Chapter 5. Lineaments of the Perennial Philosophy: Mysticism in the Late Middle Ages

13th-century followers of Erigena

It is clear that the 'heresies' listed in the papal condemnation of 1271 contain views distinctly and definitely taught by Erigena. Jones tells us that 'Cardinal Henry of Ostia … says: "the doctrine of the wicked Amaury [1] is comprised in the book of Master John the Scot, which is called *Peryphision* (*i.e. De Divisione Naturae*), which the said Amaury followed"… The papal bull (of 1225) says: "We have heard that this book is to be found in various monasteries and other places, and several monastic and scholastic persons … give themselves eagerly to the study of the said book." Further, 'Numerous copies of [this book] were found among the Albigensians in the South of France.'[2]

The council of 1209 denounced another follower of Erigena, David of Dinant, of equal fame with Amaury. They wrote:

> David of Dinant held that God, intelligence, and matter are identical in essence, and unite in a single substance, that consequently everything in nature is one – [and that] individual qualities which distinguish beings are only appearances due

[1] Amaury (or Amalrich) de Bene, 'a master in the university [of Paris] and a person of wide and commanding influence' Jones, p. 179

[2] Quoted by Jones, op. cit.

> to the illusion of sense. These pantheistic ideas are further confirmed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, a disciple of Albert the Great, who gives this further account of David's doctrine. 'David of Dinant divided the beings of the universe into three classes – bodies, souls, and eternal substances. He said that matter is the first and indivisible element which constitutes bodies, that intelligence (*nous*) is the first and indivisible element which constitutes souls, and that God is the first and indivisible element which constitutes eternal essences; and finally that these three – God, intelligence and matter – are a single thing, one and the same. From which it follows that everything in the universe is essentially one.[3]

We are reminded that 'there is a very strong tinge of Neoplatonic mysticism in the Arab interpretation of Aristotle (in the version that came to the West), and it is well-nigh certain that 'one particular book on physics' gave a basis for David's doctrine. It is possible that one of the sources of the teaching both of David and Amaury, and through them of the mysticism which followed, was the writings of Alexander of Aphrodisias, the great commentator of Aristotle in the second century. Alexander taught that the *active reason* in man is divine, and all the *ideas* which are the prototypes of the universe have their origin in this 'active 'reason', and thus have their origin in God, so that everything *real* is divine'.[4]

[3] Cited by Jones, p. 184
[4] Jones p. 185

The Brethren of the Free Spirit

There was already by 1209 a widespread 'society' in and about Paris, evidently loosely held together and yet showing some indications of internal organization. We learn of a specific ministry through 'prophets' and we find an important stress placed on ecstatic states and inspirational speaking derived from what was considered to be direct contact with God. The members of the sect rejected, as suitable only to the condition of the ignorant and unspiritual, the traditional formulae, rites and ceremonies of the Church. They denounced as superstition the worship of saints and the veneration of relics. Goodwill and spiritual insight, they held, are more efficacious than the sacraments. According to the contemporary chronicler Caesar of Heisterbach:

> They denied the resurrection of the body. They taught that there is neither heaven nor hell, as places, but that he who knows God possesses Heaven, and he who commits a mortal sin carries hell within himself … they treat as idolatry the custom of setting up of statues and burning incense to images. They laughed at those who kissed the bones of martyrs … [They taught that] The direct inward work of the Holy Spirit brings salvation, without any exterior act or ceremony … [An Amaury follower] asserts that "God spoke through Ovid as much as through Augustine" … They believe in the incarnation, the birth, the passion, and the resurrection of Christ, but they mean by it the spiritual conception, spiritual birth, spiritual resurrection of the perfect man. For them the true passion of Jesus is the

martyrdom of a holy man, and the true sacrament is the conversion of a man, for in such a conversion the body of Christ is formed'.[5]

Only a few years after the death of Amaury a powerful sect came to light, with mystical and pantheistic ideas which seem like a propagation and expansion of the views of this group. It was called in its earlier stage the 'Sect of the New Spirit', though this name was soon superseded by the name Brethren of the Free Spirit. The sect appears to have sprung up in Strasbourg, and to have owed its origin to a man named Ortlieb, who was almost certainly an Amaurian.[6]

Finally, 'The document by the 'Anonymous of Passau' (formerly supposed to have been Rudolph Sacchoni, who wrote *Summa Catharis et Leonistis*, and who died in 1259) contains 97 propositions setting forth the doctrines of the Sect of the New Spirit. (These 97 propositions have been traced back to Albert the Great, and were evidently in their earliest form drawn up by him)'.[7] It is generally considered that Hieronymus Bosch – in some senses Bruegel's predecessor – belonged to the Brethren of the Free Spirit.[8]

[5] According to the chronicler Caesar of Heisterbach, Book v. chap. xxii. p. 386) cited by Jones, pp. 187-191.
[6] According to Nauclerus, Swiss chronicler, 1215; Jones p. 192
[7] Jones, p. 192
[8] Lynda Harris, op. cit

Devotio Moderna

We are now in the territory of the Brethren of the Free Spirit where the world of 'new thought' or New Devotion was being explored by a variety of diverse groups: Beghards, Beguines, Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics, Humanists, Spirituals, Friends of God, the Brotherhood of the Common Life and the House of Love.

> 'New thought' was the popular product studied of the speculations [up till now] of the somewhat abstract doctrines of Dionysius, Erigena and Amaury … [They] were being changed … to practical truths …The Teaching of the Allness of God and the possibility of every person being an expression of his nature … spread through the world and became a *popular doctrine* … and soon became the spirit of the epoch.

> The societies of Beguines and Beghards offered splendid opportunity for the spread of the leaven of 'Free Spirit', as the popular doctrines evolved from the teachings of Amaury and Ortlieb were called … [These] societies were … transformed into the 'Brethren of the Free Spirit'.

> The metaphysics of this movement are quite plain and simple, for every time we get a glimpse of the doctrine the central idea is they same. God is all. He goes out of his unity into plurality and differentiation. In this universe of multiplicity every thing real is divine. The need of all things is a return to the divine unity. Man has

> within himself the possibility of return – he can become like Christ, like God. He can even become God. In man's state of perfection God does all in him that he does. The Church therefore is unnecessary. Man himself is a revelation of God. Heaven and Hell are allegories.[9]

Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics

The name most readily associated with the Devotio Moderna is that of the German mystic and theologian Johannes Eckhart (1260?-1328?). He was a Dominican friar who wrote a large number of works dealing with man's inner spirituality and the ability of the individual to develop this spirituality. It was thought that these ideas diminished the importance of the clergy and the sacraments of the Church. In 1327 Eckhart faced charges of heresy and recanted many of his propositions. Although his teachings were declared heretical, Eckhart's ideas had far-reaching influence and many consider them to be the precursors of Protestantism. He studied at Erfurt and then at Cologne where Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) and his pupil Thomas Aquinas 1225-1274) were the great names. We learn from Jones' commentary that 'Meister Eckhart … was able to absorb the mystical teaching of … Augustine, Dionysius, Erigena, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas [also Pagan authors], and by his real endowment of genius and his fertility of

[9] Jones pp. 202-206. see also http://www.etss.edu/hts/MAPM/info3.htm

mind he was able to become the interpreter of this mystical message to the people. He was at the storm centre of heretical mysticism – the mysticism of the 'Free Spirit'.[10]

Magnus begins his treatise *De Adhaerendo Dei* with the following unusually explicit description of the practice of meditation or contemplative prayer including a telling gloss on Christ's instructions on prayer:

> When St John says that God is a spirit, and that he must be worshipped in spirit, he means that the mind must be cleared of all images. When thou prayest, shut thy door – that is the door of thy senses. Keep them barred and bolted against all phantasms and images. Nothing pleases God more than a mind free from all occupations and distractions. Such a mind is in a manner transformed into God, for it can think of nothing and love nothing, except God; other creatures and itself it only sees in God. He whom I love and desire is above all that is sensible, and all that is intelligible; sense and imagination cannot bring us to him, but only the desire of a pure heart. This brings us unto the darkness of the mind, whereby we can ascend to the contemplation even of the mystery of the Trinity. Do not think about the world, or thy friends, nor about the past, present or future; but consider thyself to be outside the world and alone with God, as if thy soul were already separated from the body and had no longer any interest in peace or war or the

[10] Jones, p. 217

> state of the world. Leave the body and fix thy gaze on the uncreated light. Let nothing come between thee and God.[11]

In 1311 Eckhart returned to his studies in Paris. When he left for his great career as a preacher in Strasbourg, he certainly carried away with him as part of himself the mystical world-view of Dionysius and Erigena which he was to translate in scores of sermons to the people of Strasbourg. There is a passage in one of his Strasbourg sermons which is in sympathy with the views of the Brethren of the Free Spirit:

> That person who has renounced all visible creatures and in whom God performs His will completely – that person is both God and Man. His body is so completely penetrated with divine light and with the soul essence which is of God that he can properly be called a divine man. For this reason, my children, be kind to these men, for they are strangers and aliens in this world. Those who wish to come to God have only to model their lives after these men; no one can know them unless he has within him the same light, the light of truth.[12]

Eckhart himself provides marvelously clear commentaries on the esoteric meaning of scripture. In one of his sermons on the Nativity of Our Lord, he calls us away from the historical, literal narrative: 'Here in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in

[11] Cited by Jones, p. 219
[12] Pfeiffer p. 127, line 38 ff. cited by Jones p. 223

time, in human nature. St Augustine says: "What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me?" '[13] Eckhart is referring to classic meditation techniques when, further on, he states that 'the soul in which this birth is to take place must keep absolutely pure ... quite collected and turned entirely inward; not running out through the five senses, but all inturned and collected in the purest part – there is His [i.e. God's] place.[14]

Professor Jones summarizes Eckhart thus.

> We shall find in [Eckhart] the main … lines of thought which are now familiar to us in the great systems of Plotinus, Dionysius and Erigena. In his profoundly original style of speech we shall hear again of the undifferentiated Godhead, the Divine Procession, and of the soul's return home …The first point that must be grasped is the distinction between 'God and the 'Godhead'. There is – and this is the core of Eckhart's doctrine – there is a central mystery which for ever lies beyond the range of knowledge. He whom we call 'God' is the divine nature manifested and revealed in personal character, but behind this revelation there must be a Revealer – One who makes the revelation and is the Ground of it, just as behind ourself-as-known there must be a self as knower – a deeper ego which knows the me and its processes. Now the Ground out of which the revelation proceeds is the central mystery – is the Godhead. It cannot be revealed because it

[13] ibid.
[14] ibid.

is the ground of every revelation, just as the self-as-knower cannot be known because it is precisely that which *does the knowing*, and this cannot itself be caught as object.

The unrevealable Godhead is the Source and Fount of all that is, and at the same time the consummation of all reality, but it is above all contrasts and distinctions. It is neither *this* nor that, for, says Eckhart, in the Godhead, 'all things are one thing' – all the fullness of the creatures (*i.e.* created things) can as little express the Godhead as a drop of water can express the sea.

> All that is in the Godhead is one. Therefore we can say nothing. He is above all names, above all nature. God works; so doth not the Godhead. Therein they are distinguished – in working and not working. The end of all things is the hidden Darkness of the eternal Godhead, unknown and never to be known.[15]

Nobody has gone further than Eckhart in removing all anthropomorphic traits from God, *i.e.* the Godhead, but the result is that He is left with no thinkable characteristics ... He entirely transcends human knowledge … No word that voices distinctions or characteristics, then, may be spoken of the Godhead, Eckhart's favourite names are: 'the Wordless Godhead'; 'the Immovable Rest'; 'the still Wilderness, where no one is at home'. All mystics have insisted that God

[15] Pfeiffer, p. 173

> in his essence is beyond 'knowledge', for 'knowledge' must deal with a finite 'this' or a finite 'that', while God in His absolute reality must be above any 'this' or 'that'. Eckhart's 'nameless Nothing' is only a bold way of saying that the Godhead must be above everything that limits or defines – above everything that can be 'thought' or envisaged. As he himself says: 'In the Naked Godhead there is neither form nor idea ... He is an absolute, pure, clear One … the impenetrable Darkness of the eternal Godhead'. The unoriginated Being, the Ground of all that is, is the central mystery, and he who would fathom this mystery must transcend knowledge, must have recourse to some other form of experience than that which defines and differentiates as the knowing process does.[16]

The Friends of God

The group known historically as the Friends of God (*Gottesfreunde*) was formed in Basle between 1439 and 1444. Its influence extended along the Rhine as far as the Netherlands, the cities most prominent in its history being Basle, Strasburg, and Cologne. Its associates, among whom are the greatest names of German mysticism, were devoted to the practices of the interior life.[17]

[16] Jones pp. 225-6
[17] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06306a.htm

> The title Friends of God does not cover a sect, or even a 'society'… it names a … type of Christianity which found its best expression in [prophets], both men and women, who powerfully moved large groups … by their preaching, their writing, and their extraordinary lives. All the leaders of the movement were profoundly influenced by … Eckhart. [as well as by St Hildegarde, St Elizabeth of Schonau, and St Matilda of Magdeburg] …The Friends of God formed small groups or local societies, gathered about some spiritual leader or counselor. There was little or no organisation. The type of each particular group was characterized by the personality of the 'leader'. These … groups were widespread [in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland] … There was a voluminous exchange of letters among the leaders and frequent personal visits …The leading figures … are Rulman Merswin of Strasbourg; Nicholas von Lowen; John Tauler, Henry Suso, Jan Ruysbroek; Margaret and Christina Ebner; Henry of Nördlingen and the great unknown, who wrote the little book called *German Theology*.[18]

Meditation

A document giving 'Advice' ascribed to Merswin includes the following, stressing the necessity of daily meditation:

[18] Jones p. 242-245

> All those … who desire to begin a new and spiritual life, will find great profit in a withdrawal into themselves every morning when they rise, to consider what they will undertake during the day … Likewise, in the evening, on going to bed, let them collect themselves and consider how they have spent the day.[19]

John Tauler, c. 1300 - 1361

According to Tauler: 'Great doctors of Paris read ponderous books and turn over many pages. The Friends of God read the living book where everything is life.' And he tells us that one of the greatest Friends of God he had ever known was a simple day labourer, a cobbler, who had no magic of ordination and no wisdom of scholarship. Tauler, like all true mystics, insists on an inner light, 'an inward divine light which illuminates [the Friends of God] and raises them to union with God'. By merely looking at their neighbour they can tell his inward state; they know whether he belongs to God or not, and what hinders him from spiritual progress.[20]

> God is a hidden God – he is much nearer than anything is to itself in the depth of the heart, but he is hidden from all our senses. He is far above every outward

[19] Quoted by Jones, p. 256
[20] Sermon LIX, Jones p. 276

> thing and every thought and is found only when thou hidest thyself in the secret places of the heart, in the quiet solitude where no word is spoken, where there is neither creature, nor image nor fancy. This is the quiet desert of the Godhead, the Divine Darkness – dark from His own surpassing brightness, as the shining sun is darkness to weak eyes, for in the presence of its brightness our eyes are like the eyes of the swallow in the bright sunlight – this abyss is our salvation![21]

Tauler constantly insists on the religion of experience: 'The man who truly experiences the pure presence of God in his own soul knows well there can be no doubt about it … this knowledge is not be learned from the masters of Paris'; it can only come through the experience of 'entering and dwelling in the Kingdom of God … what this is and how it came to pass is easier to experience than to describe.'[22]

Henry Suso, 1296-1366

Henry Suso was a disciple of Eckhart. As a youth he received ecstatic visions. He then lived a life of terrible self-privations and self-inflicted pain. The ultimate reality for Suso, as for Eckhart, is the 'eternal, uncreated truth'. 'Here the devout man has his beginning and his end'. Whatever flows out from the source, the Godhead, can turn back again into

[21] Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, Hutton's *The Inner Way, being Tauler's Sermons for Festivals.* Jones, p.278

[22] Sermon XXXVI, Sermon XLVIII

its source, and so come to reality and bliss, and even while he is living on earth 'a man may be in eternity'.[23]

The literary gem of this religious movement is *Theologica Germanica*; the writer is plainly influenced by Eckhart and shows the family characteristics of the Friends of God. He quotes from Tauler, and he holds much the same views. This work together with the other great classic of the period, the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas À Kempis, represents the culmination of the perennial philosophy in 16th-century northern Europe that had been operating through the mysticism of the church since the early middle ages. Widely read at the time, these two books constitute a large part of the basic spiritual resource of the mystics, philosophers, humanists and thinkers of the period and from among whom Peter Bruegel cannot be excluded.

Theologica Germanica and *Imitatio Christi*[24]

'The *Theologica Germanica* and the *Imitatio Christi* were, after the Bible, the two most universally and widely read books by educated religious people in the 16th century.'[25] For

[23] Jones, p. 289
[24] Thomas À Kempis (1380-1472), *Imitatio Christi*, trl. 1952 by Leo Shirley-Price, Penguin Classics, London. The author of *Theologica Germanica* (1380) remains anonymous. The version well known today is that published by Martin Luther in 1518. See *The Theologica Germanica of Martin Luther*, trl. Bengt Hoffman, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1980. These two works, perhaps together with the writings of St Augustine, were the mostly widely read, after the Bible, of the Western spiritual tradition throughout the late Middle Ages and especially in the first half of the 16th century.

reasons that will be outlined below, it can be said that they would certainly have been known to Peter Bruegel and the circle known as the Hiël Group that, under Jansen Barrefelt, was profoundly influenced by the teachings of Hendrik Niclaes (in fact Barrefelt had been his follower) and which was part of the rather widespread movement variously known as *Domus Caritatis*, the House of Love, the Family of Love or the Familists.[26]

A number of quotations have been selected from these two books that express ideas that belong to the body of traditional mystical and esoteric teaching referred to in this thesis as the Perennial Philosophy in the form that was current in the 16th century. Interestingly, the editor of the *Imitatio* is among those who object to the term Perennial Philosophy. Apparently wanting to dismiss the idea, he says: 'there is a common tendency today to represent the Saints as experts in "natural" religion or "perennial philosophy" '.[27] In this writer's opinion he confuses the Perennial Philosophy with 'nature mysticism' and dismisses it as '[un]worthy of serious consideration'. Yet two pages later we find:

> It is hardly surprising that a man of Thomas [à Kempis'] spiritual and mental powers was widely and soundly read in the best both of pagan and Christian literature. Every page glows with the reflected light of Holy Scripture, which he knows so intimately; but he loves also to draw from the wisdom of the Christian

[25] A. Hamilton, *The House of Love*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 6.
[26] Hamilton, p. 6. see also 'English Dissenters' in *Ex Libris.* (http://www.exlibris.org/nonconform/engdis/familists.html) for a comprehensive bibliography.
[27] *Imitatio*, Introduction, p. 12.

