

2. *Christian Symbolism*

• The Early Church •

It may be surprising to some that Christian theology is to a great degree an extension of Platonism. It has long been supposed a truism that Western civilization is primarily based on Judaeo-Christian traditions¹ but this supposition ignores the more fundamental influence of the Greek philosophers. From the beginning, Christian theologians used much of Plotinus; according to the modern philosopher Bertrand Russell,

In both cases the other world was the aim - in Christianity, heaven and in Platonism, the real world of ideas.²

Remember the opening words of *St. John's Gospel* where 'Word' is a translation of *logos* in the original Greek.¹

¹ Kristeller 1979 106 describes this supposition in scathing terms. "Such a claim reveals an abysmal ignorance of the real history of Western thought."

² B. Russell 1946 289

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

And as St. Augustine makes clear, the Word was made incarnate in Christ.

Just as my word had to take on sound in order to be heard, so God's word took on flesh in order to be seen.²

Modern Christian writers are happy to acknowledge their debt to Plato.

In certain respects, Christian values, secularized and detached from their original context, sometimes revert to the pure rationalism or mystical rationalism, of Plotinus' Platonism.³

And by contrast,

if Plato and Plotinus are still alive, it is in great measure because Christianity, finding a natural ally in Platonic idealism, has taken over its principal doctrines.

The process of adapting Christian theology to Platonism was begun by the earliest Church fathers. Justin of Caerea (100-165), one of the first Christian martyrs, and Clement (c150-212), the head of the Catechetical school of Alexandria, understood that if Christian theology was to achieve respectability let alone dominance in the intellectual world, it was absolutely necessary to imbue it with the same authority and prestige as Greek philosophy and they did this by demonstrating that Christianity was a superior form of Platonism. Clement asserted that Judaism and Hellenism had merged in a "river of truth" to form Christianity. Both Justin and Clement declared that Christ was the manifestation of the Platonic *Logos* in the material world and Clement was the first to describe Plato as the Attic Moses.⁴

The emphasis on allegory and symbolism was continued by Origen (182-c251), a pupil of Clement and one of the most influential of the

¹ Also note the *First Epistle of St. John*, Chapter 5, where the Holy Trinity is described as God the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost. This passage is notorious because it is the only place that the Trinity is mentioned in the New Testament and it is now known to be a later interpolation as Erasmus was the first to point out.

² St. Augustine *Sermons* 225, 3. Cited in Wills 69

³ Paul Henry SJ Plotinus xliv. See also B. Russell 289 quoting Dean Inge: "Platonism is part of the vital structure of Christian theology".

⁴ Armstrong 98. This was a common description of Plato throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. See, for instance, Henry Cornelius Agrippa in his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. Philo, the first century Jewish philosopher, had proposed that Plato had actually derived his philosophy from Moses.

Church fathers; he was reputed to have written 6,000 works. He developed the distinction between the literal, moral and spiritual intent of the scriptures. “True there are imperfections in the Bible, but these imperfections become perfections by leading us to the allegory and the spiritual meaning.”¹ To him this reflected the relationship between the Platonic real world of Ideas and the material natural world and it was also a restatement of the words of St. Paul, “the letter kills but the spirit giveth life”.² Some of Origen’s beliefs were later declared heretical³ but this distinction he made between symbolic and literal interpretation of the scriptures has lasted throughout the Christian era.

Christian theology borrowed from other sources in addition to Platonism. Christian dogma on the afterlife and the second coming were largely taken from Zoroastrianism which the Jews had become familiar with during the exile in Persia and this included the belief that the body and soul would remain together for three days after death. From Mithraism, which was widespread in the late Roman Empire, came the idea of a sacred meal. Nevertheless, by the beginning of the 4th Century, Christian doctrine started to crystallize in the form that we now know it. It became the Roman state religion in 313 AD by order of the Emperor Constantine and this naturally gave power and authority to the orthodoxy of the establishment and an incentive to unify rival theological positions. Prompted by the heretical teaching of Arius, another Alexandrine, who had proposed that Jesus, although divine, was inferior to God the Father, the Council of Nicea in 325 codified the doctrine of the Holy Trinity worked out by Justin, Clement and later thinkers and this was ratified by Constantine himself. Other early deviant Christian sects such as the Gnostics had already been suppressed and their literature abandoned. The canon of the New Testament was fixed as we now know it.

Nevertheless the development of Christian theology did not stop. We will examine it in three areas: the continued struggle to understand the nature of God which took place within the context of the debate between mystics and rationalists, the development of the techniques of biblical exegesis to determine the nature of the divine revelation which for the Christian was the highest spiritual authority and the development of the concept of the afterlife both in heaven and hell. Christian miracles and the symbology of the saints, I shall discuss in a later chapter.

¹Origen *Philoctetes* x, i-ii

² *Corinthians* 3, 6 and see also *Galatians* 4, 24 “which things are an allegory”.

³ One of Origen’s beliefs found heretical was that the horrors of hell would not last for all time. According to him even the damned would eventually be forgiven but this view was regarded as too charitable by the church establishment.

The ideas of Plato continued to dominate Christian philosophy during the first millennium. Pseudo-Dionysius (c500 AD) so called because he was, at one time, thought to be St Paul's disciple of that name, made significant advances in theories of symbolism which were an aid to the understanding of God. In his book, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, he formalized the addition of the nine spheres of angels to the Platonic cosmos and he played an important part in the absorption of Platonism into Christian theology. He built on the ancient tradition employed by Porphyry, the pupil of Plotinus, that contradictions can best provide spiritual illumination. He emphasized the dogmatic or mysterious aspects of theology, using two contrasting and paradoxical concepts of symbolism for revealing divine truth, what is called the apophatic method - affirmation and negation, like symbols and unlike symbols. Like symbols, for instance figures in radiant white garments, suffer from the disadvantage that worshippers may believe that the inhabitants of heaven actually are white robed radiant figures.¹ Therefore he proposed the use of unlike, possibly monstrous, symbolic figures which remind the reader that these are just symbols of what is a higher reality. Furthermore, to show that God is both wise and at the same time not wise is to emphasize that He is beyond wisdom and probably beyond understanding and description and thus can only be experienced in a mystical way.² In this he took his lead from St Augustine who had already proposed that "God is better known by not knowing." The mystery of God was as easily represented by darkness as by light and by silence as by speech. The Greek god of silence, Harpocrates, is frequently represented in the literature of symbolism as an illustration of the paradoxes in the understanding of God.³

The representation of God the Father was a special instance of the apophatic method since it was the belief of Christian artists from the very earliest times that this aspect of God was too terrible, too awe inspiring, too overwhelming to attempt to depict in any way. In this they followed the words of the Old Testament: "thou canst not see my face, for there shall be no man see my face and live."⁴ And so for the first 1,200 years or so of the Christian era there were virtually no images of God the Father

¹ See for instance Ripa's *Iconologia* where many of the symbols are depicted as white robed figures.

