

THE FINGER POINTING TO THE MOON:  
PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY AND JOHN MILTON

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Abstract

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This thesis examines some of John Milton's prose and poetry, particularly *Christian Doctrine* and *Paradise Lost*, through the lens of Aldous Huxley's Perennial Philosophy. The primary argument is that readers cannot fully understand Milton without imaginarily inhabiting Milton's non-dual worldview. Among other things, the Perennial Philosophy is a rough unified theory of non-dualism. I concur with Stanley Fish that such a non-dual worldview as Milton's is different from the common Liberal worldview prevalent throughout the modern West. While Fish gives a non-dual reading of Milton in his book *How Milton Works*, I argue that a Perennialist reading of Milton both corroborates and broadens Fish's thesis. The result is that liberal readers of Milton must confront some of the limits and assumptions of their own worldview if they are to grasp the radical difference of Milton's worldview.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

More than a set of metaphysical and theological doctrines, the Perennial Philosophy describes a worldview that is in some ways opposed to our current liberal view, being based rather on the intuitions of mystics and on a nonlinear conception of time, or on time “here and now,” as in Zen.<sup>1</sup> Inherent in worldviews (which comprise the totality of a person’s beliefs about reality) are assumptions about time and history, and this explains why Stanley Fish finds it necessary to explain his own views on time and history at the end of his book *How Milton Works*. As Fish says, his “work on Milton and [his] theoretical work, especially that part of it which constitutes a sustained critique of liberalism” is really one project, which ultimately has to do with “the limits of understanding and the nature of consciousness” (561). These are Fish’s major “obsessions.” They are bound up with a worldview set “against liberal categories of thought” (562), but that is the point of view from which Fish reads Milton. Fish explains:

Indeed, within the assumptions of liberalism time and meaning are mutually constitutive. Since what is significant is not known in advance, the choices we make and the actions we take, or fail to take, matter in the strongest sense: they create the world in which we will thereafter face other choices, in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> Aldous Huxley gives a summary of non-linear time: “From Hobbes onwards, the enemies of the Perennial Philosophy have denied the existence of an eternal now. According to these thinkers, time and change are fundamental; there is no other reality. . . . But according to the Perennial Philosophy, the eternal now is a consciousness; the divine Ground is spirit; the being of Brahman is *chit*, or knowledge” ([Brahman means Divine Ground]186-187). On Zen time, see Nagatomo below.

which we will have to take other actions. But within the assumptions of Milton's theology, there is only one choice—to be or not to be allied with divinity—because there is only one meaning, and what might appear to be a succession of different situations is in fact the same situation wearing the thin disguise of temporal variation. (567)

While it is not my goal to challenge liberal categories of thought, I do think that the best way to understand Milton is to situate oneself in the place of Satan, who occupies a liberal worldview of linear time and self-determination (as Satan assumes, he is “self-begot”). Milton says that this worldview is “Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy,” which lends itself to “fallacious hope” (*PL* 2.565-568). It is the worldview of the fallen host in the Hell of *Paradise Lost*, who sat with “thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high,” but “found no end, in wand’ring mazes lost” (2.558-561). In terms of the Perennial Philosophy, Satan's perspective is that of an ego-consciousness caught in liberal time and history, and the problem for the readers of Milton thus becomes how to imagine that one's own life is like Satan's. In contrast to this, Fish argues that Milton's fidelity to God provides the structuring principle for Milton's “consciousness . . . prose and poetry” (7). Thus, liberal readers of Milton are required to situate themselves within a Miltonic worldview that runs contrary to their own view, lest such readers “reinstate and reinvok[e] the dualism Milton so often rejects; for it is only if the first principle of Milton's thought—that God is God and not one of a number of contending forces—is denied or forgotten that his poetry can be seen as conflicted or tragic or inconclusive . . .” (Fish 14).

Fish finds that *Paradise Lost* performs the Satanic mistake that its readers often make, which is to conceive of the self dualistically as being separate from God, rather than selves

monistically dependent upon Him. Despite Milton's assertion that his worldview is best, Milton's view and Satan's view are both equally taken on "faith," neither view being more "epistemologically" certain than the other (515). Fish quotes Milton on this point, and goes on to explain that even Raphael cannot refute Satanic epistemology without recourse to direct knowledge of God (the kind of knowledge that fallen humans and readers of Milton lack):

The answer, then, to the question, 'To convince the proud, what Signs avail?' is: none. Already convinced . . . It is easy to see their behavior as Raphael does, as the manifestation of a literally unbelievable obstinacy; but his own view of the matter is epistemologically no different from theirs. . . . What we are witness to in this moment is the clash of two *faiths*, neither of which can claim support (except rhetorically) in the details of a world each continually remakes. That is, the evidence they might cite in confirmation of their faith is demanded by that faith . . . It is through faith in God's goodness, despite appearances, that keeps the loyal angels loyal, even when they are assigned tasks they cannot perform . . . (515)

Milton's worldview is not epistemologically grounded with any more certainty than that of liberals, "for it is the thesis—and dream—of liberalism that conclusions and actions can be justified 'from scratch,' that is, from a vantage point which is not already hostage to the presuppositions of some partisan agenda" (562).

In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley long ago made some of the basic connections with Milton that Fish makes here and throughout his book. For example, the beginning of the following passage pertains to the type of ego-consciousness that characterizes Satan:

Whenever God is thought of as being wholly in time, there is a tendency to regard Him as a “numinous” rather than a moral being, a God of mere unmitigated Power rather than a God of Power, Wisdom and Love . . . All this is only natural; for time is a perpetual perishing and a God who is wholly in time is a God who destroys as fast as He creates. Nature is as incomprehensibly appalling as it is lovely and bountiful. If the Divine does not transcend the temporal order in which it is immanent, and if the human spirit does not transcend the temporal order in which it is immanent, then there is no possibility of “justifying the ways of God to man.” (190)

The Perennial Philosophy teaches that there is a need to overcome the “sense of being a separate ego” in time, a need for “dying to the self,” without which, we cannot learn to abide in the eternal now of union with God. Fish calls this dying to the self “the dark side of the vision to which Milton continually returns in his work, the vision of a heavenly choir in which singers are known not individually but as members of a corporate ensemble—the body of Christ or the great chorus of angelic praisers who sing a single not unceasingly and in unison, in ‘perfect Diapason,’ in complete, nonindividuating harmony” (565). Fish explains that Milton “notoriously tries to have it both ways” (566)—Milton wanted both to “sing with mortal voice,” and to have union with God at the same time. The problem with uniting with God is that it requires a dying-to-the-self, a dying which the self experiences as “having one’s dignity violated in a way that makes one feel like nothing” (565). Referring to the notion of dying to the self, Fish says that “It is in this sense that the aim of life, rightly lived, is death; what dies . . . is the self with a separate



existence, the self born (as Satan is born at line 666, book V, of *Paradise Lost*) at the moment of disobedience” (4).

This basic will to separate selfness (a will that is constitutive of the ego) is the foundation of the “obdurate pride” that Milton’s Satan refuses to give up (*PL* 1.58), but it is also Milton’s “mortal voice,” which *he* does not want to give up. Likewise, then, for the readers of Milton. As Fish explains, “the sign of evil is to have an I-identity, a separate existence, a voice that can be picked out in the crowd, a voice that stands out, a *mortal* voice. A mortal voice is the voice of a creature in exile; it is the voice of incompleteness, a voice that in its every utterance declares its distance from a perfection whose achievement (exactly the wrong word) would be its silencing” (565).

The choice of whether one is willing to snuff out the separate individual self is the choice that every serious monk or nun faces. It is the choice Milton himself faced if he was to become a clergyman, because he would have had to give up his mortal singing voice, his poetic aspirations. Instead, as Fish said, Milton wanted “to have it both ways,” he wanted both to serve God fully and to write poetry at the same time. The Perennial Philosophy shows that many others have faced a similar choice to Milton’s, not in the sense of giving up poetry, but in the sense of giving up their separate selfness as such, but they faced this choice in widely differing religious traditions throughout time and history—some of which traditions are non-theological. In addition, the Perennial Philosophy demonstrates some of the key similarities in worldviews and philosophies of life that people had who have chosen to give up their selfness.

In the most general sense, then, my thesis is that Milton had a Perennialist or Traditionalist worldview, and that it is valid to read Milton this way. I also argue that a

Perennialist reading of Milton is in accordance with Stanley Fish's thesis in *How Milton Works*. I do not mean to argue that there is a one-to-one correspondence between Milton and the Perennial Philosophy, or that Milton would have been capable of conceiving of himself as a Perennialist. The main points I will argue are as follows: Milton's subjectivity was proximally situated with respect to God; God, for Milton, was the non-dual Ground of Being, primarily immanent, and God was, thus, to be known immanently through right reason, inner worship, and the mystical body of Christ; Milton saw himself as a "finger pointing to the moon," which is to say, pointing to God, and the world of form for him was ultimately illusory. This last point is in line with Fish's thesis that Milton had a non-dual worldview, which I also discuss below in tandem with the notion that the world of form is illusory.

Finally, I argue that the Holy Spirit is like the glue of the world that holds all things together, and its presence can be felt as well as thought. Despite the fact that Milton left the question of the Holy Spirit's ontological status "open," I will show that identification with the felt presence of the Holy Spirit was what Milton meant in Christian Doctrine by "internal worship" (on the ontological status of the Spirit, see *Christian Doctrine* 1194). I will also argue that the "self" for Milton is the discursive self of Satan and of ordinary human beings, whereas the *Self* is aligned and identified with the Holy Spirit; it is the spark of divinity within every human being, and the divinity in all of creation (perhaps with the exception of Sin and Death). This gives a literal sense to the metaphor of the finger pointing to the moon, because the world of form is like so many fingers pointing. Form or "thingness" is empty of any substantial reality in itself, and this also applies to matter, even in the case of Chaos, where matter is formless (Kerrigan et.al. 360, note 12). Milton's invocation to light in book III of *Paradise Lost* discusses

Chaos as the “void and formless infinite” (3.12). Yet, this Chaos, the “boundless” deep, is not devoid of God: as God explains to the Son in book VII, “Boundless the deep, because I am who fill / Infinitude, nor vacuous the space” (168-169). More than space, God must be the very possibility of space. There is a literal sense, then, in which the moon—the guiding metaphor of this paper—is the Divine Reality, the only reality, a “spark” of which exists in all things because it is the very ground of possibility for all things (i.e. God). The Holy Spirit must be that aspect of God to which human beings are open and susceptible, the aspect of God made habitable for the human creature. But God Himself can be simultaneously present and absent in all things, and it must remain an open question, therefore, whether the spark of divinity in the soul is the Holy Spirit, or God, or both at once, or if the Holy Spirit is “nearer” to ordinary incarnate humans, whereas God is in the deepest part of the soul. Finally, how the Son fits into this nexus of Spirit and Self will be discussed in the section below called “Knowledge of the Ground.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### ALDOUS HUXLEY’S PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

Away, then, with the fictions and workings of discursive reason, either for or against Christianity! They are only the wanton spirit of the mind, whilst ignorant of God and insensible of its own nature and condition.

— William Law

Any flea as it is in God is nobler than the highest of the angels in himself.

— Meister Eckhart

Aldous Huxley’s book *The Perennial Philosophy* will be the version of this philosophy that I rely on, and I will do this for two main reasons. One is that Huxley’s is probably the least

controversial exposition of the Perennial Philosophy available. The other is that it squares most easily with Milton's theology. Huxley's attempts to show that Perennialists are all like the finger pointing at the moon, and that their outlooks on the spiritual path are remarkably similar. As David Robb explains:

Perhaps Huxley's most lasting contributions to modern American religious belief revolve around his attempts to explicate the experience of direct awareness of the Godhead. Huxley wrote *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) not as a coherent statement of his mystical beliefs but as an anthology of mystical thought. . . . By asserting that the anthological approach to truth was advantageous in understanding mystical experiences, Huxley also implied that different mystical experiences might be equally valid. (171-172)

While many of the saints, sages, prophets, and ascetics who qualify as Perennialists probably would not have thought of themselves as Perennialists, and certainly not in the case of Milton, Huxley's thesis is that there is indeed enough similarity between Perennialists to warrant the designation of a cohesive "Perennial Philosophy." This is not to imply that Milton was enlightened, or that he held a view that the spiritual Self was of the same identity as the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that Huxley did not think Milton was enlightened, and I assume that Milton's views on the nature of the self were still dualistic enough that he cannot strictly be considered a Perennialist except in hindsight.

