

# THE CHRISTIAN MYSTIC AS

*paganus redevivus:*

## A Hermeneutical Suggestion

by **Roger J. Corless**

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For some time there have been panels on East-West Mysticism at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University. These panels have grown out of an attempt, inspired by Thomas Merton, to understand Christian mysticism in a worldwide context. I believe that, were Merton still living, he would be an enthusiastic supporter of and original contributor to such panels. Merton sought, in his contacts with non-Christian mystics, a vision of what mysticism was as a whole. Yet, except for some oblique and tantalizing phrases in his prose poem "Hagia Sophia," he paid very little attention to the pagan roots of Christian mysticism.<sup>1</sup> This essay attempts to do this, and suggests that Christian mysticism is a reclamation and enrichment of the power of its pre-Christian origins.

### A STORY

My name is Margaret. You know me as Julian since I was, while on earth, an anchoress attached to the church of St. Julian in Norwich, England, during the fourteenth century of our salvation. I have come to tell you

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 363-371. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CP*. I am indebted to Stephen Daney for drawing my attention to this important text.

\* This paper was delivered on 8 May 1989 at the 24th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

something of my secret thoughts. When I received my first showings from Our Lord and Saviour I was much troubled, although much delighted. It seemed to me that what He showed me was not that which Holy Church taught, and so I kept my counsel, writing only shortly and circumspectly of what I had seen. Many years later, after continued communion at the motherly breast of my Saviour, I was emboldened to write more largely and more plainly. Your clerkes have now collected both of my poor attempts and solemnly published them as the *Short Text* and the *Long Text*. Pardon me if I find myself somewhat amused by this!

Now that I have passed beyond the world of history, I know more, but I still do not know all. Some of you may think that, after having gone through the gate of death which, through the merits of Our Lord's Passion, is now the gate of eternal life, I should have come to know everything. You will even say that I wrote "suddenly our eye will be opened . . ." That is true, but to what is our eye opened? It is opened to the infinity of God! Into this infinity, this boundless ocean of love and wisdom, I continue to grow, and its end has not been shown me.

As the hands of my Lord never leave off His work, and as I am His joyful and willing servant, so I find that my own hands are commanded never to leave off the work of God until all time shall be ended. My Lord has other sheep, who are not of the fold which I knew while I was on earth, and I must assist my Lord in calling to them.

That in my Lord's showings which most delighted yet most troubled me was the absence of any showing of hell. The clerkes taught that there was hell, the Word of God spoke of it, and all around me the Black Death was raging as a living hell. How could it be that my Lord would say that hell did not exist, that the world was all good, when so much of what I heard and saw was pain, ungood and suffering?

He replied that all was good because He loved it. All that He had made was as nothing, seen in itself. The immensity of the universe was in His sight no more than a hazel nut (or, as you say in the New World, as a filbert) and, except that He loved it, it could not survive a single instant. As our brothers Thomas of Aquino and the Master Eckhart have said, we live perpetually on the brink of the abyss of non-being, and we are held in being only by the goodness of God.

I am, now, beginning to understand more of what Our Lord meant when he showed me this. Hell is division, it is separation from God. And who can separate us from God? No human nor non-human being, and no distressful thing at all, as the blessed Apostle Paul assures us. It is our own

willfulness that separates us from God. All our unpeace, I have written, comes from failing of love on our part. This means, to speak plainly and without dissimulation, that hell is our own creation. When our minds are hellish, all we see, think and feel is hellish.

This is how it was during the terrible days of the Black Death. You who have to deal with the pain and fear of AIDS can only dimly, as in a mist, imagine the Black Death. Anyone, it seemed, might be struck down. We could see no reason for it. We did not know about what you call germs, and had someone suggested the flea as a cause, we would have laughed them to silence. All we could imagine was that God had turned against us, and that we needs must out from this stinking world and ascend to the world of light above. We threw ourselves on the mercy of God, and despised the world which He had created.