> fathers, and from the great philosophers of Greece and Rome, in order to confirm and illustrate his teaching. Anyone familiar with the writings of St. Bernard, St. Augustine, and S. Thomas Aquinas can readily detect the thought of these great theologians, while Thomas also draws from Ovid, Seneca, and Aristotle.[28]

The last sentence suggests, in outline, a parallel with the Perennial Philosophy already laid out in this thesis.

The *Theologica Germanica* predates the *Imitatio Christi* by a century. Its author is unknown but its tradition can be related to Tauler[29] whose thought was influenced by the great Eckhart who may have been his teacher.[30]

The selection of the material set out below, like the interpretation that will be offered of the deep meaning hidden in Bruegel's paintings, is based on the premise that the seeker of truth begins with the acknowledgment that he is spiritually lost, that he needs a method of work and practice of a psychological or psycho-spiritual nature. The search has to be indefatigable and the struggle between a person's human nature and spiritual nature is sometimes compared to war in much the same sense as references to 'unseen warfare' or 'hidden warfare' are found in commentaries on the spiritual life in the *Philokalia*. A number of quotations are grouped together here under the heading 'warfare'.

[28] *Imitatio*, Introduction, p. 14
[29] Hoffman-Bengt, *Theologica*, Introduction, p. 9
[30] Catholic Encyclopaedia, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14465c.htm

Other quotations are selected on the basis of the proposition in this thesis that the central activity for the pursuit of spiritual perfection is the practice of contemplative prayer or meditation. It has been shown that the cultivation of attention or mindfulness within oneself was a concept widely understood and widely practiced, albeit in varying forms, in Antiquity, throughout the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance rather in the way that bodily health and the practice of physical exercise is cultivated and practiced today.[31] From this basic principle, central to the inner life of cultures and civilizations of all periods, a vast literature springs, some fragments of which have been cited in these pages, that has become the common culture of humanity. Great sacred writings are variously interpreted as artistic or poetic or historical; though from the esoteric idea as defined by Origen, Dante and others, they should be considered as alluding to different levels of meaning: (1) the literal, (2) the moral, (3) the spiritual and (4) the esoteric or anagogic. It is the last that contains insights and images or descriptions of states of being and states of consciousness not ordinarily available to people concerned only with mundane affairs. However, it is said, particularly in Christianity, that all people possess the faculty, even if undeveloped, for perceiving aspects of God or higher truth and most people have known momentary insights or, at least, intimations of the existence of 'another reality'. Once in every generation or so an exceptionally gifted teacher appears who has more continuous or even permanent access to states of higher consciousness. But their message is almost invariably misunderstood or ignored or distorted. Eckhart, as we have seen, calls them 'strangers and aliens in this world'. It is the lot of humanity to fall into the 'forgetfulness'

[31] See above, e.g. p. 131

and ‘sleep’ that spiritual teachers warn against, but to know this is to be a seeker and it is to seekers that the spiritual teachings try to speak.

Here follows a brief anthology of quotations chosen from *Theologica Germanica* (referred to as TG) and the *Imitatio Christi* (referred to as IC) that this writer considers central to the themes of this thesis.

Warfare, Work and Trial

> Your eternal home and the joys of the heavenly country draw your heart. But the time for this has not yet come; there remains warfare, work and trial. (IC p. 160) [32]
>
> Who has a fiercer struggle than he who would conquer himself? Yet this must be our chief concern – to conquer self, and by daily growing stronger than self, to advance in holiness. (IC p. 31)
>
> Job says ‘man’s life on earth is warfare’. (IC p. 40)
>
> Without labour, no rest is won; without battle, there can be no victory (IC p. 118)

Frailty and weakness

À Kempis reminds us of our difficulties caused by the fact that:

[32] References are given in the text after each quotation. IC = *Imitatio Christi*, TG = *Theologica Germanica*

> We are not free from passions and lusts, nor do we strive to follow the perfect way [and] when we encounter even a little trouble, we are quickly discouraged, and turn to human comfort. (IC p. 38)

> Here man is defiled by many sins, ensnared by many passions, a prey to countless fears. Racked by many cares, and distracted by many strange things, he is entangled in many vanities. He is hedged in by many errors, worn out by many labours, burdened by temptations, enervated by pleasures, tormented by want. (IC p. 157)

> Keep me, also, from becoming a servant to my body's many needs. (IC p. 129)

The New Man

The writer points out that our reward cannot come until we have completed our spiritual journey and that, during its course, a fundamental change has to occur:

> You desire to be filled with the supreme Good, but you cannot attain this blessing now. I am that Good; wait for Me, says the Lord, until the coming of the Kingdom of God. You must be proved in this life and many trials await you. Consolation will sometimes be granted you, but not in its fullness. So be strong and courageous both in doing and enduring what by nature is repugnant to you. It is necessary for you to become a new man, and to be changed into another person. (IC p. 160)

The Human Condition ('original sin')

Man's difficulties are very great; we are the inheritors of events associated with our origin

> Man is an exile here … he can put his trust in nothing in this world. (IC p. 39)
>
> Man has lost the blessing of original happiness. (IC p. 40)
>
> [Man] lies under the curse common to all men. (IC p. 129)

Self Knowledge

According to the views of Thomas Á Kempis, a pathway exists along which the journey will be taken. It is an inner journey called the path of Self Knowledge. It is superior to worldly knowledge, including academic learning.

> A humble knowledge of oneself is a surer road to God than a deep searching of the sciences … where are all those Masters and Doctors whom you knew so well in their lifetimes in the full flower of their learning? Other men sit in their seats, and they are hardly ever called to mind. (IC p. 3)

The unknown author of *Theologica Germanica* takes the question of sin out of the field of morality and links it firmly to the practice of 'knowing within':

> Sin … is to know within that man has strayed and will stray from God. (TG p. 119)

And he warns against the love of knowledge for its own sake:

> Knowledge and learning … have become more loved than that which is the object of knowledge. Yes, the false natural light [i.e. not the spiritual light] loves its knowledge and its learning more than that which should have been the object of knowledge.
>
> It is conceivable that this natural light could really know and grasp God and unadulterated, simple truth as it is in God were it not for one thing: it cannot become liberated from its nature, which is concerned about itself and things of the self.
>
> In this sense we face here a mental and spiritual knowledge without love for that which is known. It rises and climbs so high that it finally develops the fanciful notion that it can actually know God and the unadulterated, simple truth. But what it really loves is still itself. (TG p. 124)

Attention

Attention is the means or the tool with which the seeker engages inwardly with the forces that pass within him. In the Greek *Philokalia* the term used is προσοχή (*prosochi*) and corresponds to the Buddhist *sati* (mindfulness). It is our lack of attention and mental instability that renders men so helpless and prone to evil.

> The beginning of all evil temptation is an unstable mind and lack of trust in God. Just as a ship without a helm is driven to and fro by the waves, so a careless man, who abandons his proper course is tempted in countless ways. Fire tempers steel and temptation the just man. We often do not know what we can bear, but temptation reveals our true nature. We need especially to be on our guard at the very onset of temptation, for then the enemy may be more easily overcome, if he is not allowed to enter the gates of the mind: he must be repulsed at the threshold, as soon as he knocks. Thus the poet Ovid writes, 'Resist at the beginning; the remedy may come too late'. First there comes into the mind an evil thought: next, a vivid picture: then delight, and urge to evil, and finally consent. (IC p. 41)
>
> We should carefully examine and order both our inner and our outer life, since both are vital to our advance. (IC p. 48)
>
> Where are you when you fail to attend to yourself? (IC p. 73)
>
> Enter deeply into inner things. (IC p. 91)
>
> Keep guard over your whole life. (IC p. 127)

Absence of attention makes the seeker prey to random thoughts that distract him and take him out of himself.

> I am usually beset by many distractions. Often, indeed, I do not really remain in my body at all, but am carried away by my thoughts. (IC p. 158)
>
> It is … better that a man deeply within himself learns the what and the how of his life. (TG p. 69)

The truth of spiritual teaching is severe and tells us that we live in illusion. Only 'When a person comes to know and see himself' (TG p. 72) can man become free of the imaginary person he pretends to be.

> Man fancies himself to be what he is not. He fancies himself to be God, yet he is only nature, a created being. From within that illusion he begins to claim for himself the traits that are the marks of God. (TG p. 115)

Even the power of thought that man is so proud of is not properly within his control.

> The usual trivial thoughts of men [are] involuntary rather than deliberate. (IC p. 100)

Practice

The practice of daily meditations and spiritual exercises is the indispensable discipline that will enable the seeker on the path to develop attention and self knowledge.

> We fail in our purposes in various ways, and the light omission of our spiritual exercises passes without certain loss to our souls. (IC p. 48)

> Although we cannot always preserve our recollections, yet we must do so from time to time, and at least once a day (IC p. 49)
>
> Enter into your room and shut out the clamour of the world, as it is written, 'Commune with your own heart, and in your chamber be still'.[33] (IC p. 51)

Only direct experience, gained through spiritual practice, delivers the truth. Anything else, however admired in the eyes of the world, is illusion.

> Let no man believe that he can come to this true Light and this inner knowledge or to the Christ Life with the aid of much questioning or secondhand information or by way of reading and studying, or with high skills and academic mastery, or with high natural reasoning. (TG p.83)

[33] Ps. iv, 4; Isa. xxvi, 20

Inner Knowledge (Esotericism)

The development of spiritual understanding is not a worldly undertaking and it can be said that it has no place at the mundane level. It cannot be spoken of directly and its utterances, lacking the logic and structure of the world, often seem shocking or incomprehensible.

> God and man are one. (TG p. 89)
>
> God is a light and an inner knowing. (TG p. 102)
>
> Man recognizes with inner knowledge. (TG p. 110)
>
> It is the inner man who receives God's law. (TG p. 114)
>
> God is the true light, void of all I and self. (TG p. 115)
>
> For he who is not on this path is unable to put it into words. And he who is on the path and knows is equally unable to voice it. (TG p. 85)
>
> One is to come to inner knowledge of the one truth … (TG p. 123)
>
> … a true inwards life. The inward life begins as follows. When a man tastes the perfect Being, as far as that is possible in an earthly life, all created things, yes, even his own self, become like nothing to him. (TG p. 147)
>
> In silence and quietness [learn] the hidden mysteries of the scriptures. (IC p. 51)

The true esoteric event has to be entirely within and not in the world.

> No good action … can make man and his soul virtuous, good, or blissful so long as it occurs outside the soul. (TG p. 69)

Death

On the mystical path the inevitable death of the body is not such an important issue other than the obvious need to:

> Realize that all things are passing and me with them. (IC p.131)

And so:

> Whoever puts his confidence in men or in any creature is very foolish. (IC p. 34)

More importantly, a different idea of death is referred to:

> Grant that I may die to all things in this world. (IC p. 113)
>
> Man should die to himself, that is to say, man, self and his I should die. (TG p. 77)
>
> Lo, where the old man dies and the new one is born again, the second birth takes place about which Christ says: For unless you are born again and thus renewed you will not come to the kingdom of God. (TG p. 78)

Man is lost because of his 'attachment to his lower self' (TG p. 79). But he must take into account the realities of his dual-nature. He belongs both to the higher world as well as the lower one and should take steps accordingly.

> Man should order his life with respect to the external and the internal. (TG p. 66)
>
> Christ's soul had to visit hell before it came to heaven. This is also the path for man's soul. (TG p. 72)
>
> This experience of hell and heaven is like two trustworthy paths for a man in his earthly life and happy is the man who travels on them properly and well. (TG p. 73).

This material shows that certain universal truths of the inner life, central to the practice of mystical religion (a form of the Perennial Philosophy at that time) were taught and followed in Europe in the 16th century. Liberated from dogma, creed, politics and the power structures of this or that church, this teaching allows us to glimpse truths resulting from the actual experience of the writers. They do not hide behind any party line or doctrine but speak to us directly from the heart and the enlightened mind.

The Brotherhood of the Common Life

One author at least has attempted to explore the level lying beyond the historical data assembled by academic historians. Ross Fuller's *Brotherhood of the Common Life* successfully reveals much of the richness and variety, high intelligence and deep inner spirituality of the movement to reform the Christian Church in the Late Middle Ages.[34] Among the themes touched on at a deep level, Fuller reminds us of the place of self-knowledge in spiritual work. He shows, quoting from the *Meditations of St Bernard,* how 'the New Devotion emphasized the growth of the attention of the heart through self-knowledge'.

> Many there be that know & understand many other things & yet they know not their own self. They take much heed of others, but they look not well to themselves. They leave their inward & spiritual things and seek God among outward things. The which is within them. Therefore I shall turn from those things that be outward to inward things, & from inward things I shall lift my mind to things above. That I may know whereof I came and whither I go, what I am and whereof I am. And so, by knowledge of myself I may ascend & come to knowledge of God.[35]

[34] Fuller, R. *The Brotherhood of the Common Life*. New York: SUNY, 1997.
[35] Fuller, op. cit. p. 123. The quotation is from *the Meditations of Saint Bernard* (Westminster 1496, W. de Worde, STC, 1917, BL C11a22)

Likewise the author of the *Imitatio Christi:*

> Even … God Himself can never make a man virtuous, good or blessed, so long as he is outside his soul; that is, so long as he casts about outwardly with his senses and reason, and does not withdraw into himself and learn about his own life, who and what he is … for wholly to know oneself is above all learning.[36]

We are reminded that 'Wessel Gansfort, whose outlook owed much to the long period he spent with the Brethren [of the Common Life] as a young man stated, in *De Oratione* that, to be able to pray freely a man must disengage himself, in a certain way, from the "outward man". Recollecting all of himself so that the three powers of "the inward man" might work more as they were intended …The three parts of the interior man, memory, intelligence and will, each have their proper work, but without "circumspect and attentive" meditation they cannot function rightly.'[37]

> Whatever things undermine the first foundation of the inner man, namely, meditation, are obstacles to all piety and the reformation of the inner man. In meditation, however, although he may not withstand the multitude and variety of inner speakers, with attention and deliberation he may plainly withstand.[38]

[36] *Theologia Germanica,* Joseph Bernhart ed., London 1950, p. 127
[37] Fuller, *op. cit*. p. 130
[38] idem

Fuller is writing intimately and knowledgeably about the methods and practice of inner or spiritual work; inner work practiced by those who participated in the New Devotion and its offshoots, generally known as Anabaptists. One of these Anabaptist groups, regarded as obscure, was known variously as the 'Family of Love', the 'House of Love' or the 'Familists'. Its leader was Henry Nicholas or Hendrik Niklaes. As will be shown, it is through the Family of Love that important aspects of Bruegel's psychology and spirituality may be sought.[39] Though not exclusively; Bruegel's travels in Italy, and perhaps particularly to Rome, where he may have been in contact with the followers of Marsilio Ficino and Agostino Steuco, are another likely source.

[39] See below, p. 216

Chapter 6. Lineaments of the Perennial Philosophy: Renaissance Mysticism

Italy and Renaissance Humanism

Fig. 1, Andrea Solario's portrait of Pietro Longoni, Milan 1519, National Gallery, London

Solario's portrait of Longoni

The National Gallery in London possesses a portrait dated 1519 of a man (identified as Giovanni Cristoforo Longoni) by the Milanese painter, Andrea Solario (see fig. 1). It conventionally represents the sitter half-length, soberly dressed in black and gazing calmly and confidently towards the spectator. Behind him is a low wall and, beyond that, stretching far into the distance, we see an exquisite tranquil landscape with meadows, river and trees and filled with quiet evening light. A mysterious half-smile plays on the subject's mouth and his look is quizzical and almost playful (fig. 2).

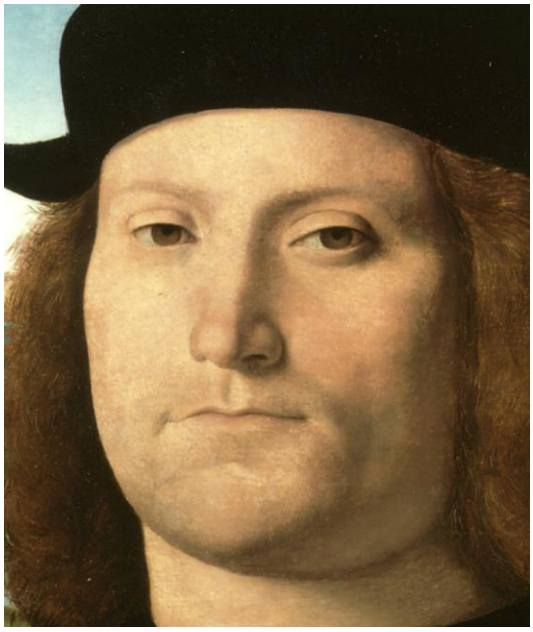
Fig. 2 Solario, detail

The Renaissance produced many such portraits, both in Italy and in Flanders and we might pause before it only long enough to savour its melancholy thoughtful mood were not our eye caught by one unusual detail. Just below the lip of the black marble parapet

on which the subject's hands rest, is an inscription painted so as to simulate letters carved into the stone: • IGNORANS QUALISFUER • QUALISQUEFUTURUS • SIS QUALIS • STUDEAS POSSE VIDERE DIV • (You know not who you were nor who you will be; strive diligently to know who you are).[1]

It would be difficult not to see in these words an invitation to ponder the ultimate philosophical question that confronts Man: Who am I? This reminder of Socrates' exhortation to 'know thyself, as the Delphinian inscription says',[2] aptly resonating with the revival of Platonism in Italy in the middle of the 15th century, was axiomatic for Renaissance mystagogues like Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and his follower Agostino Steuco.

Whitall Perry lists 70 quotations taken from spiritual masters of all religions stressing the concomitance of self-knowledge and knowledge of God or knowledge of the All.[3] These quotations show, perhaps more explicitly than the sayings around any other theme that this principle stands at the centre of esoteric philosophical ideas throughout the ages.

[1] I have not yet been able to trace the origin of this saying but Shakespeare would seem to be drawing on the same source when Ophelia says 'We know what we are but know not what we may be' (Hamlet VI, 5)
[2] 'Know Thyself'. This famous Greek maxim is attributed to any number of ancient Greek philosophers, including the great Socrates. However, according to the ancient historian Plutarch, "Know Thyself" was originally the admonition *"Gnothi se auton"* ("Know Thyself") inscribed on the Sun god Apollo's Oracle of Delphi, a temple in ancient Greece. Plutarch should know about the inscription on the Oracle, since he was once one of its caretakers. http://astrology.about.com/cs/basics/l/aa100102a.htm
[3] Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom,* (London, 1971, p. 855ff.)

