

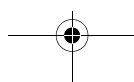
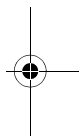
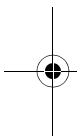
Chapter 12

The Cosmos: The Path That Leads to God

INTRODUCTION: THE BOOK OF CREATION

Throughout the era of William of Conches and Thierry of Chartres, pilgrims walked through the streets of Chartres and entered the majesty of the interior of Fulbert's eleventh-century cathedral. People came to pay tribute to the veil of the Virgin Mary and to repent of their sins before God and this holy relic. They came, as they did to towns all over Europe, looking for a way to draw closer to God. The music, the incense, sculptural programs, the massive colorfully painted walls, and the mystery of the divine office and sacraments all formed an integral medieval drama that served to connect human beings to the divine. In wide and various forms, this sacramental picture of reality was played out for a full century before the birth of the Chartrian masters. The cathedral was thought to be situated at a central nexus between heaven and earth, between the created world and the world of divine love.

The idea that the created world could also serve as a way that humans can move toward the divine was neither new nor incongruent with the pilgrimage mentality. Scripture, especially the Psalms, had sung the wonders of the created world and called on the reader to praise God through creation. The early desert Fathers, who were isolated from the cities, wrote of their encounters with the divine in the nature—including the creatures, both gentle and fearsome—of their deserts. The Celtic missionaries of Iona included stories of divine inspiration in the experience of the natural world. Even Augustine had written, "May the sacred page be a book for you, so that you may hear; may the globe of the earth be a book for you, so that you may see;



in these books only [Scripture], those who know letters read these things; in the whole world, even the fool can read.”¹

We also see evidence of this tradition, outside of Chartrian circles, in the twelfth century. We have already noted Hugh of St. Victor’s comment about the sensible world serving as “finger of God.” Even Bernard of Clairvaux comments in a sermon that the “sensible world as a kind of book, tied by a chain, so that whoever wants, may read the wisdom of God in it.”² This recognition is further revealed in a poetically beautiful fashion in the words of Hildegard Bingen, who saw the mystery of the divine presence revealed in nature:

I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark and I have breathed out nothing that can die. But I determine how things are. I have regulated the circuit of the heavens by flying around its revolving track with my upper wings—that is to say, with Wisdom. But I am also the fiery light of divine essence—I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon, and the stars, I burn. And by means of the airy wind, I stir everything into quickness with a certain invisible life which sustains all.³

The Chartrians served as central conduits for this tradition. We see within their writings not only the belief that the cosmos reveals the existence of God, but also the continuing sustaining presence of the Trinity itself. The cosmos is presented as serving as a primary tool for leading to the contemplation and experience of God.

REVELATION IN THE ONGOING ACT OF CREATION

The Chartrians held that the cosmos functions not only to reveal the divine but as divine revelation. This divine encounter stands as a central and ultimate goal for both William and Thierry. They did not, however, focus only on deep contemplation of the cosmos and its eternal idea. Rather, they were of the opinion that revelation occurs in discovering how the cosmos operates—that is, through the science as well as the metaphysics of it. They were bent on understanding themselves, human society, and morality, as well as the physical growth of trees and climatic changes. They were not content to bypass all this information to speak only about God in God’s self or in the interior of their souls. For them, any theology (God talk) must be rooted in an understanding of the cosmos. They felt that the central way to know God is to know the cosmos.

The analysis of the powers of the soul, as presented in the previous chapter, indicates that the knowledge of God is an activity of the intellect. The intellect, however, is informed and prodded by experience—enjoyed by the whole