² Gombrich 153.

³ For example, Alciato's Emblem 11 (later editions). Harpocrates represents silence by putting his finger to his lips but this gesture is actually derived from his Egyptian origin as the son of Isis. All little boys put their fingers in their mouth!

⁴ *Exodus* 23, 20. In fact, there are several Old Testament passages which forbid figurative depiction of any kind e.g. *Deuteronomy* 4, 16:18

in western art although sometimes, as Didron points out, the figure of Christ was substituted for God the Father.¹ By the middle of the 14th Century, these fears were slowly lifted and depictions of Him taking on the familiar aspect of a bearded old man gradually began to appear over the next two centuries. The only symbol of God the Father that was risked by early medieval artists was the divine hand or alternatively the

divine triangle (the Trinity) inscribed with the Hebrew letters indicating Jehovah. Both these images, particularly the divine hand, remained a common feature of medieval and Renaissance imagery.

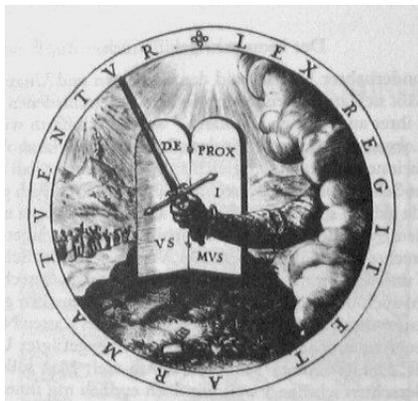


Figure 5 The Hand of God. Emblem 3 from the *Nucleus Emblematum Selectissimum* (1611) by Gabriel Rollenhagen.

Pseudo-Dionysius also wrote on the symbology of names which were believed in many ancient cultures to have sacred embodiment. In his *De divinis Nominibus*, On the Divine Names, he described the Universe in the same terms as Plotinus before him and the Kabbalists after him. It was “an inexhaustible irradiation of the beauty of God.”²

The most sacred symbolic name in Christianity is ICHTHOS representing Christ deriving from the Greek for fish I CH TH Y Z which five letters spell out *Iesus CHristos THEon Yios Zoter*, Jesus Christ Son of God, the Savior. As St. Augustine said in his *City of God*, “ICHTHOS is the mystical name of Christ, because he descended alive into the depths of mortal life, as into the abyss of waters.” A different interpretation on the name of Jesus was made by Pico della Mirandola in his *Nine Hundred Theses*.³ Drawing on the traditions of the Kabbala he proposed that Jesus was the embodiment of the tetragrammaton, the sacred symbol of Jahweh, with the letter S symbolizing the incarnation or the word made flesh. In Hebrew, a language which at that time had no written vowels, without the consonant S, Jesus or Jeu would have been inaudible or at least unwritable.

The works of Pseudo-Dionysius were translated into Latin by John Scotus Eriugena (810-877) another virtual Platonist who has been de-

¹ Didron I, 189

² Eco 18

³ Pico 14th *Cabalistic Conclusion*.

scribed as the most remarkable mind of the first millennium. He summed up his thinking with: “there is nothing among visible and corporeal things which does not signify something incorporeal and intelligible.” Eriugena interpreted the Platonic schema and the natural world as an emanation from the Godhead to which man must inevitably return.

Later in the Middle Ages, in the 11th Century, the first signs of opposition in the Church to the ideas of Plato began to emerge evidenced by the long-running philosophical dispute between the so-called Realists and the Nominalists which began as a technical discussion of the nature of Aristotle’s categories. The Realists proclaimed the orthodox view I have already recounted that within God himself were contained the universal truths of which the earthly manifestations were mere reflections or instances. According to the Realists, these universal truths or Universals had Real existence whereas for the Nominalists, universals existed in name only. The Nominalist view was initially unacceptable to the Church since it opened the possibility that there might be media of truth other than the Church and indeed other sources of truth than God Himself a possibility which would obviously undermine the status and authority of the Church. The reservations of the Christian theologians were well grounded; the terms of the debate reflected the subtle shift which was occurring throughout the Middle Ages from a theological and metaphysical discussion of the issues to a semantic and empirical one. This suggested at the very least that each instance of truth manifested on Earth led the way to a general understanding of the nature of that truth.

• The Influence of Aristotle •

In spite of this initial opposition to the works of Aristotle, his influence gained ground and objections to Platonism came to a head in the work of one of the greatest of the thinkers of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who in his effort to demonstrate the existence of God, attempted a synthesis of the doctrines of St. Augustine and the rationalism of the Greeks. He championed the Nominalist position saying “understanding is of universals which are to be extracted from particulars” which is clearly much closer to what we would call today a scientific approach. Gather as many facts, or in his words particulars, as possible and from them extract a theory or universal which will connect the facts together. Plato had taken the opposite position. He theorized from first principles rather than from the facts and then adjusted his view of the world to suit his theory. But Aquinas was strongly influenced by the work

of Aristotle which was newly available in translations from the Arabic and whose influence over European thought thenceforward rivaled that of Plato.

Aristotle had been a pupil of Plato, he was the tutor of the teenage Alexander the Great and head of the Athenian academy. He regarded it as his life's work to seek out the nature of man and to do this he had to categorize all knowledge since knowledge was the particular characteristic of man. He wrote many books¹ including those on Rhetoric, Ethics, Politics, Metaphysics, Biology, Poetics and Physics. Many of his surviving works became standard textbooks towards the end of the Middle Ages and through these his influence on education and on the culture of the West was immense. I shall comment later on the importance of the Art of Rhetoric for the literature of the time and Aristotle's exposition of the Art is still regarded as most influential. Voltaire said of Aristotle's Rhetoric: "I do not believe there is a single element of the art that escapes him."²

As for his metaphysics, he was at the rationalist end of the mystical/rational spectrum which we have discussed. He believed that philosophical problems should be approached and solved using dialectics, a logical system which he invented and through which a conclusion is reached from agreed premises by a set of strict logical rules. Bertrand Russell is disparaging about the details and results of Aristotle's dialectical methods, particularly as applied to his metaphysics, which, he says, appear to be largely "Plato diluted by common sense."³ Aristotle confirms quite plainly his reliance on Plato when he says,

that from which all particular things derive their existence, that from which they originally come into existence and into which they finally lose their existence – the substance remains unchanged underneathand therefore they believe that nothing is either created or destroyed, since 'essential nature', in this sense of the term, continues ever to be preserved.⁴

Aristotle's logic and his philosophy became available in the West in the early 13th Century from the translations and commentaries of the great Arabic scholar Averroes (1126-1198). At first, his work was banned by the Church but the authorities could not block the flood of his influ-

¹ 33 of Aristotle's works survive.

