

# PETER BRUEGEL AND ESOTERIC TRADITION

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PETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER AND ESOTERIC TRADITION

## Summary

The late paintings of Peter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525 – 1569) are full of symbolism and allegory whose meaning has been widely and differently interpreted. Some see Bruegel as a gifted, humorous peasant, others as a satirist and political commentator and yet others as a Renaissance humanist and mystic. There is no consensus on the significance of the paintings and hardly any documents to help the historian.

This thesis considers Neoplatonic humanist ideas at the heart of the Renaissance in Italy and in Flanders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, relating them to the historical continuum known as the Perennial Philosophy. This concept is little understood today and this work traces its history and demonstrates that it was widely, if not universally, accepted in the Hellenistic era and in the Renaissance.

It also considers the tradition of religious mysticism in Germany, the Netherlands and Flanders throughout the late Middle Ages that led up to the Reformation and points out that this movement is also an expression of the Perennial Philosophy, citing the works of Meister Eckhart, the Rhineland mystics and the schools that came out of the *Devotio Moderna*.

The work considers the esoteric, 'heretical' school called the Family of Love that claimed among its adherents a number of highly illustrious artists, thinkers and politicians. Such men as Christoffe Plantin, Abraham Ortelius and Justus Lipsius spurned the religious turmoil of the period and rejected Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists alike in favour of an inner mystical state they called the 'invisible church'. They were close to Bruegel, bought his paintings and, it cannot be doubted, shared his thought.

While there are no surviving documents to prove Bruegel's personal connection with the Familists, the weight of circumstantial evidence, especially when seen in the context of the Perennial Philosophy, is compelling. However, it is the paintings themselves that open comprehensively and convincingly to an esoteric interpretation – once one has the key that unlocks their meaning. This thesis provides that key and leads the reader through an analysis of seven of Bruegel's last paintings.





## Declaration and Statements

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

R. C. C. Temple

5<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

R. C. C. Temple

5<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

I hereby consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loans after expiry of a bar on access approved by the University of Wales on the special recommendation of the Member Institution concerned.

R. C. C. Temple

5<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

# PETER BRUEGEL AND ESOTERIC TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

## Foreword

### *Structure of the thesis*

The Introduction consists of two sections; the first summarises the discoveries and opinions of scholars and art historians during the last seventy years and their differing and often incompatible views as to Bruegel's religious and social status and the significance of his art. The second section analyses in some detail his painting *The Numbering at Bethlehem* along the line of esoteric ideas and symbolism that will be developed throughout the whole work

The form of the ideas of this thesis could be illustrated by a picture of three concentric circles of which the outer would be the Perennial Philosophy – what Renaissance thinkers regarded as the body of truth drawn by the ancients from their knowledge of the cosmos and which, like the universe, has no external boundary. In writing about the Perennial Philosophy I have cited Plato and Hellenistic and Renaissance Neoplatonists as well as writers of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, among whom are Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon

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<sup>1</sup> In this work Bruegel's Christian name is given as Peter rather than the Flemish Pieter, except in citations that have the original form. Bruegel himself spelt his name Brueghel until 1560 when he changed it to Bruegel for reasons that are not clear. In this work the latter form is used except in citations.

and writers associated with their ideas; I have also quoted the theosophist W. Thackara. Within this is the second circle containing aspects of the Perennial Philosophy that found expression in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance periods and which culminated in Antwerp in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century. What may at first appear to be diverse influences are drawn from Renaissance ‘paganism’, the mysticism of Meister Eckhart and his followers as well as ‘gnostic’ or ‘heretical’ schools such as the Adamites with whom Hieronymus Bosch was associated. At the centre of all this – in the innermost circle – is Bruegel or, rather, his paintings, for the man himself is more or less silent and invisible. Yet the testimony of the later paintings is like a kernel containing the wisdom of the Perennial Philosophy. The paintings are there for all to see and yet their colours, forms and narratives are a veil – albeit a veil of great beauty – that covers a high order of knowledge. They are, therefore, esoteric.

In fact the form of the ideas set out here is necessarily linear but we can remind ourselves that the right to speak of the ultimate truths of Man and the universe was regarded in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century as traditionally belonging to the realm of prophets, poets, mystics and artists. Such men spoke in multi-layered symbols and their vision is not limited to *mens* and *ratio* only. Part I is mainly concerned with the now partly forgotten language and ideas in which such philosophical questions were considered.

Chapter 1, then, sets out the case for the Perennial Philosophy as it has been understood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with quotations from, among others, Aldous Huxley, Rufus Jones, W. Thackara and William Quinn who set out what they regard as its basic tenets. Among

ancient writers cited are Dionysius the Areopagite and Duns Scotus Erigena generally regarded as the agents through whom the Perennial Philosophy passed to the West. Introduced here are the concepts of mysticism and esotericism – themes which naturally run throughout the whole work – which are presented to the reader in the light of traditional understanding.

Chapter 2 goes to the Greek sources of the European branch of the Perennial Philosophy: namely Plotinus and his followers the so-called Neoplatonists – among them Porphyry and Iamblichus. Outlines of Plotinian cosmology and psychology are given in some detail since they are the basis of so much of medieval and Renaissance spirituality.

Chapter 3 considers aspects of early Christian thought in the light of perennial ideas. Here we find the early appearance of tension between the forces of institution and the forces of spiritual freedom. Origen, the father of the allegorical method of interpreting sacred scripture, is cited in connection with esoteric levels of symbolism in the Gospel. The idea of gnosis is considered and the eventual isolation of various gnostic sects that came to be regarded as ‘heretics’.

Chapter 4 discusses these problems further and emphasises the importance the mystical and esoteric aspects of spirituality both within and outside the doctrines imposed by the Church. It traces the origins of 2<sup>nd</sup>-century gnostic sects whose beliefs and teachings survived into the 16<sup>th</sup>-century.

Chapter 5, drawing on the writing of Rufus Jones, traces the historical continuity of perennial philosophical thought and practice from antiquity up to the eve of the Reformation. It considers the mystical tradition, inherited from Dionysius and passing through Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics, that produced the *Imitatio Christi* and the *Theologica Germanica*. This chapter stresses the importance of contemplative prayer or meditation and shows how this practice was the basis of spiritual movements, under the name of the *Devotio Moderna*, such as the Friends of God and the Brotherhood of the Common Life.

Chapter 6 looks at the Perennial Philosophy acting on Neoplatonist humanists and mystics of the Italian Renaissance. Reference is made to Edgar Wind's work on Renaissance esotericism and Andrea Solario's portrait of Christoforo Longoni is analysed in the light of the idea of self-knowledge as a spiritual exercise and as a central concept of this thesis.

Chapter 7 brings us to immediate and direct influences on Bruegel. These were free-thinking humanists and mystics who occupied the no-man's-land between Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists; men like Sebastian Franck, Dirck Volckertz Coornhert and Abraham Ortelius were adherents of the 'invisible church' where God was understood as 'an event in the soul' which could be independent of external forms, rites and doctrines. Many of them, such as Ortelius, Christophe Plantin and perhaps Justus Lipsius belonged to the sect known as the Family of Love whose leader, Hendrik Niclaes, was the author of the mystical allegory *Terra Pacis* that recounts the journey from the 'Land of Ignorance'

to the 'Land of Spiritual Peace'. Bruegel was closely associated with, if not a full member, of this group.

Chapter 8, drawing on the writings of Herbert Fränger, considers the art of Hieronymus Bosch and his association with the movement known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit among whom was an extreme group called the Adamites for whom Bosch painted *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Common aspects of both Bosch and Bruegel are discussed. This chapter discusses the direct relationship in sacred tradition between art and meditation and cites an example of Tibetan culture. It ends with a discussion of Abraham Ortelius' remarks concerning Bruegel; in particular his observation that he 'painted what cannot be painted'.

In Part II, six of Bruegel's late paintings are looked at in detail with the aim of assigning their message to one of the three stages of man's possible spiritual evolution.

Chapter 9 deals with *The Adoration of the Kings* and *The Massacre of the Innocents* whose psychological commentary calls us to see the truth of the human condition – that human beings, enmeshed in the demands of temporal life, do not see that they live in spiritual darkness and ignorance.

Chapter 10, analysing *The Road to Calvary*, shows that it not only illustrates the consequences of man's stupidity but at the same time it indicates that hope of redemption lies in the evolution of consciousness. This possibility is further developed in the

symbolism embedded in *The Harvesters* and *The Fall of Icarus* where the work associated with plowing the land and harvesting the corn is an allegory of spiritual work.

Finally, in Chapter 11, it is argued that the painting known as *The Peasant Wedding Feast* is in fact Bruegel's mystical commentary on *The Marriage at Cana* – the miraculous transformation, symbolised by the changing of water into wine, which takes place when God and man are united. According to Matthew Estrada, whose ideas influence parts of the chapter, this event is sometimes known as the alchemical wedding. But the circumstances of this process are mysterious in that they do not take place in the material world. The main burden of the thesis is to investigate that 'other world' to which Bruegel had access and where, according to spiritual authorities, spiritual transformation takes place.

## Introduction 1

The life of Peter Bruegel the Elder is a mystery.<sup>2</sup> During the entire 44 years of his existence his name is mentioned no more than four times in routine official documents; twice *en passant* in letters and once, briefly, by a historian.<sup>3</sup> Yet he was highly regarded by the intellectual and political elites of his day and by the end of his life, and immediately after, his pictures were sought by the richest in the land: kings, queens, bankers and the emperor Rudolph II.

The earliest contemporary written reference is when he was admitted into the painters' fraternity, the guild of St Luke, in Antwerp in 1551. Historians, working backwards from this date and assuming that he was about 25 – the usual age for a painter at that time to be so incorporated – give his date of birth variously as 'circa 1525', 'circa 1526' or 'between 1525 and 1530'. The fact that his birth appears not to have been recorded is thought to indicate that he was born of poor peasant stock, as his earliest biographer Karel van

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent account of his life by a scholar see Orenstein, N. 'the Elusive Life of Pieter Breugel the Elder' in Orenstein, N. ed. *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, catalogue, 2001, pp. 3-11.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of all the documents relating to Bruegel's life see Marijnissen, R.H., Ruyflelaere, P., Calster, van P. and Meij, A.W.F.M. *Bruegel; Tout l'ouvre peint et dessiné*. Antwerp and Paris, 1988



Mander (1548–1606) states. Van Mander was a Dutch mannerist painter perhaps better known today as the author in 1604, 35 years after Bruegel's death, of the *Schilder-Boek*,<sup>4</sup> an anthology of lives of Northern painters, written in response to Giorgio Vasari's famous *Lives of the Painters*, published in Florence in 1550.<sup>5</sup> Although written long after the events and not corroborated from other sources, historians have relied heavily on the two or three pages that van Mander wrote about Bruegel because there is no other material relating to Bruegel's early life. He begins:

In a wonderful manner Nature found and seized the man who in his turn was destined to seize her magnificently, when in an obscure village in Brabant she chose from among the peasants, as the delineator of peasants, the witty and gifted Pieter Brueghel, and made of him a painter to the lasting glory of our Netherlands. He was born not far from Breda in a village named Brueghel, a name he took for himself and handed on to his descendants. He learned his craft from Pieter Koeck (Peter Coecke) van Aelst, whose daughter he later married ... On leaving Koeck he went to work with Jenoon Kock (Hieronymus Cock), and then he traveled to France and to Italy. He did much work in the manner of Jenoon van den Bosch (Hieronymus Bosch) and produced many spookish scenes and drolleries and for this reason many called him Pieter the Droll. There are few works by his hand which the observer can contemplate solemnly and with a straight face. However stiff, morose or surly he may be, he cannot help chuckling or at any rate smiling

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<sup>4</sup> Karel van Mander, *Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem: Paschier and Wesbuch, 1604

<sup>5</sup> Vasari, Giorgio, 1511-1574. *Lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors & architects*, by Giorgio Vasari: newly tr. by Gaston du C. de Vere. With five hundred illustrations, London, Macmillan and co., ld. & The Medici society, ld., 1912-15. The later edition of 1568 mentions Bruegel.

... Brueghel delighted in observing the droll behaviour of the peasants, how they ate, drank, danced, capered or made love ... He represented [them] as they really were, betraying their boorishness in the way they walked, talked, danced, stood still or moved.<sup>6</sup>

Van Mander speaks of a voyage in France and Italy and mentions Bruegel's friend the merchant Hans Frankert and how they liked to travel into the country together, disguised as peasants in order to visit fairs and gate-crash weddings. He gives a racy account of how, in Antwerp, Bruegel lived with a servant girl of bad character and that later, having broken with her, he went to live in Brussels having married Peter Coeck's daughter whom he had known when she was a child. The piece ends with brief descriptions of a dozen or so of the paintings and a quotation from the Liege humanist Domenicus Lampsonius comparing Bruegel to Hieronymus Bosch, where he says that he 'brings his master's ingenious flights of fancy to life once more so skillfully with brush and style that he even surpasses him'.<sup>7</sup>

Van Mander's references to Bruegel's early life were written some 80 years after the events. Much of what he writes about Bruegel's private life sounds more like reportage of popular hearsay rather than the result of research as we understand it today; there is no independent corroboration though some details of what he says of Bruegel's adult life

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<sup>6</sup> Van Mander, op. cit. from the translation by Grossman, F. *Bruegel, the Paintings*. London: Phaidon Press, 1955, pp. 7,8.

<sup>7</sup> Lampsonius was an associate of van Mander and corresponded with Vasari. See Melion, W.S., *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel Van Mander's Schilder-Boeck*. Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1991

have been verified (for example his travels in Italy) by modern research.<sup>8</sup> Some historians have doubted what he says about Bruegel's 'peasant' origins in the light of his intellectual and artistic achievements.<sup>9</sup> What Mander writes fits into what Melion calls a 'standard format' that served the aims and purpose of the *Schilder-Boek* in establishing the reputation of Northern painters worthy of humanist ideals and ideas on art, history and landscape current at the time.<sup>10</sup> It is not a critique of his painting and it tells us nothing of the intellectual and philosophical outlook of the painter.

Another piece of routine documentary material while Bruegel was alive is the record of Bruegel's marriage to Marijke (Mayken) Coecke in 1663 while a third document, dated 1565 (four years before the painter's death), is the banker Nicolas Jongelink's financial guarantee to the city of Antwerp in which he pledges his art collection. Among the paintings listed are 'sixteen items by Bruegel'.<sup>11</sup> Then there are two letters from the Bolognese geographer and humanist, Fabius Scipius to his friend Abraham Ortelius in which he asks news of, and sends 'friendly greetings' to, Peter Bruegel.<sup>12</sup> A sixth contemporary document is the mention in the Florentine historian Ludovico Guicciardini's description in 1567 of the Low Countries. There he writes of 'Peter Bruegel of Breda, imitator of Jerome Bosch's science and fantasy: for which he has

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<sup>8</sup> A detailed account of the itinerary through France, Italy, Sicily, Austria and Switzerland is given by Claessens and Rousseau, in *Our Bruegel*. Antwerp: Mercatofonds, 1969. pp. 141-153

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Gustave Glück, *Peter Brueghel the Elder*, Paris: 1936. Quoted in Claessens and Rousseau: 'Gustave Glück refuses to admit Bruegel's peasant background, p. 158

<sup>10</sup> Melion, W.S., *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel Van Mander's Schilder-Boeck*. Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Claessens and Rousseau, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. p. 35.

earned the nick-name of Jerome Bosch the Second.’<sup>13</sup> Finally, there is a seventh document, dated January 18<sup>th</sup> 1569, in which ‘Master Peter Bruegel’ is dispensed from billeting Spanish soldiers. Bruegel died on September 5<sup>th</sup> of that year and may have been too ill to fulfill that obligation.<sup>14</sup>

During, and immediately after, his life-time, Bruegel’s admirers and clients were from the higher and highest strata of society. Dominique Allart has assembled all the reliable information regarding ownership of the paintings. From this we know that in 1565, as we have seen, the financier Nicolaes Jonghelinck owned sixteen of the pictures. In 1572 Jean Noirot, Master of the Antwerp Mint, owned five. Giorgio Giulio Clovio, the celebrated Croatian miniaturist and friend of Titian, with whom Bruegel as a young man had stayed in Rome, owned five or six paintings listed in an inventory of 1557 all which are now lost. In 1594 Balasius Hütter was secretary to the Archduke Ernest, Governor-General of the Netherlands and his accounts show that the archduke had owned the famous series of six paintings representing the Twelve Months (the great landscape paintings today in Vienna, Prague and New York; one of these is now lost) together with three further paintings all of which are mentioned in the inventory drawn up after his death in the following year. Van Mander’s *Schilder-Boeck* states that several of Bruegel’s best paintings were by then in the collection of the Emperor Rudolph II. Among other seventeenth century documents we find the names of the statesman Cardinal Granvella

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<sup>13</sup> Ludovico Guicciardini, *The Description of the Low Countries and the Provinces Thereof*. London: Thomas Chard, 1593

<sup>14</sup> There has been discussion as to whether the ‘Meesteren van Pieter Bruegel’ is in fact Peter Bruegel the Elder and not Magister Brugelius, a doctor living at the time. See Claessens and Rousseau, p. 35.

(who, during Bruegel lifetime, had been prime minister of the Netherlands under Marguerite of Parma), Ferdinand II of Prague and Queen Christina of Sweden.<sup>15</sup>

During the Enlightenment and throughout the Romantic Period, Bruegel's reputation reverted to that of 'peasant painter' and his name disappears from the priority lists of collectors. His emergence from two hundred years of obscurity dates from the beginning of the last century and especially from the studies of the Michelangelo scholar and Conservator of the Casa Buonarrotti in Florence, Charles de Tolnay (1899-1958).<sup>16</sup>

Tolnay put forward the idea that Bruegel was anything but a peasant, that he belonged to a circle of Northern Renaissance humanists and men of the highest level of education, international renown and profound philosophical insight. More recent scholarship has tended to reject such views on the grounds that they cannot be proved. While it is true that almost no evidence exists establishing a direct source for Bruegel's spiritual and intellectual powers, there is overwhelming circumstantial evidence to be found in the wider context of the intellectual life of spiritual people associated with him. The purpose of this thesis is to assemble some of this material and present it in such a way that Bruegel's place in it becomes apparent.

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<sup>15</sup>Allart, D. 'Did Pieter Bruegel the Younger See his Father's Paintings?' in Brink, van den, P. ed. *Bruegel Enterprises*, Bonnefatennmuseum, Maastricht, 2002.

<sup>16</sup>Tolnay, de C, *Pierre Bruegel l'ancien*. 2 vols. Brussels: Nouvelle société d'éditions, 1935.

The recent publication of Perez Zagorin's survey of the Bruegel art historical literature from 1935 until the present time is a useful summary of what the academic historian regards as the 'problems' of interpreting the master's work.<sup>17</sup> Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bruegel has 'ceased to be seen simply as the naive artist Pieter the Droll and Peasant Bruegel, chosen, as van Mander said, 'from among the peasants' to be 'the delineator of peasants', he has now 'been generally ranked among the foremost artists of the Netherlands and northern Renaissance as well as one of the greatest of European painters.'<sup>18</sup> Commenting on Bruegel's 'masterly sureness and economy of figural draftsmanship in the depiction of human beings in every kind of posture and action' Zagorin wonders that many of the paintings 'seem to be animated by some idea' and that 'one cannot help wondering what attitudes, values, and particular philosophy underlie his works. On this question, however, he tells us 'there has never been agreement'.

As an example he refers to Bruegel's peasant scenes, and cites the *Peasant Wedding Feast*, as having elicited 'very divergent readings'.<sup>19</sup> He says that such paintings 'have been variously perceived as comic and sympathetic representations of peasant life by a humane observer, as detached and accurate descriptions by an objective recorder, as graphic allegories of human folly, as visions of an organic community which is passing

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<sup>17</sup> Zagorin, Perez "Looking for Pieter Bruegel", *Journal of the History of Ideas* - Volume 64, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 73-96; The Johns Hopkins University Press. [http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/journal\\_of\\_the\\_history\\_of\\_ideas/v064/64.1zagorin.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_ideas/v064/64.1zagorin.html)

<sup>18</sup> 'Peasant Bruegel' and 'Pieter the Droll' were commonly used appellations in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to distinguish the painter from his sons; Peter Brueghel the Younger, popularly called 'Hell Brueghel', and Jan Brueghel the Elder or 'Velvet Brueghel'. Altogether, four generations of painters belonged to the family.

<sup>19</sup> Here Zagorin cites Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, 271-73; Walter S. Gibson, "Bruegel and The Peasants: A Problem of Interpretation," *Pieter Bruegel The Elder: Two Studies* (Lawrence, Kan., 1991); Ethan Matt Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge, 1999), 24-28.

away, as products of a literary and pictorial genre of satirical commentaries on peasant crudity, gluttony, and lechery, and as an expression of the social condescension and moral superiority which humanist intellectuals and the dominant landed and urban classes of the painter's time are said to have felt toward peasants and popular culture. These differences and contradictions respecting his peasant paintings are merely an example of the more general problem of interpreting Bruegel which is repeatedly encountered in discussions of many of his compositions.' Zagorin points out that 'there is no other sixteenth-century artist whose works have been understood in such different and opposite ways.'<sup>20</sup>

The same writer says that '... in trying to answer such questions and to elucidate the meaning of various of his works, art historians, beside examining his artistic inheritance, milieu, and imagery in relation to the productions of contemporary artists and predecessors, have also looked for clues to Bruegel's thought in the influences that might have shaped his outlook as a result of his personal, social, and intellectual affiliations.' This thesis looks at the same clues but is not timid in following the direction they point in even if they lead the researcher out of familiar territory – away from the methodology of art history and into the fields of philosophy and mysticism. Zagorin laments that 'the established facts of Bruegel's biography are few and much smaller than for that of any major artist of the sixteenth century. The section on his life in the catalogue of the

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<sup>20</sup> Here Zagorin points out that 'Bruegel scholars have often commented on the differences and contradictions in the interpretations of the painter's work; see, for example Grossmann, *Bruegel The Paintings*, 37; the remarks by Marijnissen, *passim*; John E. C. White, *Pieter Bruegel and The Fall of The Art Historian* (Newcastle, 1980); Raupp, *Bauernsatiren*, ch. IV. The collection of essays in the volume on Bruegel in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 47, ed. Jan de Jong et al. (1996), 24771, contains a comprehensive bibliography on the artist.'

outstanding exhibition of his drawings and prints in 2001 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) rightly described his personal history as “still largely a mystery.”<sup>21</sup>

Zagorin states:

The sparseness of documented knowledge about him has nevertheless not deterred a succession of Bruegel scholars from propounding unsupported speculations and hypotheses concerning his life, career, and associations. An early instance was Charles de Tolnay’s important book of 1935, which attempted to “penetrate the artist’s secret thought” and “strip away his masks” in order to identify his philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Tolnay visualized him as a cultured Renaissance humanist who associated in Antwerp with a group of distinguished scholars, artists, and authors such as the celebrated geographer Abraham Ortelius (1527-98), the great printer and publisher Christophe Plantin (c. 1520-89), and the Dutch writer and engraver Dirck Coornhert (1522-90), all described as religious libertines whose unorthodox opinions Bruegel shared. Among these men, some belonged to the religious sect known as the Family or House of Love, of which Tolnay suggested that Bruegel was also a member. He believed the source of the painter’s ideas lay in fifteenth-century Platonic philosophers and humanists like Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino and in the writings of Erasmus and Sebastian Franck. As the dominant theme in his depiction of human life, Tolnay attributed to him the conception of an upside-down or topsy-turvy world, the realm of absurdity, fools, and folly.