For instance, one of the four main "doctrines" of the Perennial Philosophy that Huxley outlines says that the self is an illusory, egoic construction, but that the Self is of the same identity as God ("Introduction" 13). This is not exactly Milton's view, but it is close enough that

it makes as much sense to compare Milton to the Perennial Philosophy as it does to compare him to any of the various religious radicals of his day. In Milton's terms, rather than there being a Self, it would be more correct to say that the self dies to itself when it is fully identified with God, and, thus, there is no need to speak of a Self at all. If God is the only true reality, then there is ultimately no independent self whatsoever, and the issue of the Self and the self becomes more of an ontological or semantic puzzle than anything else.

Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* is an anthology and exposition of the ideas of some of the world's greatest spiritual seekers and adepts. Some of the names that reoccur frequently throughout the book are Meister Eckhart, Lao Tzu, Jalal-uddin Rumi, Shankara, Kabir and St. John of the Cross, and there are frequent quotations from the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the *Theologia Germanica*, the Upanishads, and from various Buddhist sutras. Huxley was not the first to come up with the thesis of the Perennial Philosophy. In the United States, the three most well known expositions of the Perennial Philosophy are probably *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1948), *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944), and *Forgotten Truth* (1976), respectively written by Frithjof Schuon, Aldous Huxley, and Huston Smith. These are the most modern versions of the Perennial Philosophy, which was earlier but similarly expounded by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), and René Guénon (1886-1951). Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the current authorities on Perennial Philosophy, explains that the term "perennial philosophy" was "probably employed for the first time by Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), the Renaissance philosopher and theologian," but that it was subsequently and more famously employed by Leibniz in 1714 (69). For Steuco, "perennial philosophy" connoted "the

Sophia which has always been and will always be”— a body of wisdom handed down by God for all time. Nasr explains further:

Steuco’s *philosophia perennis* . . . asserted that wisdom was originally of divine origin, a sacred knowledge handed by God to Adam . . . This is true religion or philosophy, whose goal is *theosis* and attainment of sacred knowledge . . .

Although severely attacked from many quarters for expressing such ideas so opposed to both the prevalent humanism of the Renaissance and the rather exoteric and sectarian interpretations of Christianity prevalent at that time, the term used by Steuco continued to survive and became celebrated through its use by Leibniz . . . interestingly enough, it is only in the twentieth century that the term has gained wide popularity. (71)

The difference between Steuco’s understanding of the *philosophia perennis* and the understanding of this philosophy today is that the Perennial Philosophy is now recognized in a global array of contemplative traditions. Some of these traditions, like Zen and some versions of Taoism, have no conception of God, and yet they aspire to the type of sapience that is the hallmark of Perennialism. Huxley makes the term perennial philosophy his own, using it in fully modern, global, and theologically noncommittal senses. Thus, “Perennial Philosophy” can refer to the philosophical thesis of one of the writers above, or to the individual perennial philosophies that can be found in the mystical traditions of the world’s major religions, or, finally, to that universal Sophia handed down by God of which Nasr spoke. The Sophia handed down by God is clearly the sense of Perennial Philosophy that fits Milton most closely. The nature of this fit will be more apparent when I discuss Stanley Fish at the close of this essay.

I favor Huxley's version of the Perennial Philosophy because Huxley was an agnostic and he emphasized the psychological, metaphysical, and experiential aspects of the Perennial Philosophy more than the theological aspects. The fact that Huxley was skeptical of theological claims makes his work more relevant to what Jürgen Habermas has called our "post-metaphysical" time. But, this also goes to show that the majority of the Perennial Philosophy can be appreciated from a secular point of view, because much of the Perennial Philosophy is based on lived experience over and above theological or philosophical speculation. The Perennial Philosophy is more properly metaphysical than religious, and a good way to think about this difference is to compare Zen, which is not theological at all, to, say, the mysticism of a Dominican like Meister Eckhart. While the monotheism of Eckhart and the almost nihilistic philosophy of Zen (Zen is more of an anti-philosophy than a religion) would seem to have little in common, they are both fingers pointing to the moon. This, at least, is the thesis of the contemporary variants of the Perennial Philosophy. The Perennial Philosophy assumes there is a "moon," or a fundamental Reality, in Huxley's words, and that the myriad forms of the world are only so many expressions of the basic Ground of Being. In probably the most concise summary possible, Huxley explains that the Perennial Philosophy is:

the metaphysic which recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being . . .

(vii)

There are four basic doctrines that Huxley describes as the Perennial Philosophy's core and which Huston Smith also relies upon in his essay "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" (see 554).

Huxley's doctrines are as follows:

First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness—the world of things and animals and men and even gods—is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be nonexistent. Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing *about* the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known. Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if he so desires, to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit. Fourth: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground. ("Introduction," 13)

Each of Huxley's four doctrines bears fruitful comparison to Milton. In a word, each doctrine can be stated as Ground, knowledge, Self, and purpose. I will go into more depth about the "Ground," the "Self," and about knowledge of the Ground in the sections below. In brief, however, I will argue that Huxley's Divine Ground is the same as God for Milton. Furthermore, the distinctions between these ideas blend together at the limits of metaphysics and become ultimately indistinguishable. As I have already mentioned, God is not just a transcendent Idea,



but an immanent presence in reality that can be felt particularly in the heart. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is like the glue of the world that holds all things together, and its presence can be felt as well as thought. Although I did not put it in exactly these terms, I argued briefly above that the “self” for Milton is the discursive self of Satan and of ordinary human beings, whereas the *Self* is aligned with the spark of divinity within every human being—and, indeed, with the divinity in all of creation. This gives a literal sense to the metaphor of the finger pointing to the moon, because the world of form is like so many fingers pointing. Form or “thingness” is empty of any substantial reality in itself. The moon is God, the only reality, a “spark” of which exists in all things because God is the very ground of possibility for all things. For Milton, Huxley’s doctrine of knowledge of the Ground comes through intuitive right reason and the mystical body of Christ, and this adds a cognitive dimension to the felt presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart. The purpose of life, then—the last of Huxley’s doctrines, is to become identified with the Ground (God), and this is quite different from wanting to be a god like Milton’s Satan wants to be (Stoll 2-4).

I argue that the Ground of Being for Milton is equivalent to God; however, as Huxley explains, “the persons of the Trinity have nothing in common with the flesh-and-blood persons of our everyday acquaintance—nothing, that is to say, except that indwelling Spirit, with which we ought and are intended to identify ourselves” (36). For Milton, the “indwelling Spirit” is the divinity that humans share with angels, possibly the Holy Spirit itself, to be accessed through right reason and the mystical Body of Christ. Huxley adds that “all the exponents of the Perennial Philosophy make, in one form or another, the affirmation that man is a kind of trinity composed of body, psyche and spirit. Selfness or personality is a product of the first two

elements” (38). The Perennial Philosophy enables us to see how many other names the non-dual Ground of Being has had throughout the world. For Milton, as for the various saints, sages, and mystics upon whose words the Perennial Philosophy is based, God is literally the Ground of the “Self,” and the Self ultimately resides in God. The fleshly egoic “self” is ultimately insubstantial and illusory, whereas the “Self” is wholly identified with the Ground of Being, God, the only true reality. Within the world of the Perennial Philosophy, it is possible to say that the self does not exist as an independent entity, because the only actual being the self possesses is precisely that which is “in” God.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### MILTON’S WAY

To some people it comes natural to write artificially; they are artificial with freshness and unction—like Milton, for example. Nothing could be more artificial than “*Lycidas*”, but nothing could be more deeply spontaneous, less of the surface. “*Lycidas*” is as much a product of the Tao as are the “wood-notes wild” of more natural poets. (Aldous Huxley, qtd. in Sybille Bedford, 467)

The quotation of Aldous Huxley above is an example of what contrasting worldviews have to do with the reading of Milton. Huxley says that *Lycidas* was a “product of the Tao,” and Tao is a concept in Chinese philosophy, translatable as “way.”<sup>2</sup> Huxley was not implying that

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<sup>2</sup> The way in which I employ the term “Tao” (with a capital “T”) here coincides with what Chad Hansen calls “primitivist Daoism,” for which “nature does endorse a particular normative *dao*,” which is to say a Way Things Are in Huxley’s sense (see Hansen in section 2). Hansen describes the Tao (“Dao”) as the following: “Daoism has a reputation of being impenetrable mainly because of its central concept, *dao*. Yet, surprisingly, the almost universal translation in English

Milton knew anything about Chinese philosophy, but, rather, that Milton wrote from within the Tao. As Huxley argued in *The Perennial Philosophy*, to some degree great art is created from within the Tao, “partaking in some sort of the divine nature” (138). This is to say that great art is in some sense in touch with a deeper reality, this being the Tao, the Way. There is likewise a tao of art (as there is of all things). Perhaps it is the case that great art stems from a place that is at once unique to individual artists, and that is also in tune with some level of being that goes “deeper” than the individual, a great Tao.

Regardless of whether such a deeper reality is “the same” for every individual who experiences it, the experience of “being there” or of “going deeper” is itself what the Perennial Philosophy aims to convey. With regards to such a deeper reality, the contemporary musical composer Philip Glass has said that music is like an “underground river” flowing through the psyche. In order to compose, all Glass has to do is tap this river—he “listens” for it, he opens himself to it, because the music is “always there” to some extent. One might be led to wonder, then, “From whence does the music come?” While Glass himself refrains from answering this question with its metaphysical implications, for Glass’ friend, Ravi Shankar, the renowned Indian sitar player, the question is easy to answer. As Shankar says, the music he hears in his

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uses one of the smallest, simplest, most familiar and least consciously noticed terms of the language—‘way.’ This common translation, ‘way,’ is apt in several ways. *Dao* (Tao) is a pivotal concept of ancient Chinese thought. ‘Way’ is similarly primitive (it resists analytic definition). We can only offer synonyms: e.g., ‘course’, ‘method’, ‘manner’, ‘mode’, ‘style’, ‘means’, ‘practice’, ‘fashion’, ‘technique’, and so on. We discover the circularity when we try to analyze one of the synonyms without recourse to the term ‘way’ with which we began.” But, the Tao can also be defined as “guide” and “road.” Farther on, Hansen says that “although it’s insightful to say humans live in *dao* as fish do in water, the insight is lost if we simply treat *dao* as being or some pantheistic spiritual realm. *Dao* remains essentially a concept of guidance, a prescriptive or normative term (see section 9.1.1).

mind comes from “The grace of my guru. The music comes through him into me.” The music for Shankar comes from a spiritual source called grace (see *glass: a portrait*). What the Perennial Philosophy does is to point out that the “underground river” is always flowing, though the way this flow will be interpreted differs between a secular American like Glass, and a spiritual Indian like Shankar. In fact, Glass and Shankar’s respective worldviews resemble once again the dichotomy between the Satanic and the Miltonic, and the Perennialist versus the liberal worldviews discussed above.

