Chapter 8

The World Soul and the Holy Spirit: Two Metaphors for the Same Reality

Introduction: The Divine Woven Naturally in the Cosmos

The question of the relationship between God and the world has long been part of Christian conversation. St. Augustine's declaration of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—had as one of its purposes to stamp out the then widespread notion that the sense world was either eternal or that it was made, in some way, out of God and therefore was a part of God or was identical with God.[1] The Christian understanding of the sharp divide between God and the world, however, had roots in the teaching of the Jewish scriptures. The Hebrew people were themselves fighting some of the same earth-divinizing tendencies among their neighbors and perhaps among themselves. One outcome was the depiction of the divine as a Sky God who is spirit and who resides in heaven. This developed over a long period of time and lives on as one of the dominant personalities of the Jewish and Christian perception of God.

Augustine's proclamation did not end the conversation. In fact, it led to more intense discourse on the relationship between divine transcendence and immanence. Many questions remained to be answered: If God was spirit and resided in heaven, how did God remain active in the world? How was God present in the world? If God became human in the form of Jesus, was this the only way or time that God and the world were united? We see, throughout Christian history, the development of the idea of sacred places

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and the sacraments, especially that of the Eucharist, which prescribed that there were certain moments when God was "really present" in the world. But, what of the rest of the time and the rest of space? Augustine too had found solace in Platonic exemplarism, but his focus was on the human person and especially the human soul. The relationship of the rest of the created cosmos to God he left ambiguous.

In the twelfth century, this conversation was twofold: What is the relationship between God and humans? And what is the relationship between God and the rest of the natural world? Following Augustine, the point at which God and humans connected was centered on the human soul, for it was here that humans truly encountered the divine, and it was the souls of the blessed that would be with God after the last days. How God was present in and to the rest of the cosmos remained unsettled.

As we saw in Part II, one way to address this issue was through the Platonic idea of exemplarism. This worked for some, but it was a difficult concept to grasp—and to preach on. The idea of the world soul offered another way to address the problem. The key lay in the connection that was made between the activity of the world soul and the activity of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Many people wrote about the Holy Spirit early in the twelfth century. Few of them connected the third person of the Trinity to the world soul. The Holy Spirit had a long history of being connected to the act of creation and to the continuing presence of God in the cosmos. This is rooted in the scriptures, the Creed, and many patristic sources. One example in the twelfth century is found in Hildegard of Bingen, who wrote, "Indeed, the Holy Spirit pervades the humans' entire nature, as noted above. This is made evident in the prophets, the wise, the good, and the just. And, in choosing everything good, the Holy Spirit, drawing them toward himself, permeates and illumines them as the sun permeates and illumines storms, so that this profusion of the fiery Holy Spirit conquers the humans' mutable nature."[2] The involvement of the Holy Spirit in creation and his continuing presence are important because it is through these activities that the Chartrians made the connection to the world soul. Both ideas—the world soul and the Holy Spirit—presented to them a picture of the same reality.

Thierry of Chartres on the Divine Status of the World Soul

There is only one mention of the connection between the world soul and the Holy Spirit in the writings of Thierry of Chartres. That is in the opening section of his commentary on the first chapter of Genesis. Thierry saw the