Bruegel was the “platonicien” of this “monde renversé,” contemplating it with the

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<sup>21</sup> Orenstein et al. *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, New York: Metropolitan Museum, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Charles de Tolnay, *Pierre Bruegel l’Ancien* (2 vols.; Brussels, 1935), I, intro. and p.20



same detachment as he would another planet. In contrast to this attitude was the artist's conception of the greatness and impersonality of nature, to whose eternal laws human beings were subject. Other than Bruegel's friendship with Ortelius, however, which can be documented, Tolnay had no proof of the artist's relationships in Antwerp and the conclusions he drew from them or any evidence that Bruegel could have been acquainted with the works of the particular thinkers whom he identified as sources. Later Bruegel scholarship has been much less inclined to such over-intellectualized explanations of the artist's work. Thus, a leading contemporary historian of Bruegel and Netherlandish art has cautioned against exaggerating the philosophical aspects of his art, noting that "there is little evidence ... that Bruegel's pictures are as recondite or cryptic as is so often believed."<sup>23</sup> In the scholarly literature's attempt to uncover the meaning of Bruegel's work through an examination of his biography and personal relationships, it is easy to find repeated examples of questionable suppositions and doubtful inferences presented as facts. Tolnay was the first to affirm that the artist was a religious libertine, a member of the Family of Love, and connected in Antwerp with intellectuals of heterodox beliefs in religion. Although the only one of these claims that can be substantiated, as I have said above, is his relationship with the geographer Ortelius, they have nevertheless been repeated by Benesch, Stechow, and other noted Bruegel scholars.<sup>24</sup> Pierre Francastel's book on Bruegel of 1995, while rejecting the importance of Platonist influences in the painter's art, speaks nevertheless of his possible contacts with heretical groups and considers it

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<sup>23</sup> Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel* (London, 1977), 10, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Otto Benesch, *The Art of The Renaissance in Northern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1945,

certain that together with Ortelius he frequented a select libertine milieu of cultivated friends such as Plantin and Coornhert. In some recent essays by David Freedberg, we encounter...similar instances of questionable statements about the artist'.<sup>25</sup>

The present work will offer an instrument for the interpretation of meaning in Bruegel's paintings based on a spiritual and philosophic outlook that is near to and even part of Renaissance humanism just as it is near to and part of the insight of the Rhineland mystics. It is a way of looking at the world long known to exist though today accepted by few professional historians and philosophers. It has, and has had, different names and sometimes no name. It is an esoteric tradition and will be referred to here as the Perennial Philosophy. A large part of this thesis (pp. 72 – 268) is devoted to an exposition of some outer aspects of its ideas – the exoteric and perhaps mesoteric aspects – its place in western thought of the last two thousand years, and to some of those who have been its adherents.

Zagorin's survey shows that, on the whole, the art historian's view ignores the role in Bruegel's work of universal spiritual truths about man and his relation to earthly life and eternal life. He dismisses the idea of an esoteric philosophy and he refers to the adherents of the school known as the Family of Love as libertines, a word with misleading connotations. Zagorin repeatedly points out that 'positive evidence is lacking to prove his involvement in a circle of Antwerp humanists or his religious heterodoxy'. He lists the names associated with Bruegel: 'Pieter Coecke van Aelst, a distinguished artist with

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<sup>25</sup> Zagorin, "Looking for Pieter Bruegel", p. 76 ff.

whom he is reported to have studied and whose daughter he married; Hieronymus Cock, the well known publisher of his prints whose business was located in Antwerp; the Antwerp merchant and government official Nicholas Jonghelinck, and the great prelate Cardinal Granvelle, Philip II's principal minister in the Netherlands, both of whom were admirers and collectors of his work', and says that 'neither these nor any of his other known associations can license the conclusion of another prominent Bruegel scholar Carl Gustaf Stridbeck that the artist's friends numbered some of the most outstanding intellectuals of the time and that in Antwerp he was one of "a circle of political and religious radical humanists" that included Coornhert and Plantin.'<sup>26</sup>

Views have been put forward by historians who see Bruegel's paintings as political statements against the oppression of the Spanish military forces in the Netherlands, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, especially, has been seen as such a commentary, some seeing in the central figure a portrait of the terrible Duke of Alba though the probable date of the picture (1566) would preclude that possibility (Alba entered Brussels in August 1567). Zagorin finds little support for these views. 'If Bruegel meant to make a political statement ... it is well hidden. *The Massacre of the Innocents* is similar to another of Bruegel's paintings on a New Testament subject, *The Numbering at Bethlehem* in Brussels, dated by the artist 1566, which also depicts a Flemish village in winter. This suggests that the two works are related and may both be simply unproblematic illustrations of the gospel story.' This essay will put forward the view that these paintings are neither political statements nor conventional religious pictures but commentaries on

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<sup>26</sup>Stridbeck, C. G. *Bruegelstudien*. Stockholm, 1956

profound psychological and spiritual realities, traditionally studied in esoteric schools, whose meaning transcends historical time and is as valid today as at any other period.

Regarding the Family of Love and how it has been treated by historians, Zagorin takes a dismissive tone: ‘The Family of Love belonged to the spiritualist wing of the Protestant Reformation, a type of religion that brushed aside the literal and historical sense of Scripture as a dead letter and held that true Christianity had nothing to do with any visible church or creed. In their place, it exalted the spirit dwelling within the individual believer through which God communicates His presence and truth ... Familism disdained rites and ceremonies, which it looked upon as childish toys suitable only for the uninitiated; the Familists considered themselves as having transcended the inferior external religion of the Protestant and Catholic churches.’ This view reveals an attitude that fails to credit the Family of Love as an example of a teaching that can lead men and women to spiritual levels that transcend the human condition. This thesis will suggest the opposite: that the higher level is to be found by searchers for the Kingdom of God (Familists called it the Land of Spiritual Peace) within themselves in accordance with Christ’s declaration ‘For behold, the Kingdom of God is within you.’<sup>27</sup> What follows will show that Bruegel, transmitting perennial philosophical ideas, can lift people from the state of blindness and ignorance of the human condition that condemns humanity to the violence and disorder which characterize daily life.

Current academic thinking about Bruegel, as summarized by Zagorin, does not deny the relationship with the Family of Love of Ortelius, Lipsius, Arias Montano, and other

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<sup>27</sup> Luke 17:20-21

associates of Christophe Plantin. He cites René Boumans's comment that 'Ortelius's religion applies to all of them: their Catholicism "was only intended for the outward world."<sup>28</sup> Connection with the sect, as Leon Voet noted, required from its adherents "the utmost secrecy and ... the necessity to blend, in the perception of the outer world, with the denomination that fitted them best, be it Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinist."<sup>29</sup> The Familists' belief in their spiritual superiority to ordinary Christians was well suited to these humanists and scholars who regarded themselves as an intellectual elite'. He says that 'whether Bruegel himself shared this point of view is an unanswerable question'. The present thesis shows that, with the help of the ideas of the Perennial Philosophy, this question can indeed be answered; that great psychological and philosophical truths common to the spiritual disciplines of the Familists and related groups can be discerned at the heart of Bruegel's painting. Zagorin states that 'despite [Bruegel's] friendship with Ortelius, no evidence has been produced that he had any tie to Familism or subscribed to its tenets. We have no reason to suppose either that he was ever anything but a Catholic. Some of his religious paintings are clearly Catholic in character.' The present thesis offers analysis of the paintings to support the idea that Bruegel did subscribe to the tenets of the Familists, in particular to ideas found in Nicolaes' book *Terra Pacis* and to ideas that belong to the Perennial Philosophy. As to his religious affiliations it will be shown that he was neither Catholic nor anti-Catholic but 'trans-Catholic'.<sup>30</sup> It also shows that Bruegel, a 'thinker in images' reveals his attitude to religion in the way he depicts the church in his paintings. Among the pictures Zagorin cites to support his suggestion that

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<sup>28</sup> René Boumans, "The Religious Views of Abraham Ortelius," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 17 (1954) 377.

<sup>29</sup> Voet, "Abraham Ortelius and His World," in Broeke M, Krogt and P. Meurer, P. eds. *Abraham Ortelius and the First Atlas*, Westeren: 1998.

<sup>30</sup> The phrase is Herbert Grundmann's; see below, p.255

Bruegel adhered to Catholicism rather than any Platonic or esoteric influences are *The Adoration of the Kings* and *Christ on the Road to Calvary*. This thesis shows that these paintings can be read as illustrating the truth, deep in the human soul, that divine consciousness, represented by Christ and his family, is present at the human level though human beings are practically unable to acknowledge the fact. Further, these paintings, through the artists' visual realism – ever a cypher for his psychological realism – reveal the mental and emotional condition prevailing in the human psyche, the state traditionally called ignorance or sleep. Bruegel's sure grasp of this spiritual truth, taught throughout the ages by philosophers and sages, allows him – and us – to contemplate ultimate realities.

In this essay the interpretation of Bruegel's paintings is based on ideas that belong to the body of universal truth about human beings and their possible relationship to the Divine World and Eternity. These truths are found in Christianity though not necessarily emphasised in the official theology of the Churches; rather, they are more often accessible through the 'invisible church', and the 'hermaic chain'<sup>31</sup> whose links constitute the strand of esoteric Christianity that belongs to what, for want of a better word, is called the Perennial Philosophy. Esoteric Christianity tends to be gnostic and has been regarded as heretical and therefore dangerous to the *status quo* maintained and controlled by the established churches. However, esotericism and the Perennial Philosophy, as will be shown, are not social or political movements; their teachings are directed to the search for self-knowledge and the inner life accessed through the practice of contemplative prayer, meditation and spiritual exercises.

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<sup>31</sup> The phrase is from Rufus Jones (see below and bibliography); today he would have said hermetic.

Almost no intellectual or verbal concepts can adequately convey the world of states of higher levels of consciousness, of *gnosis*, of the action of divine energy working through the human organism. Terms such as ‘Esoteric school’, ‘Perennial Philosophy’, ‘spiritual tradition’, ‘mystical path’ and similar expressions function as sign-posts for those who search for truth beyond the outward conventions of religion and morality. With the help of these signs-posts the seeker can find the way leading from his or her subjective state to a vision of objective reality. This Reality, according to ideas of the Perennial Philosophy that will be discussed in this thesis, exists beyond the realm of the senses, beyond the scope of the rational mind and outside our ordinary comprehension of space and time. It certainly lies beyond the realm of scientific method and the academic historian is bound to find attempts to see the influence of mystical tradition and primordial truth as ‘questionable suppositions and doubtful inferences’. Rigorously applied methodology is limited to a world bound by the senses and by the rational mind. This thesis purports to show that Bruegel’s imagery necessarily includes the physical world while always showing us the wider context in which it exists. He also shows why those bound to the limitations of earthly existence cannot see or know of the higher world of divine energies constantly offered to humanity as spiritual food.

The concept of spiritual food is found in the Old Testament: ‘Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day ... and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.’<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Exodus 16, 4-5

And in the New Testament Christ identifies himself thus: ‘I am the living Bread which came down from Heaven’.<sup>33</sup> This idea can be considered central to the spiritual tradition of the Perennial Philosophy. It is the ‘supersubstantial bread’ of the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, as we see in *The Harvesters* and in *The Fall of Icarus*, Bruegel has a profound commentary on the symbolism where bread as physical food sustaining physical life is analogous to the spiritual ‘food’ or energies that sustain eternal life. If eternal life, or the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us as the Gospel insists, then we can discover *within ourselves* the higher truths that the imagery symbolically suggests. Bruegel then – like an icon painter or like any artist who works according to the authentic traditions of sacred imagery – is the agent through whom meaning, perhaps other than that apparently depicted, can pass. Here the function of art is to serve the teaching that helps man towards what the Perennial Philosophy would regard as his highest aspirations: his need to know himself, his need to transform himself and his need to know God. Since man in his material nature is bound to the world through the senses and the rational mind, his approach to a higher world must take physical reality into account while not falling into the error, characteristic of our times, of believing that to be the only reality. Gnostic tradition regards present reality as the point of departure for the spiritual journey that can lead man to realities that lie beyond the limitations of materiality.

This thesis will suggest that those higher realities are to be sought through aspects of the Perennial Philosophy that Bruegel may have known. With its one message and in its many manifestations, it calls man to his highest possibility: the transformation of his

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<sup>33</sup> John 6:51

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of this concept see below, *The Harvesters*, p. 326



being. Man must, in the words of Christ, be ‘born again’. But before he can begin the process of being reborn he must know himself in the fullest gnostic sense; that is to say that he has to know both his earthbound self and his higher self. He must align his lower nature so as to conform to the higher: ‘As above, so below’ was perhaps the most famous of the Hermetic sayings central to Renaissance mysticism. What Bruegel so tellingly shows in his three paintings referring to the birth of Christ is the important gnosis-born realisation that our earth-bound consciousness ignores or denies and even destroys God in us. For the Perennial Philosophy the highest level of meaning in the Christian gospel is neither a code of ethics nor a guide to morality but a teaching, veiled in symbolism, on the entry of a human being into the kingdom of God. Christ tells Nicodemus ‘Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again (the Greek translates this more accurately as “born from above”); he cannot see the kingdom of God.’<sup>35</sup> According to traditional ideas the concept of the (spiritual) kingdom of God, and our possibilities regarding it, is the most consistent theme of the gospel and nearly all the parables are images referring to it.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the Christian tradition there are commentaries on the innermost or esoteric aspects of sacred literature that tell us that such an event as access to the kingdom of God does not take place in what we think of as space and time. We see, for example, in the writings of the Desert Fathers, references to a realm beyond the perceptions of the rational mind and the physical senses.<sup>37</sup> We further know that this inner journey has to be

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<sup>35</sup> see *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, Tyndale House, Illinois, 1990, John 3.3),

<sup>36</sup> See P. D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, London, 1931, Ch. I, ‘Esotericism and Modern Thought’ and Ch. IV, ‘Christianity and the New Testament’)

<sup>37</sup> See especially the *Philokalia* (see bibliography: Kadloubovsky, E. and Palmer, G.E.H.).

conducted according to long established traditions of discipline and practice. In the West, approximately during the last three hundred years, knowledge has tended to become detached from practice and today that balance is better maintained in Asia, as many recent and contemporary accounts by westerners testify.<sup>38</sup> However, there are now signs of a revival within our own culture and the writings of Guénon, Coomaraswamy and their followers now constitute a body of material that, according to traditionalists, no serious searcher can ignore.

A recurring theme of Ananda Coomaraswamy, a leading 20<sup>th</sup> century exponent of the Perennial Philosophy, is that in the ancient sacred traditions all the arts, including that of painting, served the priesthood and the aim of transformation.<sup>39</sup> For the artist working in a traditional milieu the function of imagery was to convey psychological, theological and mystical truth. The master painter was also a spiritual master; for him there was nothing theoretical about ideas; they were the expression of knowledge, acquired through lived experience, of the great laws concerning the creation of the universe and man's place in it. The traditional view would be that such laws and such knowledge can neither be given to, nor received by, a mind linked only to the senses and to rationality. Traditional wisdom would regard our scientific rationalism as no more than a preparation for understanding the great truths of man's place in the divine plan. Thus Arnold Toynbee tells us: 'the Subconscious, not the intellect, is the organ through which Man lives his

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<sup>38</sup> E.g. the writings of Goldstein J. and Kornfield, J.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Coomaraswamy, A. K. *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art* Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1977.

spiritual life, it is the fount of poetry, music, and the visual arts, and the channel through which the Soul is in communion with God'.<sup>40</sup>

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Today, many see monasticism as little more than 'escape from the real world' and its practitioners are often considered 'useless to the community'. In the medieval period monastic practise and those who followed it were acknowledged as the spiritual lifeblood of the community. The upheavals of the Reformation in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe put an end to much that had become corrupt in the monasteries while the authentic spiritual life flourished in other, non-enclosed, communities such as the Brethren of the Common Life.<sup>41</sup>

A central element of spiritual life is the practice of contemplative prayer or meditation. While this is a principal feature for monastics, it is not exclusively so and today many young people find their way to it through the Zen or Vipassana teachers of the Buddhist tradition. One example is the instruction given by the well-known meditation master, the Venerable Ajahn Tong Sirimangalo.<sup>42</sup> The practice taught in his retreats provides first-

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted by Rev. Rama Coomaraswamy in *The Problems that Result from Locating Spirituality in the Psyche*, originally published in *Sofia Perennis*, it can be accessed at <http://www.wandea.org.pl/spirituality-psyche.htm>

<sup>41</sup> See below, p.161. Note: all the ideas touched on in this Introduction will be discussed – with sources and references – in the body of the dissertation.

<sup>42</sup> Venerable Ajahn Tong Sirimangalo, *The Only Way: Vipassana Meditation Teachings*, translated by Kathryn Chindaporn. Chomtong Thailand: Wat Phradhatu Sri Chomtong, 1999

hand experience through direct, practical participation, of much that would otherwise be theoretical about psychological and spiritual states of mind and body.<sup>43</sup> In this experience several things about the nature of the mind's habitual state of dispersal and the arduous labour needed to focus it become clear. Likewise one sees how the body is unconsciously the slave of lower states of energy and how the same labour opens its susceptibilities to finer and undreamed of higher energies.

In many traditions – Zen brush drawing, Chinese calligraphy, icon-painting – there is an acknowledged correlation between simultaneous interior prayer together with the physical gesture of the artist's pen or brush. Insight is intensified in states of concentrated meditation and the meditator sees clearly how one aspect or other of the drama between spiritual labour and mystical insight is referred to in sacred art. Thus what is truly sacred in art will not be the subject depicted but the state of the man or woman who executes it: not what but how it is depicted. Methods, style and technique are no more than tools at the artist's disposal to be made use of or not, as the case may be, according to what he deems best. Spiritual work cannot proceed in conditions of inner disorder and ugliness and sacred art will always be perfect, orderly and beautiful. But if these qualities are subverted, as tended to happen in Europe in the modern era, and they serve merely an aesthetic or a bourgeois aim, truth will have given way to illusion and self-indulgence.

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<sup>43</sup> The retreat is rigorous, made up of long hours with short breaks and two meals taken at dawn and mid-day. The last three days are spent in continuous alternate 'walking meditation' and 'sitting meditation'.

Here the remarks of Said Hossein Nasr on the ‘distinction between traditional, sacred and religious art ... in the context of modern civilization, that is, a civilization no longer governed by immutable spiritual principles’ are apt.<sup>44</sup>

In modern European civilization one observes first of all the appearance of an art which is no longer based on supra-individual inspiration but which expresses more the individual rather than the universal order, an art which is anthropomorphic rather than theocentric. Once such a humanistic art, tending towards psychologization of the human subject became prevalent, especially in painting, the language of Western art rapidly lost its traditional character ...<sup>45</sup>

Following these remarks and in the light of the visionary insights gained through spiritual endeavour, certain sacred works, often those not intended for public display – for example certain books before the invention of printing such as the *Philokalia*, or some gnostic documents, or certain icons intended as aids for private devotion – provide experience of mystical truth that can be more or less direct. But in works conceived on a grand scale such as sacred architecture or a cycle of paintings such as the Bruegel series depicting the Months, the truth will be hidden, or partly hidden, by a veil. But the veil will be of such beauty as to provoke the onlooker into a deeper search.

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<sup>44</sup> Nasr, S.H. “Religious Art, Traditional Art, Sacred Art: Some Reflections and Definitions” in *Sofia A Journal of traditional Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Winter 1966. p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Idem.

The experience of prolonged and intensive contemplative prayer or meditation shows that when the inner life lacks a guiding principle there is no attention. The writings in the *Philokalia* constantly remind us that our mind is ceaselessly occupied with imaginary thoughts, conversations, emotional and dramatic scenarios that are playing in the background of our psyche. ‘Thanks to the habit of turning among thoughts the mind is easily led astray ... is deceived and takes smoke for light.’<sup>46</sup> We occasionally glimpse this and sense our attachment to it, but without applied attention we no longer notice it and we do not notice its debilitating effect on our spirit. Not until we try to engage with the disciplines of contemplative work, does it occur to us what a great task lies before us. But when we internally become contemplative mystics we have become the companions of the mythic heroes of tradition – from Theseus, the slayer of the Minotaur, to Frodo Baggins, the Guardian of the Ring. Here, where the journey of the soul begins, we will understand the language of Bruegel’s imagery.

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I express my heartfelt gratitude to Khalid Azzam and to Keith Critchlow for the unfailing patience, help and encouragement they have extended to me.

R. C. C. T.

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<sup>46</sup> Saint Nilus of Sinai (d. 450) “Texts on Prayer” in Kadloubovsky and Palmer, *Early Father from the Philokalia*. London; Faber, 1964, p. 135

## Introduction 2.

## The Numbering at Bethlehem

‘And there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed ...

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem ... to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.’<sup>1</sup>



Fig.1

Peter Bruegel the Elder, (1525-30 — 1569) *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, 1566. Oil on wood 115.5 x 163.5 cm. Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2; 1-5

The *Numbering at Bethlehem* is a large panel in which Bruegel renders his vision of the event described in the gospel of Saint Luke. The theme (apart from copies made in Bruegel's workshop) is rarely found in western art and Bruegel's treatment of it is enigmatic in that the event it purports to illustrate is partly hidden, or at least understated, in the midst of a scenario, that although rich and intriguing as pictorial anecdote, seems otherwise mundane.