² *Dictionnaire Philosophique* of 1770 cited Cooper 72

³ B. Russell 175. Dialectical reasoning as outlined by Aristotle is to be distinguished from the process of dialectical discussions which characterize Plato's dialogues and those of other later writers.

⁴ Aristotle *Metaphysics* I cited and translated by K. Freeman xi

ence and the monastic order of the Dominicans, whose orthodoxy could not be impugned since they had been given the task of administering the Inquisition, set about integrating Aristotelianism into Church dogma. Such was the origin of the school of Scholasticism and the work of Aquinas. During the late Middle Ages, the Renaissance and after, the works of Aristotle were the models for curricula in many fields including ethics, logic, physics and biology and his influence continued to be pre-eminent in these fields and particularly in poetics right through to the 17th Century.¹ The prestige and status of Aristotle in the Church, as modulated by Aquinas, increased over the centuries but again, according to Bertrand Russell, it was only due to this adoption by Catholicism that Aristotle's influence and his metaphysical errors have been perpetuated.

As you can see from the abbreviated list of Aristotle's works above, he described and categorized the things of nature as they are and in the differences of approach of Plato and Aristotle, we see an early example of the contrast between the two methods, the deductive and the empirical, the mystical and the rational, Realist and Nominalist. According to the empiricist, knowledge can only be acquired through the human senses, through induction, and the products of purely deductive reasoning such as those of Plato are specious² but such was the power, indeed the stranglehold, of Plato's approach over the western intellectual world, that the work of the empiricists was effectively stifled until the foundations of Plato's theory were finally undermined by the 'scientific' discoveries of the 17th Century and the other intellectual developments of the time that I shall describe later. The influence of Aristotle, however, in the words of C.S. Lewis, was to "dig new chasms between God and the world, between human knowledge and reality, between faith and reason."³

¹ Aristotle's categorization of Cause into material, formal, final and efficient was still used in the authoritative treatise of Estienne, *L'Art de faire les devises*, the Art of making devices, of 1645 and of Claude-François Menestrier in his *L'art des Emblèmes* of 1662 and the continuing importance of Aristotle in semiotics, the modern discipline of signs, can be seen from an analysis of Umberto Eco's book *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* published in 1986. Aristotle is cited on about 20% of the pages of this book; the average citation rate for all other authors is only 1%.

² The best known representative of this position during the Renaissance was Pietro Pomponazzi with his book *Tractate de immortalitate animus*, a Treatise on the Immortal Mind, of 1516. See the translation and commentary in Cassirer 1948 and also Kristeller 194 and 199. Pomponazzi also restates the position of Aquinas that in some circumstances empiricism, reason and faith represent different ways of demonstrating the same truth.

³ Lewis 88

Using the empiricism of Aristotle, Aquinas tried to reconcile the opposing forces of mysticism and rationalism by saying that they were both right; these were two different ways of describing and proving the nature and existence of God. He qualified this by adding the orthodox view that there were some aspects of God that were not within the reach of reason and could only be demonstrated by revelation. Although his work was extraordinarily influential within the Church and represented the culmination of development of the Scholastic school, Aquinas himself was dissatisfied. He is related, in a famous story, to have said sadly after he had completed *Summa Theologiae*, his masterwork, that what he had written was as straw compared to what he had seen.¹

Another brilliant Christian theologian who, combining the tools of both the rationalist and the mystic, grappled with the problem of how to describe God, was Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64). His exposition took a three stage approach. First, use mathematics as a symbol of the finite since mathematics is the most precise and certain knowledge and technique. Then extend finite mathematical concepts into the infinite and finally analogize from the infinite mathematical solutions to the infinite nature of the divine. If this sounds a difficult task, it was, and Cusanus acknowledges, by the very title of his masterwork, *De Docta Ignorantia*, On Learned Ignorance, that there is an 'infinite distance' between man and a rational comprehension of God. Later, Galileo made a somewhat bolder claim in his exposition of the precision of mathematics.

In these it has as much certainty as Nature itself has. Of such are the mathematical sciences alone; that is geometry and arithmetic in which the Divine intellect indeed knows infinitely more propositions, since it knows them all. But with regard to those few which the human intellect does understand, I believe that its knowledge equals the Divine in objective certainty.²

Cusanus helped to formalize the Platonic idea that in approaching God we should proceed from the complex to the simple, from the multiple experiences of Earthly life to the wholeness and simplicity of the One. Expanding on the idea of the correspondences of the objects in the Chain of Being, he proposed that a concept further up the hierarchy could be unfolded by explanation into several lower ideas and, vice versa, all ideas lower in the scale could be 'infolded' to a higher concept until

¹ Armstrong 205

² Galileo *Two world systems* trans. S. Drake cited Barrow 92.

the One was achieved.¹ St. Bonaventura² had already proposed that it was only in this multiplicity that man was capable of appreciating God since as One the intensity of His nature was too great for human understanding and this idea of the unfolding of many ideas from one was also repeated later in the Renaissance by both Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The latter put it that “all are contained in all according to their particular modes.”³

We shall see (page 67) how the practitioners of magic endeavored to make use of the links and relationships of the Chain of Being throughout the universe to control the objects of their attention and it was these very relationships which embodied the essence of Platonism. Gombrich, expressing how for medieval man the symbol was the material manifestation of the attributes of God, puts it that “the universe is a vast symphony of correspondences in which each level of existence points to the level above.”⁴ Nevertheless, the struggle between rationalism and mysticism to understand the nature of God has always been tempered in Christian thought by the knowledge that the ultimate source of faith in Christianity is neither mysticism nor reason; it is revelation. The authority of the Scriptures is absolute. Through the Scriptures, God has revealed his purpose and it is the Scriptures in which we should have faith and which are the premise upon which we base our reasoning. Faith in the scriptures and in God is contrasted with understanding based solely on human reason, what St. Paul called the ‘wisdom of this age’, a wisdom absolutely alien to God.