Origen says the soul's quest of God comes by self observation, if she knew herself she would know God also. (Eckhart)

I say, no man knows God who knows not himself first. (Eckhart).

Let me know myself, Lord, and I shall know thee. (Augustine).

If a man knows himself, he shall know God. (Clement of Alexandria).

Let us enter the cell of self-knowledge. (Catherine of Sienna).[4]

Solario's portrait is one of the very few instances where a Renaissance artist presents an esoteric idea is more or less openly. Present research has so far not discovered for whom the portrait was made and where it was originally hung. Esoteric groups traditionally met together in a suitable private house for instruction, meditation and discussion, not necessarily in secret but discreetly. The picture may have first hung in such a milieu.

If 'know thyself' is the axiomatic concept of the Perennial Philosophy it is necessary to acknowledge the profound esoteric meaning that philosophers in antiquity and the Renaissance gave to it. The quotations selected above are a few examples chosen

[4]*A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom,* London, 1971, p. 855ff.

specifically from the Christian mystical tradition to show the continuity of the idea from Antiquity.

Throughout the Middle Ages the idea of freedom of religious thought was a luxury tolerated only in those who wrote in Latin and even so, only to a limited degree. In the later part of the medieval period (1200 – 1600) the growing reaction to the Church's power and materialism was fuelled by the rediscovery, through Greek scholars fleeing to Italy from Ottoman-occupied Constantinople, of the philosophical ideas of Pythagoras, Plato, and their followers in late antiquity: Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus and Iamblichus. Western theologians had been introduced to the works of Aristotle through the Arabs in the 11th century and this had led to scholasticism and nominalism,[5] but the mysticism of Neoplatonism was little known until the appearance, in 1438, of Gemistus Plethon who, as one of the delegates chosen by the Byzantine Emperor, traveled to Italy for the Council of Florence. Officially Plethon was designated as one of the six champions of the Orthodox Church but he spent his time discoursing on Platonism to the Florentines. It was his enthusiasm for Platonism that inspired Cosimo de Medici to found a Platonic Academy in Florence.[6] Cosimo selected Marsilio Ficino, the son of his chief physician, and provided for his education in Greek philosophy. Ficino's natural aptitude was so great that he was able to complete his first work on the Platonic Institutions when he was only 23 years old. At the age of 30, after translating the *Theogony* of Hesiod, the Hymns

[5] Nominalism (Latin nominalis, 'of or pertaining to names'), granted no universality to mental concepts outside the mind. It evolved from the thesis of Aristotle that all reality consists of individual things and thus it stood in opposition to the extreme theory of realism first enunciated by Plato in his doctrine of universal archetypal ideas.

[6] Philip Sherrard, *Christianity, Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, Edinburgh 1998, esp. Ch. 5 'Christianity and the Challenge of Georgios Gemistos Plethon and Friedrich Nietzsche'

of Proclus, Orpheus and Homer, and all of the works of Hermes Trismegistus that could be found, Ficino completed his translations of Plato. When that was finished, he turned to the Neoplatonic writers, and left behind him excellent translations of Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus and Synesius.[7]

Renaissance Esotericism

The mystical or esoteric tradition of Christianity in Europe can thus be traced from Plato (though its origin is much older) through Plotinus and, in the East, to the Desert Fathers (4th to 9th centuries) and later the Athos Fathers (10th to 14th centuries), whose writings, gathered together in the anthology known as the *Philokalia* (Love of the Good) was published in Venice in 1792 and in English in 1964. In the West, Dionysius the Areopagite, as we have seen, was translated by Duns Scotus Erigena from whom the tradition passed on to Hugo of St Victor in Paris in the 12th century and to the great St Bernard of Clairvaux and the whole of the western mystical tradition. In the East, as can be seen in the *Philokalia*, the tradition was rich and unbroken from the 4th century up until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 if not beyond. By this date Greek scholars such as Gemistus Plethon and Cardinal Bessarion were in Italy where the study of Plato and Neoplatonism fired Renaissance mystics such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola

[7] *THEOSOPHY*, Vol. 26, No. 4, February, 1938, pp. 146-152; see http://www.wisdomworld.org/setting/revival.html

and Ficino's follower, Agostino Steuco who died in Rome only a few years before Bruegel visited there in 1551 and with whose school he is likely to have had contact. This would have been possible through humanist links made at the House of the Four Winds when he was still an apprentice in Antwerp.

Edgar Wind's essay *The Language of the Mysteries* helps us to see how the Renaissance saw the methods of the Neoplatonists and their contemporaries, the early Christian Fathers.[8] The esoteric current flowed from philosophy into art because 'As Dionysius says, the divine ray cannot reach us unless it is covered in poetic veils'.[9]

> 'Our interest in Renaissance mysteries might indeed be slight were it nor for the splendour of their expression in Renaissance art. But the fact that seemingly remote ideas shine forth through a surface of unmistakable radiance is perhaps a sufficient reason for pursuing them into their hidden depth. For when ideas are so forcibly expressed in art, it is unlikely that the importance will be confined to art alone'.[10]

Wind quotes Plotinus on the problems of comprehending and expressing knowledge of the highest truth, God or the ultimate One, 'we can but circle, as it were about its circumference, seeking to interpret in our speech our experience of it, now shooting near

[8] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, Introduction, Faber, 1958. He gives patristic sources for Renaissance Platonism, see his note 30.
[9] *In librum primum sentenarium Commentationes ad mentem Platonis*, Cod. Vat. Lat., 6325, fols 13 f, Eugenioe Massa ed., cited by Wind, p. 14.
[10] Wind, p. 14

the mark, and again disappointed of our aim by reason of the antinomies we find in it. The greatest antimony arises in this, that our understanding of it is ... by *a presence higher than all knowing* ... Hence the words of the Master [Plato], that it overpasses speech and writing'.[11] Plotinus adds: 'And yet we speak and write, seeking to forward the pilgrim on his journey thither.' It is a spiritual or inner journey for, as we already noted, Plotinus states 'it is not a journey of the feet'.[12]

The language of esotericism is born of the paradox of speech and silence. Wind calls it the 'disparity between verbal instrument and mystical object'.[13] According to Wind, Pico's style, which has been described as 'contrived' and 'conceited', derives from 'the parabolic fervour and "tenebrosity" he had found in the late-antique Platonists and the early Christian Fathers'. We are referred to the French author Marrou[14] who, writing about the 'secretive style' of ancient writers, says 'the obscurity of the expression, the mystery surrounding the thought thus dissimulated is [the tradition's] finest attribute, a powerful cause of attraction ... Let us honour esotericism's veil *(Vela faciunt honorem secreti*).' Marrou also cites Festugière: 'the more truth is hidden and secret, the more it has force'.[15] Pico's writings 'were regarded by his contemporaries as models of how to adumbrate an ineffable revelation through speech'.

[11] my italics
[12] See above p. 95
[13] Wind, op. cit. p. 18.
[14] *St Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 1938, pp. 488ff
[15] Father André Jean Festugière (1898-1982). French Dominican considered a leading authority on the thought of late Antiquity. His books include: *L'Idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Évangile*, 1932; *Le Monde gréco-romain au temps de Notre-Seigneur*, 1935; *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 1944-1949 and Hermétisme et mystique païenne, 1967.

Where Wind supposes that it is unlikely that the importance of great Renaissance art will be confined to art alone, the implication is that we ourselves must try to become initiated into the same mysteries: 'the greatest Renaissance paintings ... were designed for initiates, hence they require initiation.'[16]

This implies, then, that the seeker himself must have a similar, or at any rate related, spiritual search that aims to *penetrate the veils in himself* that hide the sacred from the profane among which latter can be included curiosity and intellectual greed. Without such a subjective personal search, the historian remains puzzled as, for example, when William Manchester albeit with intuitive perception, writes: 'The most baffling, elusive, yet in many ways the most significant dimensions of the medieval mind were invisible and silent'.[17] Writing about the builders of the gothic cathedrals he speaks of 'medieval man's total lack of ego. Even those with creative powers had no sense of self ... They were glorifying God. To them their identity in this life was irrelevant.' But later, remarking on the need in the 13th century for opposition to nominalist philosophy, he declares that 'Men of faith who might have challenged them, such as Thomas à Kempis, seemed lost in a dream of mysticism'.[18]

[16] Wind, *op. cit.*, p. 14
[17] *A World Lit Only by Fire*, London, 1992, p.21,
[18] ibid. p. 25.

Traditional wisdom would claim an opposite view: that those engaged in the affairs of the world are the ones who are 'lost' and that mysticism – where we understand it as the rightly conducted mystical esoteric practice ('the pilgrim's journey thither' as Plotinus puts it) towards the 'presence higher than knowing' – is the only true access to reality and that, rather than being a dream, it is exactly the opposite and provides the *means of escape* from the prison of illusion.

Perennial Philosophy and Renaissance Mysticism

It is Thackara who finds the origins of the terms Perennial Philosophy in Renaissance Rome at the beginning of the 16th century: [19]

> It was the 17th-century German philosopher Leibniz … who popularized the Latin phrase *philosophia perennis.* He used it to describe what was needed to complete his own system. This was to be an eclectic analysis of the truth and falsehood of all philosophies, ancient and modern, by which "one would draw the gold from the dross, the diamond from its mine, the light from the shadows; and this would be in effect a kind of perennial philosophy". A similar aim, with the goal of reconciling differing religious philosophies, was pursued by Ammonius Saccas, founder of the eclectic theosophical school of Alexandria in the 3rd century A.D. and inspirer of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic movement.

[19] From Sunrise magazine, April/May 1984. Copyright © 1984 by Theosophical University Press)

> Leibniz, however, laid no claim to inventing the phrase. He said he found it in the writings of a 16th-century theologian, Augustine Steuch, whom he regarded as one of the best Christian writers of all time. Steuch described the Perennial Philosophy as the originally revealed absolute truth made available to man before his fall, completely forgotten in that lapse, and only gradually regained in fragmentary form in the subsequent history of human thought. Orthodox Christianity, in his view, was its purest restoration, and the history of redemption includes the long quest for this wisdom.[20]

As far as is known the term *Philosophia Perennis* is not mentioned before Agostino Steuco, to give the Latinized version of his name, but similar terms expressing the same idea are to be found both in antiquity as well as in 20th-century authors. William Quinn cites many of these, discussing some in depth, that are more or less closely related and which could be said to belong to the same general terminology. There is *traditio legis*, the 'handing over of the law', a prevailing idea in late antiquity and adopted by early Christianity. Quinn suggests this idea of *traditio* as the basis for 'Tradition', the term favoured by Guénon and Coomaraswamy in their writings on comparative religion and culture, esotericism, and natural metaphysics. In his later writings Guénon would use 'Primordial Tradition' while Coomaraswamy preferred 'Philosophia Perennis'. Quinn has a chapter on 'Theosophia' primarily dealing with *theosophia antiqua* in contradistinction to modern 'Theosophy'. Elsewhere we read that in the Renaissance the terms *prisca theosophia* and *prisca scientia* are found. [21]

[20] "Perennial Philosophy," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* Philip P. Wiener, ed., Charles Scribners Sons, 1973, III, 457-63.
[21] William W. Quinn, Jr., *The Only Tradition,* SUNY, 1997

It is the contention of this thesis that the Perennial Philosophy pervades the mysticism of the medieval church and the Platonic mysticism of the Renaissance, two great streams that converge in 16th-century Flanders where Bruegel was ideally placed to draw on both traditions.

The historian of philosophy Charles B. Schmitt develops Plotinus' remark that 'these teachings are … no novelties, no inventions of today, but long since stated'[22] when he cites Marsilio Ficino (who uses the term *prisca theologica*):

> One of the most important facts with regard to Ficino's revival of Platonism was his conception of the Platonic tradition with a supposedly earlier tradition of 'pre-Platonism' to which he gave the name *prisca theologica*. According to him, the legitimate strand of true knowledge goes back to a long time before Plato: that is, wisdom did not start with Greeks but can be traced back to very ancient Egyptian and near and Middle Eastern sources, which were themselves later taken into Greece and became the foundations for the development of Greek philosophy. At the root of Ficino's concept lie several writings attributed to pre-Greek (or considered at that time to be pre-Greek) authors, especially Zoroaster, Hermes

[22] C.f. Thackara, cited on p. 73.

> Trismegistus, and Orpheus, which according to his interpretation were transmitted to Plato by Pythagoras and Aglaophemus.[23]

Hermeticism

It would hardly be possible to exaggerate the influence of Marsilio Ficino's revival of Hermeticism on the thinking of artists and intellectuals in the 16th century. Hermetic books dealing with philosophy and mysticism were preserved during the Middle Ages by Byzantine scholars and collectors. The group of texts now known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* finally returned to the Latin West during the Italian Renaissance when the Florentine philosopher, Prince Cosimo de Medici obtained a set of manuscripts from one of his agents in the Greek East and commissioned Ficino to translate the *Corpus* into Latin.

Hermeticism, or Hermetism, takes its name from the mythical sage (considered by some to be a god) Hermes Trismegistos or Thrice-Greatest Hermes. Trismegistos, in turn, was so-called because of his identification with the great Egyptian God of Wisdom and Magic, Thoth. Hermeticism was one of the many products of the meeting of the ancient

[23] Schmitt, Charles B. "Perennial Philosophy: from Agostino Steucco to Leibniz." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, No. 4 (1966): 505-32, p. ix. Se also http://phoenixandturtle.net/excerptmill/yates4.htm: 'Aglaophemus, who had been initiated into the sacred teaching of Orpheus, was succeeded in theology by Pythagoras, whose disciple was Philolaus, the teacher of our Divine Plato. Hence there is one ancient theology (*prisca theologia*) . . . taking its origin in Mercurius and culminating in the Divine Plato' from Ficino's preface to *Pimander*.

Hellenic and Egyptian cultures in the centuries surrounding the beginning of the Christian era. A useful summary is given by 'Cassiel Sofia':

> Hermetism combined Egyptian and Greek theology, philosophy, and spiritual practice. It found its most fertile home in the great syncretic Græco-Egyptian metropolis of Alexandria, when that city was the cultural capital of the Mediterranean under the Pax Romana. Religious and philosophical wisdom flowed from many cultures into the city, the great spiritual Krater or Mixing Bowl which gave birth to the new synthesis of religion, philosophy, and practice which was Hermetism … [This] Hermetic elixir was composed of ingredients from all the great Traditions active in Alexandria. To the millennia-rich stock of Egyptian religion, philosophy and magic were added many elements from Greek Paganism (itself influenced throughout its development by Egypt, Anatolia, Phoenicia, and Syria), particularly the Mysteries and the philosophical schools of Platonism, Neoplatonism, Stoicism, and Neopythagorism; Alexandrian Judaism, with its Angelology, Magic, and deep reverence for the sacred Book; the many forms of Christianity (Gnostic and otherwise); Persian Zoroastrianism, with its deep concern with good and evil; as well as the new developments springing up alongside Hermetism and cross-fertilizing with it, such as Alchemy and Iamblichan Theurgy.
>
> Ficino and other Renaissance philosophers, magicians, and artists who studied the Hermetic texts … believed that Hermetic philosophy was an ancient forerunner of Christianity rather than its contemporary. So when the Hermetic texts showed

> influence from Jewish or Christian myth, this was understood not as the syncretism of a late age, but as the prophetic prefiguring of an earlier one. As such, the *Hermetica* could be viewed as predicting the supposed triumph of Christianity and their obvious Paganism forgiven.
>
> Because of this mistaken assumption of prophetic antiquity, conjoined with the self-proclaimed Orphic Ficino's simultaneous re-interpretation of Magic in a much brighter and less controversial form than that of the Mediæval period (which itself contained many clandestinely preserved elements of Hermetism), the new figure of the Hermetic Renaissance Magus entered the cultural consciousness of the era. Ficino's 'Natural Magic' moved out of the shadows of the *grimoires* and once more into the light of general philosophical and theological consideration. A student at Ficino's Florentine Platonic Academy, the brilliant … Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, added the crucial catalytic element of the Jewish Qabalah to the new Pagan-Christian Hermetic amalgam, and transformed Hermetism forever. It is here that Hermeticism was born of ancient Hermetism, once more entering into a syncretic union, this time with Christianity, Renaissance Neo-Classicism and Humanism, Natural Magic, and Qabalah.
>
> The resulting vigorous Hermetic influence spreading out from the court of the Medicis and the Academy of Ficino clearly served as one of the most potent inspirations for the spiritual, artistic, and scientific renewal of the Renaissance.

Hermeticism is also called the Western Esoteric Tradition, and embraces that essential outpouring of the Light known as the *Philosophia Perennis*, the *Prisca Theologia*, the

Wisdom Tradition, and the ‘Ageless Wisdom’. Esoteric legend holds that this is a body of spiritual teachings that have been passed down through the millennia from generation to generation, teacher to student. The Tradition is said to have been the inner impetus for the blossoming of arts and sciences in many ages and the common inspiration of that which is truest in the world’s religions.[24]

[24] http://www.meta-religion.com/Esoterism/Hermeticism/hermeticism.htm

Recapitulation: the Esoteric Way of Self-Knowledge

A basic tenet of the Perennial Philosophy is that the world – the cosmos – has its counterpart in man. Man is the miniature of the universe; man is the microcosm: 'As above, so below',[1] 'in earth as it is in heaven'.[2] But Man, according to traditional ideas, is excluded from his proper place in the cosmic scheme because of what allegory calls 'Adam's sin' which condemns him to lead a false life, a life away from his rightful inheritance. This is the central difficulty of the human condition, a riddle that calls man to awaken to the reality of his situation and become a seeker of truth. If he hears this call he will learn that he must undergo an inner transition or transformation and that this has to take place before he can once again participate in real life. This transformation – sometimes called rebirth – is very difficult to achieve and costs a man dearly because it takes place in opposition to everything he values in material life; but that is an illusory life which he mistakes for the other. The seeker of truth begins to see the contradiction between what he is at present and what he is called to become and, seeing this, he cannot avoid suffering. If he has the courage to continue and if, in spite of suffering and other difficulties, he remains on the true path, he will eventually come to what tradition refers to as 'dying to oneself' – in Sufism, 'die before you die' and, in Christianity, the esoteric meaning of this 'death' is symbolised in the allegory of the Cross which is why we are told that it leads to eternal life.

[1] Hermes Trismegistus, *The Emerald Tablets*,
[2] Matt. vi, 10

If a person sees only as far as the literal and moral meaning in the narratives of sacred literature and has no sense of the mystical or esoteric meanings to which symbolism and allegory refer, then nobody can convince him otherwise. But if, desiring these yet higher meanings, he studies the world and himself impartially he may come to see the truth about what his life is and what it could be. The aim and the constant companion of the soul's journey on the mystical path is, therefore, self-knowledge.