But I was told, amidst the screams and the stench, that all would be well, that all manner of thing would be well, that God despised nothing that He had made, and that He comes down to us in the lowest part of our need to succor us. Indeed, He is not only with us, He is under us, for He is the Ground of our beseeching.

I was shown, I now believe, the world of God as the temple of God, and mankind as its priesthood. This, therefore, I now say:

Look within, and look without. Look very far in, and very far out. Do not stop at how you feel or how you think, nor even at how God appears in the letter of His Holy Word or the writings of the learned clerkes. Commune with Him heart to Heart. See your soul as a mirror of God the Creator of all. See His creation as His clothing, as did our brother Francis. Know that you and God are already oned in His opening, and that He has put all His creation in your soul. Your God became flesh for you. Do you become enfleshed for Him.

### COMMENTARY

In the foregoing fantasy, I imagine Mother Julian (whom I pretend is called Margaret) coming to push us on, in this day and age, to a more incarnational and therefore more Christian mysticism: what Cornelia Jessey has called the prayer of *cosa* or things as distinct from the prayer of *nada* or "no-thing."<sup>2</sup> I will now try to present a hermeneutic of Christian mysticism in terms of this incarnational or "thingful" (*cosa*-full) perspective.

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2. Cornelia Jessey, *The Prayer of Cosa: Praying in the Way of Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 6. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Cosa*.

*An Evolutionary View*

The evolution of religion, still less of mysticism, is not a popular subject today. It is even embarrassing for a scholar to admit to some ideas on the subject. But, as we now seem to understand the world, evolution is a given, and it is unclear how religion, or mysticism, could escape from the theory. Perhaps we avoid the subject because the theory has been simplistically applied. Some reputable scholars of the fairly recent past argued that religion evolved as the number of gods decreased, or as it became more rational, or more like the Church of England. This is not dissimilar to Condorcet arguing that the pinnacle of the evolution of the human spirit is the French Republic. We cannot take the examples seriously, yet we need not on that account dismiss the theory itself.

A full demonstration of the fact and nature of religious evolution is well outside the scope of this essay which, as it says, is merely a suggestion. Some day (or year!) perhaps I will attempt the Hegelian (as it would literally be) task of composing a thorough proof. But let us for the moment assume that there is an evolution of religion, or of mysticism, and see what we find.

*The Axial Age and World-Denial*

Karl Jaspers suggested in 1948 that history had gone through a crisis which he called the Axial Age, somewhere between 800 and 200 B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> He noted first the extraordinary clustering of major religious figures around, especially, 600 B.C.E. Many of the major so-called "world religions" owe their origin, or their distinctive "modern" form to some teacher who lived at about that time: Confucius, Lao Tzu, Buddha, the anonymous composers of the *Upanishads*, the mysterious gentleman whom we call Second Isaiah, and the pre-Socratics (as founders, in effect, of the scientific world view). This clustering is immediately clear to the most superficial student of history, yet it is hardly ever mentioned in introductory courses in religion.

Jaspers claimed that the Axial Age was the time when *logos* took over from *mythos* and that "[m]an became aware of consciousness itself" ("Axial," p. 431, column 1). He characterized the main Axial Age vision as follows:

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3. Karl Jaspers, "The Axial Age of Human History: A Base for the Unity of Mankind," *Commentary* 6: 5 (November 1948), pp. 430-435. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Axial."

Imprisoned in a body fettered by passions, separated from the light and only dimly aware of himself, man longs for liberation and redemption . . . whether it is by ascent to the Idea; or in *ataraxia* — passive resignation; or by immersion in thought; or in the knowledge of himself and the world as Atman, the Universal Self; or in the experience of Nirvana; or in harmony with the Tao — the cosmic order; or in surrender to the will of God.  
 (“Axial,” p. 432, column 1)

In short, Jaspers is saying that, in the Axial Age, religion became *soteriological* in its emphasis. The world was seen as a trap, or as a prison, and means were sought to escape it.<sup>4</sup> This vision of the world which, when we are being rude, we may call Gnostic is what Gilbert Murray calls “the failure of nerve.”<sup>5</sup> He observes that: “The religion of later antiquity is overpoweringly absorbed in plans of escape from the prison of the seven planets” (*Five*, p. 147). Murray says that “[w]e seem to have travelled far from the simplicity of early Greek religion” (*Five*, p. 149f). There comes into being “what seems to us such a commonplace truism, the difference between Man and God” with a consequent movement “away from the outer world towards the world of the soul” (*Five*, pp. 152, 160).