• Scriptural Symbolism •

Aquinas wrote extensively in his *Summa Theologiae* on the rules of interpretation of the symbols of the scriptures. He confirmed the proposal of the early fathers that,

¹ The inspiration for this idea of the unfolding of something small and apparently simple into something much more expansive is said to have come from Cusanus’ observation of the properties of recently discovered gunpowder. The inquisitive human mind has a deep-seated desire to construct all embracing theories and we are ready to seize on the most meager and in retrospect doubtful data to satisfy this imperative. We are reminded of the string theory of Pythagoras which has had such enduring consequences.

² St. Bonaventura *Sentences* XXXI, III,1 cited by Hopper 99

³ *Conclusions* #17 quoted in Wind 40

⁴ Gombrich 152

the scriptures contain a twofold truth. One lies in the things meant by the words used - that is the literal sense. The other in the way things become figures of other things, and in this consists the spiritual sense.¹

He expanded on what he meant by the spiritual sense by showing that this could be one of four different interpretations all of which could give the reader added understanding.² First there was the literal sense, secondly, the allegorical or typological interpretation, then, the tropological or figurative sense giving the significance of the symbol for moral action and, finally, all these previous interpretations led up to the anagogical sense which provided a mystical or spiritual interpretation or expectation. Thus St. Aquinas gave authority to the two sides of Church teaching, the moral and the spiritual as well as leaving room for more practical and literary interpretations. The four interpretative modes were very commonly employed in biblical and other methods of exegesis during our period although the distinctions between the four were often not precisely observed. In the secular literary tradition, Marsiglio Ficino (1433-1499), a protégé of Cosmo de Medici and the founder of the neoPlatonist academy in Florence, specifically stated that the four methods of interpretation employed in the exegesis of the scriptures could also be profitably used in interpreting secular tropes³ and these four interpretative modes remained the orthodox dogma of the Church. At the beginning of the 17th Century, this was specifically confirmed in the *Tableaux Sacrez*, Sacred Pictures, by Louis Richeome published in 1601⁴ and even now dual interpretation of scripture (literal and spiritual) is demanded by the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

This tradition of scriptural interpretation did not mean that doctrine became less inflexible. Once an interpretation became established it might remain as rigid and dogmatic and possibly equally as unrealistic or unintelligible as the original text. The classic case for the late Renaissance was the question of the relative movement of the sun and the earth, a dispute which, as we have seen, had exercised astronomers since the earliest times. Surprisingly perhaps, the Church had strong opinions on the matter and of the 'two systems', championed Ptolemy's theory that the

¹ From *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* VII, 14, 275 cited in Gombrich 13. If there were any difficulty in reconciling the two interpretations, commentators would say that literal Scripture had been cast in a simplified form, so that it would be understandable for the ordinary people.

² Cassian the 5th Century writer in his *Collationes* was probably the first to suggest that a fourfold interpretation of the scriptures was possible.

³ Ficino 1576 1370 cited Gombrich 59

⁴ Lynette C. Black *Emblematica* 9, 1, 1995 15

sun revolved round the Earth. This was not because of any empirical interest in the matter but rather, as Galileo found to his disadvantage, because the Bible said so and thus the ‘facts’ were not subject to interpretation. Heilbron notes a minimum of nine extracts from the Scriptures which refer either to the sun moving or the earth standing still.¹ For instance, in *Psalms* 104, 5, we read: “you fixed the Earth on its foundations so it will never be moved.” Such is the conservatism of the Catholic establishment and the labyrinthine nature of its decision making processes that it was not until 1992 that Galileo was fully rehabilitated in the eyes of the Church.²

We have seen how Origen in the 3rd century was one of the earliest writers to emphasize the symbolic nature of Scripture. Christianity had adopted the Old Testament into the scriptural canon because of the prophetic references in the Old Testament to the coming of Christ and to his life and actions and, vice-versa, because of the references in the New Testament by Christ and the disciples to the Prophets. The study of these symbolic references became known as typology: the type was the prophetic promise and the antitype was the fulfillment of that prophecy.³

Tyconius, who lived in the second half of the 4th Century, was the first to propose a comprehensive system for relating all prophecy to a description of Jesus and the Church.⁴ His seven rules for interpreting prophecy were followed by St. Augustine himself in his book *Of Christian*



Doctrine and were influential throughout the Middle Ages. Augustine, however, did not rely on interpretation alone as a path to the understanding of God. According to him, correct interpre

Figure 6 The Lamb of God from an engraved copper plate of the 11th century.

¹ Heilbron 345 Note 49

² Heilbron 213

³ *Typos* in Greek and *Figura* in Latin so thus we get prefiguration.

⁴ See Burkitt 1894

tation was pointless unless accompanied by faith.¹ Augustine, however, did not rely on interpretation alone as a path to the understanding of God. Possibly the best known symbolic type was the sacrificial lamb of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus which is thought to have prefigured the sacrifice of Christ himself. “Behold the Lamb of God”, says St. John of Jesus.²

Much later, typology became popularized through the compilation of concordances which detailed the prophetic references and the publication of illustrated manuscripts called *Bibles Moralisées* which were widespread in the 13th to 15th centuries³ and were a step in the genesis of the emblem and the other symbolic literature. These possibly derived from an earlier book which goes back to the 9th Century, the *Biblia pauperum*, the Bible of the poor, which included type and antitype illustrated with miniatures.⁴

Another typological work popular in the later Middle Ages was the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, or Mirror of Human Salvation. This was originally written in Latin some time between 1309 and 1324 but was quickly translated into German, French, English, Dutch and Czech. As well as over three hundred manuscript copies surviving, there were many fifteenth century blockbook and printed editions of the text (page 229). Each page of the book illustrates a scene from the New Testament and its type from the Old Testament. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of the book in view of its widespread popularity and endorsement by the Church is that several of the types or prefigurations of the Gospel events are taken, apparently at random, from mythology and classical history. For instance, a story about the presentation of a golden table to the temple of the God of the Sun is proposed for the type of the presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple.⁵ Here is early evidence of the awakening interest in the history of classical and ancient times and the trend towards the universality and acceptability of all knowledge from whatever source which reached a climax in the Renaissance. St. Clement had already used the example of Orpheus as a type of Christ. “Stretched on the lyre of the Cross, he made such sweet music that ‘he attracted all things to himself.’”⁶

¹ See for further discussion James J. O'Donnell *Augustine: Elements of Christianity* at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/twayne/aug2.html>

² *John* I, 28

³ D. Russell 14.

