint. This cosmic comparison was just as convincing to the medieval reader as it is unconvincing to the reader of today. How is it possible, the latter asks, to base a genuine vision of the spiritual worlds on a scientifically incorrect view of things? In answer to this it must be said that every picture of the universe that man makes for himself can only possess a conditional and provisional accuracy; it always remains in one way or another attached to sensory experience and imagination, and hence will never be entirely free from "naïve" prejudice; it is, however, scientific to the extent that it is able to provide logically satisfying answers to the questions that man has always asked. The Ptolemaic representation of the world, which Dante used as the scaffolding for his work, was in this sense completely scientific. But at the same time it was perceptible to the eye and not so remote from sensory experience as the modern, purely mathematical explanation of the universe, and it is precisely in this clarity—a clarity that still corresponds to "naïve" perceptions—that its capacity to be a symbol resides. Because it comprehends the world

2. See Dante's own commentary on these verses in his letter to Can Grande della Scala: "*Intellectus humanus in hac vita propter connaturalitatem et affinitatem quam habet ad substantiam separatam, quando elevatur, in tantum elevatur, ut memoriam post reditum deficiat propter transcendisse humanum modum.*"

order in relationship to man, it demonstrates the inner unity joining man to the universe and the universe to God:

> . . . Le cose tutte quante
> Hann' ordine tra loro: e questo è forma
> Che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante.
>
> *. . . All things whatsoever observe a mutual order; and this is the form that maketh the universe like unto God* (*Paradiso,* I, 103).

Dante interpreted the quantitative difference between the planetary heavens that surround one another concentrically, as a qualitative gradation in accordance with the basic notion that the higher is reflected in the lower:

> Li cerchi corporai sono ampii ed arti
> Secondo il più e il men della virtute
> Che si distende per tutte lor parti . . .
> Dunque costui che tutto quanto rape
> L'alto universo seco, corrisponde
> Al cerchio che più ama e che più sape.
>
> *The corporeal circles are wider or narrower according to the greater or lesser amount of virtue that spreads through all their parts . . . Therefore the one [the highest heaven], that sweepeth with it all the rest of the universe, corresponds to the circle that most loveth and most knoweth.* (*Paradiso,* XXVIII, 64–66; 70–72)

The geocentric—and therefore homocentric—arrangement of the planetary spheres is seen as the inverse image of the theocentric hierarchy of the angels, while hell's pit, with its circles, is its negative reflection, to which the mount of Purgatory, thrown up in the center of the earth through Lucifer's fall, provides the compensating counter-balance.[3]

Even more than by the "antiquated" world-picture that forms the framework of the *Divine Comedy,* most present-day readers—and not only "freethinkers" among them—find themselves repelled by Dante's sharp and apparently presumptuously drawn distinction between the damned, those undergoing purgation, and the blessed. To this one can reply that Dante, as a man living in the 13th century, could not have watered down psychologically the traditional

3. The significance of Dante's cosmography is fully discussed the earlier in this book, in the section "Cosmologia perennis" in the author's *Mirror of the Intellect* and also in his *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul.*

teaching about salvation and damnation, nor could he have regarded the historical examples he mentions as anything but typical. But that is not the decisive factor: Dante is completely imbued with and overwhelmed by his perception of man's original dignity, measured against which the traces of hell in this world appear as they really are. He perceives the ray of Divine Light in man, and hence is bound also to recognize as such the darkness of soul that is refractory to that light.

For Dante, man's original dignity consists essentially in the gift of the "Intellect", by which is meant not merely reason or the thinking faculty, but rather that ray of light that connects the reason, and indeed the whole soul, with the Divine source of all knowledge. This is why Dante says of the damned that they have lost the gift of the intellect (*Inferno,* III, 18), which is not to imply that they cannot think, since he allows of their arguing among themselves: what they lack, and what for them has been forever cast out, is the capacity to recognize God and to understand themselves and the world in relation to Him. This capacity has its seat, as it were, in the heart, in the being's center, where love and knowledge coincide, for which reason Dante describes true love as a kind of knowledge[4], and the spirit or intellect as loving: both have fundamentally one goal, which is infinite.

In the true man, all other faculties of the soul are referred to the being's center: "I am like the center of the circle upon which every part of the circumference depends equally", Dante makes Amor-Intellectus say in his *Vita Nuova*, "but thou art not so" *(Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentie partes, tu autem non sic* [XII, 4]). To the extent that desire and will tend away from this center, even so is the soul prevented from opening spiritually onto the Eternal: *L'affetto l'intelletto lega*—"passion fetters the spirit" (*Paradiso,* XIII, 20). When Dante says of the damned that they have lost the gift of the Intellect, this means that in their case the will has become completely alienated from the center of their being. With them, the God-denying of the will has become the ruling impulse: they go to hell because basically hell is what they want: "Those who die in the wrath of God cross over Acheron quickly, since Divine justice spurs them on, so that fear is turned into desire" (*Inferno,* III, 121-126). It is different for the souls who have to endure the pun-

4. See "Intelletto d'Amore" by Pierre Ponsoye (*Études Traditionnelles,* Paris, May-June 1962).

ishments of Purgatory: their will has not repudiated the Divine in man, but has simply looked for it in the wrong place; in their longing for the Infinite, they have allowed themselves to be deceived: "I clearly see," says Beatrice to Dante, in one place in the *Paradiso*, "how in thy spirit already is reflected the Eternal Light, which, no sooner seen, ever enkindles love; and if aught else seduce thy love, it is naught but some vestige of that light, ill understood, that shineth through therein" (V, 7–12). When at death the object of passion, and its illusion regarding the Divine good, fall away, these souls experience their passion as it really is, namely as a burning up of oneself on an appearance that only causes pain. By coming up against the limits of the enjoyment they sought, they learn to know, negatively and indirectly, what Divine Reality is, and this knowledge is their contrition. Because of this, their falsely-directed impulse is gradually exhausted; it continues to work within them—but now without the consent of their hearts—until the denial of their denial turns into the affirmation of the original, Godward-directed freedom:

> Della mondizia il sol voler far prova,
> Che, tutto libero a mutar convento,
> L'alma sorprende, ed il voler le giova.
> Prima vuol ben, ma non lascia il talento
> Che divina giustizia contra voglia
> Come fu al peccar, pone al tormento.
>
> *The will alone proves the state of cleansing that has been reached; the will, now fully free, invades the soul, which now is capable of what she will. She wills well before, but that urge permits it not, which, just as it once inclined towards sin, is now directed by divine justice towards punishment, against her own will* (*Purgatorio,* XXI, 61–66).