Before the Axial Age, or the Age of the Failure of Nerve, religion had “something unawakened about it” (“Axial,” p. 433, column 2). We might understand this in Erich Neumann’s neo-Jungian terms as “The Original Unity” which then moves on to “The Separation of the Systems.”<sup>6</sup> That is, the consciousness associated with early religion was something like the consciousness of the infant: everything came from the all-providing mother. The world was *Mother Earth*, and she gave life, but she also punished (for perhaps mysterious reasons) and brought death. One needed to accept this, for there was, at that level, no other source of either life or death. The religious mode, I would say, was *celebrational* and *this-worldly*. The world was seen as *cosmos*, an ordered place which was one’s home, and one (primarily) gave thanks for it.

This is the mode of the surviving pre-Axial traditions — those which we used to call “primitive” or “pagan.” It is nicely illustrated by Shinto, a pre-Axial tradition which has, because of the peculiarities of the Japanese

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4. Curiously, Jaspers does not seem entirely to follow his own logic. In the quote above I have omitted a key phrase. The relevant part of the quote, with the omitted section italicized, is: “. . . man longs for liberation and redemption; and he finds that he can achieve liberation and redemption in the world, whether it is by ascent . . .” Since I am not following Jaspers, but building on him, I have removed what appears to be an aberrant reference to this-worldly (because “rational,” as he calls it) religion.

5. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (London: Watts & Co., 1935), lecture IV, “The Failure of Nerve.” This is a reprint of the original (1912?) Clarendon Press edition. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Five*.

6. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*; Bollingen series 42 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954), section headings A and B in Part II.

genius, continued as an integral part of Japanese culture. Shinto worship, which is primarily a ceremony of gratitude to the *kami* (gods) seen as *Oyasama* ("Parent" or "Mother-Father"), has four elements: purification (*harai*), offering (*shinsen*), prayer (*norito*), and feasting (*naorai*).<sup>7</sup> Christian liturgists will note at once the absence of *confession*. *Harai* is, quite simply, washing. It is the removal, as it were, of dust.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Buddhism, which is definitely post-Axial, speaks of the defilement of the passions, using a Chinese character which literally means "to dye cloth." That is, Shinto sees faults as minor, superficial obscurations while Buddhism, although claiming that the defilements are in the last analysis adventitious to mind, finds the defilements staining the mind through and throughout.

If, then, as Jaspers seems to say (or perhaps as I make him say) the post-Axial religious consciousness is *soteriological*, it is so because it sees the world no longer as an ordered *cosmos* but as its opposite, a *chaos*. From this chaos, which is variously defined, the practitioner desires release.<sup>9</sup> The religious mode is now world-denying or "redemptive."

The so-called New Age religions appear to set themselves up in opposition to this world-denying or redemptive consciousness. They are, by and large, religions of the earth, that is to say of the flesh and of the "now" and they call themselves, sometimes, pagan.<sup>10</sup> And it is significant, I think, that New Age religions typically are suspicious of what they call "institutional religion" but are accepting of the "mystical" or "inner" traditions.<sup>11</sup> When we look at the Christian mystics as *pagans*, I think we can see the connection.

We sometimes hear it said that, for primitive humankind, "everything was sacred." We might as well say that, for fish, everything is water. We can make this statement because, as somewhat amphibious animals, we can distinguish water and air. Pre-Axial humankind, it seems, did not distinguish "sacred" and "secular" and so it would be more meaningful

7. Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way* (New York: Tuttle, 1962), p. 51.