⁴ See also an example at <http://www.kb.nl/kb/100boogte/hb015-en.html> (2/4/2004)

⁵ Didron II, 211

⁶ *John* 12, 32

St. Jerome also, in the 4th Century, had legitimized the use of classical texts as types for events in the New Testament, taking as his authority the unchristian admonition in *Deuteronomy* 21, 11-12 that if thou “seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and has a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife; then thou shalt bring her home to thine house and she shall shave her head and pare her nails.” The lesson here was that if the pagan teaching was cleansed of impurity it could be accepted into the Christian canon.



Figure 7 Orpheus, the type of Christ, playing his lyre to the animals. Emblem 1 from the *Emblemes Sacrez* (1667) by the Jesuit father, Augustin Chesneau

One of the most celebrated of pagan literary types was Plato's *Phaedo* where Socrates outlines his ethical view that to aspire to virtue a man must not do evil to another whatever the provocation. Socrates was condemned to death by the Athenian state but refused in turn to condemn his enemies or take the path of exile which was offered him. A Latin classic similarly taken as a pagan type by Christian commentators was the

Fourth Eclogue of Virgil. A short and brilliant poem probably written in 40 BC to celebrate the marriage of Mark Anthony and Octavia, the sister of the Emperor Octavian, it refers pointedly to the return of the Golden Age (one of the stages in the Roman myth of the creation and early evolution of mankind) following the birth of a son to the couple. This was too much for the Christian exegetes to resist and it was employed repeatedly right up to the 20th century to demonstrate the prophetic credentials of the birth of Christ.¹ It was also the origin of Dante's obsession with Virgil. Then there were the infamous Sibylline Oracles, infamous because, in spite of their popularity, many at the time of the Renaissance suspected that they were forged. The Cumaean Sibyl also features in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* and the authority of the Sibyls was memorialized by Michelangelo when he gave them equal standing to the Old Testament prophets on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. First published in modern times in 1545 by Betuleius, the Sibylline prophecies were taken to prefigure the Crucifixion and Resurrection and the dogma of Christianity. According to the introduction to a late classical version of the Oracles, "in manifold ways they tell of certain past history and equally foretell future events."²

Another in this genre of secular typology and perhaps the most celebrated in the late Middle Ages, was the *Ovide Moralisé*, or *Ovid Moralized*, a translation, commentary and symbolic exegesis in Christian terms of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the great Latin epic which had recounted the history of the world from the Creation to Ovid's own time, with the figures of mythology as the *dramatis personae* and the phenomenon of metamorphosis as a caricature of change and development. An epic in its own right of some 72,000 lines, the *Ovide Moralisé* was written by an anonymous cleric between 1316 and 1328. It was much copied especially in prose adaptations and was used by contemporaries as a vernacular source book for classical and mythological material. The commentary followed the traditional rules and demonstrated the underlying allegorical, spiritual and moral interpretations of Ovid's stories.³ The original of the *Metamorphoses* was also extremely popular in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance and there were dozens of editions both manuscript and printed many of which were edited to bring out what purported to be the classic four levels of symbolic interpretation. Not far behind in popularity were com-

¹ Clausen 119

² Cited in Grafton 1991 173 trans. J. J. Collins. Betuleius' collection consisted of eight books and four more books were discovered in the 19th Century.

³ For the early printing history of *Ovide moralisé* see Bühler Bibliography xxxiv

mentaries on Virgil's *Aeneid* also designed to bring out the allegorical significance of the epic.¹ These were both examples of the trend during the Renaissance of a Christian and classical syncretism in which classical authors were used in the application of a typology which could illuminate Christianity.

Aquinas is still recognized as the greatest exponent of modern Catholic theology and this status was formalized in 1879 when he was declared the official philosopher of the Catholic Church. He took the middle ground between faith and reason in spite of his reliance on Aristotle but his exposition was wide ranging in the manner of Aristotle; he commented on many if not most theological subjects affecting the Christian faith including ethics and free will and doctrines such as transubstantiation beyond the scope of pure philosophy. As knowledge, logic and philosophical understanding had become more sophisticated over the centuries, it also became increasingly specialized. Perhaps it can be said to have unfolded in the sense used by Cusanus. Aquinas was ready to apply this reductionist approach to Catholic dogma but nevertheless, in his view, faith and the authority of the scriptures as the source of faith and as the rational premise remained supreme.

· Christian Imagery ·

In spite of this centrality of revelation as the source of Christian doctrine and the scope for allegorical and symbolic interpretation of scripture, there was an early tension in Christian theology on the use of images and symbols in a spiritual setting. This tension flowed from the Second Commandment, "thou shalt not worship graven images."² The interpretation of this commandment has been a source of continual controversy in the Church a controversy which has focused on the use of icons and other images. The Greeks and Christian theologians had three words for a religious image: *eidolon*, *eikon* and *agalma* and each has its own interest for our theme. *Eidolon* is the word used in Greek versions of the Old Testament for the Second Commandment which is translated as 'graven image' in the King James Version. *Eidolon* has an implication of insubstantiality, of ghostliness and its earliest reference was probably to the souls of the departed who dwelt in Hades. This sense of emptiness is thus appropriate for the image of a pagan God referred to in the Com-

¹ See Allen Chapter VI 135 for a discussion of the allegories of the *Aeneid*.

² *Exodus* 20, 4

mandment. *Eikon* similarly had a more subtle meaning than the plain English word Icon which we now associate with it. An *Eikon* was originally the perceived image of the ultimate Platonic form or conceptual archetype. As we have seen, in accordance with Platonic theory, the *Eikon* was thus equally shadowy and unreal as the *Eidolon* although in a different fashion.¹

Agalma was also unsatisfactory for Christian theologians but for another reason. Probably the earliest meaning of *agalma* was as a precious object or ornament;² this evolved into an object which delighted the Gods, an object of sacrifice, a votive offering. In turn, the word took on the meaning of the image itself, particularly the statue, of the God, and then a description of the essence of the God. Finally, and this is what the theologians disliked, it could describe the moment of animation of the pagan deity when in the ancient cults and rituals, the statue of the God supposedly came alive. In this sense *agalma* was naturally related to the trope of Personification which played a large part in the literary history of the age of symbolism.