The seeker who undertakes a programmed study of himself – his interior self that traditional literature refers to as the heart – awakens to a new and unknown world. 'The heart is only a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and lions, there are poisonous beasts, and all the treasures of evil, there are rough and uneven roads, there are precipices; but there too is God and the angels, life is there and the Kingdom, there too is light …'[3]

Application of the Sacred Tradition in practice

We have explored the idea that traditional sacred art and literature are vehicles for transmitting knowledge of what philosophers associated with the Perennial Philosophy regarded as eternal truths. We have also examined the idea that such knowledge comes veiled in symbolism and allegory. Here a further stage needs to be looked at in considering how the action of such knowledge can be a transforming and even transubstantiating event in the life of a person. For actual transformation a person has to come out from the ambience of ideas and into the spiritual battleground within himself or

[3] St Makarios the Great (fl. circa 400). Quoted in J. A. McGuckin *The Book of Mystical Chapters, Meditations on the Soul's Ascent from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives*. Boston and London, 2002.

herself where those ideas are applied in practice. Sacred texts and images refer allegorically to the series of ascending steps that are specific to the spiritual journey. In literature classic examples are St John Climacus' the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*[4] and Walter Hylton's, The *Ladder of Perfection.*[5] The image of the ladder is also found in art, among notable examples is the 12th-century Byzantine icon preserved at St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai.[6] The principle of ascending steps or stages in the mystical path reflects the idea of the cosmic hierarchy that Christian mystical Tradition inherited from Plotinus. The implication of all the texts – and Hendrik Niclaes' *Terra Pacis*, which will be discussed below, is typical – is that a preliminary phase of the journey is the period when the seeker awakens to the reality of his present situation. *This is a long and difficult stage in which the seeker studies, and begins to know intimately, every illusion and pretence that sustains his or her present life in order to become free from them.*

These last words are emphasized because they throw light on an important aspect of the group of paintings by Bruegel that will be discussed later in this thesis. The idea is proposed that the path of self-knowledge through spiritual exercises is a central, though perhaps hidden, element in Bruegel himself and in his art. Rightly conducted spiritual exercises create a heightened state of consciousness or 'attentive awareness' that corresponds to the Greek *proseche* – a frequently recurring term in the *Philokalia* – or the state of *sati* or 'mindfulness' in Buddhist terminology. When developed, this quality liberates the seeker from the entanglements of his personal psychology (the thoughts and

[4]Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Revised Edition, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1991.
[5] W. Hylton (1340-1396), *The Ladder of Perfection*, Penguin Books, 1957
[6] See Evans and Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium*, New York, 1996, p. 376

feelings with which he blindly and habitually reacts to the world around him) and allows him to see objectively. The capability to *see what is* and, therefore, to *know truth* is the attribute of a high degree of interior development in a man. According to St Isaac the Syrian: 'He who succeeds in seeing himself is better than he who has been graced with seeing the angels'.[7] Or, to quote from the Sufi tradition, we find Rumi writing in the *Mathnawi*, 'The vision in you is the only thing that matters …Transform your whole body into vision, become seeing, become seeing.'[8] It is the contention of this thesis that Bruegel was a man of wisdom in the perennial tradition. It will be shown that the means available to Bruegel and his circle in Antwerp in the 1550s were the teachings of the group that can be regarded as inheritors of the Perennial Philosophy; they are known as the Family of Love or the Familists. This inheritance was the tradition of esoteric Christianity surviving in the West that has been outlined above.

Antwerp in the first half of the 16th century was the leading mercantile city in Europe; a metropolis of world class at every level, 'the Manhattan of the sixteenth-century'.[9] It had a dazzling life of arts and letters and had been the home of many illustrious figures, among them the great Erasmus. A few Bruegel scholars, Tolnay among them, acknowledge the humanist influences on Bruegel.[10] The French historian and writer on heresy Stein-Schneider sees a Cathar connection but he is unsympathetic to the idea of Bruegel's connection to an esoteric school.[11] Claessens and Rousseau briefly

[7] *Philokalia*, op. cit. St Isaac the Syrian, 'Direction for Spiritual Exercises'.
[8] Djalâl ed-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi*, VI, 1463, 4
[9] Derek Blyth, *Flemish Cities Explored*, Pallas Athene, London, revised edition, 1996, p. 147
[10] C. De Tolnay *Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien*, Bruxelles, 1935, pp. 8-14.
[11] See below, p. 262.

acknowledge Auner's remarks.[12] But no documents – other than his paintings – exist that throw direct light on what might have been Bruegel's inner life and what role he played in the intellectual life of his contemporaries. No one has investigated in depth traditional mystical ideas in their relationship to Bruegel and to the idea that the Familists and the humanists reflected principles of the Perennial Philosophy.

[12] Auner; Claessens and Rousseau, *Our Bruegel*, Antwerp, p. 210, 1969: 'the arguments on which Auner bases himself are rather compelling…'. See.M. Auner, *Tahrbuch der Kunsthistorische Sammlungen* in Wien. Vienna: 1956.

Chapter 7. The Family of Love

Lineage of the Family of Love

The Family of Love, whose ideas, this thesis argues, are central to Bruegel's intellectual and religious outlook, was not an isolated phenomenon and can be shown to be a link in the chain of schools – more or less hidden – stretching alongside the more visible history of Christianity in Europe. This essay has followed the sequence traced by Rufus Jones and others beginning with the primitive Church itself, mysticism in classical literature and in the Church Fathers followed by Dionysius the Areopagite in the 6th century and Duns Scotus Erigena in the 7th. [1] Later, in the 12th century, these teachings were to be a source for various mystical groups most of whom were violently persecuted as heretics, these include the Waldenses, who may have been related to the Cathars, and the followers of Amaury (or Amalrich) de Bene. In the 13th century we find the Franciscan brotherhoods (Beghards) and sisterhoods (Beguines) who were later to be transformed into the 'Brethren of the Free Spirit'. The teachings of Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics in the 14th century opened the way to the loosely structured 'Friends of God' and the *Theologica Germanica*. Later still, in the Netherlands, the New Devotion and the Brotherhood of the Common Life were to represent the tradition that Jones calls the 'invisible church which never dies, which must always be reckoned with by official hierarchies and traditional systems and which is still the hope and promise of that

[1] See above p. 72 ff. For similar historical sequences see Underhill, E. *Mysticism*, 12th edition. New York: Meridian Books, 1955; also Bruce B. Janz, *Who's Who in the History of Western Mysticism*, http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/mys/whoswho.htm

kingdom of God for which Christ lived and died'.[2] From there it was passed to such men as Sebastian Frank, Volkerz Coornhert and Hendrick Niclaes.[3] Today some people would see the Quakers among its descendants.[4] Both its apologists and its detractors variously wrote about the Familists in the 16th and 17th centuries,[5] the latter often in violent and abusive terms. They seem to have been more or less forgotten until the beginning of the 20th century when historians rediscovered them.

The Hiël Group

Terra Pacis and other books by Hendrick Niclaes were printed in secret by his disciple Christophe Plantin (1520-1589), the leading printer and publisher of his day and a member of a small group within the Familist Movement known as the Hiël Group. It was under the direction of Jansen van Barrefelt who was later to break with Niclaes and start (in 1569) the Second House of Love.[6] He took the name Hiël (in Hebrew, 'God Lives') presumably because of its symbolism associated with the rebuilding of Jericho.[7] According to one scholar, members of this group 'represented a much higher stratum of society and numbered literary and scientific men of renown among them'.[8] Research indicates that, apart from Plantin, among other participants were Benito Aria Montano (1527-1598), chaplain to Europe's most powerful monarch, Phillip II of Spain. Montano

[2] Jones, op. cit
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] A bibliography of primary sources is given in Hamilton, A. 1981. *The Family of Love*, (Cambridge) pp. 167-171.
[6] http://www.exlibris.org/nonconform/engdis/familists.html
[7] 1 Kings, 16
[8] Rekers, B. 1972. *Benito Arias Montano*, (London)

was in Antwerp to oversee the printing of the *Polyglot Bible*, the illustrated, multilingual publication in eight volumes that was to immortalize Plantin's name. He was renowned as a scholar and played a significant role in the high politics of the day.[9] Among other members of the group were the orientalist Andreas Masius and the cartographer and pupil of Mercator, Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598). Another was the Stoic and humanist scholar, painted by Rubens and Van Dyke, Justus Lipsius (1547–1606).[10] All of these men knew Pieter Bruegel in one way or another and at least two of them, Ortelius and Plantin, are known to have been close friends of his.

Bruegel's Philosophical Circle

Bruegel the man – as opposed to his paintings – remains more or less invisible to history. There is nothing written by him and, with one exception – Abraham Ortelius' remarks in his *Album Amicorum* which will be discussed below[11] – there is nothing by his contemporaries that provides a glimpse into his intellectual, psychological, philosophical or spiritual outlook. But those with whom he is known to have associated are among the most brilliant and outstanding men of their time; many of them were men of renown in the world. The writers, artists and religious thinkers whose names are linked with Bruegel

[9] See Henry Kamen, *The Duke of Alba*, Yale, 2004, pp. 117-119
[10] Moss, J. D. 1981. *"Godded with Love" Hendrik Niclaes and his Family of Love,* Transactions of the American Philosophical Society. (Philadelphia). p. 20.
[11] See p. 261.

were men of the humanist movement who, inwardly at least, rejected the politics and dogmatic rigidities of conventional religion in favour of a search for such philosophical and mystical truths as can be approached through methods of contemplative spirituality. Like the gnostics before them they cultivated the art of complete inner freedom from conventions and preconceptions. Outwardly, like Lipsius, they could maintain the appearance of conformity, even if lightly. Others like Niclaes, the founder of the House of Love, more openly declared themselves 'filled with God' and set themselves up as teachers, though Niclaes himself encouraged his followers to disguise their innermost convictions and let themselves be counted among the Church's faithful.[12] Theirs was a form of gnosticism in that they gave priority to the action of knowledge granted by the Spirit over the disciplines of conformity to church regulations. It can be argued that they were students of esoteric Christianity and heirs of the Perennial Philosophy.

[12] A practice known as Nicodemism, a position whereby Christians could hide their dissenting beliefs while conforming to mainstream religious rituals, See Veen M. van. *De polemiek van Calvijn met nicodemieten in het bijzonder met Coornhert*. Volume LX of Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica. Goy-Houten (Utrecht): Hes & De Graaf Publishers, BV. 2001.

Abraham Ortelius

A key that may help to unlock the mystery of Bruegel's relationship to such men is provided by Abraham Ortelius. He and Bruegel, together with Christophe Plantin who would become Europe's leading printer and publisher, were close contemporaries, all born within a few years of each other, and as young men incorporated into of the guild of St Luke in Antwerp.[13]

Abram Ortel was a native of Antwerp who latinised his name, according to the custom of the day, as Abrahamus Ortelius, is known to the world as a geographer, the some time associate of Mercator and for his publication of the *Theatrum Orbis Mundi*, the world's first atlas, published in 1570. We learn that 'his youthful reading was very much that of the humanist-in-the-making; that is, it reflected the humanist's conviction, supremely expressed in the life and work of Erasmus, that the wisdom of Greece and Rome and the teaching of Christianity constituted, when examined, a seamless fabric. '*Saint* Socrates!' Erasmus had famously exclaimed – to emphasize the unbroken line that stretched from Greek philosophers to the Church Fathers'.[14] Humanism is a broad category of thought that defies precise definition as a philosophical system. It comprises the thought of such men as Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Emanuel Chrysoloras, Cardinal Bessarion, Lorenzo de Medici, Politian, Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus and Thomas More who translated the works of classical authors and in whose styles they themselves wrote. Some were accused

[13] Paul Binding, *Imagined Corners*, Review, London, 2003, p. 39
[14] Binding, p. 30

of paganism or semi-paganism but the rigor and energy of their scholarship gave them great power and influence and many worked under (and for) the Church's authority. It inspired much of the reform movement of 14th-, 15th- and 16th-century Europe. Much of humanism can be seen as the exoteric aspect of the Perennial Philosophy.[15]

> Early in his life Ortelius himself had an experience of Christ which was to remain with him, strong and lucent, throughout its length. He had taken Christ into himself just as, a century and a half before, Groote's *Devotio Moderna* movement had advised all true believers to do, and only among those who believed in the supreme importance of this process, of an inner life dwarfing all dogmas and disputes, all hierarchies and rites, would Ortelius feel truly at home spiritually. And such a group Ortelius found: the Family of Love under the charismatic leadership of Hendrik Niclaes.[16]

From remarks noted by friends and from the contents of his library, Ortelius was deeply influenced by Sebastian Franck (1499-1542), a one-time Catholic priest, then a Lutheran pastor who later became an 'independent and highly influential spiritual teacher'. He stressed 'the longing for oneness with God [who was] so frequently impeded by doctrines and church obligations … [He] was an enemy of all religious division between believers … Franck had his roots in those two works … *Imitation of Christ* and *Theologica*

[15] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/h/humanism.htm
[16] Binding, p. 58

Germanica.[17] He was also well versed in writers at the foundation of the Perennial Philosophy, often referring to Plato, Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus as 'his teachers' who had 'spoken to him more clearly than Moses did'.[18]

Ortelius, a man of deep spirituality, together with his close friend and colleague Christophe Plantin – and there is no evidence to suggest that Bruegel was not with them – joined the movement known as the Family of Love in the late 1540s.[19]

> For Ortelius in particular the movement had roots in earlier traditions in which he had himself partaken. It's clear from the books he owned and read and from his letters … which abound in references to the spiritual life – that Ortelius was steeped in the pietistic, quietist Netherlandish religious tradition the roots of which are to be found in the *Devotio Moderna* (Modern Devotion) movement founded in 1397 by Geert Groote … The movement's influence was far-reaching, not least because of the effect of the extraordinarily popular *Imitation of Christ* (1518) of Thomas à Kempis, its fullest written expression, which itself relates to roughly contemporaneous works such as the *Theologica Germanica*. [The *Devotio Moderna*] was a major factor in Netherlands social life mainly through schools. Axiomatic to Groote's belief was a reformed system of education more humanistically inclined than the dominant one. The Brethren of the Common

[17] Binding, p.59
[18] 'Apologia' in Sebastian Franck, *Das verbütschierte Buch* (The Seven-sealed Book), 1539. Jones, *op. cit*. p. 52.
[19] Binding, p. 59

> Life, as Groote's followers were called, combined attention to classical language and literature with a somewhat anti-intellectual approach to religion, dismissing the tortuously complicated arguments of scholasticism. (Erasmus … was Brethren-educated.) Common Life schools appealed to a newly prosperous, level-headed and influential middle-class with little time or regard for the rarefied hair-splitting of orthodox theology. A practical outer life and a developed inner one sit well together; the one can safeguard the other, can give it appropriate, even encouraging conditions in which to flourish. Such a cast of mind could well mean that you stayed within the Catholic fold but developed a private spirituality, and this … was the position of many a Family member.[20]

Sebastian Franck

Franck switched his religious allegiance several times led by the combination of his humanist passion for freedom with his mystic devotion to spirituality. He came to believe that God communicates with individuals through the fragment of the divine assigned to every human being. He felt that this communication had to be direct and unfettered and wrote that 'to substitute Scripture for the self-revealing Spirit is to put the dead letter in the place of the living Word'.[21] He believed that the only true church is an entirely

[20] Binding, p. 55

[21] Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_Franck.

inward matter comprising what he called, in a phrase echoing the Gnostics of the second century, the 'invisible church'.

> The true Church is not a separate mass of people, not a particular sect to be pointed out … not confined to one time or place; it is rather a spiritual and invisible body of all the members of Christ, born of God, of one mind, spirit and faith, but not gathered in any one external city or place. It is a fellowship, seen with the spiritual eye and by the inner man. It is the assembly and communion of all truly God-fearing, good-hearted, new-born persons in all the world, bound together by the Holy Spirit – a communion outside which there is no salvation, no Christ, no God, no comprehension of Scripture, no Holy Spirit and no Gospel. I belong to this fellowship. I believe in the communion of Saints, and I am in this church, let me be where I may, and therefore I no longer look for Christ in 'lo heres' and 'lo theres'.[22]

For Franck the church of the spirit is an event within the soul; 'an entirely inward event' as Jones comments.[23]

> Love is the one mark and badge of fellowship in [the True Church].[24]

[22] Sebastian Franck, *Paradoxa*, 1533 or 4, sec. 8. cited in Jones, op. cit. p. 58
[23] Jones, op. cit. p. 59
[24] Sebastian Franck, *Paradoxa*, 1533 or 4, sec. 8. sec. 9

> External gifts and offices make no Christian, and just as little does the standing of a person, or locality, or time, or dress, or food, or anything external. The kingdom of God is neither prince nor peasant, food nor drink, hat nor coat, here nor there, yesterday nor tomorrow, baptism nor circumcision, nor anything whatever that is external.[25]

As a result of his study of the early Church Fathers Franck declared in, a letter:

> I am fully convinced that, after the death of the apostles, the external Church of Christ, with its gifts and sacraments, vanished from the earth and withdrew into heaven, and is now hidden in spirit and in truth, and for these past fourteen hundred years there has existed no true external church no officious sacraments.[26]

As Jones points out:

> 'His valuation of scripture fits perfectly into this religion of the inward life and the invisible Church. The true and essential word of God is the divine revelation in the soul of man. It is the *prius* of all scripture and it is the key to the spiritual meaning of all scripture.[27]

[25] Ibid. sec. 45
[26] 'Letter to Campanus' in Schellhorn's *Amoenitatis Literariae*, (1729), xi. pp. 59-611. Cited in Jones op. cit. p. 60
[27] Jones R. *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Macmillan, London, 1914

Elsewhere Franck declares his 'dissatisfaction with ceremonies and outward forms of any sort, his refusal to be identified with any existing empirical church, his solemn dedication to the invisible church, and his determination to be an apostle of the spirit'.[28] Franck, dismissing the Lutheran, Zwinglian[29] and Anabaptist[30] cults of his day, all of which had large followings, foretells the birth of a church that

> …will dispense with external preaching, ceremonies, sacraments and office as unnecessary, and which seeks solely to gather among all peoples an invisible, spiritual church in the unity of spirit and faith, to be governed wholly by the eternal invisible word of God, without external means, as the apostolic church was governed before its apostasy, which occurred after the death of the apostles.[31]

Jones tells us that Franck is 'without question saturated with the spirit of the mystics; he approves the inner way to God and he has learned from them to view this world of time and space as shadow and not as reality.' He reminds us that Franck had translated Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* and Agrippa's *Vanity of Arts and Sciences*[32] and, in the

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[28] Jones. *op. cit.* p. 49

[29] Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) led the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland. He was independent from Luther but had arrived at a similar position through humanism of which he was a leading scholar.