8. Tenrikyo, one of the most popular of the "New Religions" of Japan and which has a strong Shinto element, refers to defilements as "dust" in explicit contrast to post-Axial "sin": "Thus we can say that man is not to be accused of any original sin but rather is covered now and then with dust." Tadamasa Fukaya, *The Fundamental Doctrines of Tenrikyo* (Tenri City: Headquarters of Tenrikyo Church, 1960), p. 8.

9. I once taught a course on "the great world religions" (i.e., the post-Axial religions) from the standpoint of their soteriology: i.e., what is the problem, what is the answer, and how does one get from one to the other? It seemed to work.

10. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*; rev. & expanded ed. (New York: Beacon Press, 1986).

11. An engrossing semi-popular journal, *Gnosis*, is devoted entirely to "The Western Inner Traditions" and includes many articles on mysticism but none on the kinds of goings-on described in *The National Catholic Reporter*.

to say that “the sacred was everything.” That is, in our (post-Axial) terms, the sacred could not be localized as either objective or subjective. It simply was.

By contrast, the God of Monotheism manifests as Sacred Object in opposition to the profane. God exists before, and outside of, creation. Genesis 1: 1 says: “In the beginning, God . . .” (or, more correctly, *bara elohim*, “he, that is God, created . . .”). The Bible stigmatizes the identification of any object with God as idolatry, and, in the tradition of the Church, the limitation of the sacred “to this world” (note that the wording implies “another” world) has been regarded as the heresy of pantheism. That is, the God of Monotheism is a God of the post-Axial consciousness, of the split between the sacred and the secular, of a down-playing of “this world” and therefore of a need for salvation, escape, or redemption.

### *Mysticism and World-Affirmation*

But, of course, that is not the whole story. The God of Monotheism is experienced as inside as well as outside the soul. The Holy *Qur’an* (50: 15) says that Allah is closer to us than our jugular vein, and Augustine wrote that God is *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (*Confessions*, III. 6. 11). And Christianity, in addition, claims that God became flesh, that is, became intimately connected with, indeed indissolubly united with, this-worldly reality.

Whatever it is that we call “mysticism” (and I keep using the word although I am not sure what it means) seems to have something to do, at least in Christianity, with this experience of the immanence of God. Theology, on the other hand, seems to have to do with the transcendence, or the pseudo-objectivity, of God. I once read a prayer that began with the misprint “O external and almighty God . . .” Such an external God is not by any means the God of the mystics. The mystics see God in the depths of their souls and at the heart of created things.

A catalogue of citations on this point would fill a weighty volume. I will only cite a few examples which I believe are representative.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John holds pride of place amongst Christian mystics because of Jesus’ repeated assertions that he is within us as we are within him, and that he and the Father are likewise within each other. This is the co-inherence which, it seems to me, is the

hallmark of the developed spiritual consciousness.<sup>12</sup> The remark of Jesus recorded at Luke 17: 21 that “the kingdom of God is *entos humon*,” although literally meaning “among you,” was taken by Cassian to mean “within you” and has been so interpreted by generations of Christian mystics.<sup>13</sup>

Many saints are remembered as being on intimate terms with animals. Wild animals often became their pets (or, as we now say, “companion animals”), so that the distinction between “useful” (or domesticated) and “useless” (or dangerous) animals disappeared. Saint Jerome, after healing a lion, put it to work fetching food for the monastery. A raven brought bread each day to Saint Benedict during the time that he was a hermit. A noble Italian lady of Saint Francis’ day was awakened for prayer by a devout lamb.<sup>14</sup> Saint Roch was accompanied to his hermitage by his dog. Saint Philip Neri, when the time came for him to live in community, insisted that his cat be left in his apartment and that the brothers should go there to feed it. And, of course, Mother Julian is presumed to have had a cat, as permitted by the *Ancren Riwe*.