Here we are touching upon one of the main themes of the *Divine Comedy,* which we must investigate more closely, even if to do so should divert us somewhat from our opening subjects; it is the question of the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and will, on which Dante, throughout his work, throws light from all sides. Knowledge of the eternal truths is potentially present in the human spirit or intellect, but its unfolding is directly conditioned by the will, negatively when the soul falls into sin, and positively when this fall is overcome. The different punishments in Purgatory that Dante describes can be regarded, not only as posthumous states, but also as stages in ascesis, that lead to the integral and primordial con-

dition, in which knowledge and will—or, more precisely, knowledge of man's eternal goal and his striving after pleasure—are no longer separated from one another. At the moment when Dante sets foot in the earthly paradise, at the summit of the mount of Purgatory, Virgil says to him:

> Non aspettar mio dir più nè mio cenno:
> Libero, dritto, sano è tuo arbitrio,
> E fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
> Perch'io te sopra te corono e mitrio.
>
> *No longer expect my counsel nor my sign: for free, upright, and whole is thy judgement, and it were a fault not to act according to its promptings; wherefore I crown and miter thee over thyself* (*Purgatorio,* XXVII, 139–142).

The earthly paradise is as it were the cosmic "place" where the ray of the Divine Spirit, which pierces through all the Heavens, touches the human state, since from here on Dante is raised up to God by Beatrice. That this place should be the summit of a mountain overtopping the whole earthly region corresponds quite simply to the nature of the earthly paradise itself.

A question arises here: what is the meaning of the fact that Dante himself scales the mount of Purgatory without suffering a single one of the punishments through which others atone for their faults? Only at the last stage does he have to walk quickly through the fire so as to reach the earthly paradise (*Purgatorio,* XXVII, 1 off). Stage by stage the angels of the gates erase the marks of sin from his forehead: on reaching the summit, Virgil acknowledges his sanctity, and yet shortly thereafter Beatrice meets him with burning reproaches that move him to agonizing repentance (*Purgatorio,* XXX, 55ff). The meaning of all this can only be that the way taken by Dante, thanks to a special grace, is not a path of merit, but a path of knowledge. When Virgil says that for him there is no other way to Beatrice, to Divine Wisdom, except by passing directly through hell, this shows that knowledge of God is to be attained along the path of self-knowledge: self-knowledge implies taking the measure of the abysses contained in human nature and consciously shedding every self-deception that has its roots in the passional soul: there exists no greater self-denial than this, and hence also no greater atonement. Properly understood, what Beatrice reproaches Dante for is not some actual sin, but simply that he has lingered too long in contemplation of her reflected earthly radiance, instead of following

her into the realm of the invisible. In repenting of this, Dante throws off the last fetter binding him to this world. Much could be said here about the meaning of the two rivers of Paradise, Lethe and Eunoe, the first of which washes away the memory of sin, while the other restores the memory of good deeds; but we must return to our consideration of the will-knowledge theme.

Whereas, in those who sin, the will conditions the degree of their knowledge, in the elect the will flows from the knowledge of the divine order that they possess. This means that their will is the spontaneous expression of their vision of God, and for that reason the rank of their position in Heaven implies no constraint at all, as the soul of Piccarda Donati explains to the poet in the moon-heaven, in answer to his question whether the blessed in one sphere might not desire to occupy some higher sphere "in order to behold more and be more deeply loved?"

Frate, la nostra volontà quieta
Virtù di carità che fa volerne
Sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.
Se disiassimo esser più superne,
Foran discordi li nostri disiri
Dal voler di Colui che qui ci cerne;
Che vedrai non capere in questi giri
S'essere in caritate è qui necesse.
E la sua natura ben rimiri:
Anzi è formale a questo beato esse
Tenersi dentro alla divina voglia,
Perch' una fansi nostre voglie stesse:
Sì che come noi siam di soglia in soglia
Per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace,
Com' allo Re che in suo voler ne invoglia:
In la sua volontade è nostra pace:
Ella è quel mare al qual tutto si muove
Ciò ch'ella cria o che natura face.

Brother, the quality of love stilleth our will, and maketh us long only for what we have, and giveth us no other thirst. Did we desire to be more highly placed, our longings were discordant from His will who assigns us to this place. But that, as thou wilt see, cannot happen in these circles, since here of necessity love rules. And when thou dost rightly consider its nature, so wilt thou understand how it is of the essence of beatitude to exist in harmony with the divine will, so that our own wills themselves become one. Our being thus, from threshold to threshold throughout the realm, is joy to all the realm as to the king, who draweth our wills to what He willeth: in His will is our peace; it is that sea to which all moves that it createth and that nature maketh (*Paradiso,* III, 70–87).

Submission to the Divine will is not lack of freedom: on the contrary, the will that revolts against God falls under compulsion on that very account,[5] for which reason those who die "in the wrath of God" are quick to reach hell, "since divine justice spurs them on" (*Inferno,* III, 121–6), and the seeming freedom of passion turns into dependence upon the urge which, "just as it once inclined towards sin, is now directed by divine justice towards punishment against her (the soul's) own will" (*Purgatorio,* XXX, 61–6), whereas the will of him who knows God springs from the source of freedom itself. Thus, real freedom of the will depends upon its relationship with the truth, which forms the content of essential knowledge. Conversely, the highest vision of God, of which Dante speaks in his work, is in accord with the spontaneous fulfillment of the divine will. Here knowledge has become one with divine truth and will has become one with divine love; both qualities reveal themselves as aspects of Divine Being, the one static and the other dynamic. This is the ultimate message of the *Divine Comedy,* and also the answer to Dante's effort to comprehend the human being's eternal origin in the Divinity:

> Ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne;
> Se non che la mia mente fu percossa
> Da un fulgore, in che sua voglia venne.
> All'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
> Ma già volgeva il mio disiro e velle,
> Si come ruota ch'egualmente è mossa,
> L'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle.
>
> *But not for this did my own wings suffice; yet was my spirit smitten suddenly with a flash, whereupon its will found fulfillment. Here the power of high fantasy failed; but already my desire and my will were as a wheel that turned regularly, driven by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars* (*Paradiso,* XXXIII, 139–145).

