

Wolfgang Smith

ANCIENT WISDOM
AND MODERN MISCONCEPTIONS

A Critique of Contemporary Scientism

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Cosmos and Transcendence:
Breaking Through the Barrier of Scientific Belief*

*Science and Myth:
With a Response to Stephen Hawking's The Grand Design*

The Quantum Enigma: Finding the Hidden Key

Sagesse de la Cosmologie Ancienne

*Christian Gnosis:
From Saint Paul to Meister Eckhart*

*Réponse à Stephen Hawking:
De la Physique à la Science-Fiction*

*Theistic Evolution:
The Teilhardian Heresy*

*Rediscovering the Integral Cosmos:
Physics, Metaphysics, and Vertical Causality
(with Jean Borella)*

*Physics and Vertical Causation:
The End of Quantum Reality*

 ANGELICO PRESS
SOPHIA PERENNIS

word, whereas human perception opens in principle to the meta-cosmic realms, the *modus operandi* of physical science confines us to a relational and indeed subcorporeal domain. Galilean heliocentrism, finally, constitutes a bastard notion which spuriously confounds the two ways of knowing. One might add that there is also a traditional or authentic heliocentrism, which must not be confused with the Galilean; and this is what will mainly concern us in the following chapter.

8

Esoterism and Cosmology: From Ptolemy to Dante and Cusanus

There are doctrinal conflicts which can only be resolved on an esoteric plane. In the present chapter, I propose to reflect upon one such discrepancy: the antithesis, namely, between a geocentric and a heliocentric worldview. It happens, however, that there is more than one geocentrism, even as there are several distinct kinds of heliocentrism. It is necessary, therefore, to sort out these various conceptions, which pertain to different levels and must not be confounded: only then can we grasp the crux of the problem.

In the first place it is needful, once again, to distinguish between two very different ways of knowing: the way of cognitive sense perception, which takes us into the corporeal domain, and the *modus operandi* of physical science that gives access to what I term the physical universe. This said, it becomes apparent that the primary geocentrism—the geocentrism natural to mankind—is based upon the first way of knowing: looking up at the night sky, one actually perceives the stars and planets circling the Earth, while the latter itself is experienced as central and immobile. As regards the second way of knowing, one generally takes it for granted that physical science has come down unequivocally on the side of heliocentrism. But as we have come to see in the preceding chapter, it happens that contemporary physics does allow the hypothesis that the Earth does not move, does not in fact orbit: according to Einsteinian theory, no experiment can possibly prove otherwise. Admittedly, this is not much of a geocentrism; but so far as scientific knowing is concerned, it is the most that can be said: *physical* geocentrism let us call it, to distinguish the latter from the primary kind. To be sure,

there is also a physical heliocentrism which affirms that it is likewise admissible to consider the Sun to be at rest, and conceive of the Earth as orbiting around the Sun. On the level of physical theory there is no conflict between the two positions, which is to say that both are validated by the principle of relativity. As has been suggested in the preceding chapter, that principle is expressive of the fact that the notion of substance has no more place in fundamental physics: in a world consisting as it were of relations, Einsteinian relativity does indeed reign supreme.

It should be noted that there exists evidently no heliocentrism based upon cognitive sense perception. Yet in addition to what I have termed *physical* heliocentrism there is the position championed by Galileo, which insists on supposedly scientific grounds that the Earth does revolve around the Sun. As we have just seen however, Galileo's arguments prove to be fallacious, and his celebrated "*éppur si muove*" turns out to be in fact unprovable. What I shall term *Galilean* heliocentrism—the imperious claim which to this day continues to define our collective *Weltanschauung!*—proves thus to be finally no more than a spurious hybrid of the two aforesaid ways of knowing.

There is also, however, a third kind of heliocentrism, which might be termed *traditional, ionic*, and even perhaps *esoteric*; we will consider that heliocentrism in due course. But first it behooves us to reflect in some depth on the meaning and significance of the primary geocentrism.



It has been suggested that the geocentrist worldview corresponds to the mentality of so-called primitive man, someone who accepts the testimony of the senses uncritically and is supposedly incapable of scientific thought. One maintains moreover that human perception is inherently unreliable and subject to manifold illusions, and that these need to be rectified through scientific means before authentic knowledge can be attained. Even scientists admit, of course, that sense perception does indeed constitute our one and only means of access to the external world; but one denies that it can *per se* bestow

authentic knowledge of things as they are. For that one needs to supplement the human faculties by scientific instruments, and avail oneself of the theories which underlie their use. The role of sense perception in the cognitive process is thus ultimately reduced to elementary acts, such as the reading of a pointer on a scale.