The scene depicted is a typical event from contemporary Flemish village life. A tax official has set up his desk at a prominent inn where a green wreath is displayed. Next to it is a plaque decorated with the double-headed eagle, the Hapsburg insignia that gives the tax-collector his authority.





Fig. 2

A disorderly crowd of citizens and peasants has already formed around him while



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

others, singly or in groups of two or three, arrive from further afield.





Fig. 5

Those who are able pay with money, while others must pay with goods.



Fig. 6

The season is winter and, in the snow and on the frozen river, villagers and children are snowballing, skating, tobogganing and playing games on the ice. One notices how Bruegel catches the moment where teenage exuberance turns to violence. (fig. 6).



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Other details depict events of everyday life. Outside another inn a fire has been lit, possibly as a counter attraction to the tax office at the rival establishment. A group of peasants crowd around it drinking and warming themselves.





Fig. 9

At the principal inn a delivery of wine is being made and two great barrels on carts are parked in front of it.



Fig.10

While his two children look on, one impassively while his brother makes a football by blowing up a pig's bladder



Fig. 11

the innkeeper expertly slaughters a pig for roasting while his wife, holding out a pan to catch its blood, instinctively flinches from the act of butchery



Fig. 12

There are other random details: a woodsman unloads a tree trunk from his cart, organizing his strength under its weight.



Fig. 13

The smallest figure in the picture: a tiny child – quickly painted in a few deft strokes of the brush – asserts her influence over a goose by waving her arms.



Fig. 14

A woman sweeps a path through the snow.



Fig. 15

Magpies perch on the top of a leafless tree.





Fig. 16

Oblivious of all the bustle and activity chickens peck away in the snow.



Fig. 17

It is evening and through the branches of the tree we see that the sun has already begun to set.



In the foreground approaching the crowd around the inn is a family group: the man on foot while after him come an ox and a young woman wrapped in a shawl and riding on a donkey. Bruegel, showing us the saw he carries on his shoulder, tells us he is a carpenter.



Fig. 18

They are integrated into the composition so as to pass almost unnoticed. They do not appear, at first, to have any special significance (fig. 18).



fig. 19

In the background, on one side, is a ruined castle now partly converted into a farmstead (fig. 19)



Fig 20

and, in the corresponding place on the other side of the picture, there is a church but it is far away. (fig.20).

The attitudes and gestures of the peasants grouped around the tax office are depicted with a shrewd observation of human nature. Not only the physical attitude but the psychological state of each figure is individually and accurately drawn and these are so recognizable as to permit the viewer to speculate on the feelings and thoughts of each figure.



Fig. 21

Directly before the government agent's table is a fussy, careful, well-dressed man in a voluminous green coat (fig. 21). He is of some social rank for he wears a sword. His face is not shown but the inclination of his upper body and the angle of his head convey the considered attention he gives to the harsh business of paying the tax as, from the hand of his proffered right arm, while his left securely clutches his purse to his body,



fig. 22

the silver coins precisely and painfully clink into the hand of the agent (fig. 22). We can imagine the dismay of his companion, standing to his right, who suddenly realizes he has overpaid; however, he will get neither recompense nor sympathy for his error.



Fig. 23

Behind him, dressed in a striped blanket, a Levantine tries to be cheerful (fig. 23). With hands folded in front of his stomach he sways backwards with a sigh as though trying to persuade himself that ‘things could be worse’. (These were the years of violent political and religious upheaval when atrocities were committed against heretics and also against the Moors).



Fig. 24

Next in line, standing patiently, silent and resigned, is a worthy in a brown coat (fig. 24). He is isolated and helpless in his misery at the thought of parting with his last good money. Here, too, the state of mind is expressed through the attitude of the body.



Fig. 25

By his right shoulder are a couple of riffraff types (fig. 25). They are dressed as *landsknechter* or mercenaries and their attitudes suggest swagger and vanity. In a few days one of them will be helping the local military to massacre innocent children.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>See below where a similar figure appears in *The Massacre of the Innocents* p. 285 (fig. 6)



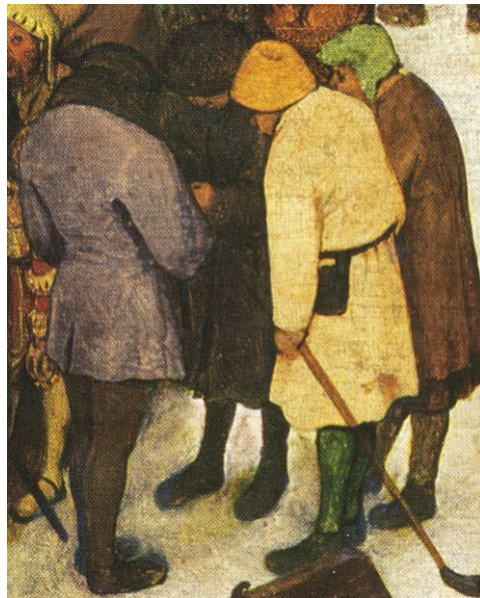


Fig. 26

Next to them, directly in front of the base of the tree, is a separate situation also to do with money (fig. 26). By their clothes we know that they are not peasants, and Bruegel's understanding of how psychological states and energies translate directly into postures and attitudes enables him to depict what is going on, who the personnel are and what their relationship is with each other. It is a pay-out. The chief beneficiary is apparently the younger man in lilac-grey coat whose commanding stance gives him a presence that dominates the other three. Whatever the deal is, they are disappointed but helpless.



Fig. 27



Fig. 28

Elsewhere in the crowd we see gawping stupidity and illiteracy (figs. 27, 28).



Fig. 29



Best dressed of all is the tax-collector in his magnificent fur-lined coat (fig. 29).

Unctuous, self-righteous and merciless, he takes the money while his ignorant and underpaid clerk enters it up in the ledger — though probably not all of it.

Such is Bruegel's mastery: his observation of life, whether grim or comic, whether light-hearted or heavy, compels the viewer's interest and attention. All aspects of the human psyche are depicted here with the precision of a specialist which may account for the viewer's sense of recognition as he gazes at each person and enters into his life. The viewer senses that Bruegel understands the reality of man's psyche, his interior world of thoughts and feelings; but he also understands the body, the organic mechanisms of movement and motor reflexes that constitute a complex of energies ranging from external movement and gesture to the subtlest nuances of psychic energy. The pictorial force of his realism may be explained by his practical understanding of the actions and the energies of the laws of nature with their play on the lives of human beings.

There is a tradition that sees in a town or village a microcosm of humanity: the 150-odd figures represented in it, in the sum total of their behaviour, represent the human condition. Man struggles against the manifest forces of nature, represented here by the harsh conditions of winter. He lives to gratify his immediate physical needs for warmth, food, shelter, money, and the calls of nature (fig. 30).



Fig. 30

‘Life’ here, at first, appears to be restricted to the material level and terrestrial values. But there is another life: a life that, according to the age-old religious idea of the ladder, by which the divine can descend to Man and by which Man can ascend to God.<sup>52</sup> But because of Man’s earthbound state of being, symbolized by Adam’s fall, he is ignorant of the higher realms which is why no one, not a single person in the painting, is aware of the presence of the Holy Family in their midst.

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<sup>52</sup>See below, pp. 80-84 for an elaboration of Plotinus’ cosmology. See also R. Temple, *Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity*, (Element, 1990), pp. 35-50 for a summary of the idea of the cosmoses with bibliography and references. Here the author is influenced by platonic cosmology as set out in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. For a modern version see P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous, Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950, especially Ch. V, pp. 82-98.



Fig. 31

The key figure of Mary is in contrast to everything else in the picture (fig. 31). Her presence reflects the stillness of the evening and the idea of what she represents, what she holds within her (symbolized by the basket she holds), adds an altogether new, but invisible, dimension to the whole scene.



Fig. 32

We see her wrapped against the harsh weather; but from her lowered eyes and the slight inclination of her head we have the impression that she is entirely self-contained (fig. 32). Unlike everyone else she has no external concerns.

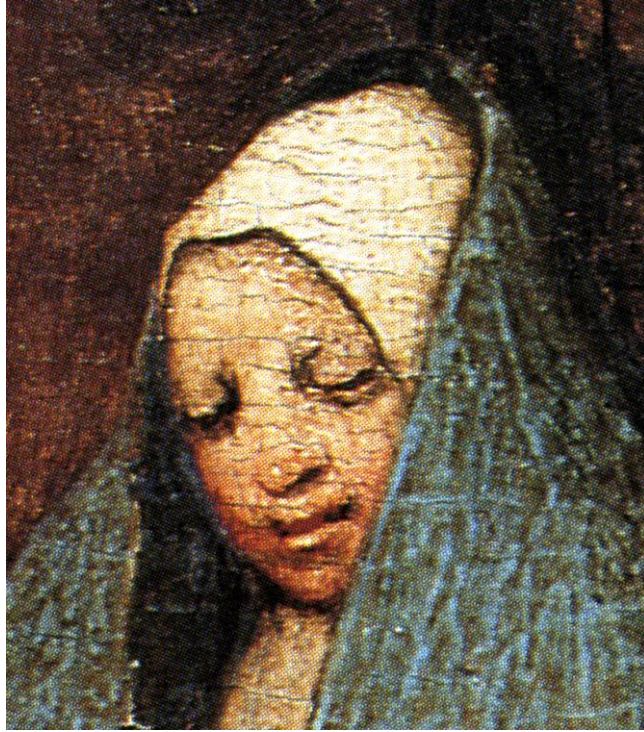


Fig. 33

It does not seem that Bruegel is painting a religious picture or even a history picture; his interest in anecdote and eye for details of behaviour, the precision of his look on the world, take us beyond the conventions of pious art. And yet the theme of the picture is taken from the Gospel. It has been suggested that Bruegel satirizes the holy text but though he does indeed appear to satirize the life of humanity, his treatment of Mary is different. She is a woman concentrated within herself (fig. 33). She does not participate in all the folly of the world, her interiorized state corresponds to one of contemplation and prayer: 'I practice silence...I enter a state where my senses and my thoughts are



concentrated ... with prolonging of this silence the turmoil of memories is stilled in my heart'.<sup>53</sup>

She appears in the world as the bringer of the truth whose origin issues from a higher level in the cosmos than that of the surrounding humanity. Nobody sees her; indeed everybody has their back to her or looks away from her. Even we, the onlookers, do not notice them at first and could easily spend ten or twenty minutes 'enjoying' the painting without ever doing so. Such is Bruegel's method that, as we shall see, when he wants to emphasise an idea he hides it or, rather, he partly hides it. All are engaged in their own activity, oblivious of anything else. Only in the movements of the little donkey on which she sits and the gentle ox that accompanies them is there an absence of agitation that corresponds to her modesty and stillness. Here, Bruegel follows the prophecy of Isaiah 'The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people do not consider... they are gone away backward'.<sup>54</sup>

On a later occasion Christ will enter the city (of Jerusalem) in triumph; here Christ, or the idea of the 'Christ within' arrives not in triumph but unnoticed. 'The people' (Israel) do not see what is in their midst.

On this scenario of the human condition the sun sets. According to biblical context it is the end of the day, the last day of the ancient order. In a few hours a great drama in history will begin. When the sun rises tomorrow, it will be the dawn of a new era, a new

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<sup>53</sup> St Isaac of Syria (6<sup>th</sup> cent.) from "Direction on Spiritual Training" in Kadloubovsky and Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*. London: Faber. 1964, p. 207)

<sup>54</sup> Is. I; 3-4

equinoctial age. All nature is hushed as if holding its breath to see if anyone will notice, if anyone will turn his head, will glance up even for a second. The sun, the earth and all the planets, including — although we do not see it here — a new star to be seen for the first time tonight, align themselves in readiness for the great event, a drama of the universe of which only humanity is oblivious.

The ruined castle in the background of the picture can be read as a symbol of emptiness. It has been interpreted as a reference to the destructive and oppressive forces of the Spanish military occupation of the Netherlands. While this may be so, it may also have a more psychological meaning. In mediaeval country life, the local castle played a significant part in the life of the peasants. It signified security in contrast to the precarious conditions of the life of ordinary people. The castle offered protection in times of war and food in times of want; its lord owned the land on which the villagers worked and could influence the individual direction of anyone's life. Thus, both actually and symbolically, the castle stood as a bastion of strength, security and authority. But this castle is in ruins, destroyed by man's folly and greed, and the people are leaderless, with no one to direct their lives, with no immediate discipline and authority. Once again Bruegel, depicting a psychological condition, is following Isaiah's vision: 'Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate...'<sup>55</sup> Could the way Bruegel depicts the church, and its correspondence in the composition to the ruined castle, be his way of saying that the church is ineffectual? It

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<sup>55</sup> Isaiah I, 7

will be demonstrated later that, as a follower of Hendrick Niclaes, that would indeed have been his view.<sup>56</sup>



Fig. 34

Bruegel has given prominence to the innkeeper (fig. 34). We do not see his face but, in his attitude, Bruegel has caught his character. He is a man with a grasp on life. He and his wife and their two sturdy children are comparatively well dressed; he is probably something of a disciplinarian and commands respect in the community. He runs a

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<sup>56</sup> See below, p. 254



thriving business and we see him at a peak moment of trade with a great number of customers to keep satisfied. Probably he has some deal arranged with the tax officials for the increase in business they bring; perhaps a percentage of the day's takings and free bed and board while they are there. (We know from the testimony of the gospels that all the rooms are let on this particular night). He is a man who appears knows his business; not dishonest but knowing every trick in the book and so very capable of looking after himself. In fact, he is good at his job. We can imagine what sort of place he has: well run, clean and with good service. And yet this man, so much a man of the world, a good citizen, a good father, an honest tradesman – whose profession symbolises hospitality - misses the greatest opportunity of his life; the greatest opportunity ever offered to an innkeeper in all history.

The moment passes, and no one, neither the innkeeper nor anyone else, is aware of it. Man is oblivious because he is intent on the immediate moment with which he is completely identified, to which he gives himself up entirely. He is the blind slave of circumstances that dictate his life but which he cannot question. Bruegel shows us this in the character of all those depicted in the picture. They are not there for our amusement, neither are they, primarily, a demonstration of Bruegel's exceptional artistry. These gifts are used to serve what Bruegel serves: namely, the Truth. At the same time, through the way he alludes to the cosmic dimension by including both the sun, the centre of the solar system, and Mary, through whom God Absolute appears on Earth, he suggests the invisible and higher reality through which humanity can relate to the divine.

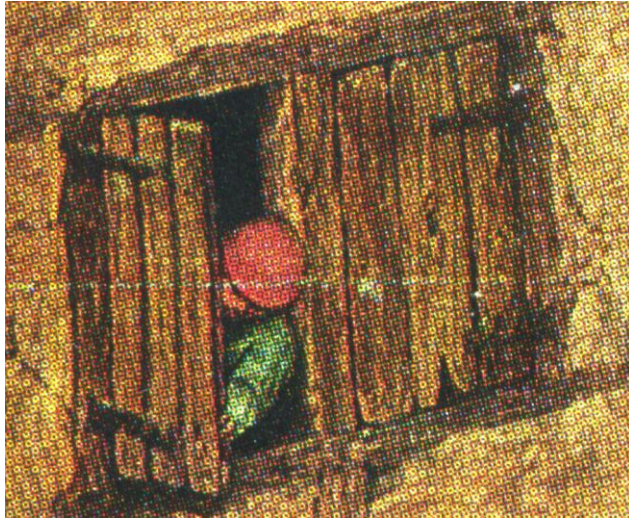


Fig. 35

He brings to the viewer's attention the man in a red cap closing the shutter of his window (fig. 35). We see this vignette on the first floor of the inn in the foreground just above the crowd around the tax-collector. This is unlikely to be an incidental detail without meaning; the moment is too powerful. The half-seen figure and the mystery of the darkened room behind him attract our curiosity. There is an intent and purpose in his gesture that suggests the willfulness with which he shuts himself into darkness in the face of the approaching sacrament. He is incapable of recognising his need for salvation and so cannot grasp its proximity.

Bruegel not only gives it a prominence in pictorial terms, he even emphasizes it by repeating it elsewhere in the picture



Fig. 34

at the window just above the fire outside the second inn (fig. 34). Here the image is tiny; hard to see even in the original work and more or less impossible to find in reproductions. Only its symbolic meaning could explain its visual significance.

The carts with hogsheads of wine occupy a central place in the composition and it can be suggested that what they symbolize relates to the painting's deeper levels of meaning. In Germany and Flanders there still exists the ancient custom of decorating the wine-houses with green branches for the festival of new wine which occurs in December. This is the probable explanation of the green wreath outside the inn. Traditionally, wine symbolizes 'eternal life, like that divine intoxication of the soul hymned by Greek and Persian poets which enables man to partake, for a fleeting moment, of the mode of being attributed to the gods'.<sup>57</sup> In the Old Testament, wine represents God's eternal gift to Man: 'he sendeth wine to make glad the heart of Man'.<sup>58</sup> The arrival of the *new* wine suggests here the arrival of Christ's New Testament, the new or higher truth that will supersede the old.<sup>59</sup> In this connection it is interesting to remember the first of Christ's miracles, recounted in the Fourth Gospel where, immediately after the prologue, it begins the account of

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<sup>57</sup> Cirlot. *Dictionary of Symbols*, London 1962.

<sup>58</sup> Psalm 104:15.

<sup>59</sup> See Maurice Nicoll, *The New Man*, London 1950, pp. 33-35 *passim*.

Christ's life with the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana, thus establishing his ministry in the world, as the higher truth. Bruegel's treatment of this theme will be discussed in a later section.<sup>60</sup>

Already in this commentary are the main themes that will be explored in this thesis.

- The necessity for hiding the important idea. This principle leads to the esoteric tradition which this essay will suggest flows through the history of ideas and through Bruegel's paintings via the Perennial Philosophy. We shall trace this from Plato and the later Platonic schools (sometimes called Neoplatonists), through the schools of Hellenistic thought that immediately preceded Christianity and which succeeded Christianity in Gnostic schools and in so-called 'heretical' ideas that existed in Europe until the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later, despite intense persecution, under different names but always following in the direction of the same primordial truth.
- One of these was a movement known as the Family of Love or House of Love (*Domus Caritatis, Huis der Lief*) that had grown out of the New Devotion and from the mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, of the 14th century. It was founded by Hendrik Niclaes and several of Bruegel's close associates were part of a small, close-knit fellowship of Familists known as the Hiël Group.

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<sup>60</sup> See below, The Marriage at Cana, p. 332 ff

- Bruegel's visual references to biblical texts, from both Old and New Testaments, suggest a profound psychological and spiritual understanding of Christianity far from the politicized positions of the institutionalized churches on either side of the Reformation divide. Here is the idea of the 'invisible church' whose ideas belong to what has been called esoteric Christianity.
- Bruegel is a student of the human condition which he observes with biting sarcasm and grim humour. His eye for truth and the basic realities that motivate human behaviour is relentless and uncompromising yet he is never without compassion. He shows us what all great religious and philosophical teachers have shown: that Man is inwardly asleep, enslaved by the circumstances of his life and blinded by them. But he sees this (and calls us to see it too) from the point of view of man's possible liberation. He understands not only that Man must awaken, he shows us the ideas and the method by which this can be done.
- Much of humanity's difficulty comes from his loss of knowledge of a life higher than his own. He has forgotten the existence of the higher world though Bruegel never omits this dimension even though humans are oblivious to it. The viewpoint in the paintings is nearly always from tree-top height. Everything in the paintings takes place under invisible and higher influences acting through the laws of nature and of the cosmos. Corresponding to the

cosmic dimension is the painter's knowledge of Man's inner world (the microcosmos) and its possibilities that lead to knowledge of higher and lower psychical levels or states of being.

- The depiction of Mary as a person in a concentrated, interiorized state shows something of the practical method for realizing an active relationship between God and a human being. It is as though she followed the injunction of Albertus Magnus:

When thou prayest, shut thy door – that is the door of thy senses.  
Keep them barred and bolted against all phantasms and images ...  
Do not think about the world, or thy friends, nor about the past,  
present or future; but consider thyself to be outside the world and  
alone with God, as if thy soul were already separated from the  
body and had no longer any interest in peace or war or the state of  
the world. Leave the body and fix thy gaze on the uncreated light.  
Let nothing come between thee and God.<sup>61</sup>

- For Bruegel the crowd populating a town, such as Bethlehem, is a symbol for a person. In sacred tradition a city or a town is an allegory for a person, its inhabitants denoting different sides of his or her character. The author of *The Teaching of Silvanus* is referring to psychological states and events when he employs the symbol of the city as an analogy for the inner life:

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<sup>61</sup> For the full quotation see below p. 148.

Throw every robber out of your gates. Guard all your gates with torches ... he who will not guard these ... will become like a city which is desolate since it has been captured, and all kinds of wild beasts have trampled on it. For thoughts which are not good are evil wild beasts. And your city will be filled with robbers and you will not be able to acquire peace but only all kinds of savage wild beasts ... the whole city, which is your soul, will perish ... Remove all these ... bring in your guide and your teacher. The mind is the guide, but reason is the teacher.<sup>62</sup>

The ruined castle in the background of the painting could be an expression of this idea. Bruegel, as we shall show, was almost certainly a follower of Hendrik Niclaes for whom 'The City is a spiritual City of Life'.<sup>63</sup>

The first part of this thesis will consider a body of philosophical and religious ideas that developed parallel to, but sometimes independently from, the theology of the established church. Its origins are diverse and some are older than historical Christianity. An example of such alternative thought are the ideas of the Gnostic schools of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries which, despite severe repression, were periodically revived, for example, by the Cathars

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<sup>62</sup> 'Teaching of Silvanus', *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p.347

<sup>63</sup> See below, p. 398

in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Gnostic interpretations of the account of the Fall provide a view of why the general life of humanity is condemned to exist far from the higher cosmic plane that is the soul's true abode.<sup>64</sup> It is also clear that it is from this terrestrial plane, so far from God, that the 'return', through the search for redemption, begins. Here, Bruegel appears to follow such an alternative mystical tradition by taking the concepts of the Fall and Redemption as psychological levels or states of being and that it is from the point of view of such ideas that he observes the human condition. Spiritually, Man is enslaved, and the condition of his slavery is both psychological and cosmological. Psychological, because of the neglected possibilities lying dormant in the psyche (the microcosm); cosmological, because of the low place in the universe in which he lives.