Some scholars take the view that Beatrice never lived, and that everything that Dante says about her refers only to Divine Wisdom (*Sophia*). This opinion illustrates the confusion between genuine symbolism and allegory, taking the latter term in the sense attributed to it since the Renaissance: taken in that sense, an allegory is

5. The justification for the forcible defending and diffusion of a religion rests precisely on the thought that truth alone liberates while error enslaves. If man is free to choose between truth and error, then he deprives himself of freedom the moment he decides in favor of the latter.

more or less a mental invention, an artificial clothing for general ideas, whereas genuine symbolism, as we have said, lies in the very essence of things. That Dante should have bestowed upon Divine Wisdom the image and name of a beautiful and noble woman is in accordance with a compelling law, not merely because Divine Wisdom, in so far as it is the object of knowledge, includes an aspect which precisely is feminine, in the highest sense, but also because the presence of the divine *Sophia* manifested itself first and foremost to him in the appearance of the beloved woman. Herein, a key is provided that enables us to understand, at least in principle, the spiritual alchemy whereby the poet is able to transpose sensory appearances into supra-sensory essences: when love encompasses the entire will and causes it to flow towards the center of the being, it can become knowledge of God. The operative means between love and knowledge is beauty: when experienced in its inexhaustible essence—which confers release from all constraints—an aspect of Divine Wisdom is already within it, so that even sexual attraction may lead to knowledge of the Divine, to the extent that passion is absorbed and consumed by love, and passion likewise transformed by the experience of beauty.

The fire that Dante has to pass through at the last stage before entering the Earthly Paradise (*Purgatorio,* XXVII) is the same as the fire in which the lustful are purged of their sin. "This wall alone stands between thee and Beatrice," says Virgil to Dante, as the latter shrinks from stepping through the flames (*ibid,* 36). "While I was in them," Dante says, "I could have wished to throw myself into molten glass to cool myself" (*ibid,* 49-50).

The immortal Beatrice greets Dante sternly at first (*Purgatorio,* XXX, 103ff), but then with fervent love, and as she leads him upwards through the heavenly spheres she unveils her beauty to him more and more, which his regard can scarcely bear. It is significant that here Dante no longer stresses the moral beauty of Beatrice—her goodness, innocence, and humility—as he did in his *Vita Nuova,* but speaks quite simply of her visible beauty; what is most outward has here become the image of what is most inward, sensory observation the expression of spiritual vision. At the beginning, Dante is not yet capable of looking directly at the Divine Light, but sees it mirrored in Beatrice's eyes (*Paradiso,* XVIII, 82–4).

> Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore:
> Fecemi la divina potestate
> La somma sapienza e il primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fur cose create
Se non eterne, ed io eterno duro:
Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.

Justice moved my exalted Maker: Divine Power made me, Wisdom supreme and primal Love. Before me were no things created, except the eternal, and eternal I endure: abandon all hope, ye that enter. (*Inferno,* III, 1–9)

Faced with these famous words, which stand inscribed upon the gate of hell, many a present-day reader is inclined to say: *Maestro, il senso lor m'è duro*—"Master, their meaning is hard for me to understand" *(ibid,* 12), because it is difficult for him to reconcile the idea of eternal damnation with the idea of divine love—*il primo amore.* But for Dante, divine love is the origin, pure and simple, of creation: it is the overflowing of the eternal which endows the world, created "out of nothing", with existence, and thus permits its participation in Divine Being. In so far as the world is different from God, it has, as it were, its roots in nothingness; it necessarily includes a God-denying element, and the boundless extent of divine love is revealed precisely in the fact that it even permits this denying of God and grants it existence. Thus the existence of the infernal possibilities depends upon divine love, while at the same time these possibilities are judged through divine justice as the negation that indeed they are. "Before me was nothing created, except the eternal, and I endure eternally": the Semitic languages distinguish between eternity, which pertains to God alone and is an eternal now, and the endless duration which pertains to the posthumous states: the Latin language does not make this distinction, and thus Dante likewise cannot express it in words. Yet who knew better than Dante that the duration of the beyond is not the same thing as God's eternity, just as the timeless existence of the angelic worlds is not the same thing as the duration of hell, which is like a congealed time. For if the state of the damned, viewed in itself, has no end, nevertheless in God's sight it can only be finite.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter": it could also be said, conversely: whoever still hopes in God will not need to pass through this gate. The condition of the damned is precisely hopelessness, since hope is the hand held out for the reception of grace.

To the modern reader, it seems strange that Virgil, the wise and good, who was able to lead Dante to the summit of the mount of Purgatory, should have to reside like all the other sages and noble

heroes of antiquity in limbo, the ante-chamber of hell. But Dante could not transfer the unbaptized Virgil into any of the Heavens attainable through grace. If, however, we look a little more closely, we become aware of a remarkable rift in Dante's work, which seems to hint at a dimension that was not developed further: in general, limbo is described as a gloomy place, without light and without sky, but as soon as Dante, together with Virgil, has entered the "noble castle" where the sages of old walk upon "emerald lawns", he speaks of an "open, luminous, and high place" (*Inferno,* IV, 115ff), as though he no longer found himself in the underworld covered by the earth. Men there are "of slow and deep gaze, of great dignity in their behavior, and speak seldom, with mild voices" (*ibid,* 112-114). All this no longer has anything to do with hell, but neither does it lie directly within range of Christian grace.