Oversimplified as this brief characterization of the science-oriented epistemology may be, it does serve to identify the contemporary scientific denigration of sense perception as a serious and respectable way of knowing. To the scientific mentality the *modus operandi* of science ranks in the final count as the sole means by which authentic knowledge can be obtained; as Bertrand Russell has famously put it: "What science cannot tell us, mankind cannot know." But of course this is by no means the case! We need to understand from the outset that cognitive sense perception can in fact give access to domains of reality beyond the range of scientific inquiry, and that what we apprehend in our daily life is part and parcel of an authentic world which physical science as such cannot reveal. We need further to understand that cognitive perception is neither a physiological nor indeed a psychological act, but is in fact consummated in the authentic *intellect*, the highest faculty within the human compound; so high in fact, that according to Platonist philosophy it transcends the very bounds of space and time. Thus, even in its humblest quotidian manifestations, cognitive sense perception proves to be something quite miraculous, something literally "not of this world."¹ What actually limits the truth and the depth of human perception, moreover, are not our faculties as such, but the use we make of them; and in this regard it appears that a collective decline has been in progress since primordial times. It appears, moreover, that the scientific denigration has itself had a debilitating effect upon our capacity to perceive, and has in fact accelerated our collective descent from the pristine state in which, according to St. Paul, man could penetrate "*the things that are made*" so as to apprehend "*the invisible things of God*" which they exemplify.²

1. On this subject I refer to my chapter on "The Enigma of Visual Perception" in *Science and Myth*, op. cit.

2. Rom. 1:20-22.

Getting back to the question of geocentrism, it is to be noted that the worldview at which one arrives by way of sense perception is of course geocentric. In light of the preceding reflections however, so far from constituting some kind of stigma, this fact in itself bestows legitimacy and indeed a primacy upon the geocentric *Weltanschauung*. It appears that the latter answers to the normal human outlook, which as such cannot be illegitimate or void of truth. And what we learn by way of our sensory faculties is that the Earth we stand upon reposes at the center of the universe, and that the Sun, Moon, planets and stars revolve around the Earth. To be sure, the geocentrist outlook does commend itself to the understanding of simple and untutored minds, as we have been told often enough; but it happens that this worldview is congenial to the understanding of sages and saints as well.

It should be noted in this regard that hitherto unsurmised *numerical* correspondences between the Gestalt aspects of planetary astronomy and the subtle anatomy of man have been discovered not too long ago by a German phenomenologist named Oskar Marcel Hinze which by no stretch of the imagination could be conceived as “accidental.” Inasmuch as these congruities—amounting to a veritable isomorphism—disappear in a non-geocentric astronomy, one sees that geocentrism, so far from being illegitimate, has actually a certain primacy. And I would note that this statement is made from a strictly scientific point of view: this is by no means superstition or “pie in the sky”! As a matter of fact, as I have noted elsewhere, not only does Hinze’s claim satisfy the criteria of scientific validity, but it is actually possible on that basis to prove by way of so-called ID theory that the current naturalistic explanation of how our solar system originated proves to be inadequate.³



The traditional doctrine of geocentrism is based upon the concep-

3. I have dealt with Hinze’s discovery and its implications at considerable length in Chapter 6 of *Science and Myth*, op. cit. The subject of ID theory will be treated in the next chapter.

tion of the *stellatum*, the sphere of the stars, which rotates diurnally around the Earth. Between that celestial sphere and the Earth there are the planets, the “wanderers,” which differ sharply from the stars by the complexity of their apparent motions. What is of primary significance, however, is the underlying two-sphere architecture of the cosmos: the notion of an outermost sphere comprised of stars, revolving perpetually about the spherical Earth which rests immobile at the absolute center of the universe. It is crucial to note that the distinction between the two spheres, so far from being simply cosmographical, is primarily ontological, which is to say that the respective spheres represent two distinct ontologic domains, two different worlds if you will; and it is worth noting that to this day one does speak of “spheres” in a distinctly ontological sense. So too it is crucial to understand that the two worlds—the stellar and the terrestrial—define a hierarchic order: that the stellar, namely, is *higher* than the terrestrial; and again I would point out that the adjectives “high” and “low” have to this day retained their hierarchic connotation. One sees that the two-sphere conception of the cosmos defines a dimension of “verticality” which is at once cosmographic, ontologic and axiological. The astronomical distance, be it measured in meters or in parsecs, separating the Earth from the *stellatum* becomes thus indicative of the immeasurable hiatus, again both ontologic and axiological, separating the two domains. One might add that the stellar world, though it cannot be identified with the spiritual which is metacosmic and invisible to mortal gaze, is yet reflective of the spiritual to a pre-eminent degree.