A characteristic of esoteric tradition in interpreting the gospel is the emphasis on the idea that the events described are not only historical but also taking place in the present moment; that they are not only geographical but also located in the inner life of the individual. In this context Meister Eckhart speaks thus about Christmas: 'Here in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity' (Sermon One). Also St Augustine: 'What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me?'<sup>65</sup> From this point of view, Tradition takes the higher meaning of the *Numbering at Bethlehem* to be an event in the journey of self-realisation. Thus this experience exists as a possibility in the life of all men at all times; that is why the literal understanding of time is suspended here. What happened

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<sup>64</sup> See Geddes MacGregor, *Gnosis: a Renaissance in Christian Thought*, Illinois, Madras, London: Quest Books, 1979, pp. 21, 45; Jonas, H. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of an Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958, p. 214 ff; also G. R. S. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, (London 1900).

<sup>65</sup> M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart, Sermons ad Treatises*, Vol. 1. p. 1., London, 1979.



'then' is also happening 'now' and 'now' always exists. These truths are perennial and the questions to which they relate are outside time, that is to say they are permanently present, now. Bruegel succeeds in bringing us this perennial vision because, in the picture, time has stopped: suddenly and at an unexpected moment with everyone frozen into the attitude which he held. It gives Bruegel – and us – an opportunity to see people exactly as they are at that moment. It has the effect of reminding us that the situation is a constant one and that the problem it reveals is as relevant today as it was on the first Christmas Eve. In other words, by updating the environment of the first Christmas Eve, Bruegel makes it contemporary and relevant as a real and personal question and not just a historical event.

Contemplation of the painting's inner meaning can confront the viewer with the question: *Am I the innkeeper?* Bethlehem and its inhabitants symbolically represent contemporary humanity and, since each man spiritually typifies humanity, it can be thought of as a representation of the inner self: all the different figures in the picture represent characteristics of the self. No one is free from the doubt, vanity, stupidity, ignorance, self-importance – the full spectrum of the human condition that is portrayed here.

According to the wisdom of the Perennial Philosophy, all these characteristics are to be found in the multiplicity of an individual's nature and no seeker of reality can long avoid this truth.

The second part of the thesis, analyzing the paintings, will show that Bruegel's images represent a teaching – we have called it the Perennial Philosophy – that sees three stages in the spiritual journey of humanity.

1. Man asleep: the majority, unconsciously going about their worldly affairs – war and politics or the pursuit of domestic, material and local needs.

*The Numbering, The Adoration and The Massacre of the Innocents*, deal mainly with the ignorance and tragedy of man asleep and his inability to comprehend even the idea man can awaken. The world of man asleep is barbaric and chaotic. *The Road to Calvary* continues with this theme of man enslaved by the forces of nature of which he has no knowledge. In this picture Bruegel introduces clues about the necessary conditions for awakening.

2. Man awake: represented pictorially as Christ sometimes with his Mother and the apostles.

The members of Christ's personal entourage in *The Road to Calvary* are shown to be on a higher level than the mass of humanity bound to the wheel of life. In the painting this is represented socially and topographically but it has to be understood allegorically.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See below, p. 302

### 3. Man in the process of awakening.

The next two pictures, *The Harvesters* and *The Fall of Icarus*, show us man overcoming his passivity; *he works*: utilizing his intelligence and innate faculties so that nature and the elements serve him; he becomes their master and not their slave. What Bruegel actually depicts – harvesting, ploughing etc. – are to be understood as symbols of spiritual work: prayer, meditation, raising the level of consciousness.

Finally, in the (we suggest wrongly titled) *Peasant Wedding Feast*, Bruegel reveals the miracle of inner transformation, of which water changing into wine is a symbol, by which inner awakening for a person can happen.

The reference to Bruegel's *Road to Calvary* mentioned the wheel of life. This universal symbolic idea, well known to Buddhists as Samsara, passes into European thought and the Perennial Philosophy through the Neo-Platonists. 'To Pythagoreans, the soul is immortal. When a body dies, the soul ascends to the One. After a judgment period, the

soul is allowed to descend and enter into another body and reside. This movement is circular, and Neo-Platonists therefore conceptualized all souls as on a wheel of life'.<sup>67</sup>

The Wheel of Life was widely depicted by artists and writers throughout the Middle Ages. The theme appears to have been introduced in around 520 by Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>68</sup> Dante, for example, offers a description of the way that Fortune influences human lives.

*No mortal power may stay her spinning wheel.*

*The nations rise and fall by her decree.*

*None may foresee where she will set her heel:*

*She passes, and things pass. Man's mortal reason*

*cannot encompass her. She rules her sphere*

*as the other gods rule theirs.*

*Season by season her changes change her changes endlessly,*

*and those whose turn has come press on her so, she must be swift by hard necessity.*<sup>69</sup>

Shakespeare frequently depicts Fortune as a wheel: 'Fortune good night: smile once more: turn thy wheel!<sup>70</sup> 'And turn the giddy round of Fortune's wheel';<sup>71</sup> 'Fortune's furious fickle wheel.'<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See *The Relationship between Neoplatonic Aesthetics and Early Medieval Music Theory: The Ascent to the One (Part 1)* by Glen Wegge ([http://www.musictheoryresources.com/members/MTA\\_1\\_2.htm](http://www.musictheoryresources.com/members/MTA_1_2.htm))

<sup>68</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. V.E. Watts (Penguin, 1969).

<sup>69</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow). <http://www.everypoet.com/Archive/poetry/dante/dante. Inferno VII 82-90>

<sup>70</sup> Kent in *Lear*, act 2 scene 2

<sup>71</sup> Rape of Lucrecia (stanza 136).

A 14<sup>th</sup> century miniature shows Fortune turning the wheel (fig. 35).on which humans rise and fall in a figure whose principle elements occur on the 10<sup>th</sup> card of Major Arcana the Tarot.<sup>73</sup>



Fig. 35

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<sup>72</sup> Henry V act 3, scene 6.

<sup>73</sup> Wheel of Fortune, 1342, Pisan School, from *Ammaestramenti degli Antichi* by Bartholomeo da Santa Concordio in Pettrocchi, George ed., *Scrittori religiosi del Trecento*, Sansoni, Florence 1974.



Of interest in this connection is the 14<sup>th</sup> century Greco-Romanesque Cross located in front of the Church of St. Nicholas at Gambatesa in South Italy. This Cross, extracted from a single block of solid stone, is inscribed in a wheel by undulating curved lines. On one face of the Cross is the crucified Christ with the Madonna, St. John and a skull; on the other face is the triumphant Christ who gives a blessing, surrounded by the symbols of the Four Evangelists. The Cross, by its

structure and carving, recalls the typical Celtic stone crosses with their wheels around the crucifix (fig. 36).<sup>74</sup>

Writers on symbolism necessarily draw on the wide range of allusions and references: the ‘Wheel of Life’, the ‘Wheel of Fortune’ and the ‘Wheel of the Year’ with their zodiacal and cosmological implications. ‘[The wheel] is, therefore, a symbolic synthesis of the activity of cosmic forces and the passage of time’.<sup>75</sup>

We note that Bruegel places a wheel in the relatively empty space at the centre of his painting (fig. 37) at the point where the two main diagonal movements of the composition intersect (fig. 38). Furthermore, the image of the wheel is repeated more than twenty times in the picture.

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.roangelo.net/gambatesa/>

<sup>75</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, London, 1962, p. 351



Fig. 37



Fig. 38

# Part I. The Perennial Philosophy

## Chapter 1. Theory of the Perennial Philosophy and Esotericism

### *Modern writers on the Perennial Philosophy*

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of influential writers revived the idea, well known in antiquity and in Renaissance times, of the *Philosophia Perennis*.<sup>1</sup> According to this idea there exists a universal source of wisdom and knowledge common to philosophical and religious traditions throughout all ages. It is regarded as the fountain of primordial truth higher than man and said to reflect divine consciousness and eternal realities. The idea was first popularized by Aldous Huxley more than 60 years ago. His book *The Perennial Philosophy* is a collation of sayings and commentaries demonstrating a concordance of thought among the great religious teachers and philosophers of all ages and different traditions.<sup>2</sup> Whitall Perry, responding to A. K. Coomaraswamy's remark that 'the time is coming when a Summa of the Philosophia Perennis will have to be written', published in 1971 his *Treasury of Spiritual Wisdom*, an 1100-page anthology of quotations and sayings from Hindu, Buddhist, Greek, Hermetic, Jewish, Christian and Gnostic wisdom where the reader, according to the Introduction, 'will encounter the heritage he shares with all humanity'.<sup>3</sup> Huxley's own definition of the perennial

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<sup>1</sup> A useful overview of modern writers on the perennial philosophy is William W. Quinn, Jr., *The Only Tradition*, SUNY, 1997. The book is an introduction to the work of René Guénon, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Charles B. Schmitt and others. See also J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore, 1974

<sup>2</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Harper and Brothers 1945. Another good introduction is Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Whitall Perry, *Treasury of Spiritual Wisdom*, George Allen and Unwin, 1971. A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), "a cardinal figure in Twentieth-century art history and in the cultural confrontation between East and West," (Princeton University Press Bollingen Series LXXXIX Vol. I *Coomaraswamy: Traditional*



philosophy is: ‘the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.’<sup>4</sup>

W. T. S. Thackara, the theosophical writer, states that:

The idea of a perennial philosophy, of a common denominator rather, a highest common factor – forming the basis of truth in the world's manifold religious, philosophic, and scientific systems of thought, goes back thousands of years at least. Cicero, for example, speaking about the existence of the soul after death, mentions that not only does he have the authority of all antiquity on his side, as well as the teachings of the Greek Mysteries and of nature, but that "these things are of old date, and have, besides, the sanction of universal religion".<sup>5</sup>

Thackara, laying out the basic foundations of the Perennial Philosophy, lists the following tenets:

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*Art and Symbolism*, Vol. II *Coomaraswamy: Metaphysics*, Vol. III *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*). He was described by Heinrich Zimmer as “that noble scholar upon whose shoulders we are still standing.”

<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Harper & Brothers, 1945; p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> *Tusculan Disputations*, C. D. Yonge, trans., George Bell & Sons, 1904; Book I, xii-xiv. The author is W. W.T.S. Thackara writing in *Sunrise Magazine*, April/May 1984. Copyright © 1984 by Theosophical University Press.

1. This phenomenal world of matter and individual consciousness is only a partial reality and is the manifestation of a Divine Ground in which all partial realities have their being.

2. It is of the nature of man that not only can he have knowledge of this Divine Ground by inference, but also he can realize it by direct intuition, superior to discursive reason, in which the knower is in some way united with the known.

3. The nature of man is not a single but a dual one. He has not one but two selves, the phenomenal *ego*, of which he is chiefly conscious and which he tends to regard as his true self, and a non-phenomenal, eternal self, an inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within him, which is his true self. It is possible for a man, if he so desires and is prepared to make the necessary effort, to identify himself with his true self and so with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature.

4. It is the chief end of man's earthly existence to discover and identify himself with his true self. By doing so, he will come to an intuitive knowledge of the Divine Ground and so apprehend Truth as it really is, and not as to our limited human perceptions it appears to be. Not only that, he will enter into a state of being which has been given different names: eternal life, salvation, enlightenment, etc.

Further, the Perennial Philosophy rests on two fundamental convictions:

1. Though it may be to a great extent atrophied and exist only potentially in most men, men possess an organ or faculty which is capable of discerning spiritual truth, and, in its own spheres, this faculty is as much to be relied on as are other organs of sensation in theirs.

2. In order to be able to discern spiritual truth men must in their essential nature be spiritual; in order to know That which they call God, they must be, in some way, partakers of the divine nature; potentially at least there must be some kinship between God and the human soul. Man is not a creature set over against God. He participates in the divine life; he is, in a real sense, 'united' with God in his essential nature, for, as the Flemish contemplative, the Blessed John Ruysbroeck, put it: "This union is within us of our naked nature and were this nature to be separated from God it would fall into nothingness."

Thackara's reference to the greatest of the Flemish mystics in the 14<sup>th</sup> century is apt for the ideas that will be developed in this study. In looking at the intellectual and spiritual background to the ideas that may have influenced Bruegel and even played a formative part in his inner world, we shall come across Gerard Groote (1340-1384) who venerated Ruysbroek and who is considered the founder of the Brethren of the Common Life and of the Devotio Moderna, the religious movement that contributed so significantly to the Protestant Reformation.<sup>6</sup> Through Groote, Ruysbroeck's influence helped to mould the spirit of the Windesheim School, which in the next generation found its most famous

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<sup>6</sup> See below, p. 153

exponent in Thomas à Kempis whose writings, the *Imitatio Christi*, together with the *Theologica Germanica*, will be considered at length.<sup>7</sup> Thackara continues:

This is the faith of the mystic. It springs out of his particular experience and his reflection on that experience. It implies a particular view of the nature of the universe and of man, and it seems to conflict with other conceptions of the nature of the universe and of man which are also the result of experience and reflection in it.

There is a poem by the late Latin poet and philosopher, Boethius, which, translated, opens as follows: 'This discord in the pact of things,/ This endless war 'twixt truth and truth,/ That singly held, yet give the lie/To him who seeks to hold them both ...' In the world, constituted as it is, men are faced not with one single truth but with several 'truths,' not with one but with several pictures of reality. They are thus conscious of a 'discord in the pact of things,' whereby to hold to one 'truth' seems to be to deny another. One part of their experience draws to one, another to another. It has been the eternal quest of mankind to find the one ultimate Truth, that final synthesis in which all partial truths are resolved. It may be that the mystic has glimpsed this synthesis.<sup>8</sup>

William W. Quinn, a contemporary writer on the Perennial Philosophy, says 'Recorded history evidences the existence of an esoteric, primordial tradition based upon a set of *a*

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<sup>7</sup> See below p. 167 ff. For notes on Groote's relationship with Ruysbroeck see <http://www.bookrags.com/biography-gerard-groote/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/world/general/ge-wtst.htm>

*priori* and immutable first principles, true now as always, which in all places and at all times have had expositors.<sup>9</sup> His book is an exposition of the ideas of René Guénon, of Ananda Coomaraswamy and, to an extent, of Frithjof Schuon.<sup>10</sup> It partly attempts to place these men and their thought in relation to that of more conventional academic and professional 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers and, more importantly, demonstrates the significance of the great historical beacons of light that Guénon, Coomaraswamy and their associates set out to rekindle. Following philosophical tradition, *e.g.* Origen's *De Principiis*,<sup>11</sup> well known to students of early Christianity, Quinn lists the following 'first principles' of the Perennial Philosophy:

1. The Absolute and the One: 'Being is one, or rather it is metaphysical Unity itself...' (Guénon);

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<sup>9</sup> William W. Quinn, Jr., *The Only Tradition*, SUNY, 1997, p. xiv

<sup>10</sup> Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877 - 1947 Needham, Massachusetts) was the son of the famous Sri Lankan legislator and philosopher Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy and his English wife Elizabeth Beeby. He became a pioneering historian and philosopher of Indian art, and a great interpreter of Indian culture to the West. He was also a tireless campaigner for the regeneration of Hinduism. In 1917, he became the first Keeper of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He stressed the spiritual element in Indian art ... Along with René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, Coomaraswamy is regarded as one of the three founders of the Traditionalist School. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ananda\\_Coomaraswamy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ananda_Coomaraswamy)). René Guénon (1886-1951) was a French-born author, philosopher, and social critic of the early 20th century. He was the founder of the Traditionalist School. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/ren-gu-non>). Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), is best known as the foremost spokesman of the *religio perennis* and as a philosopher in the metaphysical current of Shankara and Plato. Over the past 50 years, he has written more than 20 books on metaphysical, spiritual and ethnic themes as well as having been a regular contributor to journals on comparative religion in both Europe and America. Schuon's writings have been consistently featured and reviewed in a wide range of scholarly and philosophical publications around the world, respected by both scholars and spiritual authorities. (<http://www.worldwisdom.com>)

<sup>11</sup> Origen "De Principiis" in *Nicene and Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Ser. II, Vol I: The Church History. <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>

2. Aeviternity: eternal existence, everlasting, immanent duration; the eternal present as discussed in the *Timaeus*;
3. Periodicity: ebb and flow; flux and reflux; day and night; life and death; ‘An absolutely fundamental law of the Universe’;
4. Duality (or polarity): quoting Coomaraswamy: ‘every [traditional] ontological formulation affirms the Duality of Unity and the Unity of Duality’;
5. Cause and Effect (Karma): action, or action and reaction;
6. Gnosis: intellectual intuition. ‘In the hierarchy of subtle bodies ... the highest is the seat of intellectual intuition’.<sup>12</sup>

It will appear from what follows that the body of material, accumulated over more than two thousand years, which may be described as the western mystical tradition, overlaps or coincides with the ideas of the Perennial Philosophy. Thackara states that ‘Not only have mystics been found in all ages, in all parts of the world and in all religious systems, but also mysticism has manifested itself in similar or identical forms wherever the mystical consciousness has been present. Because of this it has sometimes been called the Perennial Philosophy’.<sup>13</sup>

The historian of religious mysticism Professor Rufus Jones says ‘I use the word mysticism to express the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate

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<sup>12</sup> William W. Quinn, Jr., *The Only Tradition*, SUNY, 1997

<sup>13</sup> Thackara, *op. cit.*

awareness of God, on direct and immediate consciousness of the Divine Presence.<sup>14</sup> It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage ... Religion of this mystical type is not confined to Christianity, but belongs, in some degree, to all forms of religion.<sup>15</sup> From which the author's sympathy for the idea of the Perennial Philosophy can be inferred though the term was not in current use at the time (1909) that he was writing. Jones also emphasizes the idea of tradition's continuous chain: 'There has been a continuous prophetic procession, a mystical brotherhood through the centuries, of those who have lived by the soul's immediate vision ... The Church ... has always had beneath its system of organization and dogma a current, more or less hidden and subterranean, of vital, inward, spiritual religion, dependant for its power of conviction, not on books, councils, hierarchies or creeds...but upon the soul's experience of eternal Realities.'<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, like many authors sympathetic to the idea of the Perennial Philosophy, he speaks of an unbroken succession of teachers, or, as they themselves called it 'a Hermaic chain'<sup>17</sup> from Plotinus to the closing of the Athenian Academy of Philosophy by order of Justinian in the year 529. In the latter period it had fallen under such corrupting influences as superstition and magic – 'But the successive masters in the long line of Neoplatonic thought kept burning the torch which Plato had lighted, and passed it for the Christian scholars to take up when they were ready for it.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rufus Matthew Jones (1863-1948), American philosopher, mystical scholar, Quaker historian and social reformer, M.A, Harvard in 1901. He was the author of over 50 monographs; a world traveller, Jones met with Mahatma Gandhi at his ashram in India, and spoke with religious leaders in China and Japan.

<sup>15</sup> Rufus M Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, Macmillan, 1909, p. xv

<sup>16</sup> Jones, p. xiv

<sup>17</sup> Today he would have said 'hermetic'.

<sup>18</sup> Jones p. 77

This definition of mysticism is close to that of Eckhart's translator, M. O'C. Walsh, who affirms that it is 'very ancient' and 'found in the religious traditions of the whole world.'

The specifically Christian mystical tradition with some certainty can be traced back to Alexandria. Its direct source was the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (ca. 204-270), who in his *Enneads* taught that all things emanate from the One, the return to which can be achieved by the contemplative path of detachment from all compounded things and a turning to 'pure simplicity'. Neoplatonism was incorporated into Christian thought by the anonymous writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500), who pretended to be St Paul's Athenian disciple (Acts 17:34), and by his Latin translator John Scotus Erigena (ca. 810-880).<sup>19</sup>

Thackara claims that 'the most comprehensive modern presentation of "theosophia perennis," with proofs of its diffusion throughout the world in every age, may be found in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky, in particular in her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, subtitled "The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy." Taught herself by more advanced students of the theosophic tradition, she wrote that

The teachings, however fragmentary and incomplete, contained in these volumes, belong neither to the Hindu, the Zoroastrian, the Chaldean, nor the Egyptian religion, neither to Buddhism, Islam, Judaism nor Christianity exclusively. The Secret Doctrine is the essence of all these. Sprung from it in their origins, the various religious schemes are now made to merge back into their original

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<sup>19</sup> M. O'C. Walsh, *Meister Eckhart, Sermons and Treatises*, Vol. I, London 1979, p.xiii



element, out of which every mystery and dogma has grown, developed, and become materialized'.<sup>20</sup>

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What follows is an outline connecting the history of some of these ideas from Plato until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This outline is intended to show that there runs throughout European religious thought, often hidden like an underground stream, though always known to exist if at times only by a few, a current of mystical philosophy whose source is regarded as higher than human reason and which is the original and pure wisdom common to the great philosophical and religious traditions. In particular – and this will be a main argument of this thesis – it provides a key to a body of Christian ideas that has often been regarded by the theological authorities of the Church either as heresy or on the margins of orthodoxy. It will be suggested that ideas that resonate with the Perennial Philosophy provide a way of understanding the hidden (or partly hidden) deeper meaning of the paintings of Peter Bruegel the Elder.