If we assume that there is actually something like a spiritual “Tao,” or an experience of non-dual Tao, an experience of being in profound spiritual harmony with the Way of things, then there may be a sense in which Milton had discovered Tao for himself, call it his communion with the mind of Christ. I would say that this spiritual harmony with the Way of Things is what Milton described as a “sober certainty of waking bliss” in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*. Milton puts these words into the mouth of Comus when he first perceives the Lady walking through the forest: “But such a sacred and home-felt delight, / Such sober certainty of waking bliss / I never heard till now” (261-264). The Lady was in touch with the Way, which, for Milton, was the mind of Christ, and Comus recognized this sense of the divine in the Lady, which gave her a sober certainty of waking bliss. And, Fish captures this point as well, where the Lady knows a waking bliss that puts her beyond temptation by form:

It will be the claim of the surface form—Circe’s song, Comus’ cup, the ‘precious gems’ (719) he celebrates—to teach you something (where true value resides) or take you somewhere (to ease, happiness, pleasure, power). The rightly oriented soul—the soul possessed by a sober certainty of waking bliss—will respond by

declaring that it already knows all it is necessary to know . . . and therefore that it need not go anywhere or seek anything . . . (31)

In the Perennial Philosophy, spiritual enlightenment results from being radically in tune with the Way, and bliss can quite literally follow from enlightenment. I am also implying that good theology has as much to do with people's experience of reality as it does with the abstract concepts that comprise it. Good theology cannot simply consist in a set of categorical abstractions divorced from the sensations and experiences of waking life. I assume that good theology has rather to do with explaining in abstractions the lived realities of daily life (which is not to say that abstract concepts and life do not mutually influence each other). Hence, the orientation from which I approach theology here takes religious experience as primary, and I read Milton's attempt to "justify the ways of God to men" as justifying the type of relationship Milton had with life and with God. As I try to show by discussing the Tao, Milton's relationship with God embodies a philosophy of life and a worldview—it is a relationship to the world of flesh and blood as well as to theology.

Regarding the Tao, there are also the words of Abdiel to Satan in book VI of *Paradise Lost*, in which Abdiel reminds Satan that "God and Nature bid the same:"

To whom in brief thus *Abdiel* stern repli'd.  
Apostate, still thou err'st, nor end wilt find  
Of erring, from the path of truth remote:  
Unjustly thou deprav'st it with the name  
Of *Servitude* to serve whom God ordains,  
Or Nature; God and Nature bid the same (171-176)

In *Logic of the Fall*, Richard Arnold explains that Abdiel is a “paragon of right reason,” and right reason has to do with the act of contemplation, which is not the same as “reasoning.” Arnold quotes the same passage from *Paradise Lost* above, and then goes on to say that the word contemplation “is relatively rare in Milton’s poetry (it is used one-tenth as many times as ‘reason’) and invariably denotes a positive religious activity of the mind: to contemplate is to view, observe, consider, or behold with continued attention. This is an action quite different from reasoning. Adam is formed for this and for valor. Adam is to behold and know about God’s order *as it is* . . . (46). Right reason, or contemplation, has to do with beholding God’s order “as it is,” for “God and Nature bid the same.” Thus, it seems that Milton’s theology did posit that there is a Way: there is a Christian Way to live, and there is a One Reality called God, and to live in harmony with God is to live in harmony with Nature. Diane Kelsey McColley hits at a similar point when she notes in the essay “Milton and Ecology” that “Vitalists opposed the mechanist belief that matter is distinct from spirit with the belief that nature is alive in all its parts. Poetically at least, Milton is of their party” (162).

In *Right Reason in the English Renaissance*, Robert Hoopes also connects in one passage the ideas of right reason, the Way of nature, and the need to live in accordance with that nature by making oneself into “a true poem.” Hoopes explains:

Everyone is familiar with Milton’s statement in *An Apology for Smectymnuus* that the true poet ‘ought himself to be a true poem’; elsewhere in the same treatise there is a similar utterance which, though less personal and less moving, provides a fuller example of the interaction of literary (or oratorical) doctrine and the concept of right reason: ‘For doubtless that indeed according to art is most

eloquent, which returns and approaches nearest to nature from whence it came; and they expresse nature best, who in their lives least wander from her safe leading, which may be call'd regenerate reason. So that how he should be truly eloquent who is not withall a good man, I see not.' What we shall be examining in the remainder of this book, then, is in reality a certain idea about the nature of man, a conviction, reduced to its bluntest terms, that in order for men to know the good they must themselves *become* good. (6)

We see that even the activity of writing is connected to living in harmony with the Way for Milton, like the Tao, and this is, finally, the meaning of Huxley's observation about *Lycidas* above: *Lycidas* was a product of the Tao. The Perennial Philosophy shows that Milton's Way was not incomparably different from other such Ways in numerous religious and contemplative traditions throughout the world.

Even though the conceptual and cultural worldviews of Taoism and Christianity are widely different, Perennialists like Huxley think that certain mystical *experiences* of the Tao and the Holy Spirit are similar enough to warrant comparison. This is the basic thesis of Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*. Experience is, thus, the primary focus of the Perennial Philosophy, and it takes precedence over concepts. The core concepts of the Perennial Philosophy are based on mystical experience, and the teachings and writings of mystics from major religious traditions throughout the world. These mystics taught largely from personal experience, and Huxley makes it clear that teachings from personal experience are paramount (viii). Likewise, recognizing the difference between intuitive experience and discursive rationality is essential in the Perennial Philosophy, just as there is an essential difference between the self-satisfied

discursive rationality of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, and the intuitive reason that Raphael describes to Adam in book five. Accordingly, I will focus much of this thesis on the experiential or immanentist dimensions of Milton's monotheism and on Milton's emphasis on internal worship over external worship. Stephen R. Honeygosky says that internal worship is "obviously" the "primary and more preeminent" of the two forms of worship for Milton (*Milton's House of God*, 2).<sup>3</sup> Experience is, thus, central to Milton's Way.

I assume there actually is a "Way," as in a spiritual path recognizable across cultures, and that many contemplative persons can find this Way. Such people are those who I have been calling "mystics," in a somewhat generic "way." Mystics do not all have the same experiences any more than any two people do. In addition, the interpretations mystics give to their mystical experiences differ more widely than the experiences themselves differ. The same might also be said for any culturally specific concept, like love, and, perhaps this goes for all concepts in some sense. That the experiences of love and the definitions of love between cultures should differ is not surprising. Yet, through trial and error, it is possible for persons of different cultures to learn what love means to persons of differing cultures. Linguistically speaking, we call this cross-

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<sup>3</sup> Honeygosky also explains that the terms "mystic" and "mystical" had Radical Protestant meanings for Milton, which had to do with spiritual "ingrafting" in the mystical Body of Christ. As he says, "The term *mystic* in Milton, then, refers to that relationship with Christ (and the other members of his Body)—a relationship that is spiritual, immediate, direct, personal, unifying, and permanent, though not always perceivable. This relationship, as expressed in Milton's doctrine, implies an ecstasy of sorts which stems from the awareness that one is ever drawn beyond the finite limits of one's own body and into this infinitely greater Body whose head, that is, operating and governing *mind*, is Christ" ("The Mystical in Milton," 55). In contrast, mysticism in the Perennial Philosophy has to do with gradated stages of spiritual awakening, which, in Milton's terms, would imply an intense and single-minded focus on fully uniting with the mystical body and mind of Christ.



cultural meeting of minds “translation,” and spiritually, we might call it communion. With regards to mystics, the name a mystic gives to any of various experiences of the Way will be culturally relative. However, the Perennial Philosophy asserts that it is possible to find the Way as such, that there is in fact a Way more or less common to all peoples everywhere.

If the Way has been explained throughout history according to culturally specific metaphysical and religious concepts, this is no more surprising than the fact that there are different languages and cultures throughout the world, which nonetheless are inhabited by people who have very similar experiences within and across those cultures. The Tao and the Holy Spirit are two such concepts. While it is possible to surmise that these concepts have something in common, a close comparison would reveal that they have very little in common. As but one example, Chad Hansen explains that because the Tao is a “pivotal concept in ancient Chinese thought,” Westerners have often equated the Tao with “being,” a central concept in Western philosophy (see section 9.1.1). However, the Tao is not *being* in the sense of “existence itself,” but rather a way that being manifests to us. Comparing Tao to the Holy Spirit is equally difficult, not least because Tao is normative and metaphysical rather than theistic. Hence, the orientation a Perennialist might take toward this problem is to point out that the experience of the Tao or of the Holy Spirit can be more similar than the attendant concepts are.

On a different but related theme, there is a saying in Zen Buddhism that a person should not mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. One should look beyond the finger, because the point is to see the moon. I argue that Milton saw himself as a finger pointing to the moon, where the moon is God the Father, not to be confused with the immanent and transcendent Holy Spirit, or with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As a finger pointing to the moon,

then, Milton is also pointing to the Way. Milton would not want his readers to regard his works as being much more than so many fingers pointing to God. All of Milton's works are so many ways of directing us to that spiritual reality that is, ultimately, the only reality. In Milton's world, art for art's sake is just idolatry, and while the material world of form must be taken seriously, it must not be taken so in spite of God, but precisely because form is the mode in which God has positioned our relationship to Him. The Way to God is through the multiplicity of the forms of the world.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define "form" as anything that can be conceived of or sensed by human beings and angels, anything that is defined or sensed relationally, that is bounded or limited, and that is not expressly given by God in divine revelation, or through mystical intuition. Thus, form on my definition includes even the matter of Milton's Chaos, which Milton did not include in the category of form (Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, 360, note 12). I contradict Milton here on purpose. My definition of form will skirt Milton's definition on the status of the "void and formless infinite" of Chaos (*PL* 3.12), because I want to emphasize that form cannot be conceptualized or defined. Likewise, whatever the material of Chaos is, it is beyond comprehension, presumably because it is not of the "knowledge within bounds" that Adam learns from Raphael to "abstain" from inquiring beyond (7.120).

Yet, Milton's God is beyond even the incomprehensible material of Chaos (let us say, God is beyond both comprehension and incomprehension). Thus, the particular emphasis I place on form is that form ought never to be conflated with God in Milton's theology. While in the context of *Paradise Lost* it would be unlikely that a reader would confound the material of Chaos with God, it would be easier to make that mistake in the context of this paper. The world of

form, then, is all that we can know, save for the mystical intuition of the Holy Spirit through the mind and body of Christ, divine revelation (should one be so lucky), and the Word of God as set down in the Bible. The world of form for Milton is ultimately so many reflections of God, like a hundred Zen bowls of water set out on a clear night, each reflecting the light of the moon. Again, Fish explains that it is a “temptation” to assume that forms have independent meaning and existence apart from God:

. . . to think that particulars [forms] have an existence in and of themselves. When Comus says to the Lady about her eyes and hair and lips, ‘There was another meaning in these gifts, / Think what’ (754-755), he advises her to look at the physical properties of a part of the world and allow them to tell her what she is (‘you are but young yet’[755]) and what she should do. He advises her, in short, to be an empiricist.” (33)

Neither is God to be associated exclusively with any form, idea, appearance, or image beyond that of God Himself. After all, reducing the God to a form was one of Satan’s basic mistakes in *Paradise Lost*, and this is what fed Satan’s fantastically hubristic notion that his own existence could be somehow independent of God. Of course, Milton meant to convey Satan’s mistake as a lesson to human beings. Forms are necessary for human beings—we couldn’t be human without them; yet, we should not mistake God for a form of any sort, and we should not mistake forms for existing independently of God either. In *How Milton Works*, Fish explains Milton’s attitude toward the illusory world of form as opposed to spirit, which is the only reality: “... the lesson [Milton] would teach us—that we must forsake the letter for the spirit—can be taught only in the discursive forms that letter provides. Those forms are at once the vehicles of

our instruction and the habitation of temptation—that is, of the temptation to take them seriously for themselves rather than as instruments of a supreme pedagogical intention, Milton’s intention and ... the intention of his God” (14-15). Thus, like the Zen bowls, the forms in the world are only so many reflections of God, and this applies even to Milton’s poetry.