In this connection, the question arises: did Dante adopt an exclusively negative attitude towards non-Christian religions? In a passage in the *Paradiso,* where he numbers the Trojan prince Ripheus among the elect, he speaks of the unfathomable nature of divine grace and warns us not to be precipitate in our judgement (XX, 67ff). What else could Ripheus be for Dante, other than some distant, innocent example of an extra-ecclesiastical saint? We do not say "extra-Christian", because for Dante every revelation of God in man is Christ.

And this leads to yet another question: did Dante, in creating the *Divine Comedy,* draw consciously upon certain Islamic mystical works, which show various analogies with it? The type of epic poem describing the path of the knower of God in symbolical form is not rare in the Islamic world. It may be surmised that certain of these works were translated into the Provençal language,[6] and we know that the community of the "Fedeli d'Amore" to which Dante belonged, was in communication with the Order of the Temple, which was established in the East and open to the intellectual world of Islam.[7] The argument can be carried a long way, and one can find a prototype in Islamic esoteric writings for almost every important

6. There exists a medieval Provençal translation of the *Mirâj,* the story of the Prophet's ascent to Heaven (*Eschiele Mahomet,* published by Múñoz Sendino and Enrico Cerulli). But this is more of a popular treatment of a theme which elsewhere provides the basis for important metaphysical and contemplative considerations.
7. See the works of Luigi Valli, especially *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore* (Rome: Optima, 1928).

element in the *Divine Comedy*—for the interpretation of the planetary spheres as stages in spiritual knowledge, for the divisions of hell, for the figure and role of Beatrice, and much else besides. However, in view of certain passages in Dante's *Inferno* (XXVIII, 22), it is scarcely credible that he can have known Islam and recognized it as a true religion. A more likely explanation is that he drew on writings that were not themselves Islamic, but were directly influenced by Islamic doctrines,[8] and it is probable that what actually reached Dante through these channels amounted to much less than comparative research[9] would have us suppose. Spiritual truths are what they are, and minds can encounter one another at a certain level of insight without ever having heard of one another on an earthly plane. What matters is not so much what Dante was influenced by, as the fact that he was right: the teachings contained in his *Divine Comedy* are all valid, those in the foreground in the sense of the general Christian belief, and the more hidden ones—for example, the teaching on the mutual relationship between will and knowledge discussed above—in terms of gnosis in the Christian sense of the word. It is significant in this connection that Dante was not self-deceived about his own person, and that he could observe himself from an impersonal point of view: he assessed himself correctly when he counted himself amongst the six greatest poets of all ages (*Inferno,* IV, 100-102), and he rightly allows Virgil to say of him: *Alma sdegnosa, benedetta colei che in te s'incinse!*—"Soul disdainful (of all that is vulgar), blessed be she that bore thee!" (*Inferno,* VIII, 44-45) He was equally unmistaken when he condemned the Papal policy of his time, since it led to the secular explosion of the Renaissance and the Lutheran secession. His chief spiritual legacy, however, lies in the symbols and imagery of his poem, which neither profane philosophical research nor any "psychology" will ever exhaust. They bear the seal of an inspiration independent of all temporal and spatial circumstances, and the spiritual nourishment they offer is reserved for those who, as Dante says, "in the temporal

8. Important in this respect is MS. Latin 3236A in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, first published by M. T. D'Alverny in *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen-Âge,* 1940 (42). It was also referred to in the author's book on alchemy. It is related to the *Divine Comedy* in many ways, and all the more remarkably in that it expressly names the founders of the three monotheistic religions, Moses, Christ, and Mohammed, as the true teachers of the way to God through knowledge.
9. See the studies of P. Asín Palacios.

world already stretch out their necks for the bread of the angels, by which one lives here, but is never sated" (*Paradiso,* II, 10).

(from *Mirror of the Intellect*)

St. Bernardino of Siena and the Sacred Monogram

St. Bernardino of Siena

St. Bernardino preached in Siena during the years 1425–1427. The square where he preached was always full of listeners. Moved by his words, deadly enemies were reconciled, political differences were overcome, and the town Council issued decrees against slander and usury. Furthermore, the Sacred Monogram painted on a board which St. Bernardino was wont to hold before him while preaching, was carved, by order of the Council, on the façade of the Town Hall, where it stands to this day.

Bernardino degli Albizzeschi, a descendant of an aristocratic family in the town of Massa Maríttima in Sienese territory, was brought up in the city of Siena, where, while still very young, he studied philosophy and civil and canon law before entering into the strict observance of the Franciscan Order of friars. When the Black Death once more broke out in Siena, although then only seventeen years old, he devoted himself to nursing the sick in the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala, inciting other young men to follow his example, in the same way as St. Catherine had done during the first outbreak of the plague. In later years, he traveled throughout Italy preaching and exhorting large crowds in Milan, Venice, Brescia, Ferrara, Bologna, and Florence, leaving everywhere a deep and lasting impression. In 1425, he preached Lenten sermons in Florence, whence he received the call of the Sienese Council to come to that city.

At a time when reverence for Christian tradition seemed to be on the wane, he restored to his hearers veneration for the order of the priesthood, the dignity of whose calling does not depend simply on the human perfection of the priest himself. The sermons of St. Bernardino also revived reverence for the sacrament of marriage, as well as belief in the immortality of the soul and respect for God's Name.

He used the familiar idiom of the people so that all might follow his words, lashing out fiercely against the sins prevalent at that time,

giving free rein to a certain cutting humor of his own, and often appealing to the common sense and good judgment of the intellectuals, while from his own rich store of knowledge, in unexpected flashes of intuition, he threw light upon words from the Scriptures by means of countless similes and parables.

On marriage

". . . There are two extremes: It is highly profitable to preach on the subject of wedlock, for no other theme in the world is so much discussed, yet people in general are strangely ignorant about everything appertaining thereto. On the other hand people say it would be disgraceful to preach openly on the subject or to offer advice about it. In the confessional it is mentioned with hesitation for fear it should be said that the father confessor teaches evil ways; and from the pulpit wedlock is seldom spoken of for two reasons: lest ignorant people mock the preacher, or lest he, feeling some embarrassment, should become confused in his discourse.