Perhaps the most well-known and greatest expression of the Christian mystical experience of communion with the so-called “natural” world (again, note that the word implies “another” world) is the *Canticle to Brother Sun* by Saint Francis. There is, indeed, a strong immanentist feel in Franciscan spirituality as a whole.<sup>15</sup> The incident of Saint Anthony of Padua preaching to the fishes comes across as positively pagan:

So one day, by an inspiration from God, St. Anthony went to the mouth of the river near the sea. And standing on the bank between the sea and the river, he began to call the fishes . . . and . . . all of a sudden such a great throng of large and small fishes gathered before him near the bank as had never been seen in that sea or river. And all of them held their heads a bit out of the water, gazing intently at St. Anthony’s face. There you would have seen . . . a great and very dense crowd of small fishes come in a hurry,

12. I have argued for this in many places. My fundamental position paper uses the modality as a way of understanding Buddhist-Christian relations. See Roger J. Corless, “The Mutual Fulfillment of Buddhism and Christianity in Co-inherent Superconsciousness,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*; ed. by Paul O. Ingram & Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 115-136.

13. “Conferences 1: 13,” in *Western Asceticism*; trans. by Owen Chadwick; Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 12: 202. The *New Jerusalem Bible* (footnote in loc.) allows “within you” only as “a third possibility [which] would not furnish as direct an answer to the Pharisees’ question.”

14. “When [Lady Jacoba di Settesoli] was late getting up in the morning, the lamb nudged her with its horns and roused her with its bleats, urging her to hurry and get to church.” Bonaventure, *Major Life of Saint Francis* 8: 7, in *English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*; ed. by Marion A. Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 694. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Omnibus*.

15. “Many commentaries on the writings of Saint Francis have overlooked this aspect because of a weak pneumatology.” *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*; trans. by Regis J. Armstrong & Ignatius C. Brady (Ramsay, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1972), p. 11. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Francis & Clare*.



like pilgrims going to receive an indulgence, and approach closer to the holy Father as to their protector. And so first the smaller fishes near the bank, secondly the middle-sized, and thirdly the largest fishes, where the water was deeper, attended this divinely arranged sermon of St. Anthony — all in very great peace and meekness and order. [Then] St. Anthony solemnly began to preach, saying: “My fish brothers . . . [and so forth].”

At these and similar words and preaching of St. Anthony, some of the fishes began to open their mouths, and all of them nodded their heads, and by these and other signs of reverence they praised God as much as they could. (*Omnibus*, pp. 1391-1393)

Except for the phrases “inspiration from God,” “pilgrims going to receive an indulgence” and “they praised God,” we might be reading here of the activities of a shaman who understands the voices of the beasts and is understood by them.

Much of Celtic spirituality exhibits a similar this-worldliness. Many Celtic saints, although far from other humans, had lively exchanges with the local animals.<sup>16</sup> *The Breastplate of Saint Patrick* calls Christ and the Trinity to the protection of the Christian as the pre-Christian Celt called the elemental forces. Saint Columba could say “Christ is my Druid,” that is, the Wise One of the Wild, and the Cross of Saint Martin on Iona, as other Celtic crosses, is a tree of life as much as it is the gallows of the Saviour. Heaven and earth, as A. M. Allchin pointed out in his film on Celtic spirituality shown on B. B. C. television, cannot be clearly separated by people who live in the British landscape where sea, mist and sky commonly blend into each other. There is, I would further suggest, a feeling of closeness to the earth, of indeed Mother Earth in the pre-Axial sense. It is, perhaps, out of this Celtic heritage that Mother Julian could hear Christ say, in the midst of the plague, “How could anything be amiss?”<sup>17</sup>

And then, there is the vexed case of Meister Eckhart. Hailed as a great mystic, denounced by the Vatican, in process of being reclaimed by present-day Dominicans — whatever the outcome of the debate, one thing is certain. He was accused of Pantheism, a very significant charge. Eckhart was regarded by his enemies as having gone back to a pre-Christian spirituality in which “this world” is the only world there is.