[30] Anabaptists ('Rebaptisers') are associated with the Radical Reformation that took a different stance from both Lutherans and Calvinists. 'Anabaptist' was, and still is, often used as a term of abuse usually with little or no understanding of their practice and belief.

[31] Sebastian Franck, *Chronica und Beschreibung der Turkey*, Nürnberg, 1530, K. 3 b

[32] "Recent historical investigation ... assigns Agrippa a central place in the history of ideas of the Middle Ages; he is seen as characterizing the main line of intellectual development from Nicholas of Cusa to Sebastian Franck. Modern opinion evaluates him on the basis of his Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic influences - primarily in the *De occulta philosophia*..." Agrippa von Nettesheim. In Dictionary of

tradition of such works and of mysticism, he is very harsh on the role of 'reasoning': which is 'a good guide in the realm of earthly affairs. It can deal wisely with matters that effect our bodily comfort and our social welfare, but it is "barren" in the sphere of eternal issues. It has no eye for realities beyond the world of three dimensions'.[33]

Dirck Volckertz Coornhert

If Franck, who was a generation older, was a favourite writer of Ortelius, his friend and contemporary was Dirck Volckertz Coornhert (1522-1590): artist, historian, philosopher, humanist and writer, also a pupil of Franck.

Coornhert worked as principal engraver for the great Maarten van Heemskerck together with his pupil, Philip Galle who would later become a famous engraver in his own right and who would work closely with Bruegel. For art historians, Coornhert's importance lies in the fact that he inspired artists whose designs he engraved – among them Heemskerck,

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Scientific Biography. American Council of Learned Societies. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1970; vol. I, 79-81

[33] Jones, *op. cit.* p. 56

Adriaen de Weerdt and the young Goltzius – to create images that expressed his own philosophical outlook,[34] Many of the themes of his prints are paralleled in his literary work.[35] A similarly significant intellectual and philosophical symbiosis seems to have existed between Galle and Bruegel.

The names of Galle, Bruegel, Coornhert, Montano and Ortelius all come together in the story of the engraving of *The Death of the Virgin*. The painting, a haunting work in grisaille that hangs today at Upton House near Banbury, had originally belonged to Ortelius. A large number of Bruegel's drawings were done specifically for the popular market in engravings but his paintings were private commissions and were not produced as editions of prints. The print of *The Death of the Virgin* is an exception and, even so, there was never a popular edition. Some years after Bruegel's death Ortelius engaged Galle to produce a very limited edition intended for members of the intimate circle that had constituted the Hiël group. A letter (dated 1578) exists from Coornhert to Ortelius thanking him for his copy and in 1591 Arias Montano wrote having received his.[36]

Coornhert openly acknowledged a spiritual outlook formed under the influence of Franck and, like his mentor, devoted energy to translating great masterpieces of the perennial tradition including Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Cicero's *On Duties*, Erasmus' *Paraphrases of the New Testament* and Homer's *The Odyssey*. At first, as a humanist, he

[34] The themes include moral allegories and scenes from classical Antiquity.
[35] Abstracted from Grove's Dictionary of Art http://www.oup.com/online/groveart/
[36] See Manfred Sellink in Nadine Orenstein, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 2001, pp. 258-261

was passionately committed to the cause of freedom of religious thought and opposed the rigidity and doctrinaire stance of Calvin.[37] Later he came under the influence of Franck as well as other spiritual reformers such as Hans Denck and Sebastian Costellio and 'received from them formative influences which turned him powerfully to the cultivation of inward religion for his own soul and to the expression and interpretation of a universal Christianity'.[38] Coornhert makes a distinction between the forms of institutional religion, which he calls 'outer or external religion', which he allows as a preparatory stage and 'inward religion' which is the establishment of the kingdom of God in men's hearts. 'Only God has the right to be master over man's soul and conscience; it is man's right to have freedom of conscience'.[39] 'With his intransigent defense of tolerance, even toward nonbelievers and atheists, the Dutch Catholic humanist and controversialist Coornhert made a substantial and permanent contribution to the early modern debate on religious freedom'.[40]

> Rejection of the institutionalized reform movements on the basis of their new dogmatism and formalism … motivated the believers in a more "inward" spiritualized faith. Like the reformers, Spiritualists advocated free Bible research, but as a result of the notion of a direct personal relationship with God – and individual approach that we also find in Erasmus – they attach great importance to an unimpeded access to the Spirit of the individual. At the same time they tend to

[37] Dirck Volckertz Coornhert, *Epitome processus de occidentis haereticus et coscientiis inferanda* (Gouda, 1591) and *Defensio procssuset non occidentis haereticis* (Hannover, 1593) are, according to Jones, 'powerful pleas for the freedom of the mind'.
[38] Jones, *op. cit.* p. 107.
[39] Coornhert, *Oordelen van een ghemen Landts Leere*, in *Werken*, vol. 1, fol. "643C" According to Voogt 'should be 463C'
[40] Gerrit Voogt, *Constraint on Trial: Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert and Religious Freedom*.. Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 52. Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000. p. 104

> minimize the importance of "externals": ceremonies, sacraments, the church, often also the supreme authority of the Bible, for they consider the Spirit of prior significance; the Bible without the Spirit becomes a "paper pope" as Frank put it.[41]

The same author points out that while Erasmus and humanism were a significant influence on men like Sebastian Franck, spiritual seekers were also influenced by late-medieval mystical traditions found in Eckhart and Tauler.[42] Voogt acknowledges the importance for 16th century exponents of radical dissent of the anonymous *Theologia Germanica* (German Theology) which they frequently used and quoted from.

> Henry Niclaes, founder of the Family of Love was profoundly influenced by this work (and by Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*). He, and his main disciple (and later rival) Barrefelt, felt attracted to the *Theologia's* theme of the return to a Platonic oneness and of the freedom of the will. They embraced the notion, found in this small book, that incarnation continued after the Ascension of Christ. This incarnation – known among Familists as *Vergottung* (godding) – takes place, they believed, whenever the spirit entered the individual.[43]

> One element of the *Theologia* that does leave a strong imprint on Coornhert ... mostly through the mediation of Sebastian Frank … was the idea of the invisible church, vested in the hearts of true Christians wherever they may be found.[44]

[41] Idem, p. 48
[42] Idem, p. 48
[43] Idem, p. 49
[44] Idem, p. 50

Justus Lipsius

We could scarcely find a better candidate to represent our idea of the Perennial Philosophy in the 16th century than Justus Lipsius or Joest Lips, to give the Flemish version of his name. The famous professor of Leiden University was a close friend and associate of Plantin. While there is certainty of Plantin's affiliation with Hendrik Niclaes and the Family of Love, Lipsius is more enigmatic on this point though he lived for a period in Plantin's house in Antwerp and his philosophical views and indifference to external religious forms would suggest an attitude that resonated with the teaching of the invisible church and the universality of the true inner life. 'Greek philosophy … is the hedge and enclosure of the Lord's vineyard' he wrote, and later, 'there is one road to truth, but in that road, just as in an everlasting river, many brooks from other places flow into and meet this common road'.[45] One biographer, J. L. Saunders, makes no mention of the Family of Love or of Niclaes[46] whereas Moss, on the other hand, places him in the group around Barrefelt, the former pupil of Niclaes.[47] Given his cautious nature and the characteristic guardedness of the Familists about their affiliation, it is reasonably sure that Lipsius shared a similar outlook and similar convictions to members of this intimate

[45] Lipsius, *Manductio*, I, 3 (IV, 628, 630) the author is quoting Clement of Alexandria, *Strom*. I)
[46] Jason Lewis Saunders, *Justus Lipsius, The Philosophy of Renaissance Stoicism* New York, 1955
[47] Moss, J. D. 1981. *"Godded with Love" Hendrik Niclaes and his Family of Love,* Transactions of the American Philosophical Society. (Philadelphia). p. 20.

circle. He typically remarks: 'Nature has begotten us for [two] purposes, for theory (contemplation) and for practice (action).'[48]

Lipsius was born near Brussels in 1547 and, at 13, was a schoolboy at the Jesuit College at Cologne where he 'devoured' Latin philosophical and humanist texts and was profoundly influenced by his Jesuit teachers despite the fact that they confiscated some of his books and disapproved of his passion for Stoic philosophy and the monuments of antiquity. Soon after, through his father's connections with the court of the Emperor Maximilian II, he studied in Vienna. From 1563 he attended the University of Louvain, then at the height of its fame. Noted for his brilliance he became, when still a young man, secretary to Cardinal de Granvella who, during the Reformation, was 'one of the ablest and most influential princes of the church'.[49] In the 1560s de Granvella was secretary of state to the emperor Charles V and later prime minister to the regent of the Netherlands, Margaret of Parma. He was to acquire at least two of Bruegel's paintings which, it can be assumed, he commissioned directly from the artist.[50] De Granvella was recalled to Rome in 1567 where Lipsius, still in his employ, immersed himself in the Vatican Library in the study of antiquity and meeting the most notable scholars. Later he was to make his name as a Christian interpreter of Stoic philosophy.[51] By 1578 Plantin's 'Officina Plantiniana' (which in Antwerp today can be visited as a Museum) was the most famous printing

[48] *Manductio*, ii, 2 (IV, 694)
[49] Encyclopaedia Britannica (11th edition)
[50] At this period an artist such as Bruegel would have been known to the public through engravings published in popular editions. Paintings were privately commissioned by connoisseurs.
[51] J. L. Saunders, *Justus Lipsius, The Philosophy of Renaissance Stoicism*, New York, 1955.

works in Europe and a centre of humanism and learning. Lipsius had his own study there before taking up his post as Professor of History at the University of Leiden.

In his writings Lipsius quotes copiously from Plato, Plutarch, Apuleus, Hermes Trismegistus and Philo Judaeus. 'Aristotle is much in evidence. Epictetus is quoted more often than his near contemporary, Marcus Aurelius. The Scriptures are frequently quoted, as are many of the Greek and Latin Fathers; there are many references to Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, John of Damascus, Eusebius, St Augustine, Minucius Felix, Orosius and Isidore of Seville. Lipsius has often been criticized for gathering his materials from such widely separated sources, and … he did read into many writers specifically Stoic notions. Views which are the *common property of many Schools,*[52] including Stoicism, are occasionally quoted by him to show that one man or another, pagan or Christian, had Stoic leanings'.[53]

The Stoic philosophy, as can be seen in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, laid emphasis on philosophy as practice, as 'work on oneself'.[54] One is led to the impression that for Lipsius Stoicism shared the values of the Perennial Philosophy.

[52] My italics
[53] Saunders, op. cit, p. 60

[54] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/#Phil

Justus Lipsius's philosophical reputation rests upon his status as the principal figure in the Renaissance revival of Stoicism. Stoicism was one of the great Hellenistic schools of philosophy and dominated ancient intellectual life for at least 400 years ... In the first two centuries AD it reached its height of popularity under the influence of Musonius Rufus and Epictetus. In the second century AD it found its most famous exponent in the form of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. However, after the second century Stoicism was soon eclipsed in popularity by Neoplatonism.

Despite this decline in late antiquity, Stoicism continued to exert an influence. Its ideas were discussed by Church Fathers such as St. Augustine, Lactantius, and Tertullian. In the Middle Ages its impact can be seen in the ethical works of Peter Abelard and his pupil John of Salisbury, transmitted via the readily available Latin works of Seneca and Cicero. In the fourteenth century Stoicism attracted the attention of Petrarch who produced a substantial ethical work entitled *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* ('On the Remedies of Both Kinds of Fortune') inspired by Seneca and drawing upon an account of the Stoic theory of the passions made by Cicero. With the rediscovery of the works of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus by famous Humanists such as Perotti and Politian in the fifteenth century, interest in Stoicism continued to develop. However, the Renaissance revival of Stoicism remained somewhat limited until Justus Lipsius.

> Among Lipsius's friends was his publisher, the famous printer Christopher Plantin, with whom he often stayed in Antwerp. Among his pupils was Philip Rubens, brother of the painter Peter Paul Rubens who portrayed Lipsius after his death in 'The Four Philosophers'.[55] Among his admirers was Michel de Montaigne who described him as one of the most learned men then alive.[56]

Historians and biographers of Lipsius, describing different academic posts he held at Lutheran, Calvinist and Catholic institutions after leaving de Granvella, are critical of what they regard as his lack of steadfastness. One author refers to 'a long line of incidents … which illustrate his mobility of character, his … faulty decisions regarding ways out of difficult situations, his facility for adopting the current opinions or the locality in which he was at the time residing, his rather lame reasons for professing one thing openly and rejecting it in his heart'.[57] Another says 'His decisions … were seldom such as his classical masters, Epictetus and Seneca, would have admired'.[58] But Lipsius would have learned from Hendrick Niclaes that external forms of religion have practically no meaning compared with the true experience of God which is entirely within. 'The central idea in all Henry Nicholas's writings is his insistence on *real righteousness* and *actual holiness* as contrasted with the fiction of a merely imputed righteousness and a forensic holiness, or holiness based on a transaction outside the person himself.'[59] It is clear that Lipsius 'remained quite indifferent to the various doctrines of religion, considering them all of equal value'. Saunders cites a letter from Lipsius' friend Conrad Schlusselburg who

[55] *c.* 1611, now in the Pitti Palace, Florence. An 'old copy' is in the Plantin-Moretus Museum, Antwerp
[56] John Sellars in *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/l/lipsius.htm**,** accessed 04/04/04. The reference in Montaigne is *Essais* 2.12
[57] J. L. Saunders, op. cit. p. 10
[58] R. Kirk (ed.) *Tvvo Bookes of Constancie, by Justus Lipsius*. Transl. By Sir John Stradling. New Brunswick, 1951. Quoted in Saunders, op. cit. note 9.
[59] Jones. op. cit. p.433.

quotes Lipsius: *"Nam omnis religio et nulla religio sunt mihi unum et idem."* (to me all religion, or no religion, is one and the same thing).[60] Saunders remarks: 'if we have a clear indication that Lipsius spiritually never left the Catholic Faith, it is abundantly clear … that he could not conceal his indifference to dogmas and [the] secular concerns of the Church and clergy'.[61]

Christophe Plantin

Born in France, Plantin later settled in Antwerp where, through a combination of superb skill as a typographer and good business sense he became the leading printer and publisher of his time. In 1562 he was indicted for his involvement with the Familist leaders Hendrik Niclaes and Jansen Barrefelt and was obliged to flee from Antwerp. He succeeded, however, in dissipating the suspicions against him, and it was only after two centuries that his relations with the Familists, or 'Famille de la Charité' came to light, and also that he printed the works of Barrefelt and other 'heretics'.[62]

The editor of the *Polyglot Bible* with whom Plantin worked closely in Antwerp was the scholarly Spanish Benedictine monk, Benito Arias Montano. The last volume contains essays, illustrations and maps by Montano that show the wide range of his scholarship as a philologist, an expert in Oriental languages, an antiquarian, a geographer and as a

[60] Saunders, op. cit. p. 19.
[61] Saunders, op. cit. p. 36
[62] Catholic Encyclopaedia http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12148b.htm, this work, incidentally, regards his relations with the Familists as a 'blot' on his reputation.

specialist in the practice of visualizing and tabulating knowledge. 'He designed his maps both as study aids and as devotional-meditative devices. Moreover, the maps reflect his wider philosophical outlook, according to which Holy Scripture contains the foundations of all natural philosophy. Montano's case encourages us to re-examine early modern *Geographia sacra* in the light of the broader scholarly trends of the period.'[63] Montano was also part of the Family of Love circle around Barrefelt.

The revolutionary changes in religious thought that were taking place in the 16th century did not stop with Luther and Protestant theology. The movement that has come to be called the Radical Reformation sought to go much further. Its leading thinkers, according to Jones, 'were not satisfied with a programme that limited itself to the correction of abuses, an abolition of medieval superstitions, and a shift of external authority … They placed a low value on orthodox systems of theological formulation … insisting that a person may go on endless pilgrimages to holy places, he may repeat unnumbered "paternosters", he may mortify his body to the verge of self-destruction, and still be unsaved and unspiritual; so too he may "believe" all the dogma … he may take on his lips the most sacred words … and yet be utterly alien to the kingdom of God, a stranger and a foreigner to the spirit of Christ.'[64]

[63] Zur Shalev, **'**Sacred Geography, Antiquarianism and Visual Erudition: Benito Arias Montano and the Maps in the Antwerp Polyglot Bible' in *Imago Mundi: The International Journal for the History of Cartography*, Routledge, Department of History Princeton University New Jersey zshalev@princeton.edu., part of the Taylor & Francis Group Volume 55, Number 1 / 8 October 2003, pp. 56 - 80
[64] Jones, op. cit.

The radical reformers brought a new and fresh interpretation of God who, they declared, 'is not a suzerain, treating men as his vassals, reckoning their sins up against them as infinite debts to be paid off at last in a vast commercial transaction only by the immeasurable price of a divine life, given to pay the debt which had involved the entire race in hopeless bankruptcy'. In the same way, they would not accept the Almighty as a sovereign, 'meting out to the world strict justice and holding all sin as flagrant disloyalty and appalling violation of law, never to be forgiven until the full requirements of sovereign justice are met and balances and satisfied'. These extreme reformers would not accept that God's Salvation could be thought of in such ways. They insisted that he is a personal God 'who is and always was eternal Love' and who has to be found through a personal relationship. Here Jones formulates an idea that would be echoed in more or less the same words a generation later by Coomaraswamy when he says that 'Heaven and Hell were for them inward conditions, states of the soul'.[65] In other words Heaven and Hell are not to be put off into the afterlife but are encountered and experienced as the actual psychological realities of each present moment.

Esoteric nature of the House of Love and Terra Pacis

This writer considers that the House of Love was essentially an esoteric movement, a 16th century manifestation in Europe of the Perennial Philosophy, and that the writings of its founder, Hendrick Niclaes, can be interpreted in its light. Niclaes' vision of the 'Land of Ignorance' where everything goes 'wonderfully absurdly' is not so far from the

[65] Jones, op. cit.

contemporary (or near contemporary) writings of Erasmus, in particular *In Praise of Folly*,[66] or Rabelais who repeatedly focused on dogmas that fetter creativity, institutional structures that reward hypocrisy, educational traditions that inspire laziness, and philosophical methodologies that obscure elemental reality. But it would be a mistake to regard *Terra Pacis* as satire for it is, in fact, esoteric allegory.