It will be shown later that Bruegel was a student of the idea that man has ‘not one but two selves, the phenomenal *ego*, of which he is chiefly conscious and which he tends to regard as his true self, and a non-phenomenal, eternal self, an inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within him, which is his true self’ and that he devoted his art to exploring the possibility given to human beings of making the transition from the one to

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<sup>20</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* I, Originally published 1888. Theosophical University Press electronic version ISBN 1-55700-124-3, p. viii

the other. The Perennial Philosophy has many images for this process: ‘awakening from sleep’, ‘death’ (*i.e.* dying to self) and ‘re-birth’, ‘Fall and Redemption’, ‘unconsciousness and consciousness’ and many others. The idea will be put forward, for example, in an analysis of Bruegel’s famously enigmatic *The Fall of Icarus* that the two principle figures in the composition, the ploughman and the shepherd, represent the essential duality in human nature.<sup>21</sup>

### *Esotericism*

This essay will suggest that certain ideas today discredited by current scientific thinking or considered heretical by the Church only became decadent in the later stages of their development. What has been overlooked or forgotten is that they were pure in their original form. It is possible to trace the origin of certain ideas to what students of the Perennial Philosophy regard as sources of universal wisdom. Schools, under such names as Gnosticism, Alchemy, Masonry, Theosophy, Occultism and so on, once originated from teachings that studied aspects of revealed teaching allegorically and psychologically, applying them to the inner or psychical part of a person rather than the material part. If we trace such ideas, both orthodox and non-orthodox, back to their source we may see that many of them originated as teachings of truth and wisdom that were later adapted by people who unknowingly distorted them through misunderstanding or who used them to advance their own ambitions. Later still, they are appropriated by outright charlatans. According to the Perennial Philosophy the great sages and prophets

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<sup>21</sup> See below, p. 322

who had access to wisdom also took steps to protect their knowledge from such depredation. They hid, or at least tried to hide, knowledge where only those worthy and pure in spirit could find it. Such hiding is the basis of the esoteric method whereby allegories and symbols of higher truth are embedded in works of art and literature – including folk art and folk literature – where the ideas they stand for will seem harmless. Here, the term Perennial Philosophy, together with the terms mysticism and Primordial Tradition (sometimes shortened to Tradition) will be used to refer to the original, unadulterated and uncorrupted truths of the universe revealed to humanity through the great sages of wisdom and enlightenment. Esotericism and its language of allegorical symbolism will be understood as what the Renaissance scholar and art historian Edgar Wind calls ‘a protective veil beneath which these great truths can remain undefiled’.<sup>22</sup>

The mysticism of the Perennial Philosophy is not easily accessible. As has been said, writers on the subject from Plato onwards tell us that it is intentionally veiled in symbolic language and imagery according to esoteric principles embedded in the heart of the *Philosophia Perennis* and so its course through the world is for the most part hidden and known by only a few. The reason for this was the need to protect the great truths revealed to humanity from distortion. According to the theory of esotericism ‘higher truth’ is susceptible to deformation by the adaptations and interpretations imposed on it by minds of inadequate understanding. Access to ‘higher knowledge’ is a matter of gradual initiation through long years of preparation partly consisting of the study of sacred literature and sacred art, partly through communal participation in liturgical or theurgical

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<sup>22</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, London 1958, 1968, p. 13.

ritual and partly through the practice of spiritual exercises. Another condition is that of a community, what Plato calls 'life lived together'. While much has been written on sacred literature and arts, the relative paucity of writing either on liturgical practice or on spiritual exercises presents the historian with an incomplete and consequently one-sided picture obliging him to draw almost exclusively on the literary tradition only.

Citations will be entered in this thesis from Plato (5th century BC), Plotinus and Origen (3rd century), Dante (14th century), mystical writers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and a number of 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers that indicate the perennial continuity of the idea that a hidden or esoteric universal and unchanging truth is to be found in sacred traditions and expressed in philosophy, art, literature, architecture and other forms by those who seek it. The idea of esotericism presents difficulties for the historian, even when he has negotiated the negative connotations the word has acquired in recent times, through its appropriation by the 'new age' movement, since much of esoteric thought appears to transcend the boundaries of 'rationalism'. The idea has been put forward that esotericism is based on the non-rational principle that certain 'primordial truths' originate from a very high or divine 'place' in the universe, *i.e.* from God or from what Plotinus calls 'a presence overpassing all knowledge'<sup>23</sup> and that they have been vouchsafed to humanity 'from above' not through the mind but through 'revelation'; not through the modern idea of knowledge but through 'gnosis'. Such thinking emphasizes the deep contrast between the traditional knowledge and modern science; Guénon calls the former 'sacred science'

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<sup>23</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, tr. Stephen MacKenna, London 1956, p. 617

and the latter ‘profane science’.<sup>24</sup> It is evident that he uses the word in the original Latin sense where *scientia* means knowledge. According to him, sacred science, or traditional science, is based on ‘intellectual intuition’ on the one hand, and the acceptance of the hierarchy of being, on the other.<sup>25</sup> We shall see that certain teachers of the tradition warn against book-learning unsupported by actual experience. Esotericism is a defense employed by the guardians of the higher truth so as to preserve it from being mixed with impure or less fine matter in the form of rationalizing explanations or interpretations which distort them. Thus D. H. Lawrence speaks of people ‘knowing the formulae, without undergoing the experience that corresponds ... grow insolent and impious, thinking they have the all, when they have only an empty monkey-chatter’.<sup>26</sup> When divine truths emanating from God and descending in cosmic stages, as the 6<sup>th</sup>- century Christian Platonist, Dionysius the Areopagite describes in his *Celestial Hierarchies*,<sup>27</sup> pass through intermediate stages and finally meet the terrestrial plane of existence they necessarily mix with the worldliness and materialism of human ideas. Here the work of the true philosopher is needed to protect them from degeneration, from becoming mere ‘treasures on earth where moth and rust do corrupt’.<sup>28</sup> He must make a corresponding interior ascent: ‘we must ascend to the Principle within ourselves; from many, we must become one; only so do we attain to knowledge of that which is Principle and Unity ... thus what That sees the soul will waken to see’.<sup>29</sup> The true philosopher knows how to view human activities and events within a cosmic perspective; without his spiritual

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<sup>24</sup> René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, p. 37, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *Islam and Science* the Journal of Islamic Perspectives and Science, see [www.cis-ca.org](http://www.cis-ca.org)

<sup>26</sup> Quoted by Manas in *The Resources of William Blake*, from *Manas*, September 6, 1978 in *Sunrise Magazine*, January 1979. Copyright © 1979 by Theosophical University Press.)

<sup>27</sup> Dionysius. *Celestial Hierarchies*, Shrine of Wisdom, Godolming, 1923

<sup>28</sup> Mat. 19, 6

<sup>29</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, p. 616

guidance human beings too easily ascribe to themselves powers and status that are not rightly theirs, thus distorting the true picture of the reality of what a human being is in the universe and the significance of his place in it.

## Chapter 2. Lineaments of the Perennial Philosophy in the Hellenistic World

### *Hellenic and Hellenistic Origins: Plato and Plotinus*

Plato, in a passage in the *Seventh Letter*, where he untangles different strands of philosophical and spiritual practice, gives a reason for the absence of written material. First he suggests how philosophy should be approached and the importance of acknowledging certain conditions:

One should show ... what philosophy is in all its extent; what [its] range of studies is by which it is approached, and how much labour it involves. For the man who has heard this, if he has the true philosophic spirit and that godlike temperament which makes him a kin to philosophy and worthy of it, thinks that he has been told of a marvelous road lying before him, that he must forthwith press on with all his strength, and that life is not worth living if he does anything else. After this he uses to the full his own powers and those of his guide in the path, and relaxes not his efforts, till he has either reached the end of the whole course of study or gained such power that he is not incapable of directing his steps without the aid of a guide ... Those who have not the true philosophic temper, but a mere surface colouring of opinions penetrating, like sunburn, only skin deep, when they see how great the range of studies is, how much labour is involved in it, and how necessary to the pursuit it is to have an orderly regulation of the daily life, come to the conclusion that the thing is difficult and impossible for them, and

are actually incapable of carrying out the course of study; while some of them persuade themselves that they have sufficiently studied the whole matter and have no need of any further effort.

On the practice of inner work in the spiritual life he explains in the same passage why he has never written about the spontaneity of ‘light in the soul’, (‘because it is only for a few and they can find it by themselves’), why it cannot be written about and how it would only be treated contemptuously by those who did not understand it:

Thus much at least, I can say about all writers, past or future, who say they know the things to which I devote myself, whether by hearing the teaching of me or of others, or by their own discoveries – that according to my view it is not possible for them to have any real skill in the matter. There neither is nor ever will be a treatise of mine on the subject. For it does not admit of exposition like other branches of knowledge; but after much converse about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself ... What task in life could I have performed nobler than this, to write what is of great service to mankind and to bring the nature of things into the light for all to see? But I do not think it a good thing for men that there should be a disquisition, as it is called, on this topic – except for some few, who are able with a little teaching to find it out for themselves. As for the rest, it would fill some of them quite illogically with a



mistaken feeling of contempt, and others with lofty and vain-glorious expectations, as though they had learnt something high and mighty.<sup>30</sup>

If the exploration of the inner life is a branch of knowledge that ‘does not admit of exposition like other branches of knowledge’ what is the ‘little teaching’ with the help of which men will ‘find out for themselves’? Why will only ‘a few’ find it? And why will others either despise it or become ‘vain-glorious’? The Tradition tells us that those who practice spiritual exercises may discover, perhaps more easily than the bibliophile, that the preparation for inner enlightenment is long and rigorous and that it demands a special commitment in the face of perhaps never-to-be-resolved uncertainties.<sup>31</sup> With experience the practitioner may see why sacred tradition regards much of what is ordinarily called reality as no more than illusion; human existence is seen as a kind of hypnotic sleep from which men should try to awaken.<sup>32</sup> Only then will reality be understood as an attribute of the cosmic laws that act everywhere in the universe, both on humanity and on the eternal realm of which the terrestrial world, according to Neoplatonic cosmology, is but a particle. Adherents of what we are calling the Perennial Philosophy believed that its wisdom could lead to knowledge that transcends the limitations of human perception; in particular the perceptions of the rational mind and of the physical senses.

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<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Seventh Letter*, trl. J. Hardward <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/seventh.letter.html>

<sup>31</sup> I am referring here to accounts of the contemplative such as Rev. Mother Rosemary’s unpublished *Amravati Journal*, 1990, an unpublished paper in the Library of the Temple Gallery, *The Value of Uncertainty*, date unknown, or my own journal of Vipassana meditation *When You Hear a Dog Bark*, 1995, unpublished. See above , p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> cf Plato’s image of the cave. *Republic*, bk. VII

## *Plotinus*

The great Plotinus (A.D. 204-270), perhaps together with his follower Iamblichus, may be regarded as one end of the bridge between philosophy and Christianity. ‘In him we find the supreme exponent of an abiding element in what we might call “mystical philosophy” ’.<sup>33</sup> (The other end of the bridge is Dionysius the Areopagite whose writings will be discussed below.<sup>34</sup>) The distinguished classicist E. R. Dodds says that in Plotinus ‘converge almost all the main currents of thought that come down from eight hundred years of Greek speculation; out of it there issues a new current destined to fertilize minds as different as those of Augustine, Boethius, Dante, Eckhart, Coleridge, Bergson and T. S. Eliot’.<sup>35</sup> Plotinus himself, referring to the Tradition, says:

These teachings are ... no novelties, no inventions of today, but long since stated, if not stressed; our doctrine here is the explanation of an earlier one and can show the antiquity of these opinions on the testimony of Plato himself.<sup>36</sup>

Plotinus, the founder in 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Rome of the Neoplatonist school, is, as we have seen, ‘the supreme exponent of ... mystical philosophy’. Through his follower Iamblichus and

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, Oxford, 1981, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> See below, p. 145

<sup>35</sup> E. R. Dodds, ‘Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus’, in *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, Oxford, 1973, p. 126

<sup>36</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, I, 8

later through Dionysius the Areopagite, Platonic mysticism is almost universally regarded by philosophers as the bedrock on which is founded both eastern and western Christian spirituality.

The school of Platonic mysticism that was established around Plotinus would reverberate down the ages. Plotinus evidently considered himself to be a Platonist though subsequent generations have referred to his ideas as Neoplatonism. For the purposes of finding the relationship to Bruegel's work, two aspects of Plotinus' thought will be touched on here that were revived by Italian Renaissance scholars and philosophers. Yet the essentials of these ideas had not been lost, having survived through a different route in the mystical tradition that passed through such men as Ruysbroek and Eckhart. This thesis will suggest that both the late medieval German mystical schools and the Italian Renaissance converged in Bruegel's outlook in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders. Plotinus' mysticism, generally regarded as synonymous with the Perennial Philosophy, is founded in his cosmological view of humanity. It is based on the Socratic way of self-knowledge maintained by disciplines and spiritual exercises while his sense of the cosmos emphasises the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm – the relationship between the universe and man.

### *Plotinian Psychology*

During his active life Plotinus taught orally the group of followers who came to his school outside Rome. Only at the end of his life, at the insistence of his pupils, did he commit his teaching to writing. After his death his pupil and biographer Porphyry organised Plotinus' essays into a systematic form which we know as the *Enneads*.<sup>37</sup> It is through this book that Plotinus is recognised as the incomparable genius whose philosophy deeply influenced the greatest minds of the Middle Ages, of Byzantium, of Renaissance Italy and of the Arab world. Plotinus was not a writer in the conventional literary sense; he seems to have cared little for style, and he was unwilling to simplify for the sake of his readers. There are definite indications that he lived and practised the life of a spiritual master and that the cosmic and psychological ideas that he spoke about derived from the insights and real experiences of his inner life. A revealing statement to this effect is made by Porphyry who tells us that he was able to live at once within himself and for others: 'he never relaxed his interior attention', and, further, that he 'maintained an unbroken concentration on his own highest nature'.<sup>38</sup> Plotinus himself tells us in a passage on imagination that 'philosophy's task is that of a man who wishes to throw off the shapes presented in dreams, and to this end *recalls to waking* the mind that is breeding them.'<sup>39</sup> In this case the word philosophy can be taken as the 'true philosophy', a term frequently employed by the early Christian contemplatives who lived, first, in the Egyptian desert and, later, in the monasteries of Mount Athos whose

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen MacKenna tr., *Plotinus The Enneads*, London 1969. See esp. Porphyry's 'Life' pp. 1-20

<sup>38</sup> Porphyry, 'On the Life of Plotinus', in *Enneads*, p. 7

<sup>39</sup> *Enneads*, p. 206. My emphasis

writings are found in the anthology known as the *Philokalia*.<sup>40</sup> For them, as for Plotinus and his followers, philosophy meant spiritual work, rather than academic philosophy.<sup>41</sup>

Plotinus says that ‘our task is to work for liberation from the sphere of all this evil’<sup>42</sup> by which he means man’s identification with the body and the senses and his ignorance regarding the soul. The psychological side of Plotinus’ teaching is close to that of his contemporaries and near contemporaries, the Christian authors of the homilies in *The Philokalia*. These men were known as hesychasts from the Greek *hesychia* meaning stillness or silence. For him the fall of the soul accounts for its state where it is

unstable, swept along from every ill to every other, quickly stirred by appetites, headlong to anger, hasty to compromises, yielding at once to obscure imaginations, as weak in fact as the weakest thing made by man or nature, blown about by every breeze, burned away by every heat.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The writings date from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and were preserved as manuscripts and privately circulated in the monasteries of Mount Athos until 1782 when they were published for the first time in Venice. Translations into Church Slavonic were made soon after and then into the Russian *Dobretolubiye* (‘Love of the Good’) in the five volume edition edited by Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894). The first English edition appeared in two volumes of translation by Kadloubovsky and Palmer: *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, London 1961, and *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, London, 1964. A complete edition in four volumes published in London between 1979 and 1995 translated by Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, is *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion on the relationship between Christianity and Neoplatonism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century see *Enneads*, p. lxix. In MacKenna’s ‘Introduction’ we find ‘In the passage of Augustine’s Confessions which is most directly inspired by the *Enneads* ... the words of Plotinus are “Now call up all your confidence; you need a guide no longer; strain and see.” And Augustine quoting from the Psalms, writes: I entered even into my inward self, Thou being my guide, and able I was, for Thou wert become my helper” (tr. Pusey). In this inversion of thought lies all the distance between Neoplatonic and Christian mysticism’.

<sup>42</sup> *Enneads*, p. 76

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*.

The Christian hesychast contemplatives, contemporaries of Plotinus and his followers, living in the Egyptian desert and later on Mount Athos followed similar psycho-spiritual disciplines of ‘watching and guarding the mind’.<sup>44</sup> Their concerns were that ‘thoughts change instantly one to the other; what gives them power over us is mostly our own carelessness’,<sup>45</sup> or that ‘our mind is volatile ... it never stops wandering’.<sup>46</sup> Buddhist meditation masters make similar observations.

Plotinus eloquently calls us to see that the possibility for spiritual evolution is found in the inner life and gives indications for special spiritual exercises.

He that has the strength let him arise and draw into himself, forgoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows and hasten away towards That they tell of.

‘Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland’<sup>47</sup> this is the soundest council. But what is the flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands Circe or Calypso, not content to linger for all the pleasure offered and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is the Father.

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<sup>44</sup> Hesychius of Jerusalem in Kadloubovsky and Palmer, eds., *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, London 1961, p. 299

<sup>45</sup> St Gregory of Sinai in op. cit. (note 22), p. 49

<sup>46</sup> St Isaac of Syria, in op. cit., p. 257

<sup>47</sup> Plotinus is quoting Homer; see MacKenna, *Enneads*, ‘Explanatory Matter’

What then is our course, what is the manner of our flight? This is not a journey of the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of a coach or ship to carry you away: all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be *waked within you*, a vision the birthright of all, which few turn to use.<sup>48</sup>

This passage continues with the invitation to ‘withdraw into yourself and look’ and proposes a work of interior self-perfecting which he compares to the task of a sculptor who

cuts away here, smooths there, he makes a line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring to light all that is overcast.<sup>49</sup>

He speaks with authority about working on one’s inner self and the aim of achieving a state

when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity.<sup>50</sup>

Plotinus, concurring always with authentic spiritual tradition, takes the view that the senses and the bodily organs are useful functions in so far as they can aid man in his

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<sup>48</sup> *Enneads*, p. 63. The emphasis is mine

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

search for right perception. To indulge the senses for the sake of pleasure or curiosity he considers a waste of energy and to be the sign of suffering or deficiency. He refers to the inner world as ‘an area [where] we cannot be indolent’.<sup>51</sup>

Plotinus teaches that the soul of man is a particle of the All-Soul which is one of the three Persons (or Hypostases) of the Divine Realm. This particle has fallen from a higher cosmic place into one of the lowest places in the universe, namely matter.

This is the fall of the Soul, this is entry into matter: thence its weakness; not all the faculties of its being retain free play, for Matter hinders their manifestation; it encroaches upon the soul’s territory and, as it were, crushes the soul back; and it turns to evil all that it has stolen, until the Soul finds strength to advance again.<sup>52</sup>

He compares the experience of the soul fallen into matter with that higher level which must be our spiritual goal. He makes a sharp distinction between our sense-bound life and the higher life of the soul.

Thus far the beauties of the realm of sense, images and shadow pictures, fugitives that have entered into matter ... But there are earlier and loftier beauties than these. In the sense-bound life we are no longer granted to know them, but the Soul ... sees

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<sup>51</sup> *Enneads*, p. 47

<sup>52</sup> *Enneads*, p. 77



and proclaims them. To the vision of these we must mount, leaving sense in its own low place.<sup>53</sup>

However, the *Enneads* of Plotinus are not primarily commentaries on the practice of spiritual life as is, for example, the *Philokalia*. The *Enneads* are a dense and sometimes bewildering exposition of the Platonic doctrines of man and the universe whose common link is the Soul and the relationship of the All to God or the One. Plotinus assumes in his hearers at least a familiarity with the practice of spiritual work. He makes occasional references to ‘mastery of our emotions and mental processes’,<sup>54</sup> ‘conscious attention’,<sup>55</sup> and so on, while his main preoccupation is to understand man’s extension, or possible extension, in eternity. From this lofty viewpoint, the life of earthly man is of little interest except that it defines the lower reaches of the universe and is the starting point of the Soul’s return journey to its origin.

### *Plotinian Cosmology*

The present writer, regarding Plotinus as the *sine qua non* of the Perennial Philosophy in European thought, sets out here, in abridged form, the Neoplatonist vision of the cosmos known as the Doctrine of Degrees: the gradations of densities of matter in the universe from higher to lower; the soul, fallen from a high place, making its return journey; the principle that everything is related.

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<sup>53</sup> *Enneads*, p. 59

<sup>54</sup> *Enneads*, p.133

<sup>55</sup> *Enneads*, p. 263

A theme that frequently recurs is that of the image. This is especially relevant to the idea later developed by Dionysius the Areopagite that the lower imitates, or is an image of, the higher. Hence the role of the symbol which describes, by reference to the knowable and visible, that which cannot be known and seen: ‘All teems with symbol’.<sup>56</sup> The idea that things and events in the universe are similar but existing at different levels implies a unifying principle by which everything is related; everything, including man, is part of the whole. Thus the idea of man as the microcosm, the cosmos in miniature, is an example of the universal principle acting everywhere in Creation. For Renaissance scholars such as Pico della Mirandola<sup>57</sup> it was ‘eminently worthy’ to undertake the ‘comparative study of sacred images ... and the extraction from them of philosophical wisdom’.<sup>58</sup>

The Totality, or One, or The All, is the Divinity from which flow ‘all the forms and phases of Existence’;<sup>59</sup> at the same time they ‘strive to return Thither and remain There’.<sup>60</sup> The Divinity, or Divine Realm, in Neoplatonism is approached through an ideal, a philosophical concept, or possibly a mathematical symbol, but it is not personified.

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<sup>56</sup> *Enneads*, p. 97

<sup>57</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), Humanist and Neoplatonist, he published in 1486 his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, generally regarded as the ‘manifesto’ of the Italian Renaissance.

<sup>58</sup> Wind. Op. cit., p. 9

<sup>59</sup> *Enneads*, ‘Explanatory Matter’, p. xxv

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

In the *Enneads* the universe is understood as an absolute totality, a perfect and ideal being. It consists of a hierarchical scale of cosmic beings some of which are perceptible to the senses, such as planets and stars; but the higher more divine beings are beyond the range of ordinary human perception. Man himself is placed low down in the cosmic system, though in his soul he bears a particle of the great cosmic being known as the All-Soul, with which he has the possibility of ultimately reuniting himself.

The All-Soul is one of the three beings or hypostases who together constitute the Divine Realm. It is generated by, or is the emanation of, the hypostasis that stands next highest in the cosmic hierarchy and who is the second hypostasis of the Divine Realm. This second hypostasis is named the 'Divine Mind' or the 'Intellectual Principle' (in Greek; *nous*).

The first hypostasis of the Supreme Divine Triad is variously referred to as the One, the Absolute, the Infinite, the Unconditioned; also sometimes the Father. At the same time we have to try to grasp that the Absolute, or the One is also the Many, since it is itself the Totality of All That Exists and contains all within itself. Likewise the Divine Mind contains all intelligences. According to MacKenna, Plotinus' translator,

the Intellectual or Intelligible Universe contains, or even in some senses is, all particular minds or intelligences; and there, in their kinds, are images, representations, phantasms, shadows of this universal or Divine Mind. All phases of existence down even to matter, the Ultimate, the lowest image of Real-Being are all

Ideally present from Eternity in this realm of the divine Thoughts, this Totality of the Supreme Wisdom or mentation.<sup>61</sup>

In a similar way, the All-Soul is the origin and container of all souls, who by the fact of their identity with the Universal Soul of the All are themselves potentially divine. The All-Soul is known as the Eternal Cause of All that Exists, the Vital Principle of all that is lower than the Divine Triad.

Below the three hypostases of the Divine Realm comes the Material or Sense-Grasped Universe. The highest stage of this level is the Gods; also known as Ideas, Divine Thoughts, Archetypes, Intellectual-Forms of all that exists in the lower spheres, the Spiritual Universe, Real Beings or Powers.