The four invocations to the Muse that Milton makes in books I, III, VII, and IX in *Paradise Lost* serve to demonstrate that forms are ultimately illusory, even in the case of true poetry, and the invocations also show that the Holy Spirit is immanent in creation and in human beings. If the forms of the world are only so many fingers pointing to God, then even Milton’s poetry is not meant to take priority over inner worship. To do otherwise would be to risk idolizing the letter over the Spirit. Yet, I assume this why Milton was able to take such latitude with his poetry—why he could presume to write true poetry while not falling into an idolatry of his own talents. On the invocation to Urania in book seven, Scott Elledge explains that Milton’s Muse “defies personification or deification; she is, we must think, the holy spirit that inspired Moses and other religious poets and prophets in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nor may we doubt that Milton believed literally in her being or powers of performance” (162). Milton’s invocation of the Muse is likewise an invocation of the Holy Spirit. There is also the invocation in book I:

Sing Heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top  
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire  
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.  
And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer  
Before all temples th’ upright heart and pure,  
Instruct me, for thou know’st, thou from the first

Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread

Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss . . . (1.6-7, 17-21)

Because Milton took inner worship so seriously, he was not afraid to write, and to place himself as an intermediary between God and men so that he might “justify the ways of God to men.” His belief that even the best written poetry had by definition to err with respect to God, was enough to allow Milton the latitude to write in the first place. If the letter of true poetry, or even that of the Bible, is merely a heuristic device by which humans can come to inner identification with Divinity, then that is what makes the letter important. The letter in itself is nothing, and should not be thought of as anything more. For Milton, inner worship is what really matters: “Nowadays the external authority for our faith, in other words, the scriptures, is of very considerable importance . . . . The pre-eminent and supreme authority, however, is the authority of the Spirit, which is internal, and the individual possession of each man (*CD* 1300). Elsewhere Milton says: “Every believer is entitled to interpret the scriptures; and by that I mean interpret them for himself. He has the spirit, who guides truth, and he has the mind of Christ” (*CD* 1298). On the notion that words necessarily always err with respect to God, consider the words of Raphael to Adam as Raphael relates how God created the world:

So spake th' Almighty, and to what he spake

His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.

Immediate are the acts of God, more swift

Than time or motion, but to human ears

Cannot without process of speech be told,

So told as earthly notion can receive. (7.174-179)

We see here how arbitrary the letter is from God's point of view. What matters most is a direct inner relationship to Divinity. Fish makes this same point with reference to "the morning prayer Adam and Eve send up in book V." As he says, the words of the prayer are merely relative to "an inner orientation so total, so saturating, that it is the content of what is known . . . of what is said . . . and of what is done . . . In short, for such a unified being, *what you believe is what you are is what you know is what you say is what you do*" (41). Thus, identification with the Holy Spirit is what matters more than words, and even the form of prayer and of Scripture is relative to the "inner orientation." With regards to Scripture, Fish says that the "decentering of Scripture as a self-sufficient and publicly available source of authority in favor of the internal authority of rightly constituted hearts is perhaps the best, because most extreme, confirmation of my thesis that Milton works from the inside out" (71).

Just as Raphael explained to Adam that God's acts cannot "without process of speech be told," Scott Elledge explains:

It had been a commonplace among religious teachers that the truth had often to be accommodated to the understanding of men—even as Christ had told the truth by telling parables. . . . Raphael's rationale for his narrative method in the 'epic poem' he sings to Adam is essentially Milton's (see V.563). If we can know supernatural things by assuming that natural things are imperfect representations of them, we can know characters and events in history by assuming that they were much like those of the present. . . . the imagined detail of the poem may convey general truths of a higher order. Milton hoped that his prayers to the divine Muse

were answered—that what he was inspired to write was as true as the story that Moses . . . was inspired by God to write . . . (473)

In support of this immanentist interpretation of the Spirit of God brooding upon the waters, which were first created by God, consider one of Milton’s remarks in *Christian Doctrine*:

AND SPIRIT. Gen. 1.2: *the Spirit of God brooded*, that is to say, God’s divine power, not any particular person, as I showed in Chapter 6, Of the Holy Spirit. For if it was a person, why is the Spirit named and nothing said about the Son, by whose labor, as we so often read, the world was made? (Unless, of course, the Spirit referred to was Christ, who as I have shown, is sometimes called *the Spirit* in the Old Testament.) Anyway, even if we grant that it was a person, it seems only to have been a subordinate, since, after God had created heaven and earth, the Spirit merely brooded upon the face of the waters which had already been created. (1198)

We can see that God is ultimately responsible for all of creation—“all things came from God” (1201). The nature of the Holy Spirit, however, is less clear. In his refutation of the notion that God and the Holy Spirit have the same essence, Milton says:

The Spirit, then, is not said to be generated or created, and it cannot be decided, from biblical evidence, how else it exists. So we must leave the point open, since the sacred writers are so noncommittal about it. . . . in the Old testament, it sometimes means God the Father . . . . Sometimes it means the power and virtue of the Father, especially that divine breath which creates and nourishes

everything. . . . Sometimes “spirit” means an angel . . . . Sometimes it means Christ . . . . Sometimes it means the force or voice of God. (1194)

Despite the above, Milton finds that the Holy Spirit “is obviously inferior to both the Father and the Son, inasmuch as he is represented as being and is said to be subservient and obedient in all things; to have been promised, sent and given; to speak nothing of his own accord; and even to have been given as a pledge” (1195). Elsewhere, Milton says that the Spirit is “internal, and the individual possession of each man” (1300). While the nature of the Holy Spirit as it relates to the Son cannot be known by biblical interpretation (1196), it would seem that the Holy Spirit is immanent in all creation.

Certainly, however, the Holy Spirit must also be transcendent to the world of form for human beings, if not for angels. Following Milton, I will “leave the point open” and not claim anything about the ontological status of the Holy Spirit for angels. But for human beings, it seems that although the Holy Spirit is a “creature,” it must be transcendent as well as immanent. This is because, while the Holy Spirit can seemingly be found everywhere (as God’s “voice,” His “force,” as an “angel,” as “Christ”), the Spirit cannot be seen by ordinary mortals, and it is thus also transcendent. Accordingly, the topics of immanentism and transcendentism will occupy one of the sections of this thesis below. Furthermore, in the formlessness of the Holy Spirit, and in the view that God and the Holy Spirit are both immanent and transcendent to the world of form, we have clear connections between Milton and the Perennial Philosophy.

In summary of the notions that God and the Holy Spirit are both immanent and transcendent, and that the Holy Spirit is like an emissary, or a creature (he gets “sent with”



Christ), consider the following passage where God explains to the Son how the Son will create the world:

And thou my Word, begotten Son, by thee  
This I perform, speak thou, and be it done:  
My overshadowing Spirit and might with thee  
I send along, ride forth, and bid the deep  
Within appointed bounds be heav'n and earth;  
Boundless the deep, because I am who fill  
Infinite, nor vacuous the space.  
Though I uncircumscribed myself retire,  
And put not forth my goodness, which is free  
To act or not, necessity and chance  
Approach not me, and what I will is fate. (7.163-173)

William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon explain in their editorial commentary on this passage that “the *deep* (uncreated Chaos) will not be any less *boundless* because of Creation. It is infinite because filled by an infinite God, who can nonetheless, and also with no loss of infinity, *retire* from it” (481, note 168).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NON-DUALISM AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

It is quite clear that the Father alone is a self-existent God: clear, too, that a being who is not self-existent cannot be a God. (*Christian Doctrine* 1178)

Let us return briefly to the metaphor of the finger pointing to the moon, which applies equally well to Milton and to Fish's *How Milton Works*. My thesis and Fish's book both represent attempts to read Milton as someone who made God the cornerstone of everything he wrote, and both assume that such allegiance to God provided the structuring principle for Milton's "consciousness" (Fish 7). I think the Perennial Philosophy can lend much support to Fish's thesis, and it shows that Milton's pattern of thinking can be matched with other like-minded individuals throughout the world's history. However, this is not the same as saying that the Perennial Philosophy connects Milton with other "religiously-minded" individuals. The word "religion" tends to give a misleading impression of what Perennialists are about. This is because the core of the Perennial Philosophy is more experiential than theological or religious. The Perennial Philosophy is based on mystical experiences that are not reducible to any particular religious practice or symbology. The "perennial" in the Perennial Philosophy pertains to commonalities in mystical experiences and writings that are arguably transcultural and transhistorical. Because the Perennial Philosophy is based on mystical experiences that go "deeper" than the cultural particularities of given religions, Perennialists will inevitably transgress the more dogmatic aspects of their religions. Mysticism is radically non-foundational in this sense.

If we take the term "religion" to mean any dogmatic forms of worship, there is a sense in which Milton was actually beyond religion, because he pledged his allegiance to a Truth that is not identifiable with any form anywhere (i.e. God). What matters more than anything for Milton is inner worship, and this gives a literal meaning to John Rumrich's phrase that Milton was "heretical to the core" (156). The perspective in this paper, as well as that of Fish's *How Milton*

*Works*, is to take Milton's *relationship* to God as the primary orientation from which to better understand Milton. In terms of the Perennial Philosophy, then it is not enough to say that Milton held radical views, because that is only to understand Milton in reference to discursive reason. Milton must also be understood non-dualistically and "monistically," as Fish argues throughout his book. This means that everything Milton said about politics was proximately situated with respect to, and ultimately tied back to Milton's faith in the one God.

There can hardly be a dogmatic, institutional container for a faith that is non-dual, and Zen is a good example of how dualistic means are necessary for achieving a non-dual end, not unlike Milton justifying the ways of God to men with the dualistic "letter." Zen is more of a philosophy than a religion (Kim 546), and Zen does not contradict itself by using dualistic means for a non-dualistic end. To think this is to fail to look beyond the finger (Zen) to the moon itself, which is non-dual awareness, enlightenment. Such is the brilliance of Zen. It cannot be a criticism of a spiritual discipline to say that it uses dualistic means to achieve a non-dualistic end, because things could not be otherwise: we are imprisoned in a dualistic state of awareness, and the point of Zen is to get ourselves out of it. Fish explains the same situation in terms of Milton: many of Milton's critics have read Milton as contradicting himself because he expects his readers to take life very seriously, and yet he appears to devalue the material world in favor of an imagined spiritual one. Fish explains as follows: "why, one might ask, is the poetry so full of what it finally asks us to affirm against? The answer is that the lesson he would teach us—that

we must forsake the letter for the spirit—can be taught only in the discursive forms the letter provides” (14).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, a believer has no choice but to be heretical from a dualistic or ordinary human point of view *if* she or he is to maintain the strictest allegiance to a God that is non-dual (i.e. beyond concepts and language). If our human mental faculties cannot comprehend God, then we cannot realistically expect ritualistic religious forms to comprehend God either. So, we can now understand the seeming paradox of why a good believer will be compelled to transgress the limits of religious forms precisely for the sake of belief. Contrary to the currently prevailing view of religious faith as being “irrational,” non-dualism is the epitome of a faith and worldview lived strictly according to the dictates of reason, and there does not appear to be a better classification for Milton’s faith than this.

There are two senses of non-dualism as I discuss it in this paper. One sense is rhetorical and imaginary, and it points to what is beyond the limits of language. This is the sense of non-dualism that applies to Milton. Following Stanley Fish, I argue that Milton’s worldview is a non-dual worldview. However, because worldviews are imaginary constructions, Milton’s worldview is only “non-dual” in the sense that he believes that the sustaining force of the one almighty God structures the whole of creation. The other sense of non-dualism is much more profound, because

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<sup>4</sup> In fairness to Zen, it must also be pointed out that Zen prefers a “third position” between dualism and non-dualism, which represents a “positionless position.” As Shigenori Nagatomo explains, “Zen maintains a stance of ‘not one’ and ‘not two,’ i.e., ‘positionless position,’ . . . Free, bilateral movement between ‘not one’ and ‘not two’ characterizes Zen’s achievement of a personhood with a *third* perspective that cannot, however, be confined to either dualism or non-dualism (i.e., neither ‘not one’ nor ‘not two’) (see Nagatomo below).

it pertains to an abiding state of mystical awareness. It is possible for mystics to achieve a state of awareness that is non-dual, which is quite different from Milton's imaginary non-dualism.<sup>5</sup> If non-dualism seems like a strange category to apply to Milton, it is worth pointing out that the concept of non-dualism is analogous to that of the sublime, and it has been argued that Milton was the first poet of the sublime. Abraham Stoll discusses this in his book *Milton and Monotheism*, the final chapter of which is a "speculative" meditation on Milton and the sublime.