These indications, sparse though they be, may perhaps suffice to provide an initial glimpse of what geocentric cosmology is about. One sees, first of all, that with his telescope and his polemics Galileo has assaulted far more than a mere cosmography: it was not simply a question of whether the Earth does or does not move! Nor was the point at issue whether or not the Galilean claim contradicts certain passages in Scripture, for instance those that speak of the Sun as “rising,” or as “running its course.” What stands or falls is finally nothing less than an entire *Weltanschauung*. What has actually come under attack is in fact the notion of cosmic hierarchy, of “verticality” in the traditional “ontologic and axiological” sense. But let us note

that inasmuch as this notion is basic to the very conception of spiritual ascent, what is implicated is finally the entire economy of the Christian life. One may object to this assessment on the grounds that it is surely possible to "ascend" spiritually without flying up into the sky; but whereas the spiritual or metaphysical sense of verticality needs indeed to be distinguished from the cosmographic, it yet remains that the two are profoundly linked: it is not mere imagination or pious poetry that Christ—and before Him, Enoch and Elias—"was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight."⁴ The question remains, moreover, whether the two senses of "verticality" can in fact be separated on an existential plane, and whether the cosmographic sense may not in fact play a vital role in the spiritual life. One wonders whether an individual who thinks, à la Einstein, that "one coordinate system is as good as another" can in fact maintain a living belief in the operative truths of Christianity. What counts spiritually is what we believe with our entire being: inclusive, one is tempted to say, of the body itself, the corporeal component of our nature. Does not the First Commandment exhort us to love God "with all thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might"? There can be little doubt that the ternary heart-soul-might corresponds indeed to the Pauline *pneuma-psyche-soma*, which is to say that we are enjoined to love God not only with our spiritual and mental faculties, but with our corporeal being as well. Moreover, in line with this basic principle, the Church has decreed that the literal or "corporeal" sense of Scripture cannot be denied, cannot be simply jettisoned as contemporary theologians are wont to do. Authentically Christianity has always rejected every kind of angelism; if man is indeed a trichotomous being, his religious convictions and discipline need be in a sense trichotomous as well.

Getting back to the concept of verticality, it follows then that the cosmographic sense of that notion cannot be cast aside with impunity; and I would add that history appears to bear this out: it is surely no accident that in the wake of the Copernican Revolution religious faith has visibly waned. In the more educated strata of society, especially, belief in the teachings of Christianity—to the

4. Acts 1:9.

extent that it has survived at all—has become strangely hollow and bereft of existential reality. There are notable exceptions, thank God; yet the overall trend is unmistakable: in a very real sense, Western man has forfeited his spiritual orientation. Having suffered the loss of cosmographic verticality, he finds himself in a flattened-out universe in which the concerns of authentic religion make little sense. Let no one say that religion or spirituality have no need of a cosmology: nothing could be further from the truth! As Oskar Milosz has wisely observed: "Unless a man's concept of the physical universe accords with reality, his spiritual life will be crippled at its roots." Yes, it is happening before our very eyes! As concerns Galileo and his famous trial, one cannot but commend the Church for rallying to the defense of a position which in truth is its very own.



One needs to understand that geocentric cosmology is inherently an iconic doctrine. It pertains thus to the traditional sciences as distinguished from the modern, which are concerned with the material and thus non-iconic aspects of cosmic reality. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains:

The modern sciences also know nature, but no longer as an icon. They are able to tell us about the size, weight and shape of the icon and even the composition of the various colors of paint used in painting it, but they can tell us nothing of its meaning in reference to a reality beyond itself.⁵

That is just the point! A mountain of misunderstanding and confusion in the debate over geocentrism could have been avoided if the disputants on both sides had realized that the geocentrist claim is inherently an *iconic* truth, which as such transcends the purview of the physical sciences. Ultimately geocentrism has to do with cosmic symbolism, and thus with the mystery of essence: and that is not something that can be dealt with in positivistic terms.

Having characterized geocentrism as an iconic doctrine, it may

5. *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001), p. 487.

be well to point out that the “symbolism” in question is not to be interpreted in some psychological sense: it is not a question of subjective, but of objective truth. Geocentrism is thus indeed a *scientific* doctrine, which however pertains, as I have noted before, not to the modern, but to the traditional sciences. And as such it demands a certain ability to “see,” the capacity to actualize a superior faculty of vision, a kind that can discern the meaning of the icon as distinguished from mere “shapes and colors.” The contemporary scientist, on the other hand, has been trained to do the very opposite, namely, to fix his gaze upon the outermost aspects of corporeal reality: is it any wonder that he misses the iconic sense? By means of considerable schooling one eventually becomes proficient in the task of reducing the icon to its shapes and colors: reducing the universe, that is, to its material and quantitative components. And so it comes about that the actual meaning of geocentrism escapes not only its scientific critics, but its contemporary scientific defenders as well: the contemporary debate is over the outer husk.⁶

Not only the reality, however, but the very conception of science in the traditional sense has been virtually lost. Even theologians, who *should* know better, have for the most part not a clue: if they had, they would not have busied themselves with the task of “demythologizing” the sacred texts. What then might be the cause of this deficiency, this veritable blindness? It is not a question of erudition, or even perhaps of “faith” in the religious sense; what is needed is a traditional ambience, something which in the West has disappeared centuries ago. Nasr is no doubt profoundly right when he compares the traditional sciences to “jewels which glow in the presence of the light of a living sapiential tradition and become opaque once that light disappears.”⁷ We need to realize that this marvelous metaphor applies not only to various recondite disciplines, such as alchemy or astrology, but to geocentrism as well, the meaning of which every-

6. It may surprise many readers that geocentrism still has scientific advocates. One of the best-known is Gerardus Bouw, director of the Association for Biblical Astronomy, editor of *Biblical Astronomy*, a journal dedicated to the scientific defense of geocentrism, and author of a highly interesting treatise entitled *Geocentricity*.