Descending further from the Divine Realm we come to the stage of beings known by the following names: Supernals, Celestials, Divine Spirits, or Daimones.

Yet further down comes Man, who is constituted in three phases, or images, of the Divine Soul:

- 1 the Intellective-Soul, or Intuitive, Intellectual or Intelligent Soul; or the Intellectual Principle of the Soul;
- 2 the Reasoning Soul;
- 3 the Unreasoning Soul.

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<sup>61</sup> *Enneads*, 'Explanatory Matter', p. xxv

In Christian terminology these three phases of man correspond to:

- 1 Spirit (or Mind, or Intellect)
- 2 Soul
- 3 Body

Below Man comes Matter, the lowest and least emanation of the creative power. And beyond Matter there is the level of Absolute Non-Being.

A simplification and an approximation of this scheme can be expressed in this final reduction which remains a true image of the universe:

The Absolute  
The Divine Mind  
The All-Soul  
The Intelligible Universe  
Celestials  
Man  
Matter  
Absolute Non Being

The higher levels of the universe have progressively more being and less matter and, conversely, the lower parts of the universe have less being and more matter. Matter is

described as indefinite: matter is essentially indefiniteness,<sup>62</sup> The higher spheres come progressively closer to the Reason-Principle which defines and delimits matter, bringing it under order. Throughout the whole universe the presence of matter (or Indefiniteness) is one of degree or phase according to the level of being in relation to the Reason-Principle. Plotinus defines the difference between phases of Indefiniteness as the difference between Archetype and Image. Thus each cosmic phase is at once an image of the phase superior to it and the archetype for the phase inferior to it.

This correspondence of the lower to the higher is probably the most ancient and universally held philosophical idea, expressed, in the Hermetic formula (from the Emerald Tablets) *As above so below* and in the words of the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*'

The idea of *archetype* and *image* seems not far from the teaching of the Christian theologians who, in defence of icons, spoke of *prototype* and *image*. In the latter case the icon is understood to be the image, made in the lower world, of a heavenly principle or prototype whose actual existence is in the divine world. It is the contention of this thesis that Bruegel applied this principle to his paintings, having first realised it in himself.

It is worth making the point here that an artist, capable of envisioning the higher world through spiritual endeavour and a corresponding higher state of consciousness, can become the instrument through which the higher life enters the world. For the Byzantine icon-painter and his counterpart in the medieval west there were established forms and

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<sup>62</sup> *Enneads*, p. 116

rituals that guided the inner life of the painter for such undertaking. Although in the Renaissance evidence for such an approach remains hidden, it cannot be discounted that for some exceptional individuals, among them Peter Bruegel, similar practices were used.<sup>63</sup>

In a passage on the Universe which has a ruling principle and a first cause operative downwards through every member, Plotinus calls us to understand the structure of the universe, the relationship of the parts to the whole, and our relationship with everything that exists.

We may think of the stars as letters perpetually being inscribed on the heavens or inscribed once and for all and yet moving as they pursue the other tasks allotted to them: upon these main tasks will follow the quality of signifying, just as one principle underlying any living unit enables us to reason from member to member.

All teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another, a process familiar to us all in not a few examples of everyday experience. But what is the comprehensive principle of co-ordination? Establish this and we have a reasonable basis for the divination.

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<sup>63</sup> Similar claims have been made for Hieronymus Bosch, Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, Rembrandt and other painters.

All things must be enchained; and the sympathy and correspondence obtaining in any one closely knit organism must exist, first, and most intensely, in the All.

There must be one principle constituting this unit of many forms of life and enclosing the several members within the unity, while at the same time, precisely as in each thing of detail, the parts too each have a definite function, so in the All each several member must have its own task but more markedly so since in this case the parts are not merely members but themselves all of great power.

Thus each entity takes its origin from one principle and, therefore, while executing its own function, works in with every other member of that All ... each receives something from the others, every one at its own moment bringing its touch of sweet or bitter. And there is nothing undesigned, nothing of chance, in all the process: all is one scheme of differentiation, starting from the Firsts and working itself out in a continuing progress of kinds.<sup>64</sup>

The idea of the soul's descent into matter and its striving to return to its high origin show that man is a dynamic element in the universe and that his position is neither fixed nor static. His possibilities for cosmic mobility are emphasised in the imagery of early Christian art, either literary or iconic, where we see man, either as Christ or Adam, or sometimes as saint or prophet, as fallen or risen. We see him in caves (Nativity and Harrowing of Hell), beside mountains and on mountain-tops (Transfiguration). We see

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<sup>64</sup> *Enneads*, p. 96



him borne up into the sky by angels (Ascension). These higher and lower places are symbols describing the soul's relationship with Eternity.

### *Man the Microcosm*

It is through Plotinus that the idea of the microcosm – man as the microcosm or the universe in miniature – becomes a basic tenet of Jewish, Christian and Arab thought from Hellenistic times until the rise of modern science. We find in the Talmud ‘All that the Holy One created in the world He created in man’;<sup>65</sup> one of many formulations of this idea. It was to be developed and elaborated exhaustively in the Renaissance.

The literary source of the idea of the microcosm is one of Plato's dialogues.<sup>66</sup>

In that dialogue Socrates says that just as there are four elements in the universe, so there are in us ... So we would say that the hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and so

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<sup>65</sup> *Talmud*, Abot de Rabbi Nathan, 31

<sup>66</sup> *Philebus* (29).

on that compose our bodies are identical with the same elements in the nonhuman world.<sup>67</sup>

But there is more to a human being than a body ... This can only be explained, as Greek scientists would say, by some agent. And that agent is the soul. But if this is true of the human body, then it must also be true of the universal body, the cosmos. The cosmos, says Socrates, must have a soul just as we have, a soul which in the Middle Ages was called, after Plotinus ... the "Soul of the World" (*anima mundi*). Our soul is primarily rational; we are rational animals. The Soul of the World must have a corresponding rationality and the idea of a rational universe was thus launched ... Plato argued in this same dialogue that the Soul of the World, like our own, must have wisdom (*sophia*) and intelligence (*nous*). This idea is repeated in ... the *Timaeus*, where the cosmos is said to be an image of the Demiurge, endowed with soul and intelligence and thus duplicates the individual human being.

The microcosm was also used when discussing the state. In Plato's *Republic* we find that there are three kinds of people, the appetitive, the irascible or spirited, and the rational. All men have appetites, some have both appetites and irascibility, and a few have these two faculties plus reason. It is their reason which keeps the other faculties under control. In the state, seen as a large human being, there are three classes of men who correspond to three psychological types. They are the

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<sup>67</sup> George Boas in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhiana.cgi?id=dv3-16>. The Platonic dialogue is 30A

artisans (the appetitive type), the military (the irascible), and the philosophers (the rational).<sup>68</sup>

A Renaissance-educated man such as Bruegel would have been familiar with these ideas, or versions of them that abounded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the later part of this thesis, where his paintings are interpreted in the light of the ideas being put forward here, it will be suggested that certain recurring figures: holy persons, aristocrats, farmers, soldiers, clerks and others, represent psychological types and psychological states. Boas continues:

Each serves a legitimate function but trouble arises when one or the other of the two lower classes gets control of the state and usurps the power of reason. The state then becomes like a man who is a lustful glutton or a belligerent captain. Therefore things must be so arranged that the three classes will be kept in their proper places and philosophers will be rulers.

To understand the symbolism here it is necessary to remember that ‘the state’ refers to the psychological and spiritual situation within man – the myriad different ‘personalities’ that constitute his being. Thus for Boas:

Such ideas only hint at a full-fledged theory of the identity between microcosm and macrocosm, but at least they use the human being as a basic metaphor of something larger and not obviously human ... we find the idea of the microcosm in both the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, and in the *Hermetica*. Philo,

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid*

like so many other theologians, was worried over the biblical verse, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26), he points out that the likeness could not be corporeal and must therefore be psychical.<sup>69</sup> The psychical image of God in man is the intelligence (*nous*), which rules us exactly as God rules the world. He thus takes over from the Platonic tradition that the world is a world of order and reason. This bolsters his use of the allegorical method of interpreting the Bible, for were he to take it literally, he would have to grant the existence of things which would be almost nonrational by definition.<sup>70</sup>

We further learn from Boas that:

The 10<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish Neoplatonist, Isaac Israeli, borrowing from Al-Kindi (ninth century), said that philosophy is self-knowledge, and that self-knowledge expands to knowledge of all things; he says: “For this reason the philosophers called man a microcosm” (Israeli, p. 28). The source of the idea that self-knowledge is cosmic knowledge is probably a treatise by Porphyry, *On Know Thyself*. This exists only in fragments and the following can be found in Stobaeus: [Those] “who say that man is properly called a microcosm say that the term implies knowledge of man. And since man is a microcosm, he is ordered to do nothing other than to philosophize. If then we seriously wish to philosophize without taking a false step, we shall be eager to know ourselves, and we shall acquire a true philosophy from our insight, ascending to the contemplation of the

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<sup>69</sup> *De opificio mundi* (23, 69)

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*

Whole”.<sup>71</sup> That self-knowledge is cosmic knowledge is based upon an identity between the self and the cosmos, an identity of a “spiritual” rather than a corporeal nature...Godefroy de Saint Victor (d. 1194) said in so many words in his *Microcosmus* (Ch. 18) that man is called a world not because of his body but because of his spirit.<sup>72</sup>

### *Iamblichus*

Porphyry’s student Iamblichus is one of the key figures in the transmission of perennial philosophical ideas, indeed we shall find his name mentioned in a direct reference to Bruegel by his friend Abraham Ortelius. Iamblichus (c. A.D. 250-325) is among the most important of the Neoplatonic philosophers, second only to Plotinus. His influential treatise *Theurgia* or *On the Mysteries of Egypt* deals with a 'higher magic' which operates through the agency of the gods. The Renaissance philosopher Agrippa of Nettesheim refers frequently to Iamblichus in his *Occulta Philosophia*.<sup>73</sup> Iamblichus also had a strong influence on other Renaissance occultists like Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno. Gregory Shaw, defending Iamblichus’ theurgy from the negative connotations of ‘occultism’ and ‘magic’, presents him as breaking ‘away from Porphyry

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<sup>71</sup> Joannes Stobaeus, compiler of a valuable series of extracts from Greek authors. Of his life nothing is known, but he probably belongs to the latter half of the 5th century AD. Vol. 3, Ch. 21, no. 27, p. 580

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> "In his influential work *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (1531), Agrippa combined magic, astrology, Qabbalah, theurgy, medicine, and the occult properties of plants, rocks, and metals. This work was an important factor in the spread of the idea of occult sciences." ; "The magical interpretation of Qabbalah reached its peak in Henri Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia*.". Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Eliade ed. in chief, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York 1987, article on Occultism by Antoine Faivre.

and Plotinus in order to reestablish – in theurgical Platonism – what he believed to be the true teachings of Plato and Pythagoras’.<sup>74</sup> He concludes that ‘this theurgical vision shaped the thinking of later Platonists such as Syrianus, Proclus and Damascius, and its influence extended beyond Platonic circles and may well be reflected in the sacramental theology of Christian thinkers. Indeed, the Church, with its ecclesiastical embodiment of the divine hierarchy, its initiations, and its belief in salvation through sacrificial acts, may have fulfilled the theurgical program of Iamblichus in a manner that was never concretely realized by Platonists ... the Church may well have become the reliquary of the hieratic vision and practices of the later Platonists.’<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul. The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1995, p. 238.

<sup>75</sup> *idem*, p. 242

### Chapter 3. Lineaments of the Perennial Philosophy in the Christian World

#### *The Primitive Church*

The first Christian society, the so-called primitive Church, as described in Acts was, according to the American professor Rufus Jones, writing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the history of mysticism, ‘clearly a mystical fellowship, *i.e.* a fellowship bound together, not by external organization, but by the power and experience of the Divine presence’.<sup>1</sup> The external organization was to come later and eventually hammered out on the anvils of the Ecumenical Councils beginning with that of Nicea in 325.

Jones cites the great German scholar Otto Pflleiderer<sup>2</sup> on the Apostle Paul, reminding us of Paul’s wide-ranging grasp of perennial traditions available to him at that time: ‘[he uses] the forensic conceptions of Jewish theology, or the imagery of the apocalyptic writers, or the animistic speech of popular usage, or the symbolism of the Greek Mysteries, or the religious philosophy of the Hellenistic schools, or the Pantheistic ideas of the Stoics, for all these elements of culture are combined in him, and are in evidence in his epistles.’ He goes on to say that Paul ‘cares not at all for the shell of religion ... his aim is always the creation of a ‘new man’, the formation of the ‘inward man’, and this ‘inward man is formed, not by the practice of rite or ritual, not by the laying on of hands, but by the actual incorporation of Christ – the Divine Life – into the life of man ... The proof of this inwardly formed man is not ecstasy, tongue or miracle. It is victory over the lower passions – the flesh – and a steady manifestation of love ... nobody has ever

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, R., *Spiritual Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Illinois, 1914,

<sup>2</sup> Otto Pflleiderer, *Primitive Christianity*, tr. 1906-11, vol. I, p. 96

expressed in equal perfection and beauty the fervor and enthusiasm of the initiated mystic, inspired by union with God, as Paul has expressed them in his two hymns of love – the hymn on the love of God (Rom. viii. 31 ff), and the hymn on the love of men (1 Cor. xiii) 15. Love is the Kingdom of God.’<sup>3</sup>

We see here the restitution of the true idea of love: its meaning in the universe and its proper function in the life of humanity. The modern associations of the word give many misleading meanings that tend to obstruct our comprehension when we read of it in sacred literature. This should be born in mind especially in the case of Hendrick Niclaes’ ‘House of Love’, the ‘heretical’ esoteric sect with which, as will be shown, Bruegel was closely connected. What is also useful is to be reminded that the inner life is the perspective by which reality is to be perceived. This idea was central to the traditions of religion and philosophy until the rise in recent times of what Guénon and his school call scientism<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Jones p. 15

<sup>4</sup> In understanding Guénon’s notion of science...one can hardly overemphasize the significance of the relation between the Principle and its adaptations. For Guénon, metaphysics studies the Principle and provides principal knowledge whereas the sciences of nature investigate its earthly, relative, and multi-layered manifestation in the cosmos. Scientific theories, even when enunciated as empirically established and universal truths, cannot function as substitutes for higher principles but only as further corroborations of the principles of which they are but applications. In this regard, metaphysics, as Aristotle has said, is the science of all sciences, namely it is a knowledge that provides a total framework for all other forms of knowledge, whether based on *theoria* or *praxis*. Consequently, metaphysics connects all branches and forms of knowledge, supplying a frame of reference within which the physical sciences function. To carry this point a step further, Guénon reverses the relation between theory and experiment and gives priority to “preconceived ideas” – a point of view remarkably close to Kuhn’s concept of paradigm. For Guénon, it is a “peculiar delusion, typical of modern ‘experimentalism’, to suppose that a theory can be proved by facts whereas really the same facts can always be equally well explained by a variety of different theories”. (René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, London, 1962, p. 42).



## *Origen*

In Christianity the esoteric tradition can be traced through Origen, the master of the School of Alexandria in the 3rd century and regarded as one of the greatest theologians of the early Christian era. His approach incorporated a long established tradition of allegorical interpretation of sacred literature. For him allegory was the envelope of esotericism within which the truth was to be found. Writing against literalism he asserts that ‘very many mistakes have been made, because the right method of examining the holy texts has not been discovered by the greater number of readers ... because it is their habit to follow the bare letter.’<sup>5</sup> Further, he ascribes ‘false opinions’ and ‘ignorant views’ about God because ‘the Scripture on the spiritual side is not understood but is taken in the bare literal sense’.<sup>6</sup>

Origen quotes Solomon’s advice to ‘thrice record the Scriptures’.<sup>7</sup> He comments: ‘a man ought then in three ways record in his own soul the purposes of the holy Scriptures; that the simple may be edified by, as it were, the *flesh* of the Scripture (for thus we designate the primary sense), the more advanced by its *soul*, and the perfect by the *spiritual law*.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> George Lewis, ed., *The Philokalia of Origen*, Edinburgh 1911, 8: 3-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 9: 3-7

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 22: 20f

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.* 9: 3-7

It is the same idea, with its esoteric implications, that Dante is developing a thousand years later when he says:

The Scriptures can be understood, and ought to be explained, principally in four senses. one is called *literal* ... The second is called *allegorical* ... the third sense is called *moral* ... the fourth sense is called *anagogical*, that is, beyond sense [*sovrasenso*] and that is when Scripture is spiritually expounded, which, while true in the literal sense, refers beyond it to the higher things of the eternal glory, as we may see in the Psalm of the Prophet, where he says that when Israel went out of Egypt Judaea became holy and free. Which, although manifestly true according to the letter, is none the less true in its spiritual meaning — viz., that the soul, in forsaking its sins, is made holy and free in its powers.<sup>9</sup>

Origen, insisting on sacred scripture's mystical meaning exhorts his readers to

see what distinction there is between a sensible Gospel and an intellectual and spiritual one. What we have now to do is to transform the sensible Gospel into a spiritual one. For what would the narrative of the sensible Gospel amount to if it were not developed to a spiritual one? It would be of little account or none; any one can read it and assure himself of the facts it tells – no more. But our whole energy is now to be directed to the effort to penetrate to the deep things of the

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<sup>9</sup> quoted in 'Keys to the Bible', Frithjof Schuon in J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore, 1974, p. 355

meaning of the Gospel and to search out the truth that is in it when divested of types.<sup>10</sup>

He develops the idea that there are different levels of meaning in sacred scripture: from the outer or literal level that speaks to the senses (the word he uses is ‘sensible’) to the ‘intellectual’ and ‘spiritual’. Chapter 4 of his *Commentary on John* begins: ‘Scripture contains many contradictions and many statements that are not literally true but must be read spiritually and mystically’. He continues:

And in some places they tack on to their writing, with language apparently implying things of sense, things made manifest to them in a purely intellectual way. I do not condemn them if they even sometimes dealt freely with things which to the eye of history happened differently, and changed them so as to subserve the mystical aims they had in view; so as to speak of a thing which happened in a certain place, as if it had happened in another, or of what took place at a certain time, as if it had taken place at another time, and to introduce into what was spoken in a certain way some changes of their own. They proposed to speak the truth where it was possible both materially and spiritually, and where this was not possible it was their intention to prefer the spiritual to the material. The spiritual truth was often preserved, as one might say, in the material falsehood.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Commentary on John Book 1*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen-john1.html>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

These remarks are especially helpful in the light of Bruegel's treatment of gospel themes. What is regarded as his unconventional or idiosyncratic approach signifies his licence to 'deal freely' with historical events and his freedom to make them 'subserve the mystical aim'.

*Symbol of the seed in John's Gospel*

The idea is put forward that the role of John the Evangelist and Paul the Apostle in the earliest, and, as will be shown, more or less purely mystical phase of Christianity, is entirely spiritual. Evidence for this can be seen in the *Fourth Gospel* and in *Acts*. The accounts of the sayings and the events around Christ can be understood at a profound level if the symbolism is grasped. 'John's language is simpler than Paul's', writes Professor Jones; 'he puts the profoundest truth into a parable which may be taken at any height, according to the spiritual nature of the reader, and his most important terms are themselves parables – "Light", "bread", "water", "seed" – and so, like the winged seeds of nature, his truths have floated across the world and germinated in multitudes of hearts, while *Paul's deepest message has been missed and the world has got out of him only what the theologians formulated.*'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> (my italics) Jones p. 17

The symbolism of the seed and associated ideas, bread and water, having originated in Egypt, was widely employed in the Hellenistic world, in Greek and Roman religion and it can also be found in the magic cults of South and Central America. The seed, or the ear of corn, was a symbol surrounded by elaborate ritual in the Eleusinian Mysteries.<sup>13</sup> This thesis will suggest that they are also central (though hidden) ideas in the art of Bruegel; most notably in *The Fall of Icarus* where the central figure, and indeed the central theme of the composition, is the ploughman's elaborate and careful preparation of the ground for the reception of the seed;<sup>14</sup> and in the *Harvesters* where the produce of the cornfield – bread (which is itself a symbol of the action of the law of three forces represented by flour, water and fire), nourishes the workers. And this symbolism is itself an allegory for the spiritual life.<sup>15</sup>

These ideas are emphasized here not only for the study of Bruegel's art but for the study of sacred art in general. For, as Jones reminds us,

In John's word 'Life' means something divinely begotten. It is a type of life, above the 'natural', human life as that is above the animal or as the animal is above the vegetable ... I call this idea mystical because it is a direct and immediate experience by which the soul partakes of God.

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<sup>13</sup> See Wind, *op. cit.*; also Carpenter, *The Origins of Pagan and Christian Beliefs*, London 1920; also Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London, 1922.

<sup>14</sup> See below, p. 320 ff.

<sup>15</sup> See below, p. 305 ff.

No word which John uses conveys this truth better than ‘seed’: ‘Whoever is born of God does not commit sin, for His seed is in him and he cannot sin because he is born of God’ (John iii, 9). It is a word that mystics have used again and again to express the implanting of the Divine Life within the human soul ... the same idea is expressed by ‘water’ and ‘bread’: ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life’ (John iv, 14). ‘I am the Bread of Life’ (John vi, 35-63). ‘If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever’ (ditto). Through both figures – ‘you must drink me’; ‘you must eat me’, the profound truth is told that man enters into Life, or has Life in him, only as he partakes of God; Christ is God in a form which man can grasp and assimilate ... This Lord’s supper calls for no visible elements, no consecrated priest ... It is actual transubstantiation, but it is not bread and wine that changes to literal body and blood of Christ. ‘As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the father, so he that eateth me, he also shall live because of me’ ... takes us beyond all ordinary biology, beyond all traditional theology, and brings us to a new level of life altogether – human life fed from within with, and that is ‘Eternal Life’, the life of God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John vi. The citation is from Jones p. 17-18

*Spiritual freedom and the Church as institution*

The period of Christianity when men and women could directly receive mystical energies was not long; attempts to institutionalize what had been given as revelation were being made already by the end of the first century. Jones considers that the actual presence of divine energies in the world belongs to Christ's lifetime and that of his immediate successors; it led to a revival of a form of Old Testament ecstatic prophesy which, after much controversy, was incorporated into the New Testament as the *Book of Revelations*. Another outcome was the formation of an organized institution *i.e.* the Church. 'What had been a free, spontaneous, divinely or mystically charged Christianity changed into an ecclesiastical system, a doctrine; the prophet speaking by revelation [yielded] to the bishop ruling with authority'.<sup>17</sup> Direct knowledge of God or gnosis was no longer the perceived route for personal spiritual evolution. This tendency can be traced back to Ignatius of Antioch (d. *circa* 110) who was 'possessed of a passion to leave behind him an authoritatively organized church. He had no faith that a body gathered together on the loose basis of brotherhood and fellowship and obedience to an invisible Head could survive in the midst of chaotic beliefs and growing heresies'.<sup>18</sup> He puts the bishop [head of the local church] in the place of Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> Jones p. 27

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

Ignatius instituted the administration of the sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism by the bishop: 'Let there be a proper Eucharist by the bishop ... It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or celebrate a love feast'.<sup>19</sup>

When the church emerged from its battle with Gnosticism the bishop was supreme, and the idea of his succession in the apostolic line was well established, and with it the view that the faith is the deposit of truth received through the apostles and preserved by the hierarchy of the Church.