"The fact that wedlock is discussed neither in the confessional nor from the pulpit has given rise to the prevailing ignorance of its true nature; therefore you follow your natural bent with all its mischievous practices, living as the animals do, without reverence for the high sacrament of marriage, that God established in the earthly paradise. It was the first and greatest of His gifts and you have desecrated it. You have come to believe that wedlock consists only in bodily union, whereas it consists in the trust that the woman places in the man, and the man in the woman.

"These are the two extremes: one person will say: 'Speak as frankly and openly about it, as one would about any dishonorable action.' But another will cry: 'Do not do so: it would be immoral. You will lay yourself open to evil-speakers.'

"So what will you do now, Brother Bernardino? If you remain silent for fear of incurring mockery, or from a personal feeling of embarrassment in discussing the subject, or if you should be moved by any other consideration and refrain from speaking about wedlock, you are heading for damnation. You have been instructed to preach, to remonstrate with evil-doers and to hold up their misdeeds before them, to lead them back into the way of salvation. Therefore take this burden upon you: say what must be said and let people talk as they will . . .

"In his epistle the apostle Peter writes: 'Which vessel is the weaker?' Surely the woman is the weaker: therefore be mindful of

her, and treasure her, as if you possessed a frail and precious crystal vase . . .

". . . Should a woman complain and regret being a woman, being small, or being dark complexioned, or hirsute, or crooked, she will never attain to salvation until she is content with the nature God has given her . . .

". . . Of itself the soul does not incline to unnatural practices or to any action definitely opposed to the natural order. Think of the misery of the wife of a libertine drawn by her husband into all manner of dissoluteness! It were better for your daughters to have their throats cut than to marry them to such reprobates; for, were their life taken, at least their soul might have been saved, whereas when delivered into the hand of reprobates both body and soul are lost . . .

"Wisdom and discernment: one may well be in doubt—and what then is to be done? Not all circumstances are the same, or even similar, so no general rule can be laid down, just as one cannot insist that everybody eat two loaves a day, for there are some who eat their three loaves while others eat only one, and again others who hardly touch bread at all.

"Three things are to be considered:

(1) bodily nature;
(2) spiritual nature;
(3) the particular state of grace.

"Firstly I will speak about the bodily considerations: I am young and she is young; or I am old and she is young; or I am young and she is old.

"Never marry your daughter to an old man, for she will only have grief and worry and will be liable to become a prey to countless sins. Nor should you, you older woman, ever marry a younger man, for when he has despoiled your treasure, he will turn against you. Look at your man from every viewpoint: is he strong? is he weak? healthy or ailing? Let not the strings of your lute be tuned to such a tension that they will snap! Be wise enough not to comply with his desire if it smacks of bestiality. . . .

"Then there are spiritual questions: Should you be in danger of losing God's grace and the state of grace of your own soul, let yourself go only as far as is meet and seemly, so that grace may quit you not. However, since there are few with spiritual natures, I will not say much on the subject. But I will give an example: Supposing a woman is richly endowed with the grace of God and wishes to live

continently if she be able; but she finds it not easy to decide which mode of life is the better one. Let her first seek advice from Lady Wisdom, then from Lady Conscience, and lastly let her seek the counsel of Lady Compassion—from all three noble women: but also let her turn to the love of God, to her own soul and to her love for her husband; she will then surely be well advised . . ."

On pleasure

The sermons of St. Bernardino were always full of imagery. During Lent in 1425, he preached a sermon in Florence on pleasure.

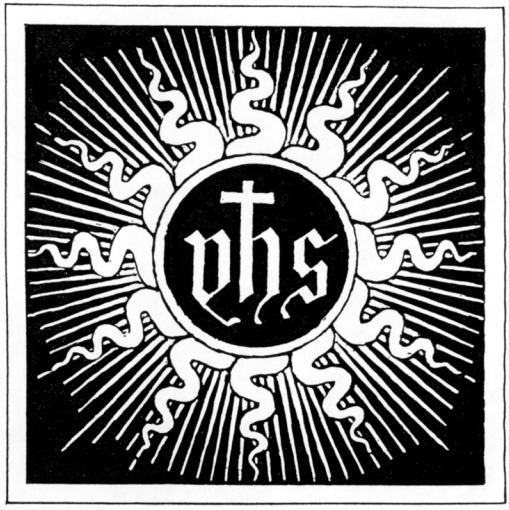
". . . Now the subject of worldly pleasure: Of pleasure it has been said: *mane floruit, et transeat*: it blossoms at morn, but is doomed to wilt away. It is as in the month of May. See the flowering fields!"

The Sacred Monogram

The custom of having a coat-of-arms had become usual even amongst commoners. Every party, every guild, every clan and family aspired to the possession of a coat-of-arms. All these aspirants to worldly honor were now confronted with the Sacred Monogram (the divine "coat-of-arms"), held up before them by St. Bernardino. This was the visible Name of Jesus, represented by the letters IHS, (*iota*, *epsilon*, *sigma*), the first three letters of the Greek name *Iesous*. This sign was situated at the center of outwardly-radiating flames of fire and rays of light. Men were to honor this sign, and seek refuge in it. In Gothic lettering, the three letters of this Monogram were later reinterpreted as representing the initial letters of the words *Jesus Hominum Salvator* ("Jesus, Savior of Men"); and also of the words *In hoc Signo* ("In this Sign").

There is more significance to this Monogram than may at first meet the eye. By propagating this symbol, St. Bernardino made devotion to the Name of Jesus accessible in an, as it were, "concrete" manner. The devotion consisted in concentrating on the inwardly spoken Divine Name, a practice which, from the origins, had been one of the chief means of spiritual assimilation. The worship of the divine-human Name of Jesus runs like a scarlet thread throughout Christian mysticism, from the time of the Fathers in the Theban Desert to the Spanish mystics of the 16th century, and continues up to the present day. Indeed, not only in Christianity but also in the mysticisms of all religions, this concentration on a divine, or divine-human Name, sometimes presented in visible form, plays a signifi-

cant part. By "objectivizing" the practice through the visible Monogram, the Sienese saint made one of the most inward treasures of the contemplative tradition outward and popular, with the object that, through its compelling power, it might, in its turn, again become inward for many souls.