Stoll reads Milton as a precursor to later intellectual fascinations with the sublime, because he reads Milton as strategically employing a rhetoric of "ambivalence" toward God, Sin, and Death. As he says, "[Victoria] Kahn and Steven Knapp both suggest that in *Sin and Death* Milton develops the rhetorical ambivalence that in the eighteenth century will become sublimity" (319). Stoll concludes *Milton and Monotheism* with a meditation on the sublime because sublimity results when monotheistic narratives fail to convey the abstract God of monotheism. In other words, God is beyond representation. God can only be explained by a "negative theology" that constantly points out what the God is not. Since God cannot be explained in words, monotheistic narratives like that of *Paradise Lost* must resort to negative theology, thus rendering God sublime:

. . . this negative theology quickly becomes a linguistic matter, as monotheism  
'emphasizes on both religious and philosophical grounds how none of the

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<sup>5</sup> There are varying degrees of non-dual awareness, and not all "realized" mystics can be said to have achieved the same level of awareness. Enlightenment or awakening is usually a gradual process, with many stages along the way. The term "non-dualism" categorizes what in actuality are a diverse range of experiences across a diverse range of mystics. Non-dualism is an umbrella term that applies to a wide range of experiences, just as the term "Christian" applies to a range of religions.

adjectives, adverbs, and verbs monotheistic theological texts ascribe to God can be construed literally.’ The abstract godhead of monotheism, then, represents an ideal that cannot be realized in language. As Raphael explains, ‘Immediate are the acts of God, more swift / Than time or motion, but to human ears / Cannot without process of speech be told’ (7.176-78).” (13)

Here again the Zen moon metaphor is apposite, because the moon represents that which is beyond language, it is non-dual, and such non-dualism, such ineffability is in the province of the Perennial Philosophy. Not only does language fail to convey God, but the mysticism of the Perennial Philosophy teaches us that such a failure of language is not linguistically unique to Europe or to monotheism. Rather, the non-dualism of the Perennial Philosophy is itself beyond representation. Non-dual reality appears sublime from a dualistic point of view, and the Perennial Philosophy shows that non-dualism can be a direct mystical experience. Thus, to argue that Milton’s God is non-dual is to make a claim about the rhetoric Milton employed, and a claim about Milton’s conception of God. Alternatively, the conception of non-dualism in the Perennial Philosophy is based on mystical experience, which posits that reality itself is non-dual. In Milton’s terms, then, if God is the non-dual Ground of Being, the Perennial Philosophy says that it is possible to be mystically united with that Ground. Hence, I argue that the Perennialist claim that reality is non-dual is not far off from Milton’s

If the sublime points to the ineffable by its relation to the limits of language, the Perennial Philosophy points to the ineffable by citing actual mystical experiences of reality. In the Perennial Philosophy, a perception of the Absolute is the same as a perception of God so long as they are both non-dual. We have here the paradox of how to convey non-dual awareness in a

dualistic language: don't look at the finger, look at the moon. Language is merely made up of signs, and this can in no way replace an inward, direct intuition of God. The finger is a sign, a form, but God cannot be expressed by any form whatsoever. The words one uses to describe non-dual experiences become irrelevant, because the experiences themselves are beyond words. Thus, we have gone from the negative theology of monotheism to the Ground of Being—the general term for ultimate reality in the Perennial Philosophy. Metaphysically speaking, neither of these terms can convey the perception of the Ground itself, the ineffable, the direct intuition of which comprises the “core” of the Perennial Philosophy. In a different but related way, we will return to the topics of Milton and the limits of language with a discussion of the metaphysical concepts of immanentism and transcendentism below.

Regarding the “ineffable” and the direct experience of it, Jerome Gellman says that “William James . . . deemed ‘ineffability’ or indescribability an essential mark of the mystical. It is not always clear, however, whether it is the experience or its alleged object, or both, that are to be ineffable. A logical problem with ineffability was noted long ago by Augustine, ‘God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. . . .’” (“Mysticism,” section 3.1). The problem of not being able to say anything about God, in turn, gives rise to the “endless displacement” cited by Abraham Stoll, which characterizes negative theology:

Monotheism's inherent skepticism toward revealed detail is directed not only at other gods, but also at God. . . . Indeed, as Aryeh Botwinick explains, monotheism pushes God beyond what is knowable: ‘The utterance of the word ‘God’ initiates a process of endless displacement that finds no resting place. All we can ever do by way of assigning a content and pinpointing a reference for

‘God’ is to continually assert that God is not literally to be construed in this way or that . . .” (85).<sup>6</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A SHORT DISCURSION ON POLITICS

Perennialists are radical thinkers, and their views cannot ultimately be contained within religious or political frameworks. David Robb points out that Huxley “expressly cautions against combining religious devotion with exterior political ends” (171). Yet, Perennialism is bound to be radical from a political point of view, because it subverts most of the dualistic beliefs and aspirations that make up politics and the body politic. Likewise, it is not surprising that Milton should exhibit signs of both radical liberalism and deep conservatism, that from some angles Milton should seem like a stodgy old Puritan—a conformist, dogmatist, and world denier, and also a revolutionary in both politics and religion. Such a position is typical of Perennialists. Non-dualism is both highly complex, and yet the simplest worldview imaginable—so simple that it confounds discursive reason, and with it, a linear understanding of time and history. As opposed to the linear liberal view, Fish discusses a “circular” view of time and history (567), where political “fruits grow not in the soil of human history, but, as the Attendant Spirit says in *Comus*, ‘in another country,’ an *interior* country. . .” (568). “Human history” here is Satanic

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<sup>6</sup> Again, the Zen theme of the present essay is apposite. Gellman points out that an answer to the “endless displacement” of the term “God” can be found in Buddhism: “Several responses to this problem are possible for the mystic. One is to avoid speech altogether and remain silent about what is revealed in experience. . . . A fourth possibility lies in the ongoing negation of whatever is said . . . An example . . . can be found in the endless negations in some Madyamika and Zen Buddhist meditative consciousness” (sic.) (“Mysticism,” section 3.1).



history, liberal history, where the fruits are expected to come not from Gods will, not from living in harmony with the Tao, but from instrumental reason. As Fish says, “that is why history is not determinative in Milton’s universe. What is important on any occasion is not how things have turned out (as a historian might assess it) but whether or not one’s inner loyalties have been maintained and strengthened . . . The perspective of history, of events as they unfold in linear time, is not a master code but still another temptation . . .” (569). Or, consider another remark by Fish on the world of form for Milton, which encompasses the liberal understanding of linear time and history:

Now if the plurality of forms—the face of difference—is only a surface phenomenon produced by eyes that fail to see the essential unity of all things, then the variety of events, that difference which emerges in and as time, is no less illusory; for given the radical homogeneity of a God-centered universe, the urgency of any one moment must be like—no, must be exactly the same as—the urgency of any other.<sup>7</sup> (*How Milton Works* 567)

For contemporary readers of Milton to understand how Milton “actually” thought, we are required to inhabit a different conception of time and history. We are required to inhabit a Perennialist’s worldview in which the only real goal is to conform oneself to the Way Things

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<sup>7</sup> On the notion of the ever-present “now,” consider Huxley: “The universe is an everlasting succession of events; but its ground, according to the Perennial Philosophy, is the timeless now of the divine Spirit. . . . Knowledge of what is happening now does not determine the event. What is ordinarily called God’s foreknowledge is in reality a timeless now-knowledge, which is compatible with the freedom of the human creature’s will in time” (184-185). Compare Fish: “action takes a historical form in a material landscape, but the pressure to which the actor responds (or fails to respond) issues from an obligation that is outside or above history even when its expression is *in* history. That is why Kolbrener is on the mark . . .” (Fish 570; see also the second quotation of Fish).

Are, as Huxley says, the Tao, or in Milton's terms, to the will of God. Conformity with the will of God translates into Milton's politics, as well. Consider Fish on William Kolbrener:

Kolbrener is on the mark when he says [in *Milton's Warring Angels*] that although Milton is continually elaborating a political program (especially in his prose tracts), he at the same time manifests 'a profound distrust of politics'—that is, a distrust of politics offered either as an alternative to the desire to obey God's will or as the necessary vehicle of the realization of that will. . . . Milton is not indifferent to politics, but he is, finally, indifferent to 'mere politics (39), to politics that seeks its end (in both senses) in itself, a politics that regards itself or is regarded as 'self-begot, self-raised.' (570-571)

The Christ of the Gospels can also be read, like Milton, as a cultural and spiritual revolutionary who held to a radically simple worldview. Milton's non-dualism was revolutionary and subversive in nearly same way that Christ's was, the obvious difference being that Christ lead by example whereas Milton wrote. It is not enough to survey the words of Christ, or the words of Milton and conclude that the words actually convey the subject position of the speaker with finality. To do this is to take the rhetoric as primary, thereby marginalizing the agency of the speaker. And, in this case, the agency of the speaker is consciously and precisely aligned with a God that is non-dual, and beyond representation. Despite the fact that Milton was not enlightened, it is the argument of this paper that Milton's subjectivity was proximally situated with respect to the Absolute. There was thus no politic or religion that could win his allegiance, because his allegiance was to Truth alone. Fish remarks that, in Milton's world:

There is quite literally nowhere to go and only one thing to do, and the essential truth about things will not be altered by either your success or your failure in doing it. It is this that puzzles the Satan of *Paradise Regained* when he asks Jesus, ‘What dost thou in this World?’ and receives no answer, although the answer has been given before, in isolation from any particular person or circumstance: ‘Mee hung’ring more to do my Father’s will’ (II, 259). That is, ‘I am always doing, or trying to do and trying to be, the same thing.’ (567-568)

In the same vein and with reference to the Bible, Terry Eagleton remarked that Jesus “appears to do no work, and is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.” Furthermore:

He is presented as homeless, propertyless, celibate, peripatetic, socially marginal, disdainful of kinsfolk, without a trade, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, averse to material possessions, without fear for his own safety, careless about purity regulations, critical of traditional authority, a thorn in the side of the Establishment, and a scourge of the rich and powerful. Though he was no revolutionary in the modern sense of the term, he has something of the lifestyle of one. (*Reason* 10)

We generally think of Christ as being a force for conservatism in history, but this is to conflate Christ himself with the history of Western religion. If Christ was revolutionary, the major institutionalized forms of religion in the West have been the opposite.<sup>8</sup> Yet, there is no worldly

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<sup>8</sup> I agree with Terry Eagleton that Christ was a kind of proto-Socialist, if only in hindsight (see *Reason* 9-11). In the context of the Perennial Philosophy, it is clear that Christ was too non-dual not to be both progressive and conservative, and politically revolutionary all at once. Non-dualism is always revolutionary, for the simple reason that it subverts all narratives whether

goal or rhetoric that can contain the subjectivities of actual human beings. The only point to life there is is to exist simply for the sake of existence itself. In monotheistic terms, the point of life is to exist for the sake of loving God. The love of God, however, must go beyond concepts, just as God is beyond them. For Eagleton, God is “gloriously pointless.” This does not mean Eagleton disbelieves in God (he doesn’t tell us), but that God has no *conceivable* motive for being other than “for the pleasure of it” (10). Likewise, then, for us. As Eagleton explains, “the world thus belongs to that exceedingly rare class of objects which . . . exist entirely for their own sake and for no drearily utilitarian end—a category which along with God includes art, evil, and humanity” (9). This is another way to say that God is non-dual (i.e. precisely “pointless”<sup>9</sup>), and that God has thus left us free to be ourselves, but also “free to fall.” Likewise, if God is non-dual, God is also beyond representation. Abraham Stoll remarks that:

Beginning with the second commandment, monotheism asserts itself by opposing all other gods and all forms of idolatry, and so the monotheistic drive toward true religion is a drive toward the absence of representation. Monotheism has a

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religious or political. Eagleton argues that socialism is the best political match for a view of existence as being pointless.