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16. Fortuitously, another member of the panel at which the original version of this essay was read, Esther de Waal, mentioned to the delight of the rest of us many such instances in her paper “The Concept of Dysart/ Dissert: East/ West Encounters in Early Celtic Monasticism.”

17. For the creation spirituality element in Mother Julian, see Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (London, SPCK, 1987), pp. 128-137.

*Affirmation, Negation and Transfiguration*

The question arises, from these few examples, whether the mysticism of *cosa* is atypical of Christian mysticism, and, indeed, opposed to the "orthodox" mysticism of *nada*. Dom Cuthbert Butler catalogues the difference between the mystics of light and the mystics of dark but does not solve the problem for us.<sup>18</sup> Cornelia Jessey tries to assure us that there is no opposition. Citing Niels Bohr that "the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth," she tells us that:

The prayer of *cosa* goes in a direction opposite to the prayer of *nada*, as north is opposite to south, but it is only another profound truth. The profound truth of the prayer of *cosa* is as old as the profound truth of *nada* — perhaps older. (*Cosa*, p. 6)

But she is a little slippery. How is it another profound truth? I suggest we go back to Erich Neumann. If, as his book maintains, the ontogeny of personal integration is (in some analagous sense) a recapitulation of the phylogeny of myth, then perhaps the Axial Age is equivalent to adolescent rebellion and a maturer spirituality would entail a reconciliation with Mother. If, further, we might legitimately claim that the mystics are maturer Christians than the rest of us, then we might find that they (or, at least, the mystics of *cosa*) have resolved the tension between the experience of God as transcendent, or "external," and as immanent. And, I believe, we do find just that.

Saint Francis, in his *Canticle to Brother Sun*, praises the sun and other "natural" phenomena as creatures of God, not as objects in themselves, and he uses the particle *per*. This means in Italian "for," "by" and "through" (*Francis & Clare*, p. 38f, n. 5). In English, we must choose one of these translations (Armstrong and Brady in the note just cited explain why they chose "through") and thereby lose the richness of the original.

In pre-Axial mode, one might praise the sun as sun: the sun *himself* would be a god, *Sol Invictor*. In post-Axial mode, one acknowledges that behind the sun (and other phenomena now called "natural" in contrast to "supernatural") there is another force, a force indeed without which the "natural" world would be dead. Whereas the Monist (or Pantheist) holds that the universe is Itself Being and that it created Itself by its own inherent power, life and consciousness, the Monotheist teaches that God, who alone has (or is) Being, says to the inert universe: "Let there be . . ." (Genesis

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18. Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism*; 2nd ed. (London: Constable, 1926).

1: 3, 6, etc.).<sup>19</sup> Such an inert universe could not *in and of itself* be anything but “a vale of tears” from which all right thinking people must desire deliverance.

The vision that “nature” herself was dead and therefore could not be worshipped as such was a startling revelation which distinguished the religion of Israel from that of its neighbors. The Temple of the Most High, to the frustration of looting conquerors, was empty. There was no god who could be carried back to Babylon in triumph. The prophets and the psalmists made fun of those who bowed down to images which “have noses and smell not” (Psalm 115 [113]: 6). The religious festivals, beginning as agricultural and possibly fertility festivals, were transformed into celebrations of God’s redeeming acts in history.<sup>20</sup> Centuries later when Islam became known as a religion, daily prayers were ordained to be said (amongst other items) just *after* dawn, noon and dusk, as if to say very clearly: “We tell time by God’s sun, we do not worship the sun as a god.”

Today, when “redemptive theology” is somewhat under a cloud and, like vinyl records, seems quaint and old-fashioned, we need to remind ourselves of its power. The proclamation “I am the LORD, there is no other,” and the realization by the post-Exilic Jews that the Lord did not need a Temple made with hands for his temple was the entire universe, and by Micah that God did not need animal sacrifices (Micah 6: 6-8), liberated the Monotheist from subservience to natural forces. One saw how one could go beyond and behind the pesky earth-spirits and (later) the gnostic archons into friendship and communion with “he who made the Pleiades and Orion” (Job 9: 9). In a word, one had grown up and realized that Mother was not God, she was just mother.