The Monogram of the Name of Jesus
as propagated by St. Bernardino of Siena.

St. Bernardino said: "Put the Name of Jesus in your houses, in your rooms, and keep it in your hearts. . . . The best inscription of the Name of Jesus is the one that is in the heart, then the one that is spoken, and then the one that is painted, engraved, or sculpted. . . . Everything that God has created for the salvation of the world is contained in this Name of Jesus. . . . It is origin and without origin . . . It is worthy of praise like God Himself."

"When the Name of Jesus lives in your heart of hearts, your desire also to gaze upon it will be all the greater . . . If your heart is empty of the Name, the best way to achieve its possession is to place it visibly before your eyes. . . ."

From a sermon on the Name of Jesus

The following is an excerpt from a sermon on the virtues of the Name of Jesus given by St. Bernardino both in Florence and in Siena, in the year 1424.

"Today let us speak of the shining countenance of the Seraphim. St. Paul says : 'Before the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow, whether in Heaven, on earth, or in hell. . . .' Believe me, whosoever is not of the devil will this day tell of the wonder of the Name of Jesus. Yet how shall I adequately express the virtues of the Name?

Whether I speak or cry out, my words are but as silence; I can with my words uplift His Name, yet it is a degradation of it. I can affirm and negate a thousand times in order to explain Him, and yet leave Him unexplained. . . . What I want to convey to you is that the virtues of the Name of Jesus are so great that the more I say, the less I reveal. If all the grains of sand in the sea, all the leaves on the trees, and all the stars in the heavens were tongues praising and glorifying the Name of Jesus, all of them together could not say more than a hundred-thousand-thousandth part of what one single tongue could tell. The reason for this is that the Name of Jesus is Origin without origin: that before the creation of the sun and until the burning-out thereof, the Name was pre-ordained, from everlasting to everlasting, until the end of time and thereafter. The Name of Jesus is as worthy of praise as God Himself. The prophet David said: 'As Thou art praiseworthy, Lord, so is Thy Name (Jesus).' If all the angels of Paradise, from the lowest choir to the highest, and all men on earth who are, who were, and who ever will be, were to give themselves up to praising the Name of Jesus, it would still not suffice for a Name of which it is written at the beginning of the Book: 'My Name is the foundation of those who are saved.' In this Name of Jesus all are saved. Through faith in His Name the Holy Fathers were saved. . . .

"Everything that God has done for the salvation of the world lies hidden in the Name of Jesus.

"Read the Scriptures, the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of St. Paul and other apostles, the Apocalypse, indeed the whole Bible, and if you can point to a single sinner, sick in soul or body, who called for help in the Name of Jesus and was spurned, I will breathe my last breath! Look at the story in St. Luke's Gospel of the blind man who begged, crying: *Jesu, fili David, miserere mei*! Jesus called the man to him and spoke, saying: 'What wilt thou that I do unto thee?' The blind man answered: 'That I may see.' Take note, he meant it spiritually, he meant the Son of God. The blind man said: 'Lord, that I may see', for therein alone lies our entire happiness, namely that we may see the very Countenance of the Lord Jesus; and from this you can see how truly He is the refuge of the contrite heart. . . .

"Devils flee before the Name of Jesus and are rendered powerless by it. God first gave His Name to the Apostles, and afterwards to us all, wherewith to combat devils. This means that you can guard yourself against the devil himself, and not only against those who

are bedeviled. In the last chapter of St. Mark's Gospel Jesus says: 'In my Name shalt thou cast out devils . . .'

"One day, as St. Bernard walked in the streets of Milan, a woman possessed of an evil spirit was brought before him. At once, recognizing the woman's sickness, the saint, filled with pity, kneeled down beside her to release her. Thereupon, through the mouth of the sick woman, the devil spoke, saying: 'You can do nothing against me.' St. Bernard answered: 'Not I, but the Name of Jesus will exorcize you', and so it happened. So holy and fearful is the Name of Jesus! It is holy to men who are holy and good, and terrifying to the devil, to the wicked, and to the possessed. All the more is it to be revered by merchants and craftsmen, and under the superscription of His Name should all their books and manuscripts begin. Let everything that we aspire to do be begun in the Name of Jesus. . . . For the usurer and the libertine the Name instills fear; for Jesus is humble, mild, full of earnestness and every sort of truth. . . . From the sweet-scented flower of the vine, snakes slink away: in like manner the devil flees before the fragrance of the Name of Jesus . . .

"In Padua, while listening to a sermon on the Name of Jesus, a maniac was restored to sanity. Likewise in Alessandria della Puglia, a woman was instantaneously healed of her soul's sickness when a boy touched her with the monogram of the Name of Jesus. . . .

"You, merchant trading overseas, carry it with you! You, soldier at the wars, and you, traveler, take it with you everywhere, and have faith that the Name of Jesus will protect you from every harm . . .

"Take the Name of Jesus into your homes, into your rooms, into your hearts. . . .

"In the words of Solomon: 'A strong tower is the Name of the Lord.' Thousands of experiences have shown, and continue to show every day, that with the Name of Jesus in one's hand one is safe from robbers and highwaymen, and so one says the words: *autem transiens per medio illorum ibat,* or simply: 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus'; for whosoever turneth to the Name of Jesus will find protection. . . .

"Consider the body, that is, the flesh: there is no human disposition, be it ever so wrathful, uncontrolled, proud, lustful, mean, greedy, covetous, or otherwise filled with vice, which, if the man concerned accept the Name of Jesus with faith and love, will not immediately be released from every temptation. . . .

"Christ said: 'If you lay hands upon the sick in my Name, they shall be healed.' But make it a rule to remember what I mentioned earlier, namely, that, should you not receive the grace you pray for,

it is either because your faith was weak, or else the grace was withheld for the good of your soul. . . .