<sup>9</sup> With regard to pointlessness and this essay’s Zen theme, the world of form is like one-hundred bowls of water each reflecting the light of the moon. The moon is enlightened mind, or God (it doesn’t matter what we call it). The world is just as pointless as enlightenment is, but with the caveat that enlightenment makes life easier because one no longer has any ego to carry around. It must also be pointed out that Zen goes beyond concepts entirely, and the abstract God of the Perennial Philosophy is another concept. From the point of view of the monotheistic variants of the Perennial Philosophy, one explanation for Zen is simply to assume that Zen masters are particularly expert at perceiving God without concepts. Zen masters, of course, would disagree. Zen represents the skeptical extreme of the Perennial Philosophy just as negative theology represents the skeptical extreme of monotheism, where there is nothing at all that can be said or thought about God. On negative theology, see Aryeh Botwinick’s *Skepticism, Belief, and the Modern*.

structural tendency toward silence and erasure—an endpoint that is sometimes called aniconism for the total absence of representability in the divine economy.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### THE SELF, DISCURSIVE REASON, AND RIGHT REASON

In the Perennial Philosophy, the “moon” in the moon metaphor above is called by various names at different points in history and in different cultures, names such as the Tao, emptiness, the Godhead, the Absolute, nothingness in Zen, or Ātman (Huxley, *PP*, 7, 9, 21-22). Huxley’s argument is that all of these names essentially point to the same thing: enlightened awareness, the non-dual Zen moon of the metaphor. Non-dual awareness is a rare and profound version of spiritual enlightenment in which normal identification with the egoic self is transcended in an identification with the Ground of Being as such. In Milton’s terms, such an identification would be tantamount to recognizing one’s divine nature, the Spirit within, which overlaps with with the mind of Christ (see, for instance, Honeygosky, *Milton’s House of God*, 55).

When a person has transcended the small self and has identified with the Self in God, this person will not perceive any individual self left over that is not God. Such is non-dual awareness, which has so often been misunderstood as a heretical (and egotistical) conflation of the self with God. Huxley lists numerous quotations that seem to show how the speaker was identified utterly with God, and it would be easy to write off such pronouncements as delusions of grandeur. Consider but a few examples from pages 10-13 of *The Perennial Philosophy*:

To gauge the soul we must gauge it with God, for the Ground of God and the Ground of the Soul are one and the same.

—Eckhart

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.

—Eckhart

The spirit possesses God essentially in naked nature, and God the Spirit.

—Ruysbroeck

My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except my God Himself.

—St. Catherine of Genoa

The pronouncements above stem from a non-dual point of view, where there is ultimately nothing but God. Hence, the accusation that identifying the Self with God is egotistical misses the mark. If there is no self that exists independently of God to begin with, then to identify the Self with God is simply to admit the obvious. Admitting the obvious is what the speakers in these quotations are doing. But humility is also fundamental to the Perennial Philosophy (viii; 11), just as it was fundamental to Milton's attitude. Consider, for instance, Milton's seemingly egotistical aspiration to "justify the ways of God to men" (PL, I, 26). Setting himself up as an intermediary between God and men saddles Milton with a heavy burden of responsibility. Take *Sonnet 19*, for example. Although Milton is in the "dark" due to blindness, and his poetic talent is "Lodged with me useless," this only makes his "soul more bent / To serve therewith my Maker . . ." (2-5).

With respect to the judgment that Milton is a hypocrite or an egotist, Fish points out that Milton knew there was no way to be absolutely certain whether he was egotistically deluding himself in any given situation or not (5-6). If divine revelation is extremely subtle and the Scriptures cannot be relied upon to decide what our actions should be in every situation, then it is up to individuals to try to recognize when they make the mistake of siding with their egos over God. Such a situation requires the utmost responsibility from believers, and humility (if not fear) is a natural correlate to responsibility. It's also a good thing that non-dualism makes life quite simple. As Fish explains:

There are only two acts one can perform in a world created and presided over by a God who is at once everywhere and nowhere: either an act that affirms his preeminence and claims nothing more (or less) than to be tracing out the meanings he has already inscribed on the face of things, or an act that affirms the self and claims the ability to generate one's own meanings and, through them, one's own world. (87-88)

Raphael's degree/kind distinction in Book V of *Paradise Lost* seems to imply that there is a small egoic self, and also a Self that shares its being with God:

Fancy and understanding, whence the soul  
Reason receives, and reason is her being,  
Discursive, or intuitive; discourse  
Is ofttest yours, the latter most is ours,  
Differing but in degree, of kind the same.  
Wonder not then, what God for you saw good

If I refuse not, but convert, as you,  
To proper substance; time may come when men  
With angels may participate . . . (5.486-494)

If men and angels differ “but in degree,” there must be a spark of divinity within the human soul, and this is what I am calling the Self, following Huxley. It seems that reason here intermixes with the soul, just as the meaning carries over from line 486 to the end of 487: reason is the “being” of the soul, and yet reason “receives” the soul. It must also be noted that the Self is not an essentialist concept, because the Self is the spark of divinity within the soul. Thus, the Self is ineffable, and not essential. Alternatively, the egoic small self is the self of Satan, as well as that of of human beings. Like human beings, Satan is possessed of discursive reason (or rather possessed *by* it). He prefers to use discursive reason over intuitive right reason, because it is only within the realm of discursivity that Satan can imagine himself not subservient to God. For intuition would tell Satan, like the good angels, that God is the ground of his very being, and that he cannot be self-possessed. As Raphael explains shortly before the passage quoted above, “freely we serve, / Because we freely love . . .” (5.538-39). Satan clearly wants no part in such service, preferring rather pride to humility, for it is “Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav’n” (1.263).

Yet, because the small self is also the discursive self, Satan can be seen to prefer a dualistic rationality to a non-dual one, and a small, prideful self to a divine Self. Satan also makes the mistake of taking forms too seriously, to the point that he even conceives of God as a form. As Fish points out, not only is this mistake typical of Satan, of idolaters, and of fallen human beings, but it is also typical of many of Milton’s critics, who read Milton dualistically and



who thereby claim to perceive a fundamental bifurcation in Milton's thinking. Fish argues that no such bifurcation exists in Milton's work. Rather, the signs and symptoms of dualism, such as "conflict, ambivalence, and open-endedness . . . are not constitutive features of the poetry but products of a systematic misreading of it, a misreading performed *in* the poetry by Comus and Satan . . . it is only if the first principle of Milton's thought—that God is God and not one of a number of contending forces—is denied or forgotten that his poetry can be seen as conflicted or tragic or inconclusive or polysemous or paradoxical . . ." (14). Thus, the way to read Milton is non-dualistically.

Regarding Satan's mistaking of the Godhead for a form entity, consider the passage early in *Paradise Lost* where Satan tries to convince the fallen host that they can reign "free" in Hell:

What shall be right: farthest from him is best  
Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme  
. . . . .  
Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell  
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free: th' Almighty hath not built (1.247-248, 251-259)

It is clear that Satan thinks God is a form, because it is possible to be “farthest from him” in Hell (line 247), because God has a superior “force” but not superior “reason” (248), and because God has not “built” any of his empire in Hell (259). Satan assumes that God has both spatial and material dimensions (“force” and “thunder” implying material or essential dimensions). But Satan also thinks that his discursive “reason hath equaled” that of God, and, most strikingly of all, he assumes the “mind is its own place.” Despite the fact that Satan is here speechifying to his legions, there are many such passages in *Paradise Lost*, and it becomes clear that taking discursive reason too seriously is also linked to taking forms too seriously. This, in turn, produces the delusion that God is a form himself.

Another relevant passage is in Book II, where Satan again tries to convince his peers that they are “to none accountable” in Hell, “preferring / Hard liberty before the easy yoke / Of Servile pomp . . .” (255-257). Satan thinks Hell is somehow out of the reach of God, and that there can be such a thing as “hard liberty” there, as if God’s reach were as limited as Satan’s own. Satan thinks sheer geographic distance is enough to put a barrier between Hell and God, as if God were not the very condition of possibility for distance. Amazingly, Satan voices these opinions and then goes on to describe God in non-dual terms. As he says, the fallen host can learn to:

Thrive under evil, and work ease out of pain  
Through labor and endurance. This deep world  
Of darkness do we dread? How oft amidst  
Thick clouds and dark doth Heav’n’s all-ruling Sire  
Choose to reside, his glory unobscured . . . (2.261-265)

Here God is described as residing in “thick clouds” and “darkness,” and Raphael describes God in Book VI this way, as well: “Within the Mount of God, fast by his throne, / Where light and darkness in perpetual round / Lodge and dislodge by turns . . .” (5-7). God does not appear to have a preference either for the light/dark or painful/pleasant forms that surround Him.

However, it is clear that the fallen host is in “pain.” While Satan recognizes God’s “throne; from whence deep thunders roar / Must’ring their rage, and Heav’n resembles Hell,” he does not realize that God is beyond pain because pain is associated with creatureliness and form. Only forms are bound by the geographic limitations of space itself, of distance, which is yet another form that is constituted within the imaginary spatio-temporal limitations of human and angelic perception. Forms, in other words, exist according to the linear conceptions of time, history, and causation that the Perennial Philosophy discounts.

On this view, Satan looks very much like a liberal Enlightenment thinker, convinced by notions of progress, independence, freedom, and the sufficiency of the mind as a place unto itself. In Milton’s universe, however, time is an illusion, freedom is relative, and history is devastatingly uncertain. But, as Richard Arnold points out, citing Milton’s *Art of Logic*, there is no “middle ground” between the Satanic and the Perennial or right reasoning worldviews:

when Satan delivers Eve to the Tree, her crystalline assertions are resplendent with the power of right reason—she intuitively calls into question the veracity of the serpent’s claim . . . This is right reason at its nearly Abdiel-like finest: Eve knows that (as Milton writes) ‘Between affirmation and negation there is no middle ground’ (139); she skillfully deploys a Miltonic *etymological conjugate* . . . and she concludes by establishing the *ontological closure* of their ordained

situation—‘Law to ourselves’—and with the claim that their right reason (as she is displaying) is her law. (62)

Stanley Fish has noted the same epistemological divide between his worldview and the liberal worldview, a divide that marks the uniqueness of his reading of Milton. In fact, Fish wrote a chapter of his book on this point called, after Milton, “On Other Surety None.” As Fish says:

It is not my intention to make Milton into a caricature of an idealist, someone who believes that ‘thinking makes it so’ and that unhappy situations can be removed simply by declaring them otherwise. The fact that the visible world provides no firm (uninterpreted) basis for determining the shape of things (including the shape of God) does not leave us in a state of freedom as much as it leaves us in a state of almost unbearable responsibility. True, we are not constrained by independent evidence to a specific construction of the world, but this absence of (external) constraint is not the lifting but the imposing of a burden, the burden of hazarding (on the basis of insufficient information, without the support of the evidence of things seen) a construction which, once hazarded, will for the environment in which we thereafter live. . . . Our conceiving, even though they are grounded in nothing—in no brute empirical datum—produce grounds that one cannot simply wish away, if only because it is against their now-in-place background that wishes (or any other mental actions) could themselves be conceived. (524)

Here Fish is explaining the reason why I said early on that this thesis has to do with the readers of Milton as much as it has to do with Milton himself. One cannot conceive of a different worldview without putting oneself into that view; thus, as modern liberals, in order to read

Milton rightly, we must change some deep aspects of who we are. We must also fathom the limits of discursive rationality from within that rationality. To my mind, one of Milton's greatest accomplishments must be that he outlined in poetry the divide between two distinct worldviews, thus delineating the limitations of dualistic reason in one worldview from a non-dual perspective in the other worldview.

