

Chapter 6

The Cosmos: An Orderly Gathering of Creatures Made in the Image of God

INTRODUCTION: A THEOLOGICAL AND EXEMPLARISTIC COSMOLOGY

The Chartrians share a great deal with many of the masters of their day. Few of the others, however, spent so much time writing about the cosmological implications of their metaphysics. This was not done in one particular treatise. Rather, it was produced in the lines of the glosses that they wrote. Indeed, the gloss seems to have been merely a platform from which to launch into their own views on the nature of the cosmos and its metaphysical and theological framework. In Part IV of this study, we will pay close attention to natural philosophy and its importance among the Chartrians. But now we will explore the cosmological significance of Chartrian philosophy and theology. In his last work, the *Dragmaticon*, William of Conches offers us a fascinating look into the world of mid-twelfth-century science. Ultimately, however, any truth within it lies incomplete if it is not understood within its metaphysical context.

In this chapter, we look at the effects the Chartrian metaphysics had on their understanding of the cosmos. Thierry's account is rooted in his reading of Boethius—and William's, in his reading of Plato. Here, we will look at each of these Chartrian masters in turn as each offers his own distinct—though complementary—view of the topic. We begin with a caution offered by William. He reveals that just as the sense world is an exemplary image of the archetypal world, so his account of the sense world is “a likeness of an

account—that is, an imperfect account because only a divine account is a true account; but a human one is a likeness.”¹ This statement is, of course, based on Timaeus’ statement in Plato’s dialogue that bears his name. William’s disclaimer stands as a warning against the presumption of humanity’s ability to obtain perfect knowledge of anything and the recognition of the limits of reason.

**THE COSMOS AS AN IMAGE OF GOD:
WILLIAM’S EXEMPLARISTIC COSMOLOGY**

The first thing that can be said of the Chartrian understanding of the cosmos is that it is a single entity. There is only one. This concept was, of course, not unique to the Chartrians. However, the way they deduced it brings out a pertinent part of their thought. They grounded their understanding of the oneness of the cosmos in their understanding of the oneness of God and the intelligible world. William writes that “since there is one exemplar and not many, therefore the number of worlds that there are is similar—there is one.”² This statement is important because it limits the discussion, but highlights the fact that all that exists is a single unified whole.

There are not only no other “cosmoses,” but the cosmos that exists is a single integrated entity. All creatures and all aspects of the cosmos, from rocks to rivers to stars, are members of a single whole, which individually and together form the cosmos that is imaged on the divine exemplar. There is nothing and nowhere that is not an image of God. All that is, corporeal or incorporeal, exists as one because God is one.³ When we reflect back on the determination of the Chartrian refusal to read the ideas as plural in the divine mind, we can see a clear connection. Understanding God’s oneness is a prerequisite for understanding the cosmos. There is no plurality in God and it is in this element of faith and understanding about God that we begin our understanding of the cosmos. According to this line of thought, cosmology can not begin without this as its ground.

When William states that “the world is an orderly gathering of creatures,”⁴ he gives us a vision of interrelated unity with each part being imaged on the divine exemplar, and existing exemplaristically as “part” of the single whole which is an image of God. This leads to the second thing that we can say about the cosmos. It is good. William writes, “God made the world which is the most good.”⁵ Again, the fact that the cosmos is the “most good” is recorded in both Genesis and the *Timaeus*. The more one can learn about it, the more one can learn about God. One can study what the cosmos is and this can lead one back to discover something about what God is.