7. Op. cit., p. 488.



one presumes to understand. Given that cosmic realities are connected to their exemplars by way of essence, it follows that a worldview bereft of essence has no place for traditional science—be it geocentrism or any other—as well. Such a traditional science may of course survive in its outer forms, even as the shapes and colors of an icon remain in place when its meaning has been lost. Geocentrism, in particular, may thus survive in its cosmographic dimension; thus reduced, however, to its outermost sense, it turns indeed into a superstition, the mere vestige of a forgotten worldview. In terms of Professor Nasr’s metaphor, geocentrism becomes thus “opaque.”



Geocentric cosmology, whether conceived Ptolemaically or according to the Tychonian system,⁸ affirms that the stars and the seven classical planets—Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury and Moon—are engaged in ceaseless revolution around the Earth, as if mounted on giant rotating spheres. In short, the heavens revolve while the Earth stands still: what is the *iconic* significance of that? To the ancients it meant that the stars and planets serve as principles of motion in the terrestrial sphere. Even as the Sun gives rise to the alternation of day and night, and of the seasons, and the Moon gives rise to oceanic tides and other phenomena, so it is with the stars and the five remaining planets: such was the ancient belief. Astronomy and astrology were thus inextricably linked, and could in fact be viewed as complementary aspects of a single science. Let us recall that Ptolemy has left us not only his *Almagest*—the most comprehensive and influential treatise on astronomy produced in antiquity—but the *Tetrabiblos* as well, which delves into predictive astrology no less.

Given that the celestial spheres do indeed exert an influence upon the terrestrial world, how then, let us ask, is that influence transmitted-

8. According to Tychonian astronomy, the planets Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury orbit around the Sun, while the Sun and the Moon orbit around the Earth. See p. 146.

ted to the sublunar realm? At the hands of Aristotle this question received a rather physical if not indeed mechanistic answer. Having convinced himself on philosophical grounds that there can be no such thing as empty space, and persuaded that the celestial spheres are composed of an element termed the aether, he thought that each sphere exerts a kind of mechanical force upon the next, from the stellatum down to the terrestrial. And since the latter sphere does not itself move, the result must be a "mixing of the elements," and thus the production of internal motion and change: such is at least the apparent sense of the Aristotelian theory. It appears, however, that the earlier conceptions of astrological influence had been far more refined than this apparently crude explanation. The pre-Aristotelian conceptions had been far more theological than physical, if one may put it so; we must remember that preceding civilizations had populated the heavens with gods—or angels, as we prefer to say—who presumably disposed over more spiritual means of communicating their influence to the sublunar realm. But be that as it may, the celestial spheres were in any case conceived as "active" in relation to the terrestrial, which is to say that the worldview of these early civilizations was inherently astrological.

This basic feature of ancient cosmology has of course been abandoned in the wake of the Copernican Revolution. Copernicus himself tried hard to salvage as much as he could of the old cosmology: he was by no means a revolutionary or an iconoclast. Yet, by a kind of relentless logic, his astronomical innovation did precipitate the collapse of the ancient worldview: in the minds and imagination of those who, following Copernicus, came to espouse the heliocentric cosmography, astrology became a dead issue. For now the Earth itself revolves, and presumably acts upon other planets, even as these in turn act upon the Earth. The new cosmology is thus visibly democratic: the traditional hierarchy, in which the Earth had been relegated to the lowest position, has been replaced by a planetary system in which the terrestrial globe enjoys more or less equal status with its companion planets. There is now no more "up" and "down," no more "east" and "west," "north" and "south," except of course in relation to a particular planet orbiting the Sun. Clearly, the very basis for an astrological outlook has disappeared.

According to the new cosmology, the stars and classical planets no longer exert an influence upon the Earth; or to put it more accurately, no longer exert a "higher" influence. According to contemporary physics, there is an interaction via gravitational and electromagnetic forces; and certainly in that sense the Sun, Moon and stars still affect the Earth. But it is needless to point out that the action of forces or exchange of particles admitted by the physics of our day are nothing like the "influence of the celestial spheres" as conceived in ancient lore—which is of course precisely the reason why the very idea of astrology appears to us today as a primitive and indeed exploded superstition.



Iconic truth has to do with the relation of a cosmic to a metacosmic reality. The reading of a cosmic icon contributes however an element of its own: a perspective or point of view one can say. And this entails that such an icon can be read in more than one way.