And this is where the Christian mystic comes in to resolve the tension between the transcendence of God (which in its clean, post-Axial way fits neatly into a systematic theology) and his immanence (which is pre-Axial, murky, and quasi-pantheistic). The mystic is, above all, one who *experiences* God. And the Christian God is not only (as in other Monotheisms)

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19. “That (One-With-No-Second) thought, May I be many, may I grow forth. It sent forth fire. That fire thought, May I be many, may I grow forth . . .” *Chandogya Upanisad* VI. 2. 3. in *The Principal Upanisads*; trans. by S. Radhakrishnan (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 449. Radhakrishnan comments that “thought” (*aikṣata*) is “literally saw. This word indicates that pure being is conscious.” Note that although I agree with Jaspers that the Upanishads are post-Axial, I believe that there is a spectrum from minimally to maximally post-Axial, and that traditions such as Monistic Hinduism and Taoism are on the low (pre-Axial) end of the spectrum, while the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are towards the high end. There is no space here to offer proof for this view.

20. For example, during Sukkoth one sits in a booth decorated with the fruits of the harvest but thinks, not of the fecundity of Mother Earth, but of how one’s ancestors, being nomads, lived in temporary shelters (Leviticus 23: 42-43).

above and beyond the universe while also being somehow deeply within it, he also became flesh, was crucified, and rose beyond birth-and-death into dimensionlessness. By accepting death (and a real, not a docetic, death) Christ assented to the post-Axial vision that all is not well with the world, true satisfaction is not to be found in it. He then passed into the earth, sanctifying and transforming the Earth Mother, and from thence ascended in the resurrected flesh, post-Axial but celebrational.<sup>21</sup>

Some forms of Christianity have stopped at the Cross: the rotting and twisted Christ of the Isenheim Altarpiece by Grunewald (ca. 1509-1515) is its icon. Such a Christianity makes no sense, even on its own terms, for it sees Christ as a failure. Creation Spirituality is a needed antidote, but, I believe, it goes too far. It is not clear what it does with sin and suffering.<sup>22</sup> The cosmic Christ of Matthew Fox has not been crucified (although the planet, which is "Mother," but also somehow Christ is "being" crucified).<sup>23</sup> By going experientially through the crucifixion to the resurrection, the Christian mystic, especially the mystic of *cosa*, accepts the reality of sin, of the post-Axial vision, and then recaptures the vision of power in creation, seeing it however as divine not by reason of itself but by reason of its redemption, and therefore its participation in the resurrected life by having become, I dare to say, co-inherent with Christ in the Blessed Trinity.

## CONCLUSION

My claim, then, is that there is an ancient view of the world as sacred in such a way that sacred and secular are indistinguishable or, better, are not yet distinguished. For the purposes of this essay, and to be a little

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21. That Christ's contact with earthly things sanctified them is a commonplace of patristic theology. For example, at his baptism, it was said, the water did not purify him (as it would us) but he purified it, so that all water became sacred and suitable for baptism. However, I have not come across a patristic suggestion that, by his burial, Christ sanctified the very earth herself. (The germ of this idea was suggested to me by Thomas Sherratt, a former Franciscan friar).

22. This was a question which the Vatican asked of Teilhard de Chardin and to which, in my view, he never adequately responded. An article by Kenneth Woodward on Thomas Berry in *Newsweek* (5 June 1989 — "A New Story of Creation," pp. 70-72) concludes with the remark: "But Berry's theory . . . does not take into account the existence of moral evil . . ."