Regarding the Perennial Philosophy, Huxley refers to Milton's Satan along the lines above: "Being rational and free, human beings are capable of being diabolic. . . . [one must be] sufficiently moral to be a devil. . . . to be diabolic on the grand scale, one must, like Milton's Satan, exhibit in a high degree all the moral virtues, except only charity and wisdom" (*PP*, 229). While we are "free," in other words, we are merely "free to fall" if we do not act in accordance with right reason. Like Milton, Huxley also discusses the folly of discursive rationality, which takes itself too seriously:

In the last analysis the use and purpose of reason is to create the internal and external conditions favourable to its own transfiguration by and into spirit. It is the lamp by which it finds the way to go beyond itself. We see, then, that as a means to a proximate means to an End, discursive reasoning is of enormous value. But if, in our pride and madness, we treat it as a proximate means to the divine End (as so many religious people have done and still do) . . . cleverness becomes the enemy, a source of spiritual blindness ... (141-142)

The distinction between discursive and intuitive reason runs throughout the Perennial Philosophy, and Huxley makes it clear, as does Milton, that discursive reason is only a tool to be used for a "further advance towards spirituality and a return, through unitive knowledge, to the

divine Ground” (229). Here, Huxley discusses union with the Ground in terms of “unitive knowledge,” sounding much like Raphael blending reason and soul in his discourse to Adam above.

If right reason were equivalent to just one of Huxley’s four core doctrines, it would be the doctrine of knowledge, because knowledge is a function of being, and right reason unites the knower with what is known (vii, 35, 145). As Robert Hoopes explains, right reason is “a mode of knowing, a way of doing, and a condition of being” (Hoopes 1). Yet, for Milton, the mode of knowing that is right reason is made possible by the mind of Christ, which is the possession of every individual believer (Arnold 95, 102). Thus, to use right reason is to identify oneself with the mind and mystical body of Christ, which is to say, to identify oneself with that “Self” in Christ by making oneself more godlike. Thus, the concept of right reason presupposes Huxley’s doctrine of “knowledge,” and it also implies that there is a divine Self to identify with in the first place, and a Divine Ground within which the Self has its being, Self and Ground being two more of Huxley’s core doctrines. Hoopes goes on to explain right reason:

The uses and connotations of the word ‘intuition’ have both accumulated and changed since Milton’s time. It would be rash and mistaken to seize on the appearance of the world in his work and call him a mystic. . . . we must conclude that for Milton ‘intuitive reason’ and ‘right reason’ are interchangeable. Both denote the ‘right rule,’ a rule that is at once a measure and a governor whereby men may distinguish and choose between good and evil. . . . In his *Art of Logic* [Milton] observes that logic teaches the art of reasoning, but that it can never teach men the nature of Reason. That brief observation may almost be said to

carry with it, by implication at least, Milton's entire thought on the subject of right reason. Neither the art of reasoning nor knowledge as such will serve as proper ends for man. (199)

It must also be noted how much Hoopes' words here echo those of Huxley above. For, as Huxley says, "the habit of analytical thought is fatal to the intuitions of integral thinking" (19).

Finally, as a last word on right reason, Richard Arnold argues in *Logic of the Fall* that the Fall in *Paradise Lost* was due to the use of "pure reason," or discursive reason, as opposed to right reason, and that this wrong use of reason applies to Satan as well as to Adam and Eve. Eve fell because she was confused by her own discursive reason, and by Satan's "masterful" labyrinth of Aristotelian pseudo-logic" (57). Satan in particular represents the folly of discursive rationality—an ego, in other words—that wants to know how it itself came to be, an ego that wants to be "self-begot" and self-possessed, and yet who is aware of his own folly and misery ("mee miserable"). Satan's unwillingness to accept his own limitations is typical from the point of view of the Perennial Philosophy, which, like Arnold, emphasizes the folly of egoic rationality, the folly of "pure reason" when it is not tempered and circumscribed by right reason. *Paradise Lost* is, thus, an allegory of human psychology and the subtleties of reason as it works within dualistic and non-dualistic psychological paradigms.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **IMMANENTISM AND TRANSCENDENTISM**

The Perennial Philosophy lends a literal and pan-cultural sense to the idea that there is a spark of divinity within every human being. Indeed, on the Perennialist's view the world is

sacred, since the world is the fullest expression of spirit we are likely to know in our human forms. But even this account needs to be modified somewhat, because the notion of there being a “sacred” or uniquely “spiritual” dimension to reality is still too dualistic for the Perennial Philosophy. Along these lines, Fish points out that this is “the dualism Milton so often rejects” (14). The only alternative to viewing God in this way is to conceive of God as a force or entity, which is to place God in a spatial location somewhere beyond the world. To think of God this way is to commit one of Satan’s most basic mistakes. However, God is both immanent and transcendent for Milton. Thus, to conceive of there being a distinct “sacred” or “spiritual” aspect of reality is to miss the point, because everything is spiritual and God is at once nothing and everything, nowhere and everywhere. As Milton says in *Christian Doctrine*, “God could always produce any effect he pleased both when and how he chose” (1203). Furthermore, “the Father is not only he *by* whom, but also he *from* whom, in whom, *through* whom, and *on account of* whom all things are . . .” (1198). Oddly enough, however, if everything is spiritual, that is to say, of God, then nothing is spiritual. The spiritual is simply another dualistic category for a reality fundamentally beyond our comprehension, just as God is beyond comprehension. The category of the “spiritual” is simply another form, another finger pointing to the moon. Abraham Stoll explains that early deists thought along similar lines to those above, and the result is a monotheism pushed to its skeptical extreme in negative theology or aniconism. In negative theology, the Godhead is utterly abstract and beyond representation, but it is still conceived as a transcendent One (9). These notions are quite close to those of pantheism and panentheism, which bear comparison to Milton’s conceptions of God and the Holy Spirit.



Given that Milton's theism is closer to panentheism than pantheism, it is useful to contrast both views in order to delimit Milton's position with respect to them. John W. Cooper provides a summary of panentheism in his book by that title:

In brief, panentheism affirms that although God and the world are ontologically distinct and God transcends the world, the world is "in" God ontologically. In contrast, classical theism posits an unqualified distinction between God and the world: although intimately related, God and creatures are always and entirely other than one another. . . . The crucial difference is how God relates to the world, and this reflects different aspects of Plato's theology. . . . Broadly speaking, the difference between classical theism and panentheism is what each appropriated from Plato and Neoplatonism. (18)

We see that the God of panentheists is both transcendent (18) and immanent (19), and "like classical theism, panentheism is not a single monolithic theology but a group of related views with common basic affirmations. . . . *Panentheism* literally means 'all-in-God-ism.' . . . 'the doctrine that all is in God'" (26). While there are different variations of panentheism, and of pantheism, some of them are explicitly connected to the notion of the Ground of Being that I discussed above (28). In fact, some panentheists and pantheists qualify as proto-Perennialists, particularly in the cases of Taoism and Plotinus.<sup>10</sup> Cooper goes on to say that "like all general terms, there are widely differing ways of understanding panentheism, in particular what 'being in God' means and in what way God's being transcends the universe" (27). Notice that Cooper is still discussing immanence and transcendence, and that these terms are related, but often in

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<sup>10</sup> Huxley discusses Plotinus as a Perennialist, on page five of *The Perennial Philosophy*.

conflicting ways. The same conflicts in terminology and definition apply to pantheism, as well. Immanentism and transcendentism represent the limits of what can be said in the language of metaphysics, and such terms thus delimit what can be said in a theology like Milton's, as well.

Cooper also mentions that some contemporary Christian panentheists use panentheism as a "basis for affirming the Trinity" (28), because of the proximity of panentheism to Christianity in Neoplatonism.

To articulate the biblical doctrine of creation, the Christian church fathers adapted Plato's eternal transcendent God, the Father, Mind, and Craftsman, who is wholly other than the world he makes. They modified it to fit the doctrine of the Trinity . . . [however] Neoplatonism is panentheistic because everything exists within God in a series of concentric emanations. In Neoplatonism God is both the wholly transcendent One, the Mind, and the World-Soul immanent in the world. (18-19)

Thus, there are both ancient and contemporary precedents for comparing the Trinity to pantheism and panentheism. In addition, Huxley discusses Plotinus as a proto-Perennialist, and Cooper explains that most early panentheists "followed Plotinus, the Neoplatonist who reframed Plato's theological cosmology as a divine hierarchy, a 'Great Chain of Being'" (18). There are, thus, ways in which Perennialism and theism have been tied together since ancient times. The more metaphysical such comparisons become, however, the clearer it is that the Godhead cannot fit into language. Michael Levine discusses pantheism as a "non-theistic concept of deity," and this bears more of a direct relation to the Perennial Philosophy than it does to Milton's theology.

Levine writes that:

There are probably more (grass-root) pantheists than Protestants, or theists in general, and pantheism continues to be the traditional religious alternative to theism for those who reject the classical theistic notion of God. . . . certain religions are better understood as pantheistic rather than theistic when their doctrines are examined. Philosophical Taoism is the most pantheistic, but Advaita Vedanta, certain forms of Buddhism and some mystical strands in monotheistic traditions are also pantheistic. (See section 1 in “Pantheism”)

As Huxley discusses it, the Tao is one of the names for the non-dual Absolute, “as at once the Ground and Logos” (169). But, even though it describes the “Nature of Things”(116), the Tao is non-theistic. From a monotheistic point of view, it would seem that the unifying effect of God’s presence can be felt even by non-theistic thinkers—in which case, the descriptive terms one uses are not as important as the experience of the divine itself. Hence, the experiential focus of the Perennial Philosophy that I discussed above. Now, consider Levine again on pantheism:

Pantheists usually deny the existence of a personal God. . . . They deny that God is “totally other” than the world or ontologically distinct from it. The dichotomy between transcendence and immanence has been a principal source of philosophical and religious concern in Western and non-Western traditions; and all major traditions have at times turned to pantheism as a way of resolving difficulties associated with the theistic notion of a transcendent deity or reality. (See section 1 in “Pantheism”)

The Perennial Philosophy shows how it is possible to use the language of immanentism to conceptualize the same abstract Godhead discussed at the extreme transcendentalist limits of

negative theology. When it comes to the direct mystical intuition of the Absolute, the metaphysical language of transcendentalism and immanentism becomes irrelevant. As Huxley points out (*PP*, 9), it is on the grounds of irrelevance that the Buddha famously refused to speak on most metaphysical matters. In this way, the Perennial Philosophy shows that immanentism and transcendentalism are like fingers pointing to the moon, and when conceptualization breaks down at the limits of metaphysics, non-duality is all that remains. Beyond discursive reason and rhetoric, however, the Perennial Philosophy asserts that non-dualism can be directly intuited. The point is not to look at the finger, which is merely a form, a sign, but to experience the moon of the Zen metaphor directly. As Huxley says, the point is to “become Godlike:”

. . . the Kingdom of Heaven is within us . . . Plato speaks in the same sense when he says, in the *Republic*, that “the virtue of wisdom more than anything else contains a divine element which always remains.” And in the *Theaetetus* he makes the point, so frequently insisted upon by those who have practiced spiritual religion, that it is only by becoming Godlike that we can know God—and to become Godlike is to identify ourselves with the divine element which in fact constitutes our essential nature . . . (*PP*, 14-15)

The difference between the deism that flourished in the eighteenth century and pantheism is that, for deism, God is utterly transcendent to the world, whereas God is both immanent and transcendent in pantheism and panentheism. However, in most versions of pantheism, God is in no sense a personal God, but rather a divine Unity that includes and yet transcends the world (see Levine section 7). It is worth pointing out that the concepts of transcendent and immanent mutually implicate one another. Chin-Tai Kim explains:

Both transcendence and immanence are relational notions that relate the *ground* to the grounded beings. . . . Transcendence and immanence thus defy separation; they exist in a tension in any reflective conception of ultimate reality. Without exaggeration, the best religious and metaphysical thought has concerned the structure of this tension; how such structure is understood has weighty implications for humanity's existential self-understanding and comportment in the world. . . . [however] We are not identifying religion, theology, and metaphysics. (Italics mine, 545-46)

Given that transcendentism and immanentism are “root metaphors” of ultimate reality (Kim 546), it is not surprising that the interpenetration of these concepts can be traced throughout Milton's theology. Likewise, panentheism and pantheism both employ the language of immanentism and transcendentism. To say as I have that God for Milton is equal to the Ground of Being, is a way of saying that God is both immanent and transcendent. And this is to imply that God cannot fit into language at all, despite the wide proliferation of available theisms. There is nothing more that can be said of God, and it must be assumed that God is everything and nothing at once. I admit that it cannot be ascertained for certain whether or not Milton's view of God accords with the Ground of Being in the Perennial Philosophy. However, I do not think that this assumption can be refuted, either. While Milton may not have thought of God in exactly these terms, the notion of God as the Ground of Being has more to do with defining a lived relation to God than it does with the ontological status of God Himself.