Having spoken of geocentrism as an iconic doctrine, it now behooves us to note that heliocentrism, rightly understood, is likewise iconic. Both contentions turn out to be correct, which is to say that each embodies an iconic truth; it is the perspective, the point of view, that differs. More precisely, the respective doctrines correspond in fact to different *levels* of vision. The heliocentric, inasmuch as it evidently entails a more intellectual or "inward" kind of vision, actually ranks higher than the geocentric. Whereas the latter, by virtue of its "earth-centered" perspective, perceives the cause and principle of all being in terms of its effect or influence upon the terrestrial sphere, the heliocentric is focused upon the Sun, which as the representative of Deity does by right occupy the center of the universe. As "the author not only of visibility in all visible things, but of generation and nourishment and growth" as Plato says,⁹ it could not be conceived Ptolemaically as a mere planet, one among several bodies that revolve about the Earth. Given the overtly theophanic outlook of traditional heliocentrism it is hardly surpris-

9. *Republic* vi.

ing that the doctrine is closely associated with the Pythagorean and Platonist schools as distinguished from the Aristotelian. Based on the report of Philolaus, the Pythagoreans espoused a non-geocentric cosmology in which the Earth revolves around a central fire, the so-called Altar of the Universe, which apparently was not however identified with the Sun. That step was taken later by the Neoplatonists, whose cosmology thus became overtly heliocentric. Eventually, when the doctrine was revived in the Renaissance movement championed by Marsiglio Ficino, it assumed again a somewhat altered form: what Ficino instituted was almost a full-fledged religion, a kind of neo-paganism. Copernicus himself was profoundly influenced by this movement, as can be clearly seen from numerous passages in the *De Revolutionibus*. To cite but one example (from the tenth chapter of the First Book) that enables us to savor the spirit of those Renaissance times:

In the middle of all sits the Sun enthroned. In this most beautiful temple, could we place this luminary in any better position from which he can illuminate the whole at once? He is rightly called the Lamp, the Mind, the Ruler of the Universe; Hermes Trismegistus names him the Visible God, Sophocles' Electra calls him the All-seeing. So the Sun sits upon a royal throne ruling his children the planets which circle round him.

Yet notwithstanding these panegyrics, it appears that the light of iconic truth was fast fading. A kind of earth-bound literalism, hostile to the spirit of Platonic philosophy, was beginning to manifest itself, foreboding the advent of the modern age. Neither in Marsiglio Ficino nor in Copernicus do we encounter an authentic revival of Platonist doctrine, nor can it be said that the resultant heliocentrism conforms to its traditional prototype: "Rather was it comparable," writes Titus Burckhardt, "to the dangerous popularization of an esoteric truth."¹⁰

It behooves us now to ponder this highly significant remark. Why should the truth of heliocentrism be termed "esoteric"? And why should its popularization be "dangerous"? Having characterized the

truth of heliocentrism as "iconic," are we perhaps to conclude that "iconic" and "esoteric" are synonymous? By that token, however, authentic geocentrism would be "esoteric" as well.

I propose to give at least a partial answer to these questions. Let it be noted, first of all, that there is a *prima facie* opposition, a kind of logical contradiction, between the geocentric and the heliocentric claims. It is further to be recalled that heliocentrism is based upon an intellectual vision which replaces or supersedes the sensory. The point, however, is that authentic heliocentrism—that is to say, heliocentrism understood *esoterically*—does not deny that sensory truth, but accommodates it, rather, within an enlarged and perforce hierarchic vision of reality. Vivekananda has put it well when he said: "Man does not move from error to truth, but from truth to truth: from truth that is lower to truth that is higher." Now, this recognition of lower truth, I say, constitutes indeed a mark or criterion of authentic esoterism. The higher truth is never destructive of the lower: quite to the contrary! A so-called esoterism, therefore, which undercuts the normal and in a sense God-given beliefs of mankind is perforce a fake: a dangerous counterfeit. Has not Christ Himself declared: "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill"? And mark the words: "For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."¹¹ Admittedly Christ is speaking of the Mosaic law; yet one may surmise that His words apply likewise to the body of beliefs enshrined in the Old Testament, which most certainly includes the tenet of geocentrism. Till "heaven and earth pass" all these "lower truths" shall remain effective and in a way binding upon us: let no one cast them aside before "heaven and earth" have passed, on pain of falling into what an Upanishad calls "a greater darkness."

Getting back to the *prima facie* contradiction between the geocentrist and the heliocentrist claims, I would like now to point out that this paradox cannot be resolved on the level of our "common sense" views concerning corporeal reality. Nor indeed can it be resolved on an Aristotelian basis, let alone a Cartesian. It seems ultimately to require the high ground of a non-dualist metaphysics, be

10. *Mirror of the Intellect* (State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 21.