To follow the esoteric idea it is necessary to distinguish between two realities: the material world in time and the spiritual world in Eternity.[67] The formulaic, 'pagan' idea sees a separation between spirit and matter, but the universe of Plotinus, and of Dionysius the Areopagite, shows us a graded world that, descending, understands spirit gradually becoming less spiritual and more material; while, ascending, it sees matter becoming gradually less material and more spiritual.[68] Pure spirit and pure matter only 'exist' at the extreme poles of the universe: the level of 'The Absolute' and the level of 'Absolute non-being'.[69] This hypothesis takes on another meaning in the light of the idea that man is the universe in miniature, the microcosm. It means that all gradations of matter exist in him, though some are so fine as to be imperceptible to the physical senses and, it could be said, are not of the material world. Man's lack of self-knowledge (lack of inner self-knowledge) leaves his psychological and spiritual worlds in darkness. Never entering within himself, he has only the vague or distorted and inaccurate ideas about his inner universe. Esoteric and gnostic teachings hold that, for 'light', or 'love', or 'Christ' to

[66] Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Praise of Folly and Letter to Martin Droop 1515*, Penguin Books, 1971.
[67] c. f. Eckhart 'Why celebrate the Birth of Christ in time, if I do not celebrate his birth in eternity, in me'. Eckhart attributes the remark to Augustine. See O. M. Walshe *Eckhart*, vol. I, p. 1
[68] Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology and Celestial Hierarchies*, Shrine of Wisdom, Godalming, 1965
[69] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. McKenna, London 1956. Intro. pp.xxvi and xxxi.

enter into a man, certain conditions have to be prepared through the help of methods of contemplation and prayer that lie at the heart of all religions – often partly buried or hidden behind external forms and rituals. These methods can create what the Hindu masters call an 'inner structure' and what, in the *Philokalia*, is called 'the house of spiritual architecture'.[70]

Esoteric symbolism in the Gospel

Many commentators hold that an esoteric aspect of prayer can be understood from the words of Jesus in the gospel.[71] Before discussing these in detail it will be helpful to remember that the entire passage, chapters 5, 6, and 7 of St Matthew's Gospel, begins with a symbolic description hinting that this part of the teaching is esoteric. 'And seeing the multitudes, [Jesus] went up into a mountain; and when he was set, his disciples came unto him. And he opened his mouth and taught them.[72] The movement *away* from 'the multitudes' and the fact that he 'went *up* a mountain' esoterically symbolizes Jesus' withdrawal from the level of worldliness and multiplicity to a spiritually higher place where very few could follow him, *i.e.* only the disciples and not the crowd. It is while still in this exalted state of being that he tells them: 'When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy father which is in secret; and thy father which seeth in secret shall reward thee'.[73] The Greek εἰσελθε εις τό ταμείον σουν

[70] The Monks Ignatius and Callistos in the *Philokalia*. See Kadloubovsky and Palmer (eds.) *Prayer of the Heart*, London, 1957, p.181.
[71] Matt. 6:6. (A.V.)
[72] Matt. 5:1, 2. (A.V.)
[73] Matt. 6:6

και κλείσας την θύραν σου προσευζαι τώ πατρί σου τώ έν τώ κρυπτώ (literally: 'enter into your hidden room and having shut your door pray to the father, the one in secret') lends itself to mystical interpretation. For example the 'hidden room' corresponds to the 'house of spiritual architecture'; the term 'father' in Neoplatonism is a synonym for 'The Absolute', the centre of the universe and origin of all.[74] As far as the individual is concerned the 'father which is in secret' is unknown to all other parts of the self, and cannot be known by the 'normal' process of thought, the process called by Hendrik Niclaes 'knowledge of the flesh'. The early 4th-century mystic, Aphrahat the Persian puts it thus:

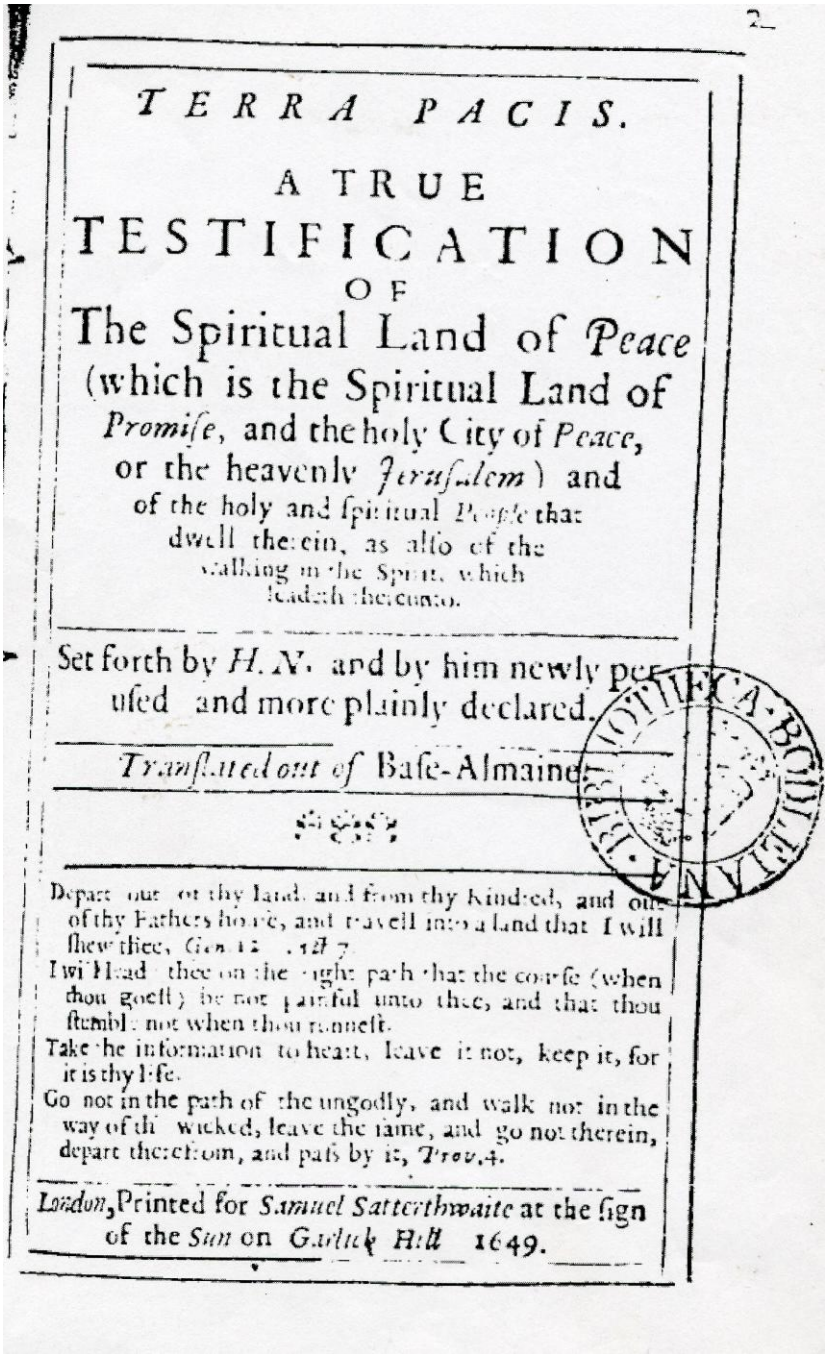
> From the moment you start praying,
>
> Raise your heart upwards
>
> And turn your eyes downward.
>
> Come to focus in your innermost self
>
> And there pray in secret to your heavenly father.[75]

The text fragments discussed below are from the English translation of 1649. Hendrik Niclaes' *Terra Pacis* is a classic in the genre of allegorical mystical literature that describes, in images taken from the visible world, events whose reality is in the invisible world. These events refer, often directly and intimately, to the adventures of the human soul – indeed, our own soul – on its evolutionary journey. Examples of the genre are found throughout all ages and may be amongst the oldest and most enduring literature

[74] See above, p. 101
[75] McGuckin, *op. cit.* p. 19.

known to humanity. The 3rd-century philosopher Plotinus leaves us in no doubt that, for him at least, Homer's *Odyssey* is just such an example 'For Odysseus is surely a parable to us…it is not a journey of the feet'.[76]

[76] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, p. 63, 1956 edition, trls. MacKenna, (London)



TERRA PACIS.

A TRUE
TESTIFICATION
OF
The Spiritual Land of *Peace*
(which is the Spiritual Land of
Promise, and the holy City of *Peace*,
or the heavenly *Jeruſalem*) and
of the holy and ſpiritual *People* that
dwell therein, as alſo of the
walking in the Spirit, which
leadeth thereunto.

Set forth by *H. N.* and by him newly perused and more plainly declared.

Tranſlated out of Baſe-Almaine.

Depart out of thy land, and from thy Kindred, and out of thy Fathers houſe, and travell into a land that I will ſhew thee, *Gen.* 12. 1. & 7.

I will lead thee on the right path that the courſe (when thou goeſt) be not painful unto thee, and that thou ſtumble not when thou runneſt.

Take the information to heart, leave it not, keep it, for it is thy life.

Go not in the path of the ungodly, and walk not in the way of the wicked, leave the ſame, and go not therein, depart therefrom, and paſs by it, *Prov.* 4.

London, Printed for *Samuel Satterthwaite* at the ſign of the *Sun* on *Garlick Hill* 1649.

Fig. a, Title page, *Terra Pacis*, courtesy the Bodleian Library

Terra Pacis

Introduction

Terra Pacis, The Land of Spiritual Peace was first published in Antwerp in 1574 by Hendrik Niclaes, the founder of the mystical religious sect known as the Family of Love or the House of Love (*Domus Caritatis, famille de la charité, huis der liefde*, etc.). The title page (see fig. a) gives the author as H. N. This is in fact an abbreviation for Helie Nazarenus (Elijah the Nazarene), the name bestowed on him for his mission as a prophet. He founded the Family of Love in the early 16th century and it attracted converts in quite large numbers in Brabant, Flanders, Friesland, Holland, Antwerp and, later, in France and England, where it seems to have petered out around 1690 after long harassment and condemnation by both the Crown and the Church.

Last published in English in 1649 and little read after the end of the 17th century, *Terra Pacis* has the status of a lost classic more or less unknown today. The commentary aims to show that a symbolism can be discerned in the text that corresponds, in part, to the hidden sense in Bruegel's art and that such spiritual allegories are part of a continuous tradition dating at least as far back as the origins of Christianity.

In the introductory 'Epistle', Niclaes makes it clear that his intention is to 'know the Truth in the Spirit'. His only concern is with the inward, spiritual life though, as he

explains, spiritual truth cannot be directly communicated to those who have not the necessary special preparation. The realities of the Kingdom of God are so far from anything we can perceive with the physical senses – which he calls 'knowledg (sic) of the flesh' or 'wisdom of the flesh' – as to be incomprehensible to those living in the material world. The term 'knowledg of the flesh'is not, of course, a coy way of referring to sex. Its meaning is psychologically precise and refers to the fact that, at the earthly or material level, our thoughts, attitudes and outlook on the world depend on information from the physical senses. Science, or what René Guénon calls 'scientism', and much of Western thinking are founded on the rational mind's ability to weigh, measure, analyse and classify matter perceived by the senses, so it is difficult for us today to conceive of a faculty of knowing that is situated 'beyond reason and beyond sense-perception'. Niclaes says towards the end of his text 'The Kingdome of God of Heavens is come *inwardly* in us'.[77] To those of us who have yet to make the 'journey' from the psychological or spiritual condition allegorised as the 'Land of Ignorance' to the inner state represented by the 'Land of Spiritual Peace' he can only speak, as Christ did to the 'multitude', in parables.

> For I will open my mouth in similitudes, reveal and witness the riches of the spiritual heavenly goods as parables, and figure forth in writing the mystery of the Kingdom of God or Christ according to the true beeing.

[77] See below, p. 407. The emphasis is mine.

> I look and behold: to the children of the kingdom (of the Family of Love of Jesus Christ) it is given to understand the mystery of the Heavenly Kingdom; but to those that are therewithout, it is not given to understand the same. For that cause all spiritual understandings do chance to them by Similitudes, Figures and Parables.

He goes on to say that the use of 'parables and similitudes' is provisional. Later, they will not be necessary, but only after the occurrence of an event that he calls 'a new birth'.

What has been said so far uncovers a theme consistent with the perennial Philosophy and, as this author intends to demonstrate, common to the ideas implicit in Bruegel's paintings. Man's inner world is, or rather should be, and could be, the microcosm, the image in miniature of the universe; but in his present state, Man fails to reach this in himself and his inner world is in disorder. There are different stages, or states of being, in the journey from chaos and darkness towards true life. Various traditional literary images describe the human condition before the journey begins. For example, the Gospel refers to 'blindness' and 'deafness'. Saint Anthony the Great defining 'intelligence' implies that we are not even worthy to be called men;[78] *Terra Pacis*, as we shall see, employs the symbol of humanity living in the land of 'Ignorance'. The first part of the journey consists of a stage called by the Greek Fathers *Praktikos*, this is the stage of self-study through the practical disciplines of prayer and work through which the seeker

[78] 'He alone can be called a man who can be called intelligent (true intelligence is that of the soul), or who has set about correcting himself. An uncorrected person should not be called a man. St Anthony the Great (251? -356) in Kadloubovsky and Palmer (ed.) *Early Fathers of the Philokalia*, London 1954, p. 22.

learns to master the physical and psychological machinery that constitute his lower or worldly self. The next stage is that of *Theoretikos* or contemplation; the mystic is able to *see what is*, he is liberated from worldly matters towards which he is now objective – indifferent even – and is able to work on specific difficulties in his personal path. The final stage, *Gnostikos*, knowledge of what John of Apamea in the 5th century called 'invisible realities',[79] refers to a realm that cannot be described in ordinary human language. These stages, *Praktikos*, *Theoretikos* and *Gnostikos* constitute the three main themes that inform Bruegel's paintings. Every image, whether a detail or in the broad plan, serves the search for the meaning of humanity within God's universal plan.

Much of the text of *Terra Pacis* – all the part that describes the 'Land of Ignorance' – refers to the first stage of the spiritual journey, that of the seeker's awakening to the reality of his or her situation and accurately identifying the nature and quality of each difficulty. The grim absurdity of all human endeavour, which would be comic if it were not so tragic, is revealed for what it is. The philosophical point from which Bruegel views the world is very much that of Niclaes: humanity's error in looking to the material world to solve questions that only the higher world can answer. But humanity in general is ignorant of the higher world, as Bruegel demonstrates in his *Numbering at Bethlehem* and *Adoration of the Kings*, and especially when he implies that access to it is nearby: within and through oneself. ('The Kingdom of Heaven is within you'.) Humanity compounds this error by accepting, in the place of the higher life, a substitute; people allow themselves to be satisfied with the external formalities of pseudo-religion. 'Their

[79] McGuckin op. cit. p. 21.

Religions or godservice is called the *Pleasure of Men*. Their doctrine and ministration is called *Good Thinking*'.

The text of *Terra Pacis*, like the anecdotes in Bruegel's paintings, has higher significance only when considered from an esoteric point of view. Mystical literature has little meaning outside the psychological or spiritual realm. Every description is an account of subtle mental events and emotional currents whose energies, vibrating at varying tempos, animate our psycho-physical world. Our comprehension of what passes in our inner world depends on the quality and on the level of our consciousness; and consciousness, in its turn, depends on our ability to focus and hold a disciplined interior attention upon ourselves.

This will be clear to anyone who has experimented with meditation (with the proviso that it be conducted in an authentic context such as, for example, a traditional Vipassana or Zen school). The same would be true from the contemplative prayer traditions of Christianity such as were once readily available, as we see in the *Philokalia* anthology, to those who sought them and which today are difficult to find. Here, it may help to remind ourselves of the point already made that, in such work, the seeker studies the waywardness of the undisciplined and untrained mind as well as the unwillingness of the body to submit itself to stillness and silence. These are attributes of the confused and unredeemed world that is the human race's inheritance from Adam, the 'Old Man'. But if he persists he will discover intimations of another life within himself waiting to be awoken: the 'Buddha nature', the 'Christ within' or the 'New Man'. The nomenclature

varies in the different cultures and civilizations that have existed but the essential truth that they describe is the same.

Thus when Niclaes exhorts his readers to 'fly now out of the North and all Wildernessed Lands; rest not yourselves among the strange people, nor among any of the enemies of the House and Service of Love; but assemble you with us, into the Holy City of Peace, the New Jerusalem, which is descended from heaven and prepared by God', the ideas of the Perennial Philosophy would insist that we follow with our psychological understanding, because Niclaes is describing psychological events and places within ourselves. The author is telling us to make an inner movement, to mobilize an inner attention, by whose action we can withdraw from the myriad thoughts and feelings that occupy our subconscious; we may then find the ordered place in ourselves where we can be open to a higher influence beneficial to our search for eternal values.

The language of *Terra Pacis* may sound quaint sometimes and the syntax is occasionally a little obscure. But, honouring the fact that this is the period of English literature that produced the Authorised Version and the Book of Common Prayer, the present writer has not sought to modernize the passages he has chosen. But we should not let the writing's archaic cadences obscure the fact that H. N. speaks with spiritual authority and psychological accuracy about the human condition. *Terra Pacis* is a forgotten work, virtually unknown since the end of the 17th century. For that reason, as well as its

considerable literary merit,[80] more than half of the original text is reproduced in the Appendix.[81]

The principle according to which psychological or spiritual transformation can take place is self-knowledge, the study of one's inner world, called by writers of the mystical tradition 'watching over oneself' or 'guarding the heart'. The mystical seeker is a 'traveler' visiting and observing in himself all those aspects of thought, memory, imagination, feelings, inner attitudes, habits of mind and so on that make up the subconscious interior world that Niclaes describes as 'wildernessed lands and ignorant people'.

> We have gone through and passed beyond many and sundry manner of wildernessed lands and ignorant people and so have considered the nature of every land and people. Into all which we found the strange ignorant people very unpeaceable and divided in many kinds of manners, dispositions and natures, as also vexed with many unprofitable things to a great disquietness and much misery unto them all.
>
> The whilst we considered diligently hereon, so we found by experience that every people had their disposition and nature, according to the dispositions and nature of the land where they dwelt or where they were born.

[80] Jones (op. cit.), amongst others, points to its affinity with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which it predates.
[81] See pp. 389-421.

Niclaes, a master in the school of self-knowledge, is telling us of the subconscious world (the people are 'ignorant' due to the absence of conscious awareness) where attitudes and thoughts are subjective. It is this lack of objectivity that causes everything to be 'unpeaceable and divided'.

Here H. N. touches on a central theme of the perennial tradition: man's multiplicity 'divided', as he says, 'in many kinds of manners, dispositions and natures'. The situation for the interior state of unredeemed man is chaos, disorder and contradiction; the opposite of the condition of the heavenly city: 'Jerusalem is a city built at unity within itself'.[82]

The outline of the spiritual predicament for humanity in all its grandeur and complexity becomes apparent. The solution to the difficulties of the situation is by the esoteric path, little known and difficult to find.