"God says: 'My Word today is no less strong than it was in the early days of the Church.' All the miracles wrought by the Apostles, and by others who were not apostles, were performed in the Name of Jesus. Indeed, once the Apostles said to Jesus: 'See yonder Pharisees, who are not Thy disciples, yet they cast out devils in Thy Name.' What more proof can one have of the power of the Name of Jesus?

"When great difficulties face you, cry aloud: 'Jesus, have mercy on me!' and no harm will come to you. Carry Him with you, so that you may lay Him next to your heart; soon you will turn to Him out of very habit. In every trouble, cry: 'Jesus, Jesus', and your heart will become humble, be it as hard as diamond . . .

"In every sorrow and anxiety, He is a Comforter. . . . To those who endure in patience, He is their Refuge. He will bring you joy. In the midst of torture, the Apostles were full of trust. Take heed, Brother Bernardino! Unless you are ready to rejoice in persecution for the Name of Jesus, you will go to the cursed house. 'Be of good cheer, rejoice and be exceeding glad,' said Jesus to His Apostles, 'for great is your reward in Heaven when you are persecuted for my Name's sake.'

"Once, as St. Peter was entering the Temple, a lame man begged of him alms. St. Peter said to him: 'Gold and silver have I none, but that which I have I give thee. In the Name of Jesus rise up and walk.' The man arose and ran rejoicing into the Temple. In like manner, in whatsoever trouble your soul may be, it will arise rejoicing at the Name of Jesus. . . .

"The best inscription of the Name of Jesus is the one that is found in the inmost heart: the next best is in words, and finally it is the visible Name, be it written or carved. If the bodily eye be constantly confronted with it, it will soon become visible to the eye of the heart, that inward spiritual eye of the soul. Often you will speak His Name aloud with reverence, love, and faith, until it becomes a habit with you, a habit which will imprint itself ineradicably upon your soul in whatsoever difficulty life brings to you. 'Jesus, Jesus' are the words you will have in your heart and find yourself repeating, like the holy Bishop Ignatius who was martyred for Jesus' sake: at each blow he received, he said the word 'Jesus' aloud and no other word passed his lips. Accordingly, when they had killed him, having marveled at his patience, they cut him open and on his heart was

found the Name of Jesus in golden letters. On dividing the heart into two parts they found the Name of Jesus on both sides; and however small the pieces into which his heart was cut, on each smallest part stood the Name of Jesus, proving that indeed he carried the Name in his heart. . . .

"Hear the words of St. John in his Gospel: 'Whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my Name, it shall be given unto you.' "

Concerning the pictorial representation of the Name

"It is surrounded by twelve broad rays denoting the twelve Apostles, or the twelve clauses of the Creed: between them are eight, ten, or twelve thinner rays standing for the doctrine of Holy Church, or the perfection of the Apostolic life. Its rightful place is on the escutcheon of Holy Church.

"When the Antichrist enters this world he will appropriate for himself all the names of the Almighty; but of the Name of Jesus he will not presume to take possession.

"The background of the Monogram is blue, the sign of faith, love, and hope. St. Paul says: 'Take the Name of Jesus for your shield and buckler.' A wondrous weapon it will be when raised aloft against the hosts of the Antichrist.

"About the three initials: To him who carries the Monogram they denote the Trinity, to be imprinted on his inmost heart: to him who thus dedicates his soul, it is not only a sign, it is a miracle of Grace . . .

"Let us now consider the place of the Holy Monogram: it is in the sun, whose rays illumine the soul. Twelve is the number of the ecstasies of unswerving faith. The main blessings vouchsafed correspond to the larger rays, the remainder denote the *gratia gratis data.* The whole is framed in a square, signifying the four cardinal virtues.

"Domine Dominus, quam admirabile nomen tuum in universa terra!

"I will describe the monogram with a simile: either you carry the Name of Jesus in your heart, or you do not. But he who does so will all the more long to have it visible before his eyes. A lover bearing the picture of his lady in his heart's eye sees her likeness in a thousand outward things. The more one's heart is possessed by it, the more pleasing is it in visible form. And so it is with the Name of Jesus; he who possesses it inwardly longs for it outwardly. The Apostle Paul was filled with the Name both within and without. Should your heart be empty of Him, the means to attain Him is by placing Him before you and confessing Him openly.

"The great Constantine carried His Name emblazoned on his banner, whereby he was victor in every battle. In Verona I saw an old book in the Sacristy, a Gospel, the pages of which were colored in purple as the garments of Christ. All the lettering was in silver except where the Name of Jesus occurred, and this was written in gold so as to show that the Name of Jesus is above all other names, as gold is above all other precious metals. . . ."

The wave of religious fervor which followed this sermon on the Name of Jesus, and which swept over the Sienese people, is something beyond our present-day powers of conception to grasp. It shows that the rationalism of the Renaissance had not yet undermined the capacity of men's souls to sense the imponderables of spiritual reality which a simple symbol is able to convey.

The Council of the city decided that the Monogram of the Name of Jesus, such as St. Bernardino was wont to hold before him as he preached, was to find a permanent place on the façade of the Town Hall in the form of a large colored relief. Many citizens placed the same sign, either painted or carved, over the entrance to their homes, so that it became almost a second coat-of-arms of the city. Also, in other Italian cities which the saint at one time or other had visited, one finds the same sign on buildings and in homes.

(from *Siena, City of the Virgin*)

The Alchemy of Prayer

In so far as alchemy contains a science of Nature—the latter comprising both gross or corporeal and subtle or psychic manifestation—its laws and concepts can be freely transposed to the domains of the other traditional sciences, for example, to humoral medicine, and also to the corresponding science of the soul and its related therapeutics (*see diagram of the four humors or temperaments on p. 122*). More important to us in the present connection is the transposition of alchemical perspectives to spirituality or mysticism, for it offers a parallel to what was said earlier regarding the "chemical marriage". Here, only brief mention of this particular transposition will be made, by way of indication and amplification, without attempting to pursue all its ramifications.