11. Matt. 5:17-18.

it Platonist, Vedantic, or Trinitarian.¹² no lesser realism will suffice. And yes, that ground is indeed “esoteric,” to say the least. There can be little doubt, moreover, that this too is the ground upon which Dante conceived his monumental vision of what might be termed the integral cosmos. In a single poetic cosmography he combined, if you will, the geocentrist and the heliocentrist cosmologies; and it is highly significant that one passes from the former to the latter precisely at the threshold of the Empyrean, which thus represents the boundary, as it were, between the two “worlds.” For indeed, as one crosses that boundary the ascending spheres no longer expand, but now contract. In that supernal and indeed angelic realm, the hierarchic order of successive spheres is reversed: here to “ascend” means to approach the Center, which comprises the Altar of the Universe, that is to say, the Throne of God. The Empyrean, thus—the outermost Ptolemaic sphere—marks the point of reversal, where “*heaven and earth shall pass*,” which is also the point where “*a new heaven and a new earth*” shall come to be.¹³



The question arises whether the preeminence of authentic heliocentrism may not be reflected on the physical plane in some salient cosmographical characteristic: does not the very principle of cosmic symbolism demand that the superior glory of the true heliocentric vision be mirrored somehow in the actual geometry of the planetary system? I submit that what Copernicus describes glowingly as a “wonderful symmetry in the universe, and a definite relation of harmony in the motion and magnitude of the orbs, of a kind not possible to obtain in any other way” is precisely that cosmographical

12. Regarding the uniqueness and supremacy of Trinitarian nondualism I refer to *Christian Gnosis* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2008), Chapter 7.

13. *Isa.* 65:17 and *Rev.* 12:1. Let me note that, mathematically speaking, Dante’s integral cosmos constitutes a three-dimensional sphere, with the Empyrean as its (2-dimensional) equator. The Florentine poet appears to have been the first man to conceive of a more-than 2-dimensional sphere. On the cosmology of the *Divina Comedia* see also Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, op. cit., pp.17–26 and 82–98.

reflection. Admittedly, the Copernican and the Tychonian systems prove to be mathematically equivalent,¹⁴ which is to say that they predict the same apparent orbits; even so the symmetries and harmony of which Copernicus speaks remain hidden in the Tychonian scheme, whereas they become resplendently manifest in the Copernican.

One has mixed feelings, therefore, concerning the contemporary defense of geocentrism. Whereas Christian believers are surely to be commended for guarding a doctrine basic to their faith, the reductionist spirit of the times has forced the debate onto a cosmographic plane on which the essential has already been lost, and where for that very reason the defenders find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Admittedly the principle of relativity offers some protection to the beleaguered Tychonians, but at the cost of emasculating the geocentrist claim. Meanwhile the fact remains that a heliocentric coordinate system offers undeniable theoretical advantages precisely because it is adapted to the symmetries Copernicus had his eye upon: the very symmetries that bear witness to the heliocentric truth. The Tychonians may indeed be right in claiming that they too can explain the observable facts, but one wonders at what cost in the form of cumbersome *ad hoc* interventions.¹⁵ One cannot but commiserate with these defenders whom the opposing side does not deem worthy even of a response.

What necessarily baffles the exoterist mentality is what might be termed the multivalency of authentic revelation, be it scriptural or cosmic. Truth is hierarchical, and so Holy Writ and the cosmos as such need be in a sense hierarchical as well. No single perspective or level of understanding—no single “*darshana*”—can do full justice to the integral truth: Revelation itself informs us of this fact in various ways. Typically both Scripture and the cosmic revelation do so by way of “fissures,” that is to say, seeming incongruities which disturb

14. A sketch of the proof may be found in Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (New York: MJF Books, 1985), pp.201–206.

15. So far as planetary orbits are concerned, Tychonian astronomy is equivalent to the Copernican as we have said. *Ad hoc* interventions, however, are needed to account for stellar aberration and stellar parallax. See pp.147–152.

and puzzle, and hopefully spur us on to seek a higher level of truth. As Christ Himself intimated to His disciples on the eve before His passion: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."¹⁶ Humility in the moral sense is not enough: we need also an intellectual and indeed theological humility. To preserve ourselves from falling into some arid dogmatism, we need ever to continue on our way: "from truth that is lower to truth that is higher." Dogmas, it seems, are meant for the *viator*, the spiritual traveler, not for the armchair theologian. It is not that dogmas of a sacred kind are simply provisional or limited in the ordinary sense, but rather that they harbor unsuspected truths. We need, as I have said, to continue on our way; as the author of Hebrews points out: "*Strong meat belongeth to them that are full of age.*"¹⁷ And moreover, since truth derives ultimately from God, this step-by-step ascent constitutes indeed an *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, a veritable "journey into God." But clearly, it is an *itinerarium* in which the *viator* himself is progressively changed; in the words of St. Paul: "*But we all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.*"¹⁸