> It is true that the whole earth is unmeasurable, great and large, and the lands and people are many and divers, but the most part of the lands are beset by grievous labor, and with much trouble the people are captivated with sundry unprofitable vexations.

[82] Psalm 122. v. 3.

> But the children of the kingdom have a land that is void of all molestation and a City which is very peaceable. Verily, without this one City of Peace or Land of the Living there is no convenient place of Rest on the whole earth.
>
> But this land of peace (which with his people is ful of joy and liveth in concord) is a secret land and is severed from all other lands and people. It is also known to no man but of his inhabitants. But the entrance into the same is very straight and narrow, for that cause it is found of few, but there are many that run past it or have not any right regard thereon. Therefore remaineth this good land of the living unloved and unknown of the most part of the strange people.

The founder of the Family of Love, offering himself as a guide, warns of the difficulties that beset the spiritual traveler and tells him that all will be well, provided that he himself wishes to make the journey.

> We will show forth the neerest ways and the needfullest means and guides that lead thereunto, because that every traveller may keep the right High Way and keep the more diligent watch until he comes through the gate.
>
> Seeing now that this way to the Holy Land is perilous to pass through, for him that is unexpert therein, so have we thought good to testifie and show forth distinctly (and that altogether to the preservation of the traveller) the most part of

> the wildernessed places of the strange people, and the perils of deceit, each one according to his pernicious disposition and nature; to the end that everyone may be of good cheer and may, without fear, pass through the way rightly and without harm, and that no man should remain lost, except he would himself.

The main part of the text of *Terra Pacis* can be read in Appendix I; this writer has added commentary where it may be helpful in bring the reader's attention to Niclaes' ideas relating to the teaching of the Perennial Philosophy and Peter Bruegel's paintings. Of particular importance are passages with the themes of the 'bread of life', i.e. spiritual nourishment, employing the images of 'corn' and 'seed'.

Later, a description of arms, armour and instruments of war corresponds to imagery in Bruegel's *Adoration of the Kings* in the London National Gallery. Elsewhere there are lists of names indicating the behaviour of different types of people that could describe the characters in Bruegel's 'crowd scenes' as seen in *The Numbering at Bethlehem* (1566) in Brussels and *The Road to Calvary* (1564) in Vienna. In another passage the text gives names for a group of suffering people that could be Jesus' mother and her entourage in *The Road to Calvary*.

Chapter 8. Esotericism in Art

Hieronymus Bosch

Similarities of artistic style and intellectual ideas between Bosch and Bruegel

As a young man Bruegel was hailed as a 'new Hieronymus Bosch' and we see that some of his early works have affinities both of style and of imagery, sometimes so close as to be indistinguishable, with the works of that master. It has been suggested that the reasons for this may have been commercial. We learn from Van Mander,[1] writing a few years after Bruegel died that his first employment was at the House of the Four Winds, the business operated by the publisher, painter and printmaker, Peter Coecke van Aelst (1502-1556).[2] Coecke, a pupil of Bernard van Orley, was also an architect, sculptor, designer of tapestries and stained glass, a writer and a publisher. He worked in Antwerp and had travelled to Rome and to Constantinople; the drawings he made on his journey were later published by his widow Mayken Verhulst (later to become Bruegel's mother-in-law) as woodcut illustrations *(The Manners and Customs of the Turks)*. He ran a large workshop and was regarded as one of Antwerp's leading painters. However, he is more important for his publishing activities. The translation (1539) of the architectural treatise *The Five Books of Architecture* of the important Renaissance architect and writer Sebastiano Serlio, played a large part in spreading Renaissance ideas in the Netherlands.[3] Coecke, who was also a translator of Vitruvius, became the teacher not only of Bruegel but also Hieronymus Cock, who became an artist, engraver and publisher. By the 1550s,

[1] Van Mander *Schilderboek*, op. cit..
[2] According to Delevoy this is confirmed by Coeck's biographer Fransiscus Sweertius (Robert L. Delevoy *Bruegel*, Skira, 1959)
[3] Kim H. Veltman, http://www.mmi.unimaas.nl/people/Veltman/books/vol1/ch2.htm

Coecke's publishing house, *At the Four Winds*, played an important role in the spread of texts on perspective and the ideas of Renaissance humanism. The press was later taken over by the engraver Philip Galle where he rendered many of Bruegel's compositions as engravings.

Bosch's work was still extremely popular and a talent such as Bruegel's, readily able to produce drawings in the Bosch manner, would not be short of employment. But the House of the Four Winds was also a rendezvous for people whose talents and interests surpassed commercial interests. Most historians agree that it was a meeting-place for intellectuals, artists, humanists, members of sects such as the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the Brotherhood of the Common Life and the House of Love.

What can be learned by comparing the work of Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516) with that of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525-1569)? Art historians have devoted considerably more energy to investigating the meaning of Bosch's work than that of Bruegel. Problems of interpretation are sometimes similar in respect of both artists but some writers have tended to see Bruegel as no more than an imitator or follower of Bosch. This may be true of Bruegel's earlier works but his later paintings are from a man who was, in every sense, a master, philosophically as well as artistically. In the case of the older painter such works as *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Temptation of St Anthony* or *The Haywain*, both the thematic material and the detailed imagery are sufficiently provocative as to demand investigative response. Bosch appears to work from an idea, or a set of ideas whose intellectual sources are hard to identify. Historians have attempted variously to

place him in the context of the primitive religious and folk traditions of medieval Europe, or Rabelaisian Renaissance humanism, or among the sexually perverse and Anti-Christ worshippers of a mad heretical sect. Yet none of these theories convincingly provide insight into the mystery that attends Bosch. With Bruegel the mystery is less obviously a feature of his work, though many people sense it as can be seen from the number of fictional and fantastic books that have been inspired by his paintings.[4] The present writer wants to show that if he possessed the same 'secret' as Bosch, he hid it more deeply and with greater skill and subtlety. So much so that some art historians, who refer to the fame of Bosch after his death and the fact that he was widely admired in the first half of the 16th century, acknowledge Bruegel as no more than the best of the imitators but deny that he came near Bosch's achievement.[5]

Bosch's connections to esoteric ideas

The first study of Bosch that relates to the ideas of this thesis is that of the Berlin art historian W. Fränger (or Fraenger), working in the 1930s and 40s.[6] According to him Bosch's symbols do not represent the world that we perceive with the physical senses but another to which the mystic could be initiated and which he 'undoubtedly … deliberately and consciously revealed'.[7] Fränger, Harris and others demonstrate that Bosch's imagery can be shown to relate to ideas of Gnostic or Neo-Platonic character that would have been regarded in his time as heretical and which can be shown to be part of the Perennial

[4] c.f. non-academic books by Michael Frayn, *Headlong*, Faber, 1999; Rudy Ruckers *As Above So Below*, New York, 2002; Claude-Henri Rocquet, *Bruegel or the Workshop of Dreams*, Chicago, 1991.
[5] Lynda Harris, *The Secret Heresy of Hieronymus Bosch*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1985, p.44.
[6] Wilhelm Fränger, *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch*, Faber and Faber, London 1952.
[7] Fränger, p.2

Philosophy. Where Fränger detects alchemical allusions he sees the universality and the continuity of the Tradition flowing in Bosch's thought and imagery. He says, for example, with reference to alchemy, the study of which was at that time emerging from the shadows, 'recently … investigation into alchemy … makes it possible to recognise it for what it really is: namely, a striving towards perfection, a doctrine that saw in the transmutation of matter a *symbol* of man's spirit and the mysteries of creation, death and eternal life'.[8]

Fränger was among the first to consider Bosch's association with the Brethren of the Free Spirit, and, in particular, with a group within that movement called the Adamites: 'The *Homines Intelligentiae* of Brussels belonged to a radical sect of the Free Spirit, the so-called Adamites. In calling themselves "men of the spirit" they gave the term *intelligentiae* the scholastic definition, which contrasted *intelligentiae* as a supra sensual power of perception, comprehending things still uncreated (intuitive vision), with *ratio*, the empirical mode of understanding (discursive thinking)'.[9] This terminology, pointing to a state of knowledge higher than reason corresponds to a level of mystical understanding at the heart of the perennial tradition which, in the words of Frithjof Schuon, 'is called, *anagogical*, that is, beyond sense'.[10] The Adamites were a 13th-

[8] Fränger, p.7, the italics are mine
[9] Fränger, p. 17
[10] c.f., for example, 'Keys to the Bible', Frithjof Schuon in J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore, 1974, p. 355

century revival in Europe of a 3rd-century sect described by the heresy hunter in the early Christian period, Epiphanius of Salamis.[11]

Fränger cites Herbert Grundmann[12] who compares the spirituality of the Free Spirit with that of Eckhart who, like them, sought the 'earthly possibility of the *'homo perfectus',* a concept that …'to the very end remains the basis of Eckhart's moral teaching'.[13] The indications are that the term esoteric is applicable to the Adamites: 'We attribute the sect's ill-fame to malicious slander, due to the fact that the Adamite mysteries were kept strictly secret. All such secrecy brings suspicion in its wake'.[14]

Meditation

Meditation was the principal means for ascent in the spiritual path and a central activity for the Adamites. It leads to the innermost core of the self, the central and highest faculty for gnosis that could be symbolically expressed by the image of the eye: 'The tiny reflected image in the eye is regarded as the individual's 'self', his soul, which is a microcosm inter-radiating with the sun, the world-eye of the macrocosm.'

[11] Frank Williams, Translator, "The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salami", (4th century), *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, Vol. 35. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994.
[12] Herbert Grundmann: *Studien űber Joachim von Floris,* Zur Biographie Joachims von Fiore und Rainers von Ponza. In: Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters 16, 1960, S. 437-546.
[13] Fränger, p. 22
[14] Fränger, p. 23

A similar idea is found in Indian belief regarding the sun and in the pupil of the eye: 'Purusha in the mirror – on him I meditate'[15] Fränger points out that the idea is found in Plotinus and in Goethe's 'sunniness of the eye'. He tells us that 'medieval Platonism practiced this pupillary concentration in its "speculation" and that it was an instruction for meditation: 'by means of [such] concentration … the individual in meditation endeavoured to move out of the "ego self" to the "world-self" or the sun-like "God-self"'.

This shows the central significance that a yoga-like discipline of systematic meditation had for the sect 'whose assemblies apparently were based on the principle of communal exercises in concentration and the esoteric experiences resulting from such exercises'. Further, according to Fränger, it is evident that 'Bosch, too, was familiar with this discipline and an experienced traveler on the unusual paths of visionary illumination'.[16]

Such discussion of esoteric themes, with quotations from the Upanishads, Erigena, the Gnostics and Eckhart, is reminiscent of the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy; so much so that one can suppose Fränger to have been in touch with the work of that writer if not actually associated with the *Philosophia Perennis* movement with which he was contemporary. The comments cited above on the role of meditation in relation to mysticism and to art are central for Fränger to the understanding of Bosch, as they are to the ideas put forward on these pages and thus to Bruegel. The passage quoted below reinforces a theme already emphasized in these pages.

[15] Khandogya Upanishad 1, 6-7:
[16] In this case the picture referred to is Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, today in the Prado Museum.

Fränger, in line with tradition, explains that 'the first step in all exercises in concentration is to exclude completely the external world and all activities of the will, in order to reach a mental state that is at first completely free of thoughts, words and ideas, a mere "staring" – as this perfectly self-forgetting condition of abandonment is called in the language of medieval mysticism'.[17] A further stage consists of summoning an image into the meditative vision and, remaining in the contemplative state, letting the emptiness of the initial state of consciousness be permeated with a new energy.[18] Fränger continues 'for now the image contemplated unfolds of its own accord, fanning out into a dream-like wealth of association; and the field that up to now was empty of intellectual and sensual perception suddenly becomes charged with the energy of a magnetic field, pulling together as though by a series of shocks the associations belonging to the guiding image.' He decribes how, 'without any active participation on the part of the individual in meditation, the image before him discloses its own meaning. Here Fränger uses the word *Innewerden* that his translator renders as 'comprehension', though it more accurately means 'inner becoming'. In any case it is entirely different from *Begreifen,* that is, ordinary understanding. At this stage the contemplative condition, or what Buddhists call 'access concentration' is reached, in which 'clear perception' of truth appears to the practitioner. According to the same author, Suso describes this state when says that 'the setting of the senses is the rising of truth' and 'if any man cannot grasp the matter, let him be idle' (i.e. he has to remain perfectly still) 'and the matter will grasp him.'[19]

[17] Here Fränger refers to Jan van Ruysbroek
[18] Similar methods are used in Tibetan Buddhist 'Dzogchen' meditation; see below p. 245.
[19] Fränger, p. 65

Fränger, referring to Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* in Madrid, says that

> 'The Brethren who performed their devotions before this panel intended as an aid to meditation, detached themselves from the ordinary world by gazing at the focus of concentration and so were drawn into the spell of a spiritual world that opened, step by step, in ever deeper significance as they returned to it in complete concentration again and again. In this way the beholders in fact became co-creators and active interpreters of the symbols that stood before their eyes in solemn, mysterious and enigmatic silence.'[20]

The same author is explicit on the subject of the mysteries of that 'other world' that Bosch 'deliberately and consciously' set out to reveal:

> 'to put it in Gnostic terms, we are drawn out of the Pleroma, that is, the world of being that is permeated with divine energy, and down into the Kenoma that is devoid of substance; and so we are confronted with an abyss of nothingness. It is to this void [that our attention is directed]. [This] conforms to the fundamental condition insisted on by all mystics as essential to contemplative illumination, the "shedding of all concepts, images and forms" or the casting off of all that is, not only what exists outside oneself, but one's own being also, as Meister Eckhart expresses it. Now we have got the exact terms to describe the central point. *It is a*

[20] Fränger, p. 66

focus of concentration such as has always been used in the practice of meditation'.[21]

Bosch's connection to the teachings of Divine Love

The study of Bosch's paintings and the spirituality of the Free Spirit movement opens onto another universal central theme, namely that of love. The Brethren's 'way to the heights of sinless perfection' can be understood in terms of Platonic love. This must be qualified in terms of the original meaning of what in the *Symposium* is called the 'greater and more hidden' mysteries. We read there of 'ascending under the influence of true love' by stages of perfection and beauty until the aspirant will see with the 'eye of the mind … the true beauty – the divine beauty … not images of beauty but realities' and finally to 'become the friend of God and be immortal'.[22] 'What mattered to the disciples of the Free Spirit … was precisely love itself, and what is more, love in its highest ideal form as a sacrament, and not as a convenient social institution'.[23]

We can trace several different sources for the theological system of the Adamites; among them the identification of Adam with Christ, which derives from the Jewish-Christian

[21] Fränger, p. 63, my italics
[22] Plato, *Symposium*, Jowett Trsl. 209e-212c
[23] Fränger, p. 22

Ebionites, the eschatological prophecies of Giacomo di Fiore[24], and finally Origen's doctrine of the return of all things. But there is no doubt that Neoplatonic philosophy, with its long tradition in Europe, also played a part. 'The original contribution of the Free Spirit movement was the unparalleled daring with which it applied theories to reality and carried out the dangerous experiment of *living* a philosophy in precisely the most exposed area of existence, namely that of love. The three different doctrines could be welded only in the form of spiritual eroticism, dominated by the image of Adam and Eve and their innocent love'.[25]

Fränger agrees that these ideas were shared by David Joris (1505-1556), who saw himself as Adam-Christ, and the man who he identifies as 'the most likely candidate to be Bruegel's spiritual father', Hendrick Niclaes (1502-1581) who founded the *huis de Liefde* in Amsterdam, 'that is to say, a "house of love", as a temple for quietistic contemplation in which the *Familia Caritatis* that was under his guidance assembled for mystical celebrations. According to his doctrine, Moses was the representation of the Kingdom of the Father. As a herald of hope Moses had only entered the forecourts of the Temple, and although Christ as the salvation-bearer of faith had penetrated into the inner Temple, it was reserved for himself, Heinrich Niclaes, as the embodiment of love, to enter the Holy of Holies and … inaugurate the kingdom of the Holy Ghost'.[26]

[24] Or Joachim of Floris (1135-1202) according to Bernard McGinn 'the most important apocalyptic thinker of the whole medieval period, and maybe after the prophet John, the most important apocalyptic thinker in the history of Christianity'.www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/joachim.html
[25] Fränger, p. 23
[26] Fränger, p. 42

Bosch and Bruegel's relationship to the church

The spiritual aims of the various schools of the Free Spirit movement and those associated with them such as Joris, Niclaes and others, far surpassed the narrow, confined thinking imposed by the church. The esoteric nature of the Perennial Philosophy and the traditions of its oral transmission render much of its doctrine obscure or invisible to the conventional researcher. And where its teachings are given form in the world they tend to be veiled behind symbols and allegory. The doctrine of the three ages of the world was one such teaching that passed into Free Spirit circles from the 12th-century Italian mystic, theologian, and philosopher of history, Giacomo di Fiore, a man both acclaimed as a prophet and denounced as a heretic.[27] According to his theory of universal evolution the world had began with the Kingdom of the Father, revealed in the Old Testament. Its place was taken by the Kingdom of the Son, which was fulfilled by the New Testament and continued down to the time of Saint Benedict; in the year 1260 it reached its fullness of perfection and dissolved into the Kingdom of the Holy Ghost. This last kingdom was to be one of peace and pure love, of hermit-like contemplation in which the 'dead letter of the two testaments' would be quickened into a purely spiritual understanding of the *evangelium aeternum.*[28] When attempts to realize Giacomo di Fiore's doctrine of the three kingdoms were made by the Spirituals of the Franciscan Order, and in the lay world by the brotherhoods of the Beghards and sisterhoods of the Beguines, and above all by the extreme disciples of the Free Spirit 'the effect … was to drive a breach into the ecclesiastical system. For if man in his last kingdom were granted spiritual perfection, a

[27] http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article?tocId=9368578
[28] Fränger, p. 39

direct vision of God, and an ambiguous liberty, then the traditional sacraments of the church would be superfluous'.[29]

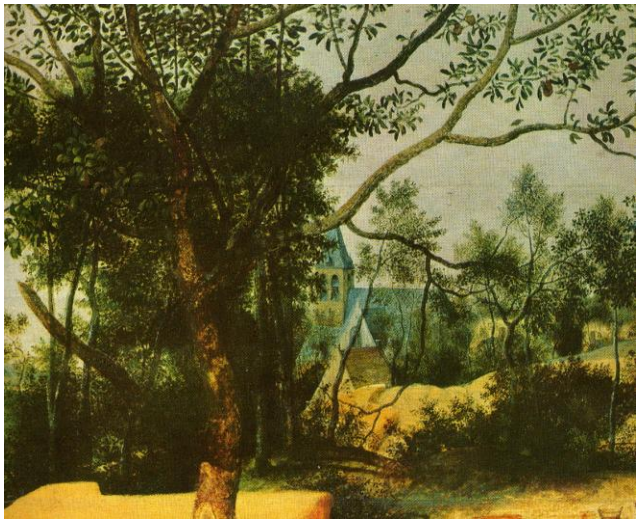


Fig. a, *The Harvesters*, detail with church

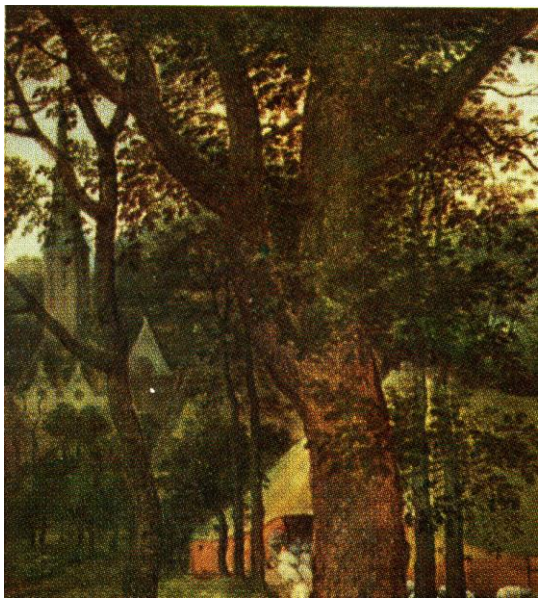


Fig. b, *Bridal Procession*, detail with church.