In spite of these unsatisfying connotations, *Agalma* continued to be employed at the center of the debate on the nature of God as a description of the essence of the divine. It is used by Plato at the central moment in the *Timaeus* where he describes the newly created universe as a thing of joy for, or alternatively as the essence, of the Gods.³ We can also see it in Plotinus who expanded on the relationship between art and the Platonic form; he used *agalma* for both the essence of the object being depicted and the resulting work of art and in the same passage he characterizes the Egyptian hieroglyphics as containing the essence of the archetypal symbolic language and the ultimate representation of the sacred Realities.⁴ In the Renaissance it was still used for the same purpose. Claude Mignault in his commentary on Alciato's *Emblems* refers to *agalma* as a characterization of emblems⁵ and in this context, another commenta-

¹ *Eidolon* however has the same root as *Eidos* which with *Idea* are the words which Plato actually uses to describe his metaphysical Forms

² *Odyssey* III, 437

³ *Timaeus* 37c There are several possible translations: see for instance that of Lee "When the father who had begotten it perceived that the universe was alive and in motion, a shrine [agalma] for the eternal gods, he was glad."

⁴ *Enneads* V, 8, 6

⁵ Alciato *Emblemata* ed. Mignault 1577 43 "...hic Emblemata vocantur carmina, quibus imagines, agalmata, pegmataexplicantur". "In this, Emblems are called poems by which images, representations, symbols ... are explained." *Pegma* was the title of the wellknown emblem book of Pierre Coustau of 1555. For a discussion of the meaning of this Latin word see page 224

tor on Alciato, Barthélemy Aneau, in his translation, *Les Emblemes d'Alciat* of 1549, confirms that the purpose of the emblem was to expose the 'essence of things'.¹

It is not surprising given these semantic difficulties that early Christian theorists had a problem with images. On the one hand there were those who argued that for the image to be true it must be identical in nature to the object depicted, it had to be consubstantial with the original much as the elements of the Eucharist and the other sacraments were and still are deemed today. The opposing party supported the Platonic separation of form and representation of that form and contended that the icon was acceptable as merely the representation of God. It was eventually understood that these theoretical problems should give way to the obvious benefit that an image could convey a message to the otherwise illiterate or *idiotae* who formed the mass of the people including most of the feudal nobility and even many of the ordinary parish priests. Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century stated that statues in church and cathedral served as "the books of the illiterate". In the 8th Century, St. John Damascene, who was able to distinguish six different meanings of the word icon, said the same. "Images speak, they are neither mute, nor lifeless blocks, like the idols of the Pagans...Images open the heart and awake the intellect, and, in a marvelous and indescribable manner, engage us to imitate the persons they represent."²

This position was formally adopted by the Eastern Church at the Council of Nicea in 787 and subsequently also in the West through the medium of the *Libri Carolini*. It was determined that the figures of Jesus, Mary, the saints and the angels could be represented but not worshipped and this was confirmed in the Synod of Arras in 1025. Honorius of Autun writing at the end of 11th Century put it tactfully: "painting ... is the literature of the laity"³ However, Jean de Gerson at the very beginning of the 15th Century acknowledged that the problem of interpretation of the second Commandment still existed, by insisting that "we do not adore the images, but honor and adore who is depicted, God or his saints in whose image it is."⁴

But the dividing line between icon and reality was very narrow. Bernardino of Siena, a well-known and fiery preacher, also at the beginning of the 15th Century, started the practice of displaying a large image of

¹ *Les Emblemes d'Alciat* Lyons: Bonhomme 1549 8 cited Ayers Bagley *Emblematica* 7, 1, 1993, 60

² Quoted in Didron 3

³ Eco 16

⁴ Gerson *De decem praeceptis, Opera Omnia I* quoted in Huizinga 190

Christ during his sermons but the congregations became so inflamed that eventually the practice was prohibited by the authorities. Later, Peter Ramus, the 16th century French philosopher, expressed his distrust of the Art of Memory since the images it employed smacked of idolatry.

The authority of the image as an acceptable religious aid had however been given final authority by Aquinas who said: “man cannot understand without images. The image is a similitude of a corporeal thing but understanding is of universals which are to be extracted from particulars”¹ and in this as in all things he followed Aristotle who had realized that thought itself was not possible without the sense of vision; he wrote, “the soul never thinks without a mental picture.”² We can note Aquinas’ reference to his thesis that sense perceptions as revealed through vision are the basis for and origin of understanding and in addition that knowledge is derived from an extraction of general rules from instances and examples of behavior perceived in the natural world. Here we have a restatement of the Nominalist position we have already met which was absolutely opposed to the Realism of Plato. The corollary of Aquinas position on images was that it was permissible to expound spiritual matters in terms of corporeal examples since the latter were very much easier for the layman to grasp.

The use of art and image in Christian society achieved its climax in the decoration of the great Gothic churches constructed in the late Middle Ages. The cathedral of Chartres for instance has several thousand stone statues and several more thousand stained glass pictures. The arrangement and content of all this work usually followed the order given in the works of the great encyclopaedists of the time notably Vincent of Beauvais (c1190-1264). Financed by the king of France, Vincent wrote what was possibly the greatest encyclopaedia before modern times, the *Speculum Majus* or Great Mirror. Partly based on the *Florilegium gallicum*, it was an example of a genre about which we shall have more to say later, that is a collection of the sayings of classical authors. It was divided into three parts (a fourth on Morality is now known to be by a later author) and the whole consisted of 80 books and some 9,885 chapters, detailing all knowledge of the time including what we would now view as scientific subjects, the arts, medicine, the law, industry, education, theology, philosophy and history the latter covering Creation and the Fall through the

¹ Thomas Aquinas *In Aristotelis libros... de memoria and reminiscencia commentarium*. 449b 30 trans. Robert Pasnau.

² *De Anima* 432a 17 trans. W.S. Hett.

early biblical stories and down to his own time. All these subjects were depicted by the statues or in the stained glass in the cathedrals of the age.

The effect of these on the illiterate congregations of the time must have been electrifying. Certainly the clergy themselves were inspired. The purpose of the decoration and the spiritual or anagogical mode of interpretation of them are demonstrated by the words of Suger, Abbot of St. Denis in Paris (writing in the first half of the 12th Century). When commenting on the decorative beauty of his church, which he himself had constructed, he said that “out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God, ..I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.”¹ Any lingering doubts that Christian theorists had about the efficacy of imagery to assist in the interpretation of Scripture or of the Book of Nature were thus dispelled. The typology of the former and the symbolism of the latter were validated as an education tool for the unenlightened in their efforts to comprehend the Divine. But this ambiguity over the nature of the icon was never easy to resolve and this applied to all the symbols of God. It required a certain intellectual rigor to disassociate the symbol from the divinity of what it signified and it is easy to understand how the symbol itself might readily assume a divinity of its own.² A secular example was the Renaissance obsession with hieroglyphs and with the original Adamic language where again it was accepted that it was inherent in the nature of the symbol itself that enlightenment was to be found.