Within the framework of spirituality, alchemy is above all the alchemy of prayer. By the word prayer is to be understood not so much an individual petition, but rather the inward—and sometimes

also outward—pronouncing of a formula or name directed to God and evoking God, thus especially the so-called "ejaculatory prayer". The pre-excellence of this kind of prayer rests on the fact that the word or phrase repeated as a means of concentration is not one which has been selected by some human being or other, but either derives wholly from revelation or contains a Divine Name, if indeed it does not consist exclusively of this Name. Thus the word pronounced by the person praying is, thanks to its divine origin, a symbol of the eternal Word and, in the last analysis, in view of its content and power of benediction, is one with the latter: "The foundation of this mystery (that is, the invocation of a Divine Name) is, on the one hand, that 'God and his Name are one' (Ramakrishna), and on the other, that God Himself pronounces His Name in Himself, hence in eternity and outside of all creation, so that his unique and uncreated word is the prototype of ejaculatory prayer, and even, in a less direct sense, of all prayer." (See: the chapter "Modes of Prayer" in *Stations of Wisdom* by Frithjof Schuon.)

Thus, fundamentally, the Divine Name or the sacred formula of ejaculatory prayer is related to the passive soul, as is the Divine Word, the *fiat lux,* to the passive nature or *materia prima* of the universe. This brings us back to the correspondence (mentioned by Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî) that exists between, on the one hand, the Divine Command (*al-amr*) and Nature (*tabi'a*), and, on the other, Sulphur and Quicksilver, the two fundamental powers which in the soul are (respectively) relatively active and relatively passive. In its immediate sense, and from the point of view of "method", Sulphur is the will, which unites itself with the content of the word pronounced in the prayer, and acts in a formative manner upon the Quicksilver of the receptive soul. In the last analysis, however, Sulphur is the penetrating spiritual light contained in the sacred words, like the fire in flint, and whose appearance effects the real transmutation of the soul.

This transmutation goes through the same phases as are determined by the alchemical work, for the soul initially, on turning away from the outward world, becomes congealed, then dissolves as a result of inner warmth, and finally, having been a changing, volatile stream of impressions, becomes a motionless crystal filled with light. This is indeed the simplest expression to which this inward process can be reduced. If it were to be described in greater detail, it would be necessary to repeat almost everything that has been said about the alchemical work, and to relate it to the inward action of prayer

and within the framework of corresponding spiritual contemplation. (See Frithjof Schuon, *op. cit.*)

It will suffice here to mention that the alchemy of prayer is treated particularly fully in the writings of the Islamic mystics.[10] Here it stands in close relation to the method of *dhikr,* an Arabic expression which can be translated as "remembrance", "recollection", and "mention", and also as "ejaculatory prayer". "Remembrance" is intended here in the sense of the Platonic *anamnesis*: "The sufficient reason for the invocation of the (Divine) Name lies in its being the 'remembering' of God; and this, in the last analysis, is consciousness of the Absolute. The Name actualizes this consciousness and, in the end, perpetuates it in the soul and fixes it in the heart, so that it penetrates the whole being and at the same time transmutes and absorbs it." (Frithjof Schuon, *op. cit.*)

The basic law of this kind of inward alchemy is to be found in the Christian formula of the *Ave Maria,* the "angelical salutation". *Maria* corresponds both to *materia prima* and to the soul in its state of pure receptivity, whereas the words of the angel are like a prolongation of the divine *fiat lux*. The "fruit of the Virgin's womb" corresponds to the miraculous elixir, the Philosophers' Stone, which is the goal of the inward work.

According to the medieval interpretation, the angel greets the Virgin *mutans Evae nomen* (reversing the name of Eve): *Ave* is indeed the reverse of *Eva*. This indicates the transmutation of the chaotic soul into the pure mirror of the Divine Word. To the objection that the angel did not speak Latin, and that *Eva* in Hebrew is *Khawwa*, it must be answered that in the domain of the sacred there is no chance, and also that things which seem mere coincidences are in reality preordained. This explains why in the Middle Ages the smallest details of Scripture, even the very names, were studied and variously interpreted according to their symbolism—and with an inspiration which rebuffs every reproach of artificiality.

*
* *

The male-female androgyne symbolizes the completion of the alchemical work, with the signs of the seven planets in such an order that the three solar signs correspond to the masculine side of the androgyne, and the three lunar signs to the feminine side, while

10. See my *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine,* pp. 101 et seq.

the androgynous sign of Mercury represents the "keystone" between the two series. This gives rise to the schema below, in which the stages of the "lesser" and "greater" works will be recognized.

In a certain respect (and quite apart from the astrological meanings of the same sign), the signs on the right may be called active, and those on the left passive, since the "lesser work" completes the readiness of the soul, and the "greater work" completes the spiritual revelation.

The individual signs correspond to one another in pairs. One depends on the ascent of the Moon, and the other on the descent of the Sun (these two movements occurring in the course of the work). When, on the contrary, both movements are viewed as occurring in parallel, the signs are ordered as shown in the schema.

From this, it can be seen that for every active aspect, there is a corresponding passive aspect. Saturn represents a passive "abasement", and Mars an active descent. The first sign represents the extinction of the ego-bound soul, the second the victory of the spirit.

On the next level, the third sign, Jupiter, corresponds to the receptivity of soul, while the fourth sign, Venus, corresponds to the rising of the inward sun.

The Moon (the fifth sign) and the Sun (the sixth sign) respectively embody the active and passive poles in their pure state, while Mercury bears both principles within itself.

Planetary and metallurgical correspondences

Mercury ☿
(quicksilver)

1 Saturn ♄ (lead)	2 Mars ♂ (iron)
3 Jupiter ♃ (tin)	4 Venus ♀ (copper)
5 Moon ☽ (silver)	6 Sun ☉ (gold)

To see how these six stages constantly recur as fundamental themes in all spiritual realization, one should consult the above-mentioned chapter "Stations of Wisdom" in the book of the same name by Frithjof Schuon.

(from *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*)

The text above is from the book *Qeb Bppbkqf^i Qfqrp ?ro`he^oaq7 Obcib`qflkp lk P^`oba >oq) C^fqep) ^ka @fsfifw^qflkp*) bafqba _v Tfiif^ j Pqlaa^oq. © 2000 World Wisdom Inc.
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