Getting back to cosmography: the higher truth of heliocentrism, as I have said, is reflected in the superior beauty or "symmetry" of the corresponding mathematical description; but we need to remember that the "high truth" in question pertains to what may indeed be characterized as an esoteric level of vision. Reduced to a mere cosmography, heliocentrism ranks in reality *below* its geocentric rival; for the latter, insofar as it corresponds to the testimony of cognitive sense perception, opens upon vistas of truth, as we have noted before, which are inaccessible to the physical scientist as such. The problem with an "exoteric" geocentrism, on the other hand—a geocentrism that simply denies the heliocentric truth—is that in the final count it lacks a credible defense against a scientific heliocentrism: referents and epicycles, figuratively speaking, do not stand up well against the equations of Kepler and Newton. Even the most

16. John 16:12.

17. Heb. 5:14.

18. 2 Cor. 3:18.

committed geocentrist can hardly fail to recognize a superior cogency in the heliocentric theory, and secretly sense that some other truth must stand at issue, a truth not comprehended from the geocentric point of view. But alas, to the exotericist mentality that "other truth" is perforce hostile, an erroneous teaching that threatens the integrity of the geocentric worldview. What by right should spur us on to seek a higher, more comprehensive level of understanding—what *de jure* should be *liberating*—comes thus to be feared and rejected as a rank heresy.

What further complicates the issue is the fact that heliocentrism has generally come to be identified with the Galilean doctrine, which is in fact a rank heresy. I have already suggested that Galilean heliocentrism erodes the sense of verticality which supports and indeed enables the spiritual life: that it plunges us into a flattened and de-essentialized cosmos in which the claims of religion cease to be credible. I propose now to consider yet another ill effect of the Galilean heresy, which in a way is complementary to the aforesaid loss of verticality.



Every religion is perforce *homocentric* in its worldview. To put it in Christian terms: man occupies a central position in the universe because he is made in the image and likeness of Him who is in truth the absolute center of all that exists. Furthermore, man is central because, as the microcosm, he in a way contains within himself all that exists in the outer world, even as the center of a circle contains in a sense the full pencil of radii. Or again: man is central because he is the most precious among corporeal beings. Genesis teaches in fact that God created the Earth as a habitat for man, and the Sun, Moon, and stars "*for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years.*" It is on account of man's centrality, moreover, that the Fall of Adam could affect the entire universe. Now, it is true that the centrality of which we speak is above all metaphysical, or mystical as one might also say; yet even so, it is in the nature of things that this "essential" centrality should be reflected cosmographically. Does not the outer manifestation invariably mirror the inner or essential reality? To

suppose that man can be metaphysically central while inhabiting a speck of matter occupying some nondescript position in some nondescript galaxy—that would surely be incongruous in the extreme. Once again: it would deny the very principle of cosmic symbolism, and thus the theophanic nature of cosmic reality. To be sure, it is possible to affirm metaphysical centrality on an abstract philosophical plane and in the same breath affirm cosmographic ac centrality as well; I doubt, however, that one can do so on an existential level, that is to say, in point of actual credence. To the extent that we truly believe the stipulated ac centrality of the Earth, we are bound to relinquish the traditional claim of homocentrism: in reality, I say, these two articles of belief are mutually exclusive. One can, I say, pay lip-service to both, as in fact a contemporary theologian may well do; but actual belief—that is something else entirely.

The objection may be raised that it is actually possible to espouse an acentric cosmology without detriment to the rightful claims of religion; and one might point to Nicholas of Cusa by way of substantiating that contention. True enough! One needs however to understand that the Cusan cosmology is profoundly Platonic, and corresponds indeed to an authentically esoteric point of view. Its so-called ac centrality is consequently worlds removed from the Einsteimian, and could more accurately be described as a "pancentral-ity." The Cardinal, thus, does not simply deny the geocentrist claim, as does the Galilean astronomer: in reality he transcends the geocentrist contention, and in so doing, justifies and founds it "in spirit and in truth," paradoxical as this may seem. "It is no less true," declares Nicholas of Cusa, "that the center of the world is within the Earth than that it is outside the Earth"; for indeed, "the Blessed God is also the center of the Earth, of all spheres, of all things in the world."¹⁹ Here, in this terse and lucid statement worthy of a sanctified mind, we breathe the pure and invigorating air of a Christian esoterism. It is ever the way of authentic esoterism to "deny" only by

19. *On Learned Ignorance*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1985), p. 115. A masterful discussion of the Cusan cosmology may be found in Jean Borella, *The Secret of the Christian Way* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), chapter 2.

affirming a higher truth, which contains but yet vastly exceeds the original claim.

It is true that the Earth enshrines the center of the universe; but so do the Sun, the Moon, and the myriad stars. Yet it is evidently the first of these recognitions that matters most to us so long as we are denizens of this terrestrial world. As I have noted before, we depend upon that recognition, that truth, for our orientation: our spiritual orientation no less than our physical.