• Morality and Hell •

Naturally, there were areas where Christian thinking passed beyond Platonism. Christians believe that each soul is created anew at birth; there is nothing here of Plato’s theory of reminiscence. In these areas of development of Platonic thought however, Christian theology has often had difficulties. The theological problem of evil is and was preeminent; why does a beneficent and all powerful God permit suffering and disaster, a dilemma which was related in Christian thought to an exposition of the nature of Creation. The Greeks had proposed that God had made the

¹ Suger of Saint-Denis trans. and ed. Panofsky 1955 Chapter XXXIII. There were those however such as St. Bernard who strongly opposed the belief of Suger that the decorative nature of his church uplifted the thoughts of his congregation to God. They believed that the cost of the decoration was better spent on the needy.

² An obvious example and one which epitomizes the essence of the symbol to medieval thinking is given in the quotation from St. Bonaventure on page 21.

universe out of preexisting material. Christian theologians insist that it was created out of nothing although the Scriptures themselves do not provide much help in the matter. Genesis itself is actually silent on the material of creation stating only, as you remember, that “in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”¹

Early Christian fathers, principally Basilides of Antioch in the second century, developed the idea of creation out of nothing as a riposte to the Gnostics who had espoused Greek orthodoxy in the matter in an attempt to reconcile the goodness of God with the apparent evil of the material world. To the Gnostics, present evil must derive from preexisting material but this solution to the dilemma was complicated by the fact that orthodox Pythagorean number theory, which was fully espoused by the Church authorities, did not accept that infinity was consistent with order and perfection.² And there was yet a further complication. For Basilides it was of the highest importance that God’s omnipotence to create as He chose should not be fettered in any way and this would logically preclude Him from using preexisting material.

These complexities and the divergence between the Greek and Christian systems gave much difficulty to Renaissance thinkers in their attempts to develop a philosophy which fused both classical and Christian ideas. Dante gave Beatrice the unenviable task of reconciling the paradox and she proposed in Solomonesque fashion that God was eternal but the universe was not.³

In his eternity beyond time,
beyond all other comprehension, as was his pleasure,
the eternal love revealed him in new loves.
Nor did he lie, as slumbering, before;
for nor before nor after was the process
of God’s outflowing over these waters.⁴

There is another and more important area where there was a major difference between Christian and Greek thought. Greek philosophy and indeed Greek religion saw no natural relationship between theology and morality.⁵ Immortality for the Greeks was a species of sickness and there was no discussion of personal moral struggle. Aristotle proposed that the

¹ *Genesis* 1, 1.

² See for a further discussion Hopper 96.

³ This was also Boethius’ solution to the paradox (page 63)

⁴ Dante *Paradiso* xxix, 16 trans. Carlyle 1956

⁵ Kitto 195

good man does what he does because he likes to do it¹ and the only serious moral fault, was to overstep the bounds of Fate and invite retribution from the Gods for excessive *hubris*.² He suggested that moral virtue which could be achieved by continuous righteous behavior, was, with intellectual virtue, the path to happiness. But for the Christian, correct moral behavior which is rewarded by individual redemption was absolutely central to Church doctrine and, as a corollary, so were the punishments meted out to those who did not live up to these high standards. This ethical imperative of Christianity is relevant to our theme since over time these moral aspects of Christian teaching blended with the Aristotelian moral imperative of attaining virtue. The short, witty, moral aphorisms of the fable and the epigram inherited from classical literature and the combination of classical and Christian tradition reinforced by the symbolism of the age, later found a natural vehicle in the emblem, device and the rest of the symbolic literature.

During the whole of the Middle Ages, the dominant theme of the Church in its relationship with ordinary members of the congregation was the emphasis on individual moral weakness, the necessity for repentance and reform and the sanctions of Hell for those who fell short. According to a recent study of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, which we discussed above, in its text and pictures,

the *Speculum* contains a vivid account of the religious and artistic forces at work in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the lessons in piety, the allegories, and all of the arts were devoted to instilling in the minds of the people the need for salvation and the dread of eternal damnation.³

To understand the obsession with morality, with the afterlife and with Hell, we have to go back to the core of Christian doctrine, the Crucifixion. We can imagine that the death of Jesus in such a sudden and horrible manner was violently shocking to the Disciples. He who had

¹ This idea has exercised thinkers throughout the period. Thus Boethius (trans. V.E. Watts 1969) 132 "For just as weakness is a disease of the body, so wickedness is a disease of the mind." Dante in the 7th Canto of the *Inferno* had those who suffered from depression condemned to Hell as sinners. In Samuel Butler's tendentious utopian novel *Erewhon* of 1871, those who are sick get sent to prison and those who commit crimes get hospital treatment.

² The idea of Fate having bonds or bounds is discussed extensively in Onians Part 3 at 303 where it is shown to originate from the common and universal experience of early societies with the product of the spinning wheel. The most celebrated instance of this metaphor is Plato's spindle of fate in the *Timaeus*.

³ From //special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/sep2000.html (2/4/2004) at which see a manuscript example with miniatures. See also A. Wilson & J. L. Wilson 10

preached love, who had been acclaimed as the Messiah, was executed as a common criminal for some indeterminate reason at the instigation of the religious leaders of his own people. What could be made of this unexpected and terrible event; what could possibly be salvaged from the abrupt wreck of their dreams?

The considered response of Church theologians was to assert that the Crucifixion was part of the Divine plan. It was not an accident, it was not a mistake, the fearful event was a deliberate sacrificial act by God. But for what reason, had He promoted such a terrible act, the sacrifice of his own Son? To save humanity itself. To save it from what? To save humanity from sin, the consequences of which would be eternal damnation. St. Augustine formulated the theoretical basis of the evil nature of mankind in his doctrine of Original Sin. God has been punishing the world for the sin of Adam, and, suggested Augustine, only through faith in Christ can we obtain redemption. In later life Augustine came to believe that it was Eve who was primarily responsible for the Fall and that women epitomized the temptations which the soul had to face in the material world. According to him, nature was constantly seducing the soul and it was the task of the church to restore it to the divine grace.