As soon as the sense of the Divine Presence vanished from men's hearts, the religion which Christ had initiated underwent a complete transformation. Magic and mystery took the place of the free personal communication. The real presence of Christ was sought in the bread and wine and in the bath of regeneration rather than within the soul itself.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ignatius, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, tr. Roberts-Donaldson, 1885, Ch. Iv. The love feast, or *agape* feast, was an early Christian tradition comprising a communal meal which, celebrated in conjunction with the eucharist, was known as the Lord's Supper.

<sup>20</sup> Jones pp. 35, 36



### *Early appearance of 'Heresy'*

From this point onwards, *i.e.* already in the 2nd century, the division between spirit and institution begins to appear. In view of the growing number of adherents to Christianity and the consequent need for organization, this was perhaps unavoidable. What is clear, however, is that followers of the purely spiritual way could not be stifled or repressed despite the antagonism, sometimes well-meaning, sometimes malicious, of a church already making compromises with the material world and its politics. The mystical tendency, when it ignited the popular imagination, would appear again and again in the form of popular movements, sometimes mass movements, often persecuted by a combination of church authority, state power and heresy hunting.

In the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century one such movement was Montanism. It seems to be the first spiritual-mystical popular movement, sweeping North Africa, that revived prophesy. Tertullian was its chief sympathetic exponent. The Montanist leaders were 'possessed' with the idea that the promises of John xiv-xviii were now being fulfilled in them.<sup>21</sup> It will be seen below that a version of Montanism, *i.e.* Catharism in 13<sup>th</sup>-century France, survived in Flanders and influenced Hieronymus Bosch who can be regarded in certain ways as Bruegel's predecessor as we shall see below.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> These are the chapters containing 'I am the way, and the truth and the life', 'because I live, you will live also...you in me and I in you', 'my peace I give to you...let not your hearts be troubled', 'Abide in me', etc. Jones p. 47

<sup>22</sup> p. 231

*'Pagan' traditions in Christianity*

There was another route for the mystical tradition that passed, on the whole safely, through the mainstream of the church. This was the mysticism of Greek philosophy that comes from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – but mainly from Plato through his interpreter, Plotinus. The Stoics (whose philosophy was revived in Renaissance times by Bruegel's friend Justus Lipsius), also influenced Christian mysticism. Many authors sympathetic to the idea of the Perennial Philosophy affirm that there was an unbroken succession of teachers. We have seen Jones referring to the 'Hermaic chain' from Plotinus to the closing of the Athenian School of Philosophy.<sup>23</sup> It is a remarkable fact that the Platonic Academy survived in Athens for more than 500 years after Christ. It was closed by the order of the Emperor Justinian in the year 529. Professor Jones tells the story.

The edict of a Christian emperor closed the doors of the Academy and drove the little band of philosophers out into exile. There were seven of them and they took their beloved books and started out from the famous seat of philosophy, to seek a quiet retreat in Persia – the wise men of the West going towards the East with no star for guide. It was a pathetic end. The mighty stream of truth seemed at last, after eight hundred years, to be losing itself in the desert sand. The church would brook no rival in the field of truth and it proposed to ban all unbaptized teachers,

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<sup>23</sup> Jones p. 77

and to taboo all streams of truth that did not flow from the canon. The Christian emperor reckoned ill if he thought he could suppress the contribution of Greek wisdom by lock and key. He could banish the feeble relic of the school, and then settle down in the fond belief that the world was now rid of the philosophic brood. Not so. Before Justinian was in his grave, this Neoplatonic philosophy was ... translated into Christian terms, and was made into the spiritual bee-bread on which many Christian generations fed.<sup>24</sup>

He goes on to say that ‘the [Christian] Greek fathers were all influenced by the philosophy of Greece, and from the time of Origen (A.D. 185-254) there is a strong Neoplatonic flavour in all their work. ‘The immanence of God is the very warp and woof of their thinking ... Clement, Origen and Athanasius ... were interpreting Christianity to the Greek mind through the historical forms of Greek thought and [they] ... hit upon elemental facts of universal religious experience.’<sup>25</sup> We are reminded of Greek philosophy’s central philosophical practice by Clement’s ‘harmonized man’, the goal of human perfection ... ‘it is then, the greatest of all lessons to know oneself. For one who knows himself will know God, and knowing God, he will be made like God’.<sup>26</sup>

The mysterious Ammonius Saccas, who left no writings and whose ideas are inferred from the works of his pupils, was an important link in the chain of schools of the Perennial Philosophy. After long study and meditation, Ammonius opened a school of

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<sup>24</sup> Jones p. 79. ‘Bee-bread’ is an American expression for pollen

<sup>25</sup> Jones p. 84

<sup>26</sup> Clement, *The Instructor*, Book III, chap. i. 83

philosophy in Alexandria in 193. His principal pupils included both pagans and Christians: Herennius, the two Origenes, Cassius Longinus and Plotinus. Hierocles, writing in the 5th century AD, states that his fundamental doctrine was eclecticism, derived from a critical study of Plato and Aristotle. His admirers credited him with having reconciled the quarrels of the two great schools. He is regarded by some as a theosophist and may also perhaps be considered the first Neoplatonist. Among other things, he warned about the dangers of drawing too rigid a division between pagans and Christians. Although people spoke of him as *theodidaktos*, or “god-taught,” he was a modest man who considered himself merely a *philalethian*, or lover of truth. The aim of his school was universal brotherhood, a view of the essential unity of all religions, and making the study of philosophy a living power in people’s lives.<sup>27</sup>

We shall also see how this stream of the Tradition passed into the Latin world in the early middle ages and from there into the arena of thinking men, mystics and spiritual seekers in northern European cities such as Antwerp and Brussels in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is a pathway leading to spiritual awakening whose route is often outside the conventions of institutional religion, whether Catholic or Protestant. The attempts by historians to identify Bruegel’s religion have been contradictory and inconclusive. Yet Bruegel’s religion, or his attitude to religious ideas, must be an important key to the meaning of his paintings. If it is the case that he actively studied and applied mystical ideas that correspond to what has been called the Perennial Philosophy, the researcher is necessarily

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<sup>27</sup> Drawn from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ammonius\\_Saccas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ammonius_Saccas) and <http://www.alcott.net/alcott/home/champions/Ammonius.htm>

led to the Hellenistic milieu of early Christianity where the origins of Christian mysticism are to be found. From here the seeker must pick out the thread that connects Bruegel with that source. He will find that this thread links together groups or schools of religious mystics nearly always regarded by the established church as 'heretical'.

In the early, and still Hellenistic, Christian tradition, the communities or schools of men and women who devoted themselves to the mystical path were the monastic brotherhoods and sisterhoods that first came into being in the Roman Empire.

The early Christian monks formed an international society that flourished in all the Greek territories of the late Roman Empire, as well as Syria and Persia, in Egypt gathered around the Nile, and as far into Africa as Nubia (modern Sudan) and the highlands of Ethiopia. They inhabited the rocky and desert terrain of Sinai, Palestine, Arabia and Turkey (ancient Cappadocia); and in the great capital of the late Roman Empire, Constantinople, they became almost a civil service, so great were their numbers, and many dedicated scholars and aristocrats among them. After the fifth century, monasticism became popular in the West too, where Gaul (modern France) and Italy became centres of activity. Soon over the whole early Christian world, which was drawn like a circle around the Mediterranean basin, Christian monks could be found living in small communes of hermits

gathered together in remote valleys, or in small houses, usually a few dozen living the communal life together.<sup>28</sup>

The same author goes on to describe the elaboration of ‘spiritual theology’ based on such men as Origen of Alexandria, ‘one one of the most elegant Platonist philosophers of his age [who had] created an extensive and elegant system for scriptural exegesis and the methods needed for purifying the soul and assisting its illumination and ascent’.<sup>29</sup>

Professor McGuckin points out that the literature emanating from this milieu was not concerned with the disputes over doctrinal issues which were being debated elsewhere under the imperial eye and where the resulting decisions were given the force of Roman law. ‘The monastic texts, by contrast, were largely uninterested in controversial argument. It was a literature dedicated to the secrets of the inner life.’<sup>30</sup> We see in these remarks the beginning of that tension, sometimes leading to violence and cruelty, that has nearly always existed between those following the mystical path and the religious institutions of the state.

### *Esoteric symbolism in the New Testament*

It is in this tradition that P. D. Ouspensky, writing in 1911, says esotericism is the ‘kingdom of heaven’ about which, in public, Jesus only spoke indirectly; though, even in

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<sup>28</sup> McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters*, Shambala. p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem.* p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

the parables, the sternness and severity of the teaching cannot be hidden'.<sup>31</sup> After giving the parable of the wheat and the tares<sup>32</sup> Christ 'sent the multitude away and went into the house'. He ends his explanation of the symbolism, which he gives privately to a small group of people, namely the disciples, saying 'the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of the world'.<sup>33</sup> And later, of the net cast into the sea, into which was 'gathered of every kind' and of which 'they cast the bad away' he declares 'So shall it be at the end of the world: and the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.'<sup>34</sup> The central idea of esotericism in the gospels is summed up in well-known, but not well understood, phrases: 'many are called but few are chosen'<sup>35</sup> and 'great is the harvest but the workers are few'.<sup>36</sup> The concept of the many and the few, clearly stressed by Christ, had long before been stated by Plato who declared that 'philosophy was a mystical initiation' limited to 'the chosen few'.<sup>37</sup>

Another important exponent of the perennial tradition in the 20th century, Frithjof Schuon tells us that in the Bible 'word-for-word meaning practically never suffices by itself and [that] apparent naiveties, inconsistencies and contradictions resolve themselves

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<sup>31</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe*, London, 1931, Ch. I, 'Esotericism and Modern Thought' and Ch. IV, 'Christianity and the New Testament'.

<sup>32</sup> Mat. 13: 24-30

<sup>33</sup> Idem, 39-40

<sup>34</sup> Idem, 47, 49-50

<sup>35</sup> Mat. 22

<sup>36</sup> Luke 10.2, Mat. 9. 37-38. Also Thom. 73

<sup>37</sup> Edgar Wind, referring to *Phaedrus* 244E in *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, London 1958, p. 14). Likewise, discussing exoteric and esoteric meanings in the mysteries (*Phaedo* 67-69), 'Many are the thyrsus bearers but few are the bacchoi'. (idem, p. 15).

in a dimension of profundity of which one must possess the key. The literal meaning is frequently a cryptic language that more often veils than reveals and that is only meant to furnish clues to truths of a cosmological, metaphysical and mystical order'<sup>38</sup>

An example of the cryptic language, traditionally employed in esoteric literature, might be the apparently straightforward description, quoted above, which tells us how Jesus 'sent the multitude away and went into the house'. A mystical interpretation would see in the idea of the multitude, the idea of multiplicity, the 'many', as opposed to the 'one'. The former referring to man ('my name is legion'<sup>39</sup>) or, more specifically, unredeemed man's level of consciousness which is multiple, divided and lacking order, as opposed to God who is 'one', undifferentiated, the highest or divine level of consciousness. The 'house' that Christ 'enters' might be seen as what writers in the *Philokalia*,<sup>40</sup> call the 'house of spiritual architecture' or, in St Catherine of Sienna's phrase, 'the cell of self-knowledge,' whose location is at the inner centre of a man's being and accessible through mystical contemplation.

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<sup>38</sup> see J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Penguin books, 1974, p. 354

<sup>39</sup> Mk 5:9

<sup>40</sup> Translated into English by Kadloubovsky and Palmer in 2 vols: *Prayer of the Heart*, London 1961 and *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, London 1964. The quotation is from the latter vol., 14th century monks, Ignatios and Callistos.



### *The Church Institutionalized*

The questions of the sources for the synoptic gospels are still a matter of debate.<sup>41</sup> It can be supposed that those who had been with Christ memorized and wrote down what they had personally seen and heard. Such notes were shared, passed on to others and copied with varying degrees of accuracy and, later still, groups of people around a particular teacher, gathered these notes into collections of sayings, editing and collating them with accounts of significant and miraculous events. By the middle of the second century a wide variety of material abounded purporting to reflect Christ's words and actions. Small and not so small groups of Christians were to be found all over the so-called civilized world, *i.e.* the Roman Empire: in southern France and Italy, in Egypt and North Africa, in the eastern Mediterranean countries and throughout the Balkans and Asia Minor who treasured these materials. (There are also traditions of the spread of Christianity into China and India.) Some were slaves, some were well-born, some were philosophers and some were Gnostics. For some, Christianity was a message of hope in a world of social oppression, injustice and cruelty; for others it brought meaning to this present life as well as to the soul's longing for union with the divine in eternity. Such a variety of class, race, language and education tended to produce a corresponding variety of versions of what Christ had said and done. Men, such as Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, who regarded themselves part of the 'apostolic succession' and who had influence and ability felt a need to unify and universalize these varied accounts of the sayings and actions of Christ.

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<sup>41</sup> G. R. S. Meade's *The Gospels and the Gospel*, London, 1902 remains a good introduction. See also M. H. Smith *A Synoptic Gospels Primer* <http://virtualreligion.net/primer/> with summaries of the positions taken by Weisse, Griesbach and Farrer.

Part of Irenaeus' authority came from his having been a disciple of Polycarp, the last of the sub-apostolic age, who had died in 155 A.D.<sup>42</sup>

### *Gnostics*

In the second century, that is, still before the Church Fathers imposed dogmatic and doctrinal strictures on how to interpret certain mysterious and mystical ideas, there were a number of different groups, loosely associated under the term 'Gnostics', who sought the way to actualize in themselves certain proposals implicit in what Paul and John had understood and taught. The 'Gnostics' (the term is loose and it may help at this stage to think of them as mystical seekers or perhaps mystical philosophers) through working to *know themselves*, discovered that the human being consists of two different opposing halves. Each half was itself seen as consisting of two parts. First there was the visible body which was made of a subtle element, such as had constituted Adam's body before the Fall, which they called the *hylic* body. Later, after Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the *hylic* body was enclosed within a covering of gross matter which was called the *choical* body. According to Rufus Jones the idea of the body's 'outer sheath' was based on the scriptural text 'Unto Adam also and his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them'.<sup>43</sup> The second half of a human being was invisible and also consisted of two parts: the *psychical* being which

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<sup>42</sup> See passage in St. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*, III, 3) which brings out in fullest relief St. Polycarp's position as a link with the past.

<sup>43</sup> Gen. iii. 21. A.V. cited by Jones, R. in *Spiritual Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Illinois, 1914, p. xiii.

belonged to the Demiurge who was the creator of the world (though he is not the highest deity) and the *pneumatical* being who was above the psychological. This pneumatic or spiritual part was a seed planted in man by the highest being of all – that which the Gnostics called the Pleroma and which Christian mystics (for example the 14<sup>th</sup> century German writer and preacher Meister Eckhart) called the Godhead.

In the third book of his famous treatise *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus makes his celebrated appeal to the ‘successions’ of the bishops in all the Churches which he uses to justify his opposition to ‘heretics’ who professed to have a kind of esoteric tradition derived from the Apostles.<sup>44</sup> ‘To whom, demands St. Irenaeus, would the Apostles be more likely to commit hidden mysteries than to the bishops to whom they entrusted their churches? In order then to know what the Apostles taught, we must have recourse to the ‘successions’ of bishops throughout the world’.<sup>45</sup> Irenaeus was especially concerned about a widespread movement, later called Montanism, which he regarded as spurious and outside the succession.

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<sup>44</sup> See The Gnostic Society Library Irenaeus: *Against Heretics*, <http://www.gnosis.org/library/advh1.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, [www.newadvent.org/cathen/12219b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12219b.htm),

## **Chapter 4. Lineaments of the Perennial Philosophy: Gnosticism and Christian Platonism**

### *Montanism*

It may be interesting to follow this movement which, incidentally, is one of many, since it is possible to link it with a subsequent chain of related schools that are connected along a period of more than a thousand years and which crossed over into the west and whose ideas were still available to those who sought them in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders. It arose in Phrygia (today western Turkey) and was referred to by contemporaries as the New Prophecy. Its leaders were Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla who emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit: “Behold, man (i.e. the human being) is like a lyre and I come upon him as a plectrum. Man is asleep and I am awake”. “Behold, the Lord is raising [to ecstasy] the hearts of men and he is giving them [new] hearts”.<sup>46</sup>

According to Jones, the Montanists ‘launched a movement for a ‘spiritual’ Church composed only of ‘spiritual’ persons. They called themselves ‘the Spirituals’ and they insisted that the age of the dispensation of the spirit had now come. The Church, rigidly organized with its ordained officials, its external machinery, and its accumulated traditions, was to them part of an old and outworn system to be left behind. In place of it was to come a new order of ‘spiritual’ people [who were] ... born from above, recipients

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<sup>46</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48,4,1. from *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993) pp. 147-150; see [www.womenpriests.org](http://www.womenpriests.org)).

of a divine energizing power, partakers in the life of the spirit and capable of being guided on a progressive revelation into all the truth.<sup>47</sup> In other words they claimed to be directly inspired by the Holy Spirit as had those of the apostolic age, about whom we read in the New Testament, of prophetic visions, ecstasies and the power to work miracles. This movement, and others that relied on visions and prophecy such as the group around the theologians Valentinus and Ptolemy, attracted enormous numbers of followers both in Rome and throughout the Christian communities. However there was an equally forceful opposition to them from Irenaeus and other high-ranking Christians who denounced them as spurious and as false prophets. The position of the Church's 'big hitters' – Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, Tertullian, Hippolytus – was eventually victorious; so much so that the writings of those who made the 'wrong choice', *i.e.* 'heretics' were more or less totally destroyed and their authors vilified and smeared for two thousand years.

According to one authority Montanism 'was simply a reaction of the old, the primitive Church against the obvious tendency of the Church of the day – to strike a bargain with the world, and arrange herself comfortably in it'.<sup>48</sup> Such reaction against institutionalism, against the external *forms* of worship rather than the internal *spiritual experience*, is a feature of reform movements throughout the history of Christianity and intensifying in the period between the end of the Middle Ages and the explosion of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Together with relatively recently discovered writings such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip* and other texts found at Nag Hammadi in the mid-

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<sup>47</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> W. Möller, "Montanism," Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopaedia or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, 3rd edn, Vol. 3. Toronto, New York & London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1894. pp.1561-1562.

20<sup>th</sup> century, we can today see more or less clearly what had hitherto only been hinted at: the essence of that ‘spiritual church’ or ‘invisible church’ that the Church Fathers were so anxious to suppress and which can be called esoteric Christianity.

From the bishop’s point of view, of course, the gnostic position was outrageous. These heretics challenged the right to define what he considered to be his own church; they had the audacity to debate whether or not catholic Christians participated; and they claimed that their own group formed the essential nucleus, the “spiritual church”. Rejecting such spiritual elitism, orthodox leaders attempted instead to construct a *universal* church. Desiring to open the church to everyone, they welcomed members from every social class, every racial or cultural origin, whether educated or illiterate – everyone, that is who would submit to their system of organization. The bishops drew the line against anyone who challenged the three elements of this system: doctrine, ritual and clerical hierarchy – and the gnostics challenged them all. Only by suppressing gnosticism did orthodox leaders establish that system or organization which united all believers in a single institutional structure. They allowed no distinction between first- and second-class members than that between the clergy and the laity, nor did they tolerate any who claimed exemption from doctrinal conformity, from ritual participation and from obedience to the discipline that the priests and bishops administered. Gnostic churches, which rejected that system for more subjective

forms of religious affiliation survived, as churches, for only a few hundred years.<sup>49</sup>

Was the destruction meted out to the Gnostic churches wholly successful? There is a case for saying that the teachings lived on, reappearing in one form or another throughout the history of Christianity sometimes disguised within orthodoxy; sometimes, like the Cathars, openly and so attracting severe retribution; sometimes hidden unsuspected in the art, architecture and music of the church.

No one has yet succeeded in defining 'gnosticism' adequately, or indeed in demonstrating whether this movement preceded Christianity or grew from it. Certainly Gnostic sects were spreading at the same time as Christian ones; both were part of the general religious osmosis. Gnostics had two central presuppositions: belief in the existence of a secret code of truth, transmitted by word of mouth or by arcane writings. Gnosticism is a 'knowledge religion' – that is what the word means – which claims to have an inner explanation of life. Christianity [acting as a host] fitted into this role very well. It has a mysterious founder, Jesus, who had conveniently disappeared, leaving behind a collection of sayings and followers to transmit them; and of course in addition to the public sayings there were 'secret' ones, handed on from generation to generation by members of the sect.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Elaine Pagels *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, 1979, p. 118

<sup>50</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.45

This introduces the idea of another dimension to gnosticism, namely the role in it of ancient or ‘pagan’ philosophy. Tertullian named Marcion with other Gnostics, whom he regarded among the pagan philosophers, when he wrote the famous line, ‘What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?’<sup>51</sup>

The pre-20<sup>th</sup>-century understanding of Gnosticism was that it was primarily a product of synthesis between Greek philosophy and Christianity. This was the view of Tertullian and his anti-heresy peers in the second century and a view largely shared by scholars through the modern era. Even Harnack (1896) defined Gnosticism in this way.<sup>52</sup> More recently Hans Jonas<sup>53</sup> saw Gnosticism's origins in the synthesis of Greek and Eastern religion. But, the discovery of the library at Nag Hammadi in Egypt has forced a different view of the origins of Gnosticism. Because the Nag Hammadi corpus of Gnostic materials included pseudo-Christian, Jewish-Gnostic, and Hermetic-Gnostic (Persian) documents, the

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<sup>51</sup> Tertullian, ‘On Prescriptions Against Heretics’, 7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), vol. 3, edited by Cleveland A. Coxe. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963, p. 246.