What happens, now, when we ascend from a geocentric to an authentically heliocentric worldview: do we retain the original homocentrism? One may surmise that as we transcend the geocentric outlook, we likewise transcend the lesser theological conception of homocentrism, in accordance with the Pauline dictum: "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."²⁰ The resultant and indeed higher homocentrism is thus in reality a Christocentrism; but again, that Christocentrism is not destructive of the earlier notion, the lesser truth—even as the Christ who "liveth in me" is not destructive of the "I" that "lives." It is once again a question of levels, of hierarchy. Meanwhile the intrinsic connection between geocentrism and the lesser homocentrism endures on the plane to which either notion applies, which is none other than that corresponding to our human condition. Let no one therefore deny either of these notions, these truths, "from below": the consequences of that denial cannot but be tragic in the extreme. Such a denial affects and indeed "poisons" every aspect of human culture, beginning with the life of religion, which it undermines.



It would be hard to overestimate the impact of the Copernican Revolution upon Western culture. Already in 1611, when that revolution had barely begun, John Donne appears to have divined its larger significance: "And new philosophy calls all in doubt," he laments; "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone." No wonder the ecclesiastical guardians of the Roman Church were apprehensive as well, without

20. Gal. 2:20.

perhaps realizing in full clarity what it is that ultimately stands at issue. Today, four centuries later, what lay concealed in that beginning has become clearly manifest, for all to see; as Arthur Koestler notes, it is "as if a new race had arisen on this planet." Could this be the reason why St. Malachi, in his famous prophecies, characterizes the reign of Pope Paul V (1605-1628) by alluding to the birth of "a perverse race"? One needs to recall that what is sometimes termed the first Galileo trial took place in the year 1616. What, then, could be that "perverse race" to which the saintly prophet refers? Given that Galileo is indeed "the father of modern science," one is compelled to answer that it is none other than the race of modern scientists, and by extension, the community of individuals imbued with the modern scientific outlook. This, then, constitutes the fateful "birth" which took place during the pontificate of Paul V: no wonder St. Malachi singles out that event! It was not simply a question of planetary astronomy, obviously: what came to birth was indeed a "new philosophy" as John Donne was quick to realize. From that point onwards, Western man began to look upon the universe with different eyes; and thus he found himself, quite literally, in a new world. Goethe, as always the realist, surely did not overstate the case when he declared that "probably not a single fact has had a deeper influence on the human spirit than the teaching of Copernicus." Only one should add that whereas Copernicus proposed the heliocentric hypothesis—the new mathematical model, if you will—it was Galileo who supplied the new philosophy.

As everyone knows, Galileo was formally tried in 1633 and forced to recant his Copernican convictions. The proposition that the Sun constitutes the immobile center of the universe was declared to be "formally heretical, because it is expressly contrary to the Holy Scriptures." And so the matter stood until 1822, when, under the reign of Pius VII, the Church commenced to soften its stand with regard to what it termed "the general opinion of modern astronomers." Thus began a process of accommodation with "the new race" which came to a head in 1979, when Pope John Paul II charged the Pontifical Academy of Sciences to re-open the Galileo case, and if need be, to reverse the verdict of 1633. Given the mentality which came to the fore in the wake of Vatican II, the outcome of that

inquiry was never in doubt: Galileo was exonerated—some would say, "canonized"—following which Pope John Paul II in effect apologized to the world for wrongs committed by the Church. Could this be the reason, perhaps, why St. Malachi alludes to this Pope in the enigmatic words "*De Labore Solis*"? To be sure, the phrase, which traditionally refers to the movement of the Sun, does relate to Galileo, the man who denied that the Sun does move. Could it be, then, that St. Malachi, having previously signaled the birth of a "perverse race," is now alluding to the fact that some four hundred years later the Church has reversed its stand and relinquished its opposition to that "race," which is to say, to that new philosophy? Certainly St. Malachi's allusion can be interpreted in other ways as well; for example, "*De Labore Solis*" might be taken as a reference to the fact that this Pope, who has traveled far more extensively than any of his predecessors, has so many times "circled the globe" in his papal airliner (named "Galileo," interestingly enough).

But be that as it may, the fact remains that the Church has now joined the rest of Western society in adopting a scientific worldview; during the reign of Pope John Paul II, and obviously with his sanction, a Copernican Revolution has finally taken place within the Church itself. Yet, to be precise, it is not the Church as such that has undergone change—that has "evolved" as the expression goes—what has changed, rather, is the orientation of its human representatives: it is Rome, let us say, that has reversed its position. Humanly speaking, the ecclesiastic establishment may have opted for the only viable course: given the sophistication and prowess of contemporary science—given the "*great signs and wonders*" that could "*deceive even the elect*"—it may not be actually feasible to stem the mounting tide of scientific belief. One must nonetheless insist, in light of the preceding analysis, that the contemporary rejection of geocentrism is not in fact compatible with Christian doctrine. To the extent, therefore, that Rome has embraced that position, it has compromised the true teaching of the Church: this is the crux of the matter.