[29] Fränger, p. 41

Such observations may be part of the explanation as to why, in Bruegel's paintings, the status of the church is not emphasised. There are several instances in his work, most notably the *Harvest* (New York, fig. a) and the *Bridal Procession* (Brussels, fig. b) where the church is there in the middle or far distance but inaccessible, usually because of a ditch or dense foliage. We have seen in *The Numbering at Bethlehem* (p. 12) that the church is far away and how, in the composition, its situation corresponds to the castle in ruins. It is possible to interpret the presence of the church as irrelevant to the psychological and philosophical themes of the painting and therefore practically useless. This may be an example of Bruegel's caution – compared to Bosch – in exposing esoteric truths. It is likely that he, like Bosch, understood that 'the Free Spirit rejected all authority of the church. Giacomo's three principles: *perfectio, contemplatio* and *libertas*, which Herbert Grundmann has brilliantly called 'not anti-Catholic so much as trans-Catholic', inevitably brought about … disregard for the church's authority'.[30]

If Bosch and, in his own day, Bruegel were cast in the role of prophets, or at least as witnesses, of the unknown teaching, as painters they could communicate different strands of thought at different levels of meaning. These could range from humor, irony and satire behind which are philosophical, psychological and, beyond them, mystical ideas. According to Fränger the satirical elements in Bosch's work derive from a 'bitterly malicious satire on the church'. But both artists used satire as a corrective against 'fanatical excesses of mysterious sectarian cults'.[31] Following the revolutionary strand in Bosch's work back to its origin we will find that 'his metaphorical images are a system of

[30] Fränger, p. 42
[31] Fränger, p. 3

hieroglyphs – half generally acceptable, half a riddling game of hide-and-seek – that we can now recognise as a *secret revelation*'.[32] 'Bruegel, as his whole cycle of Virtues and Vices shows in a thoroughly realistic manner and with a vivid awareness of his own time, was attacking contemporary pagan cults. [Such movements] had become a cancerous threat to the movement's morally pure endeavour'.[33]

[32] Fränger, p.6
[33] Fränger, p. 99

Connection between meditation and art in Asia

The idea of *homo perfectus* and the methods of contemplation are seen as central to the traditions of European medieval religious art and sacred architecture as, for example, Titus Burckhardt's work on Chartres shows.[34] The present writer's work on icons echoes this theme.[35] The correlation between art and contemplation can be readily observed in the field of Asian sacred art. Ian Baker's recently published book on a unique group of Tibetan monastic paintings is helpful in the clarity with which images and meditation are shown to be reflections of each other.[36] The murals, Baker writes: 'introduce an extraordinary series of paintings on the walls of the Lukhang, the Dalai Lama's private meditation chamber in Tibet. The spiritual practices illustrated in these murals belong to the highest level of Buddhist Tantra and, in particular, to Dzogchen, the teachings of the "Great Perfection"… [they] convey a timeless vision of one of the world's most profound systems of spiritual illumination'.[37] And further on he writes: 'The paintings on the Lukhang's western wall illustrate a range of contemplation techniques unique to a Tibetan system of meditation called Dzogchen, the Great Perfection. Unlike Tantric Yogas based on inner transformation, the methods of Dzogchen directly reveal the enlightened essence that underlies all experience and perception'.[38] Baker quotes a well-known insight of William James: 'our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely

[34] Titus Burckhardt, *Chartres*, Golgonooza, 1995
[35] R. Temple, *Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity*, Luzac, Oxford, 2000.
[36] Ian Baker, *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple*, Thames and Hudson, 2000.
[37] Baker, p. 9
[38] Baker, p. 113

different'[39] and goes on to say that 'the Lukhang murals are windows onto this expanded world of consciousness which transcend culture, time and space'. It is in the light of this universality that Baker suggests that 'the gestures and subtler emotions in the faces of the Rishis and Mahasiddhas bear comparison with the works of Bosch and Bruegel.'[40] He does not develop this idea but the implications for this thesis are significant. (See fig. 1.)

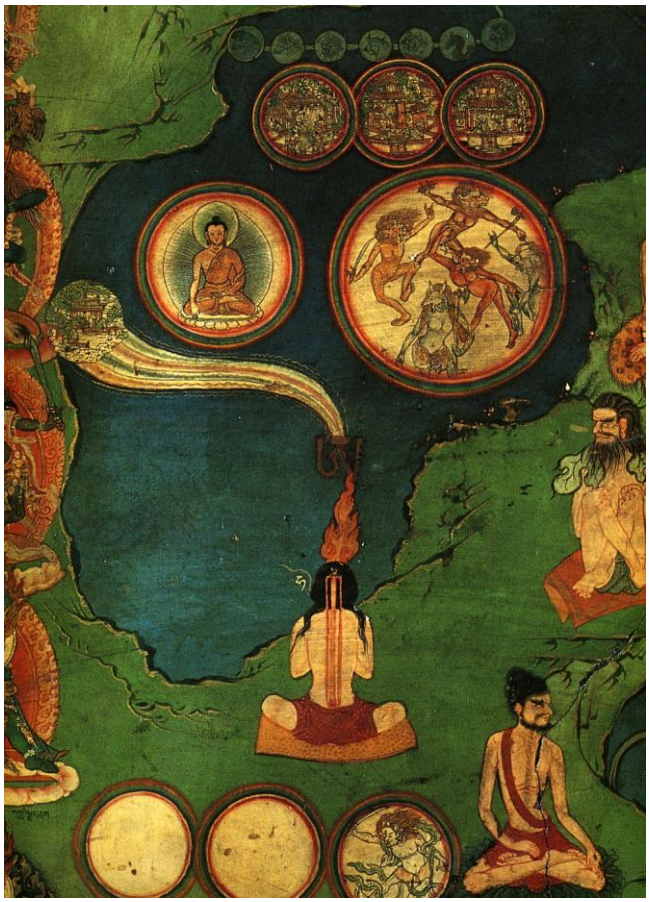


Fig. 1, Lukhang, 17th century mural

[39] Baker p. 40; he is citing William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York and London, 1902 and 1982. p. 388

[40] Baker, p.39. (I have corrected his spelling from Brueghel)

The inference is that Bosch and Bruegel, both associated with schools of esotericism or mysticism, knew about and practiced forms of meditation capable of leading to that higher level of consciousness that permits a true vision of man's place in the cosmic scheme. These schools were regarded as heretical by the authorities and it was sensible to be circumspect about participation in the practice. But, as discussed above, there is also a deeper and more important reason for the complete silence that surrounds these mysteries.

> Whatever is sacred,
> Whatever is to remain sacred,
> Must be clothed in a mystery.[41]

Mallarmé is stating, or rather re-stating, the ancient principle of the necessity for guarding certain knowledge from profane eyes.

The Teachings of the Brethren of the Free Spirit: a Survival of Catharism.

Lynda Harris sees the Brethren of the Free Spirit as an anomalous survival of Catharism.[42] It has been shown how she traces the history of that movement and presents the case for its Gnostic origins via the Bogomils in Bulgaria in the Middle Ages,[43] thereby suggesting an unbroken chain for the transmission of mystical ideas and esoteric

[41] Stephan Mallarmé, *Art for All*, 1862. Quoted by Baker, *op. cit.*
[42] Lynda Harris, *The Secret Heresy of Hieronymus Bosch*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1995, 2002.
[43] See above p. 133.

teachings, from the Hellenistic Mystery Religions to Bosch and the Brethren of the Free Spirit; an idea that can be extended to their immediate successors, *i.e.* Bruegel and the House of Love. Harris writes:

> Catharism is … indisputably … a Gnostic religion. The Gnostic systems … see the material world as a world of darkness and death, governed and even created by, its own deity. The spiritual world, in contrast, is seen as a totally separate realm of light and life, ruled by a separate god. Birth into the physical world is viewed by the Gnostics as a trap from which it is very difficult to escape. The soul, fallen into the world of matter and caught in the wheel of repeated births and deaths, is seen as "drunk" "asleep" or even "dead." It is in a state of drugged oblivion and has forgotten its origins in the world of spirit. But its entrapment need not be permanent, for a Saviour is sent out from the realm of light to rescue it. Walker says "Gnosticism is born at the crossroads of many ancient cultures."[44] Myths, symbols, and ideas from all the main religions of the world, all the way from Rome through to India contributed … The most important influences include certain ideas and myths from Egypt, dualistic doctrines from the Babylonian religion of Zoroaster, philosophical theories developed in the Greek world, and, above all, concepts from Judaism and Christianity.[45]

[44] Walker, B., 1983, *Gnosticism. Its History and Influence*, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire.
[45] Harris, p. 24

Ortelius' Eulogy and the analysis of H. Stein-Schneider

The one extant contemporary document giving a hint at the depth of Bruegel's thought is provided by Abraham Ortelius who left this statement, recorded in his *Album Amicorum* not long after the artist's death. It is typically translated as follows:

> Peter Bruegel was the most perfect of his century; this could be denied only by the ignorant, by a rival, or by someone knowing nothing of his art. He was taken from us while still in his full manhood. I hardly know whether to incriminate Death, which perhaps thought him old enough, considering the matchless talent it had observed in him; or whether Nature feared to see herself distained, since he had imitated her with so much art and talent.
>
> Eupompos, the painter, on being asked whom of his predecessors he had chosen as master, replied by pointing to a crowd of men: it is nature herself that we must imitate, not an artist. This observation well applies to our friend Bruegel, so that I prefer to call him, not the painter's painter, but the painter's nature, and I mean by this that he deserves to be imitated by all. Our Bruegel has painted – as Pliny says of Apelles – many things that cannot be painted. In all his works there is always more thought than paint. Eunapius makes the same claim for Timanthus in Jamblicus. Painters who paint graceful things in the bloom of life and go out of their way to add to the painting an elegance which they derive from themselves,

> denature the whole image represented, and in departing from the chosen model likewise fail to achieve true beauty. Our Bruegel never committed this error.[46]

The heresiologist and writer on Neo-Catharism, H. Stein-Schneider, offers the commentary that:

> Ortelius instructs us, in a surprising passage, that the 'drolleries' of his friend Brueghel (*sic*) and the naturalistic images that he paints have a completely hidden meaning. All his pictures, his friend [Ortelius] tells us, had a secret, hermetic meaning beyond that of the represented image. Pieter Brueghel hid, behind his innocent images, an arcane dimension, with the implications of which Ortelius, we understand, was cognizant. Brueghel certainly was, as Ortelius is telling us, a painter capable of imitating nature as no other [artist] of his time. But beyond Brueghel's natural [power of] imitation, he tells us, lies the representation of an entirely different dimension of which Ortelius gives us a vague indication by means of a typically Renaissance riddle. Literary allusions abound in this text that is full of remarkable images. Everything in this text is unusual, at the antipodean opposite to [the usual idea of] 'Peter the Droll or 'Peter the Realist' with which we are so familiar.[47]

The original Latin of the latter part of Ortelius' text is as follows

[46] Bob Claessens, Jeanne Rousseau, *Bruegel*, New York, 1984, p. 187.
[47] H. Stein-Schneider, 'Les Familistes Une secte néo-cathare du 16e siècle et leur peintre Pieter Brueghel Ancien' in *Cahier d'Etudes Cathares*, XXXVI, Printemps 1985, 11e Serie No. 105, p. 8.

> *Multa pinxit, hic Brugelius, quae pingi non possunt, quod Plinus de Apelle. In omnibus omnis operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur. Idem de Timanthe Eunapius in Iamblicho. Pingunt voluntque picture lenocinium quoddam et gratiam de suo adjicere, Totam depravant representatum effigiem et ab examplari proposito partier et a vera forma aberrant.*

Following Stein-Schneider, we can arrive at the following:

> He painted many things, this Brueghel, that usually cannot be expressed by painting, as Pliny says of Apelles. In every one of his pictures we have to search for a meaning beyond that which appears on the surface. (Jamblichus makes the same claim for Timanthe as does Eunapius.) Painters who add to their work an element of enticement or cheap allurement completely change the meaning of everything that is represented and they put a distance between the object they depict and its truth.

Apelles is generally regarded as the greatest painter of antiquity and, though none of his works survive, he was idealized by Renaissance humanists. He lived from the time of Philip of Macedon till after the death of Alexander. He combined Dorian thoroughness with Ionic grace. Attracted to the court of Philip, he painted him and the young Alexander with such success that he became the recognized court painter of Macedon . His picture of Alexander, holding a thunderbolt, was likened to the statue of Alexander with the spear of the sculptor Lysippus. Other works of Apelles had a great reputation in

antiquity, among them the noted painting representing Aphrodite rising out of the sea. This, and other themes, were recreated by Botticelli and other Italian artists of the Renaissance.[48] The painter Timanthus (4th century BC) was another admired figure in the Renaissance; for example by Alberti who, following Pliny, ascribed a famous fresco in Pompeii, dating from the 1st century AD and depicting the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, as a copy of a lost work by that artist.[49]

The references to Eunapius and especially to Iamblichus, whose importance has already been mentioned, are significant here. These men, renowned in the late-antique and early Christian period, were of great interest to Renaissance humanists and we see that Ortelius makes a connection between Bruegel and the Neoplatonist schools of the 4th century. Iamblichus has already appeared in the pages of this thesis.[50] Eunapius, a Greek sophist and historian, was born at Sardis, A.D. 347 and, while still a youth, went to Athens. Initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, he was admitted into the college of the Eumolpidae (the sacred priestly families) and became a hierophant. There is evidence that he was still living in the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II (408-450). Eunapius was the author of the *Lives of the Sophists*, which deals chiefly with the contemporaries of the author.[51]

Stein-Schneider points out:

[48] Adapted from an article by P. G. in http://15.1911encyclopedia.org/A/AP/APELLES.htm.
[49] See http://www.philipresheph.com/a424/gallery/course/gtod/ch6.htm
[50] Iamblichus is 'one of the key figures in the transmission of perennial philosophical ideas'. Part I. p.109.
[51] See http://44.1911encyclopedia.org/E/EU/EUNAPIUS.htm

> that the last lines of Ortelius' texts are a variation on Iamblichus' citation. The Sophist has in effect declared that the addition of a personal element on the part of the painter transforms the portrait from an objective truth to a subjective one. Here, Ortelius applies Iamblichus' idea to Bruegel's method which [implicitly] parallels that of the philosopher. Ortelius tells us that this transformation is accomplished by two means: one is by the appending an element of 'enticement or cheap allurement'[52] – the Latin word *lenocinium* being in effect the *trickery* by which a harlot attracts her clients. The second means of transformation is *gratia,* grace or embellishment, a freely-given indication and, thus, an element that does not belong to the represented object and so a kind of symbol. Such a sign can be snow covering the ground which indicates cold [suggesting that] frost means infertility. Or it can be a bird, either caged or free, by which we understand the possible starting-point of the soul's journey. Bruegel, Ortelius tells us, was prone to employ signs of this kind in order to transform totally the primary meaning (the *vera forma*) of his picture and thus to present an entirely new message and so different [in meaning] as to have nothing to do with the objective reality of what was first represented.

Stein-Schneider goes on to assert that Bruegel's entire work (*omnibus omnis operibus*) cannot support an interpretation based on his realism or any external appearances; that the external aspects are no more than veils hiding the truth. 'Bruegel could, according to

[52] Stein-Schneider has 'sexual provocation' which this author finds too distracting in already obtuse passage.

Ortelius, paint something and, at the same time, signify the opposite of what it seemed to be saying'.[53]

The same author insists that Ortelius' text 'clearly' tells us of a secret and hidden dimension in Bruegel's work inaccessible to those who lack the key to their proper understanding. This leads to the famous drawing, preserved in the Albertina in Vienna, known as *The Painter and the Art Lover* where the artist, perhaps Bruegel himself, with a poised brush in his hand and a determined expression, gazes with intensity and vision into the unknown (see figure 1).


Fig. 1

Behind him stands the client, an obviously weak character, clutching his wallet and looking with hopeless incomprehension at the picture. Late medieval art employed glasses as a symbol of the inability to see. We shall come across a similar figure in the National Gallery's *Adoration of the Kings* where spectacles indicate the person's inability

[53] *Cahier d'Etudes Cathares*, p. 11

to understand what is before him (see fig. 2). 'It is this "veil" before the non-initiated spectator's eyes that Brueghel demonstrates in the drawing that some see as a self-portrait'.[54]

Fig. 2, detail, *Adoration of the Kings.*

Stein-Schneider offers the following challenge:

> The text of Ortelius and Bruegel's self-portrait seem then to be compelling indication that all the pictures of our painter contain secret messages, comprehensible only to initiates. The panel-paintings of our Brueghel would be *'peintures à clef'*. But what would then be the key to these paintings that his friend Ortelius described as '*secret'* (Appelles) '*veiled'* (Timanthus) and *'expressing by their message the opposite of what is seen'* (Iamblichus)?

With these questions in mind we are now in a position to continue looking at Bruegel's paintings in the light of the ideas of the Perennial Philosophy.

[54] Idem.