This was the theory; from the evidence not a very impressive one since to succeed it had to be shown not only that humanity was by nature predominantly sinful, that such sin was so wicked that it merited an eternity in damnation and that the prospect of damnation or by contrast the rewards of heaven were sufficiently real that humanity would be prepared to put their faith in Christ and their life in His hands. It has to be said that these are difficult criteria to meet. It is certain that life was precarious for the ordinary person at the time of Christ and especially later, after the collapse of the security provided by the *Pax Romana*, when there was during the 'Dark Ages' in Europe "a continuous succession of economic mishandling, exploitation, war and robbery, inflation, want and pestilence."¹ The viciousness of man and the uncertainty of life's prospects must have been acutely obvious although it is questionable whether at the end of the 20th Century during which 100 million people have died in wars in Europe alone that there has been any improvement. It is, however, also evident that the large majority of people are not now, and were not then, evil to any great extent and the punishments prescribed in the medieval descriptions of hell were out of proportion to the gravity of the ordinary peccadilloes of life.

¹Huizinga 17

Yet Christianity had survived and flourished in spite of the grimness of this core doctrine and there were good reasons for this. Unlike the Roman cults which were mostly a prerogative of the patrician classes, the Christian message was directed at ordinary people. It had a strong spiritual element, again unlike the Roman cults where ritual was divorced from theology and, above all, Christianity had the strong moral emphasis derived from the prospect of redemption from sin. If you believe, you will be worthy of Christ's sacrifice and you will be saved. Christ taught love of your fellow man and the Church fathers reinforced the requirement of good behavior with a big stick - the threat of eternal Hellfire. The moral emphasis of Christianity is thus not just a byproduct of the natural social concerns of religious and civic leaders. It lies at the center of Christian spiritual doctrine and Christian literature is therefore dominated by moral treatises. One such was the *Physiologus* which I discuss below (page 179) and in which this didactic theme was illustrated by references to the animal world.

Yet in spite of its centrality to Christian theology, the nature of the afterlife, Hell and the Second Coming has never been precise and this uncertainty goes back to the Gospels themselves. *St. Luke* (16:22-) refers to the poor man finding himself in the bosom of Abraham and the rich man going to Hell,¹ straight after death. *St. Mathew's Gospel* refers frequently to the Second Coming and the Last Judgment.² The contradiction is understandable at the time of the Apostles who believed that the Second Coming was imminent if not immediate. But when it became apparent that the Second Coming would be long delayed perhaps until the end of time, theologians had to deal with a dilemma: what was to happen to body and soul in the meantime?

It is an essential element of Christian doctrine that the body itself and not just the soul will eventually be resurrected. The physical resurrection of Jesus and his physical appearance to his disciples was an essential link in the chain of authority from Christ through the disciples to the early Church leaders. Here is one of the few instances where Christian orthodoxy rejects symbolism and indeed this was a principal cause of the early condemnation of the Gnostics who were prepared to accept the resurrection of Christ as a symbolic statement.³ St. Augustine suggested a solution to the problem by allowing the soul to go to heaven (or more likely

¹ This is the only reference to Hell in the New Testament and some authorities think it is a later interpolation: see Ranke-Heinemann 228

² Gurevich 139

³ Pagels 5.

to a lower place) immediately after death whereas the resurrection of the body would have to wait for the Last Judgment. The concept of Purgatory as a halfway house making the whole process more palatable had to wait until more charitable and possibly more confident times for the Church towards the end of the Middle Ages. But the early pastoral Church did not wait for resolution of the theological niceties; to encourage spiritual and moral conformity, it made full use of the likelihood of an afterlife spent sampling the immediate horrors of hell.

The graphic descriptions contained in anthologies of visions, a genre which culminated in Dante's masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy* and other clues from collections of sermons and Penitentiaries¹ reflecting the practical life of the medieval congregation, indicate the difficulty that the Church had in keeping its flock spiritually correct. Paganism was just beneath the surface. Belief in magic and miracles, the Christian version of magic, was widespread. The predominant symbolism of early medieval Christianity was thus of death and of hell; perhaps not surprisingly, it was easier and more satisfying to depict the horrors of hell than the delights of heaven.



Figure 8 the punishment in Hell for the ireful. From the *Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds* of 1493 published by Marchant.

¹ Penitentiaries were books provided for medieval priests setting out the recommended penance for sins revealed by parishioner in the confessional.

We shall see later how the Jesuits adopted the emblem book after the Reformation as an instrument in their struggle against Protestantism. The visual element of the emblems accorded with the technique of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, who had suggested the “application of the senses to help the imagination picture to itself in the minutest detail, the horror of sin and the torments of Hell.”¹ By the 17th Century, the specifications of the torments of hell had become codified to a certain extent and were spelled out by Jeremiah Drexel, the Jesuit emblem writer with careful reference to their scriptural origins. These involved (but, as they say, were not limited to) an eternity of darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, hunger and thirst, stench, fire, worms, appalling living conditions and not unnaturally despair.²

In modern times the Churches teaching on hell has come full circle. *The Encyclopaedia of Catholicism* published in 1994 confirms that the images of the eternal torments of hell are not to be taken literally but instead symbolize the suffering inherent in a state of sin and in time for the second millennium, Pope John Paul II confirmed the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council from the 1960’s that hell is a state of mind rather than a place, it “is the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.” This emasculation of the punishment for sin has not meant that moral behavior has become anything less of a spiritual imperative for Christianity. It remains, as it always has been, a central plank of church dogma.

We have seen that early Christian theology, particularly in the first millennium, was fully in the Platonic metaphysical and symbolic tradition although this tradition was tempered in late medieval times both by the empirical approach inspired by Aristotle and by the primacy of the ultimate Christian authority, Holy Scripture. In spite of or perhaps because of its origins, by the late Middle Ages, theology had diverged from philosophy which came to be regarded as a separate discipline. We saw too that in spite of the conceptual difficulties images were validated by the Church as a tool for spiritual instruction and thus whether it was from the writings of the Church fathers, from the Scriptures or from the Book of Nature, the Christian had many sources of symbolism to employ in the attempts to approach and understand God. In this he followed the dictum of St. Paul who had said: “for the invisible things of Him from

¹ Praz 170

² Jeremiah Drexel, *Nicetas II*, ii in his *Opera* 1628 333-346 cited by Manning 307

the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.”¹

¹ *Romans 1, 20.*