23. The front cover of Fox's *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) depicts a young man identified as Christ and Holy Wisdom and holding the planet earth. The note inside the back cover explains that: "There is a traditional icon of Christ as Holy Wisdom from Russia. This is a modern variant of that theme . . . based on Matthew Fox's discussion of God as a child and Meister Eckhart's vision of the beautiful naked boy." This remark is too offhand. Whatever a vision of a naked boy may have meant to Meister Eckhart, it is not at all clear that it has much to do with Hagia Sophia who is, in Eastern Orthodoxy, almost always female and different from Christ (see, for example, Samuel D. Cioran, *Vladimir Solov'ev and the Knighthood of the Divine Sophia* [Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977]). If Christ is straightforwardly identified with Sophia and the planet earth, how is this not pre-Axial religion *tout simple*?

provocative, I call this the “pagan” viewpoint. This view is then replaced by that of a Sacred standing over against, or transcendent to, what comes to be known as the “secular” or “this world.” But such a view is both personally unsatisfying (it alienates us from our immediate environment) and unfaithful to the rich ambiguity of the Christian experience in which God is known to be at one and the same time immanent and transcendental, personal and transpersonal, invisible and incarnate.

It is then left to the mystic to explore the *terra incognita* between these apparent opposites and, in the process, to risk being accused of heresy. The typical accusation, I have suggested, is Pantheism (or Monism) and Panteism is, it seems, typical of the “pagan” viewpoint. Therefore, I claim, it might be fruitful to regard the Christian mystic as a neo-pagan or *paganus redevivus*. But, just as the Christ of Matthew’s gospel is Moses *redevivus* but is not Moses himself, so the Christian mystic is not “merely” a pagan but one who has recovered the ancient vibrancy of nature and brought it into the Christian sanctuary.

Pre-Axial consciousness looks at a flower and celebrates the beauty of creation: that, and nothing more.<sup>24</sup> Post-Axial consciousness regards this as superficial, reminding us that all flowers die. As the Zen saying has it: “Life is like getting into a boat that sails out to sea and sinks.” Therefore, it pulls away from creation and seeks redemption. The Christian *mystical consciousness*, that is, that of the experiential contemplative or “friend of God,” sees, as it were, a dogwood flower — the white flower whose red tips are said to have been acquired after its wood was used for the Cross. The Christian mystic of *cosa* celebrates the “original blessing,” accepts and mourns the subsequent corruption (the oddly named “original” sin) and goes on, through redemption, to celebrate resurrection and cosmic transfiguration.

And so we come back to what it might have been that Merton was hinting at in “Hagia Sophia.” The poem begins with a notably pre-Axial or “pagan” statement: “There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*” (CP, p. 363). Merton continues in a very “thingful” way, with scenes in a hospi-

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24. The devas (earth spirits) of the Findhorn Garden explicitly ask us to see the beauty of creation by contemplating flowers: “We suggest that you appreciate the beauty that we present to you in our flowers. See the positive in them in as many ways as you can, and then look at the rest of life in the same way.” Larkspur Deva, quoted for the month of June in the Findhorn Nature Calendar for 1989 (Findhorn Foundation, Forres, Scotland).

tal: very concrete, not at all a mysticism of *nada*. His hospital shows us the reality of pain: the world is not entirely as it should be, and the "awakening of one man . . . in the hospital" is the awakening of the Axial Consciousness. Then "the helpless one" goes through the Cross and "Naturé [is] made wise by God's Art and Incarnation . . ." (CP, pp. 364, 365). The poem closes with a vision of Mary, seen at "Sunset. The Hour of Compline. Salve Regina" (or, indeed, the hour of Vespers and of the Magnificat), who gathers in herself the energies of *Natura* and is "a personal manifestation of Sophia" (CP, pp. 369-370).<sup>25</sup>

Herein, Merton presents us with a way of relating to God which is entirely Christian, yet which carries with it, fulfilling rather than escaping from, the telluric powers of paganism. He suggests, I would claim, that the Christian mystic is *paganus redevius*.

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25. Merton's identification of Sophia with Mary seems to me at once more recognizably Christian and more spiritually satisfying than Matthew Fox's ambiguous equation of Sophia with Christ and the planet earth.