<sup>52</sup> Harnack, Adolf (1851-1930) leading German scholar and theologian of his time. Son of the Lutheran scholar Theodosius Harnack (1817-89). He taught at Leipzig (1874) before becoming professor at Giessen (1879), Marburg (1886), and Berlin (1889-1921). The last appointment was challenged by the church because of Harnack's doubts about the authorship of the fourth gospel and other NT books. His unorthodox interpretations of biblical miracles including the Resurrection and his denial of Christ's institution of baptism. (see his *History of Dogma*, 7 vols. 1894-99) (New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, J.D. Douglas, 1974, p 452)

<sup>53</sup> See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: the Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston 1958. An astonishing work considering it was published before the discoveries at Nag Hammadi were known. It remains one of the best introductions to Gnosticism. Another invaluable work is Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Random House, 1978.



origination of Gnosticism should be considered to be a broader world-view transcending both Christianity and Greek philosophy.<sup>54</sup>

With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, the doors on the first centuries of Christianity are wide open.<sup>55</sup> The light now streaming in has proved too much for some; the Churches themselves even after 50 years seem quite unable to respond. One is grateful therefore to Dr Pagels who, as well as publishing scholarly work in leading academic journals, shares her views with a wider readership in her books; views that endorse those 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers such as Mead, Jonas and others who have sought to rehabilitate gnosticism.<sup>56</sup>

Many of the books from Nag Hammadi were written between the later part of the first century and the end of the third century AD. They belonged to a community of Egyptian monks who studied a Christianity rather different from what would soon become the canonical New Testament and the dogmas of orthodox doctrine. The establishment of the Church as a secular institution after the passing of the apostolic age (*i.e.* those who had actually known Jesus Christ and had been taught by him or by his immediate followers) created, already in the second century, the beginnings of a division between those who sought to live a purely spiritual life in direct contact with divine energies or the Holy Spirit and those who wanted to establish the religion of Christ as a social movement in the world. The latter, under the powerful and influential Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, established Christian practices and beliefs laid down within specific boundaries and

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<sup>54</sup> Marcion and Marcionite Gnosticism By Cky J. Carrigan, Ph. D. (11/96) <http://ontruth.com/marcion.html>

<sup>55</sup> James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Harper and Row, 1977

<sup>56</sup> Among Dr Pagels' works this writer would recommend *The Origin of Satan*, 1995; *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, 1989; *The Gnostic Gospels*, 1979; *The Gnostic Paul: Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*, 1975 *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, 1973.

which excluded many of the writings and ideas of the former group. Later, in the fourth century, Athanasius the bishop of Alexandria ordered the destruction of all ‘heretical’ texts. The order seems to have been successful and, until the Nag Hammadi discovery, access to their ideas – in written form at least – was almost exclusively through the polemical essays of its opponents.

The direction taken by those Gnostic groups in the second century reveals a recurring tendency within Christianity; a tendency that goes against the often rigid conventions of the institutionalized, established churches; adherence to which was nearly always disapproved of and often persecuted. Once the church had entered into an alliance with the state at the beginning of the fourth century, its ideals were too easily compromised in favour of political aims such as state security and state unity. For the individual the compromise was at the level of conscience. For the next 1200 years some aspects of the church had a tendency to become an organization comparable in some ways with the business world or the civil services of modern times; it provided the best opportunities for men of ability to advance their personal status to high levels within society. Dissent, then as now, was a sure way to oblivion and ignominy.

### *Gnosticism: The Way of Self-knowledge*

The scholar Elaine Pagels has convincingly suggested that Gnosticism is, in essence, the way of self-knowledge, that the abiding idea of the spiritual life, the *measure* of all

spiritual knowledge, is self-knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore it is an esoteric way much of which ‘remained, on principle, unwritten’.<sup>58</sup> ‘A wise man does not blurt out every word’<sup>59</sup> and ‘Be not as the merchants of the word of God. Put all words to the test before you utter them’.<sup>60</sup>

Gnostic teachers usually reserved their secret instructions, sharing it only verbally, to ensure each candidate’s suitability to receive it. Such instruction required each teacher to take responsibility for highly select, individualized attention to each candidate. And it required the candidate, in turn, to devote energy and time – often years – to the process. Tertullian sarcastically compares Valentinian instruction to that of the Eleusinian mysteries which ‘first beset all access to their group with tormenting conditions; and they require a long initiation before they enroll their members, even instruction for five years for their adept students, so they may educate their opinions by this suspension of full knowledge, and, apparently, raise the value of their mysteries in proportion to the longing for them which they have created. Then follows the duty of silence ...’<sup>61</sup>

Pagels points out that ‘for gnostics, exploring the psyche became explicitly what is for many people today implicitly – a religious quest. Some who seek their own interior direction, like the radical gnostics, reject religious institutions as a hindrance to their

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<sup>57</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, See Chap. VI ‘Gnosis: Self-Knowledge as Knowledge of God’, pp. 119-141

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 140

<sup>59</sup> ‘The Teaching of Silvanus’, in *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 352

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 361

<sup>61</sup> Pagels, p. 140. The quotation from Tertullian is from his *Adversus Valentinianos I*

progress. Others, like the Valentinians, willingly participated in them, although they regard the church more as an instrument of their own self-discovery than as the necessary “ark of salvation”’.<sup>62</sup> And further, ‘Both gnosticism and psychotherapy value above all, knowledge – the self-knowledge which is insight’.<sup>63</sup>

The spiritual exercises of the Gnostics, then, are not specifically described in their writings, though they are hinted at and obliquely referred to. The author of *The Teaching of Silvanus* is referring to psychological states and events when he employs the symbol of the city as an analogy for the inner life and the imagery in some of Bruegel’s paintings, such as the *Numbering at Bethlehem* or the *Massacre of the Innocents*, can be viewed in the light of such meaning.

Throw every robber out of your gates. Guard all your gates with torches ... he who will not guard these ... will become like a city which is desolate since it has been captured, and all kinds of wild beasts have trampled on it. For thoughts which are not good are evil wild beasts. And your city will be filled with robbers and you will not be able to acquire peace but only all kinds of savage wild beasts...the whole city, which is your soul, will perish...Remove all these...bring in your guide and your teacher. The mind is the guide, but reason is the teacher.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 123

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 124

<sup>64</sup> ‘Teaching of Silvanus’, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, San Francisco, 1977, p. 347

The great G. R. S. Mead wrote that ‘Gnosis was to be attained by definite endeavour and conscious striving along the path of cosmological and psychological science’.<sup>65</sup>

‘Conscious striving’ and ‘psychological science’ refer to the kinds of inner exercises familiar today to students of Vipassana or Zen meditation and which are being studied and even revived in Christian monasteries and churches that put emphasis on contemplative prayer. There are signs, for example on Mount Athos, that the hesychast tradition is being once more revived.<sup>66</sup>

### *Spiritual Exercises*

It is implicit in the writings coming from the *Philosophia Perennis* tradition that philosophy only begins to have meaning when it is fully lived and *practised*. Today philosophy is an academic subject and students studying it for their degrees are not expected to practice it. But in former times contemplation or *theoria* was an essential foundation of the tradition of true philosophy. We see this in the life of the groups that formed around great teachers in antiquity such as Pythagoras at whose school on the island of Croton disciplines were imposed in matters of diet, silence and daily conduct. We also learn from the French scholar and theologian Pierre Hadot that ‘Plato had given

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<sup>65</sup> G. R. S. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, London 1900, p. 175.

<sup>66</sup> See Mitchell B. Leister in *Quest Magazine*, March-April 2000,  
<http://www.theosophical.org/theosophy/questmagazine/>

his Academy an extremely solid material and juridical organization. The leaders of the school succeeded one another in a continuous chain until Justinian's closure of the school in 529, and, throughout this entire period, scholarly activity was carried out according to fixed, traditional methods.<sup>67</sup> The same author goes on to remind us that 'the tradition was continued, both in the Arab world and in the Latin West, up until the Renaissance (Marsilio Ficino)'.<sup>68</sup> Similar spiritual exigencies, as we shall see, were applied among the 'heretical' groups of Germany, Holland and Flanders in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Hadot shows that, in the Perennial Philosophy, Reality is not perceptible to the rational mind or the physical senses; it has to be sought by the cultivation of inner, spiritual energies. Such energies are acquired through the practices of contemplation, prayer and meditation; though these alone are insufficient. 'Techniques by themselves used by a person working alone will not advance him in the path; a spiritual step can be taken only with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>69</sup> This may be a non-rational or, according to some, supra-rational idea but it is the traditional view and is found frequently, for example, in the *Philokalia*. There we find, for instance, St Isaac of Syria, writing in the 6th century, saying, 'Spiritual mysteries are above knowledge and cannot be apprehended by the physical senses or the reasoning power of the mind'.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Blackwell, 1995, p. 71

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>69</sup> Author's interview with a monastic spiritual adviser, Vatopaidi Monastery, Mount Athos, May, 2005

<sup>70</sup> Kadloubovsky and Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, London 1964, p. 227.

For human beings to perceive the world of Reality via the descent of the Holy Spirit it is necessary, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, to sense what he called a ‘hierarchical succession’ of intermediate and higher worlds that are perceptible to our spiritual faculties but not to our physical senses.

Each order in the hierarchical succession is guided to the divine co-operation, and brings into manifestation, through the Grace and Power of God, that which is naturally and supernaturally in the Godhead, and which is consummated by him superessentially, but is hierarchically manifested for man’s imitation, as far as is attainable, of the God-loving Celestial Intelligences.<sup>71</sup>

Man, or rather man’s soul, can aspire to ‘imitate’ Reality by what Iamblichus calls ‘cosmogonic mimesis’ which can be understood as aligning the inner cosmos, the microcosm, with the structure of the macrocosm.<sup>72</sup> This is not a matter of ‘taking thought’ by which a man ‘cannot add one cubit to his stature’,<sup>73</sup> it can only be done by interior prayer and attention – what the *Philokalia* calls ‘tending the vineyard of the heart’.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology and The Celestial Hierarchies*, Shrine of Wisdom ed., Godalming, 1963.

<sup>72</sup> Gregory Shaw, Iamblichus *Theurgy and the Soul*, 1995

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 6:24

<sup>74</sup> Kadloubovsky, E. and Palmer, G.E.H. *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*. London: Faber and Faber, 1961.

Hadot suggests that religion and philosophy, for Pagans, Jews and Christians in late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, held much in common and even, it may be said, were essentially the same. ‘Both Judaism and Christianity sought to present themselves to the Greek world as philosophies; thus they developed, in the persons of Philo and Origen respectively, a biblical exegesis analogous to the traditional pagan exegesis of Plato’.<sup>75</sup>

More important for this study is Hadot’s demonstration that the *conduct* of philosophy was based on the *practice* of spiritual exercises, and, further, that such exercises were similar from antiquity to the Renaissance.

Ignatius’ *exercitia spiritualia* are nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition ... In the first place, both the idea and the terminology of *exercitium spirituale* are attested, in early Latin Christianity well before Ignatius of Loyola, and they correspond to the Greek Christian term *askesis*. In turn, *askesis* – which must be understood not as asceticism, but as the practise of spiritual exercises – already existed within the philosophical tradition of antiquity. In the final analysis, it is to antiquity that we must turn in order to explain the origin and significance of spiritual exercises.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hadot, *op. cit.*, p. 72

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82



*The Tradition in the West: Dionysius the Areopagite*

An important exponent in Christianity of Plotinus' ideas is the 5<sup>th</sup>-century Christian Platonist, Dionysius the Areopagite. Just as there is a suggestion of an 'unbroken chain' connecting Pythagoras and the pre-Platonists through to the last of the Neoplatonists, so there is the idea of continuity in Christian mysticism. According to Andrew Louth: 'With Denys (Dionysius the Areopagite) we come to the end of the development of Patristic mystical theology. For with Denys are completed all the main lines of the mystical theology of the Fathers ... In Denys the tradition of apophatic theology, which has its roots in Philo and Gregory of Nyssa, is summed up by the tiny, but immensely influential, *Mystical Theology* ... For Denys is the most well-known exponent of the Negative or Apophatic Way, where the soul flees from everything created and is united with the Unknowable God in Darkness.'<sup>77</sup>

The trans-cosmic principle, as set out by Plotinus, whereby each phase of the universe is the image of the phase above it and, at the same time, the archetype for the phase below, becomes, in the works of Dionysius, the 'imitation of Divine Power'.

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<sup>77</sup> Louth, *op. cit.* p. 159.

According to the same law of the material order, the Fount of all order, visible and invisible, supernaturally shows forth the glory of its own radiance in all-blessed outpourings of first manifestation to the highest beings, and, through them, those below them participate in the Divine Ray. For since these have the highest knowledge of God, and desire pre-eminently the Divine Goodness, they are thought worthy to become first workers, as far as can be attained, of the imitation of Divine Power and Energy, and beneficently uplift those below them, as far as is in their power, to the same imitation by shedding abundantly upon them the splendour which has come upon themselves; while these, in turn, impart their light to lower choirs. And thus, throughout the whole hierarchy, the higher impart that which they receive to the lower, and through the Divine Providence all are granted participation in the Divine Light in the measure of their receptivity. The holy orders both lead and are led, but not the same ones, nor by the same ones, but that each is led by those above itself, and in turn leads those below it.<sup>78</sup>

In 827 a set of Dionysius' writings was sent to Louis I, son of Charlemagne, who turned them over to the Abbey of St Denis. It can be seen today with its decorated cover in the Louvre. During the reign of Charles the Bald (843-876) John Scotus Erigena received a royal command to translate the works of Dionysius into Latin. He also wrote an original work which was permeated with Dionysian views and which was destined to have a great influence on later generations. The importance of Dionysius and his translator and

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<sup>78</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite *Mystical Theology and Celestial Hierarchies*, Godalming, 1965, p. 44.

commentator Erigena cannot be exaggerated. Nearly every medieval scholar made use of these writings; the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French scholar Dulac says ‘If the works of Dionysius had been lost, they could be almost reconstructed from the works of Aquinas.’<sup>79</sup>

It was [Dionysius’] formulation of the celestial order which fed the imagination of the Middle Ages and ... furnished Dante with the ‘nature of the ministry angelical’. It was here too that Spenser got those ‘trinical triplicities’ which ‘About him wait and on his will depend’. And we get an echo ... in Tennyson’s lines:

The Great Intelligences fair

That range above our mortal state.

The ninefold order of the heavenly hierarchy came to be as much a necessary part of human thought as the pictorial facts of the gospel were ... so that not only poets and theologians made general use of [it] but ... it was taken up everywhere by the popular mind.<sup>80</sup> The ‘celestial ladder’ leading back to God became, too, the common property of all later mystics, and there is hardly a single mystical writer who does not have somewhere in his book a description of the ‘upward steps’ by

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<sup>79</sup> L’ Abbé J. Dulac, *Oeuvres de St Denys l’Areopagite*, 1932

<sup>80</sup> The ‘Nine Choirs of Angels’, connecting Man to God are, in ascending order: Angels, Archangels, Powers, Dominions, Thrones, Virtues, Principalities, Cherubim and Seraphim.

which the soul flees from the world and the flesh to an inexpressible union with the One Reality who is above knowledge.<sup>81</sup>

One example the influence of Dionysius is Walter Hylton's *Scala perfectionis* or *The ladder of perfection*, published in 1494.<sup>82</sup>

John Scotus Erigena announced at the beginning of one of his tracts that true philosophy and true religion are identical.<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere he says 'There is nothing in the visible and material world which does not signify something immaterial and reasonable'<sup>84</sup>. Jones tells us that he 'seized the pantheistical elements of the system and brought to full emphasis the doctrine of the 'progression of God' into all things and the return of all things into God'.<sup>85</sup> Erigena's own book *On the Division of Nature* 'marks a philosophical epoch which, together with the Dionysian writings, turned the stream of Greek Mysticism into Christian Scholasticism'.<sup>86</sup>

#### *Origins of the Cathars: Paulicians, Montanists, Manichaeans and Bogomils*

Many of the ideas that Erigena was concerned with resonate with the movement we know as Catharism which came to France via Eastern Europe and which historians have shown had its roots in oriental Christian 'heresies' dating back to the earliest Christian times.

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<sup>81</sup> Jones p. 107.

<sup>82</sup> [Westminster:] Wynkyn de Worde, 1494, Bv. 2. 7

<sup>83</sup> Erigena, *De Divina Praedestinationae*, c. 851

<sup>84</sup> *De Divisione Naturae*, v. 3

<sup>85</sup> Jones p.108

<sup>86</sup> Jones p. 124

Catharism was a revived form of Manichaeism and Montanism. Its appearance is recorded in Bulgaria about the middle of the ninth century. It seems to have come from Armenia, where sects of Paulicians held similar views. According to Jones, the Paulicians were probably named from Paul of Samasota, not far from the ancient 'Ur of the Chaldees', today in north western Iraq, where they originated as a separate sect around the middle of the seventh century. The patriarch of the sect was a certain Constantine, who had come under Gnostic and Manichaean influences. He had a copy of St Paul's Epistles which he considered to be the foundation of his own gnostic ideas. By allegorical interpretation he harmonized St Paul's Christianity with Oriental theosophy and the product was the 'Paulicianism'... Later [it] became 'Catharism' in the West.<sup>87</sup>

According to Lynda Harris in her book on Hieronymus Bosch, it was Manichaean/Cathar dualism, surviving in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders that was the foundation of Bosch's mystical ideas and symbolism.<sup>88</sup> She cites a significant group of authors who consider that Catharism, which came to France via Eastern Europe, had its roots in oriental Christian 'heresies' dating back to the earliest Christian times.<sup>89</sup>

Steven Runciman finds a gnostic origin for the Paulicians especially in the dualism that was characteristic of the gnostics and their answer to the problem of the origin of evil. He also suggests a Zoroastrian influence through the Christian or Zoroastrian heretic

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<sup>87</sup> Columbia Encyclopedia, <http://www.bartleby.com/65/pa/Paulicia.html> See also Medieval Church, [http://www.medievalchurch.org.uk/h\\_paul.html](http://www.medievalchurch.org.uk/h_paul.html), Jones p. 143, Herzog, "Paulicians," Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopaedia or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, 3rd edn, Vol. 2. Toronto, New York & London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1894. pp.1776-1777.

<sup>88</sup> Lynda Harris, *The Secret Heresy of Hieronymus Bosch*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1985, p. 24. See below, p. 143.

<sup>89</sup> These are usefully summarized in Lynda Harris, *The Secret Heresy of Hieronymus Bosch*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1995, 2002

Bardaisan who, in the second century, taught that ‘Buddha and Zoroaster ... Hermes and Plato, as well as Jesus, taught God’s message to man’.<sup>90</sup> The Paulicians survived and even thrived in Byzantine times until the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) that saw the end of iconoclasm. After this date Paulicians were oppressed by the authorities. The emperor Constantine V transplanted colonies of them to Thrace, a policy adopted by subsequent emperors. There they lingered on until their teachings were revived in 10<sup>th</sup>-century Bulgaria by a group known as the Bogomils.<sup>91</sup> They were named after a priest named Bogomil (‘loved of God’). Runciman states that ‘by the end of the eleventh century the main body of the Bogomils was definitely Gnostic in its ideas’.<sup>92</sup>

The Bogomil heresy was born amidst peasants whose physical misery made them conscious of the wickedness of things. The Christianity imposed on them by their masters seemed alien and without comfort. The creed of the Paulicians, settled nearby, was fitter; it taught simple Dualism and explained the misery of the world. An unknown priest adapted it for the Slavs ... As time went on the new faith developed; the heretics came in touch with the Messalians, who gave them access to all the wealth of Orientalized Gnostic tradition. And thus a new Christianity was formed, based on early Christian legend and Eastern Dualism ... to become one of the great religions of Europe.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee*, Cambridge, 1947, p.12; ‘the main Zoroastrian element in Mani’s teaching, the opposition of Light and Darkness, he probably derived from Bardaisan’.

<sup>91</sup> Runciman, *op. cit.* p. 67

<sup>92</sup> Idem, p. 89

<sup>93</sup> Idem, p. 93

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the Bogomil teaching, that is, Catharism, spread to the West finding followers in Lombardy and in France. It had become the state religion of Bosnia where it survived until Turkish rule in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Historians such as Runciman account for these movements mainly on political grounds and it is true that the rivalries and alliances of powerful dynastic clans and ecclesiastic authorities played the Bogomil heresy as a card when it suited their drive for influence and ascendancy. At the same time there was in the West a strong anti-clerical movement and a desire for the original purity of religion that important elements of the ‘heresy’ seemed to offer. These elements reflect the Perennial Philosophy. Harris notes, interestingly, ‘a number of scholars have begun to ... see [that] Catharism and Bogomilism were unexplained revivals of primitive Christianity, which had somehow been influenced by Gnosticism. Any similarity between them and Manicheism are explained by the universal Gnostic ideas that were shared by all of them’.<sup>94</sup>

Making the connection with Manichaeism, Harris discusses the Tammuz myth cited as an early example of the symbolism of spiritual death and resurrection with its parallel in Manichean and Cathar literature and the forgetfulness that overtakes the soul (or Adam) once it is ensnared in the body.<sup>95</sup> ‘Widengren ... says ... the chief doctrines of Manichaeism are the same as those of all other Gnostic systems.’<sup>96</sup> Manichaeism developed in Mesopotamia in the third century AD. ‘It was an amalgamation of many earlier systems, including Gnostic Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and even Buddhism.

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<sup>94</sup> Harris, p. 32

<sup>95</sup> Harris, p. 27

<sup>96</sup> Widengren, G., 1946, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism (King and Saviour II)*, Uppsala and Leipzig.

Mani, who died in 277, claimed Buddha, Zoroaster, Hermes, and Plato as his predecessors. He always called himself “Mani, Apostle of Jesus Christ”.<sup>97</sup> According to Runciman, Obolensky, Loos and other scholars ... Manichaeism remained strong in the Middle East ... it influenced a seventh century sect called the Paulicians [who] arrived in [Byzantium and] the Balkans in the eighth century.<sup>98</sup> Harris points out that in the tenth century Manichaeism and Messalianism combined to become Bogomilism. Bogomilism was Catharism. ‘Virtually all of today’s experts ... accept that West European Catharism had direct links with East European Bogomilism.’<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> [www.factmonster.com](http://www.factmonster.com)

<sup>98</sup> Harris, p. 29

<sup>99</sup> Harris, p. 34