

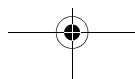
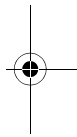
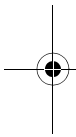
Chapter 11

Illumination: The Soul's Journey into God

INTRODUCTION: SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

In the thirteenth century, Bonaventure wrote his own Christocentric Franciscan articulation of the mystical journey into God. Writers and architects in the twelfth century also created their outline of the pathway to God. To some, like the Victorines and Cistercians, this path was rooted in the contemplation of sacred scripture. For others, like Hildegard and the Beguines, it included direct mystical experience of the divine. Indeed, the study of twelfth-century spirituality has been largely focused on these figures and on the schools of thought they represent. Most of them wrote from the perspective of prayer, contemplation, and a unitive experience. They also tended to offer a fully articulated spiritual journey—much of this following the classical stages of purgation, illumination, and union. The Chartrians, by contrast, neither expounded on the contemplation of sacred scripture nor on their personal experiences of the mystical union achieved by any means. Rather, their investigation of the human person and of the soul's journey to God was rooted in their study of the created world and in their metaphysics of exemplarism. While acknowledging the limits of intellectual ascent, they none the less offered their analysis based on their understanding of Neoplatonic and scientific texts. When they invoked scripture and the fathers, it was more in support of their own innovations than as an authoritative road map to be followed.

As we saw earlier, Thierry of Chartres and William of Conches presented an understanding of the cosmos based on the most up-to-date scientific



information. We also noted how both Chartrians integrated their cosmology, metaphysics, physics, and chemistry with their theology. This interlinking is quite consistent with their educational mindset. Recall that, according to the Chartrian scheme of education, the study of theology builds upon a foundation in the liberal arts. And these arts are not left behind—as they were within the school at St. Victor and the abbey at St. Thierry—when one undertakes to seek necessary reasons for one’s faith. Rather, they serve as the precision tools of the theologian. Thus equipped, the Chartrians demonstrated how a study of the cosmos can elucidate theological truth and support a spirituality that leads to God.

Raymond Klibansky has pointed out that “the purpose of the naturalistic reading of creation ultimately has one goal, to attain, through knowledge of the structure of the created world, knowledge of the Creator.”¹ Klibansky could have been quoting William of Conches for whom the goal was just that clear. William writes, “And so through calculated reasoning, humans attain knowledge of the incorporeal and, similarly, knowledge of the Creator.”² While this journey does not negate the use of scripture, mystical experience, or contemplation of divine truths, the Chartrian rendition of “the soul’s journey into God”³ is rooted in an essentially intellectual understanding of the natural and intelligible worlds.

ECCE HOMO: THE HUMAN AS MICROCOSM

If some form of elemental theory of the physical world was widely shared in the twelfth century, so was the belief that human bodies were made of these same elements. Hildegard of Bingen states that “the elements—namely fire, air, earth, and water—are in the human being.”⁴ Honorius of Autun adds, “Whence came the corporeal substance used in man’s creation? From the four elements, and for this reason, man is called a microcosm, that is, a lesser world; for from the earth he has his flesh, from water his blood, from air his breath, and from fire his warmth.”⁵ Within the elemental structure of the human body worked the humors—phlegm, blood, bile, and black bile—which, when in balance, led to good health. This Galenic system had been in place for a millennium. So William of St. Thierry states, “Humors work in the smaller world which is man, the microcosm, as has been said.”⁶ Exactly how this system worked underwent a change with the arrival of Constantine of Africa’s works. This was a key source for both the Cistercian abbot and William of Conches.

The Chartrians also presented humanity as a micro-image of the cosmos. This comes out in various ways in their writings. We have already seen that the Chartrians believed that the physical laws of nature, as secondary