Now, consider again the words of Raphael as he explains to Adam the relationship between God, God's creatures, and creation:

O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom  
All things proceed, and up to him return,  
If not depraved from good, created all  
Such to perfection, one first matter all,  
Endued with various forms, various degrees  
Of substance, and in things that live, of life;  
But more refined, more spiritous, and pure,  
As nearer to him placed or nearer tending  
Each in their several active spheres assigned,  
Till body up to spirit work, in bounds

. . . . .

Spirits odórous breathes: flow'rs and their fruit

Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed . . . (5.469-478, 482-483)

Like discursive and intuitive reason—the first “oftest” human, the “latter most is” angelic (5.488-89), creation and creatures are graded more by “degrees” than kinds. Nonetheless, all “To vital spirits aspire” (484). It seems to me that the best way to imagine the relationship of God to creation here is as the Ground of Being, which fits also with Adam’s response:

Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set  
From center to circumference, whereon  
In contemplation of created things  
By steps we may ascend to God. (509-512)

I read the spatial metaphor “from center to circumference” as implying that God is at the center, and the most insensate or non-living forms of creation occupy the circumference. Angels must be nearer to the center than humans, and humans nearer to the center than plants. Yet, in the words of Raphael in the passage quoted above, the metaphor comparing God to creatures and to creation is an essential one, because it discusses “matter.” The “various forms” of creation are created from “various degrees / Of substance,” but the more “spiritous” those forms are, the closer they are to God. God must be, then, the essential essence of all matter. And, to go back to Adam’s metaphor, God’s relationship to creation is more like an inverted cone than a flat circle. Even though the cone is still a spatial metaphor, it captures more of the sense of “spiritous” depth inherent in matter. God is immanent here as well as transcendent. While such images are only paltry and ultimately futile representations of God, this simply goes to show that God is beyond representation. There can be no distinction between God and creation, because nothing at all can be thought of God that does not err with respect to “Him.” And, as we saw above, the metaphysical terms of immanentism and transcendentism themselves interpenetrate and mutually presuppose one another.

God is anything He wants to be, and another image for this is in Book XI of *Paradise Lost*. As Michael explains to Adam and Eve that they must leave Paradise, Adam fears that “departing hence / As from his face I shall be hid” (315-316). Adam asks how he and Eve are to know God on earth as they did in Paradise: “In yonder nether world where shall I seek / His bright appearances, or footstep trace?” (328-329). But, Michael comforts him by pointing out that God is “omnipresent.” As Michael says:

Not this rock only; his omnipresence fills

Land, sea, and air, and every kind that lives,  
Fomented by his virtual power and warmed:

. . . . .

Yet doubt not but in valley and in plain  
God is as here, and will be found alike

Present, and of his presence many a sign (11.336-338, 349-351)

Is it possible, then, to say that God is not immanent in creation as well as transcendent to it?

There is no way to say. Furthermore, one of Satan's most fundamental errors is to assume that God has an ontological status at all, that God is a form of some sort. Milton's God is thus best understood as the Ground of Being, because, while He cannot be reduced to any *thing* in particular, neither can his presence be subtracted from thingness as such.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### KNOWLEDGE OF THE GROUND

One of the themes of Stoll's *Milton and Monotheism* is how Milton fits into the larger historical sweep of polytheism and monotheism, where the Enlightenment witnessed an increasing focus on pure monotheism, and a rejection of all other supernatural entities like angels. Stoll reads the signs of this historical development from *Paradise Lost* to *Paradise Regained* to *Samson Agonistes*, where there is a tension in *Paradise Lost* between polytheism and monotheism, and where monotheism becomes so extreme in *Samson Agonistes* that Milton borders on deism. It is the experience of Samson, then, that provides the nearest example to the world of the Perennial Philosophy to be found in Milton's works, and pantheism represents the



farthest horizon of that world, just beyond what Milton was apparently willing to live with.

Referring to his book, Stoll comments:

This study attempts to describe the monotheistic ideal of aniconism, and how, by pushing toward an extreme minimalism in representation and ontology, it shapes the seventeenth century religious imagination. It is in the extreme position of deism that aniconism finds its clearest expression . . . Deism offers the silent and invisible religious economy of an extreme monotheism. . . . Although many of the most important deist texts were published after Milton's death . . . The aniconic endpoint of deism demonstrates a quality that is present earlier: that in its very structure and in the historical articulations of it across the seventeenth century, monotheism pushes toward a rational and skeptical extreme. (9-10)

About the "aniconic endpoint of deism," Stoll writes that "structurally, monotheism tends toward an extreme aniconism, or a position utterly denying the representability of the divine economy" (14). And, Stoll is not alone in these conclusions. Charles Taylor's recent book *A Secular Age*, maps out the meaning of secularism in the Christian West, and argues, among other things, that the history of monotheism represents increasing skepticism and disenchantment of the world. A God who cannot be represented is a hard God to make an argument for. Also, as mentioned above, Stoll relies on Aryeh Botwinick's discussion of negative theology in *Skepticism, Belief, and the Modern*, which corroborates Taylor's conclusions above. For example, Stoll uses negative theology to examine Adam's beliefs in *Paradise Lost*: "Faced with the extreme transcendence and aniconism of monotheism . . . Adam makes use of his conceptual

shortcomings in order to forge his narrative. Adam's poetics depend on the explanatory power of the negative—on an approach similar to the broad tradition of negative theology” (138).

Stoll also discusses how close Milton comes to deism in *Samson Agonistes*, where Milton's monotheism has been pushed to the extreme such that revelation is highly suspect, even in the case of the Scriptures. Thus, *Samson Agonistes* is a “tragic” poem, because “without a [supernatural] voice or an angel, Samson is left with the opaque phenomenon of internal revelation” (265). Stoll explains this further:

As an experiment in a world without revelation, *Samson Agonistes* marks the skeptical extreme of Milton's monotheism. The chapters of this book have recorded how monotheism, with its structural need to exclude all other divine beings, and with its resistance to representations of the divine, has made Milton's poetry profoundly uncomfortable with revelation. . . . In *Samson Agonistes* . . . revelation dwindles to an invisible, inaudible, inward event. . . . *Samson Agonistes* becomes both Milton's most direct meditation on monotheism, and his closest approach to the subversive theology of deism. (265-6)

For Milton, however, it is clear that revelation was not entirely absent from the world. Milton's invocations to the Muse in books I, III, VII, and IX of *Paradise Lost* show that Milton did believe the Holy Spirit could infuse him with divine Truth. Furthermore, there is intuitive right reason, which also partakes of the Holy Spirit and the mystical body, or “mind” of Christ.

I see this thesis as pushing Milton's views a little beyond the limit of what Milton actually believed, or was capable of conceiving. For example, due to his historical time, Milton probably could not have had a conception of God that was as utterly abstract as it is in my

discussion, or in the Perennial Philosophy, were there is not always a sense of “God” as being a god at all. Pantheism is the closest we can come to a “non-theistic” conception of “God,” to refer again to Michael Levine’s understanding of pantheism. Rather than a God, pantheism posits a divine Unity of all that is. Yet, why should divinity be associated with Unity, and why, for that matter, should there be a conception of Unity at all. Like Taoists, Levine explains that pantheists conceptualize being as a divine Unity because “they experience it as such” (see section 5). But this does not speak to the fundamental issue at stake: why should we assume there is some kind of metaphysical or supernatural Reality beyond our immediate experience? The Perennial Philosophy answers this question from intuitive mystical experience and says: “There is a Divine Reality.” Milton, on the other hand, had the Bible. For Milton, however, the immanent “internal” aspect of faith was the most important. As Milton says, “Nowadays the external authority for our faith, in other words, the scriptures, is of very considerable importance . . . . The pre-eminent and supreme authority, however, is the authority of the Spirit, which is internal, and the individual possession of each man” (*CD* 1300).

Stanley Fish’s thesis is that Milton fundamentally rejects the kind of materialist dualism that Satan believes in. Yet, as noted above, Milton cannot help but argue in dualistic terms (using the “letter”) for a spiritual reality that is non-dual. The basic mistake readers of Milton can make is to interpret Milton’s thinking dualistically in the same sense that Satan’s discursive rationality was dualistic. The Perennial Philosophy takes non-dualism a step farther than Milton, by abstracting God the Father to the point of being the Divine Ground. Yet, it is clear that this is the limit of what can be said of God at all. A God that is everything is also a God that is nothing. All there is left of God at that point is the sheer fact of human experience, of being as such.

While Milton's conception of God did not go to this extreme, Milton's arguments about knowing God inwardly overlap considerably with the Perennial Philosophy. The way to gain a knowledge of and contact with the Ground is the topic of this section.

Fish explains that "what is true about the world is that God created it, and to enjoy its fruits as if they created or sustained themselves is to join Satan in chewing 'bitter ashes' . . . Milton's God . . . requires that you engage with his created fertility *as his*, that you say yes to persons, experiences, and projects because you see them as manifestations and vehicles of the loyalty [to God] you continue to affirm and not as entities valuable in and of themselves" (13). While we are required to say "yes" to the world because it is God's creation, we must do this "against the evidence" of the world that seems to say there is no God (10), or that there is a God, but that He has apathetically left us alone in the universe.

The only way to know God is by one's own inner resources, or "through the body," and God thus becomes almost wholly immanent after Milton's time, which is historical time period when deism developed. Yet, while *Samson Agonistes* represents the nearest Milton's views came to such pure immanentism, it does not represent "the culmination of Milton's theology" according to Stoll: "On the contrary, it labors to carve out exactly the position that *Paradise Lost* takes as its starting point: by demonstrating how the lack of revelation disrupts theodicy, it functions as a *defense* of the epic's extensive use of angels and other forms of the supernatural" (italics mine, 308). The above ideas are central to a comparative study of Milton's thought, his historical context, and the Perennial Philosophy.

As mentioned above, I find that the distinctions between pantheism and panentheism make a useful heuristic with which to better understand Milton's views. This is not to deny that

Milton believed the Bible, but rather to emphasize the degree to which God must be known immanently within oneself. It is imperative that Christians learn to use their hearts and their minds in order to find the way to God within. We could also recall the words of Michael as he describes to Adam how “the faithful” few on earth are to know God:

He to his own a Comforter will send,  
The promise of the Father, who shall dwell  
His Spirit within them, and the law of faith  
Working through love, upon their hearts shall write,  
To guide them in all truth . . . (12.486-490)

In effect, then, “God is within.” Despite the fact that *Paradise Lost* could not have been written by a serious panentheist, as panentheism precludes metaphysical suppositions like angels and Heaven, Milton’s God is immanent, which is to say that his God is the Ground of Being. The main reason why Milton was not a panentheist is simply because he believed the Bible was the word of God, even if it had been poorly transcribed. The main reasons Milton was not a pantheist is because he held a view of God was transcendent to the world, and he also believed in the Trinity. These views contradict pantheism, which can be glossed as the belief that God is everything and everything is God (Levine, sections 4 and 5). Milton believed that there were other divine entities besides God, and that God had a personal aspect or personal “face.” Despite this, in *Paradise Lost*, even the personal God is described in non-dualistic terms.

In panentheism, all things have their being in God (Cooper 28). I argue that the God of panentheists is equivalent to God as Milton understood Him, which is nearly equivalent to the Ground of Being in the Perennial Philosophy. For Milton, one can know God as the Ground

through Spirit, the heart, and the mind of Christ. The notion of God as the Ground is particularly relevant to *Samson Agonistes*, where there is no way to know God except through the Scriptures and through the heart. As Milton says in *Christian Doctrine*, the Son “declares that he and the Father are one in the same way as we are one with him: that is, not in essence but in love, in communion, in agreement, in charity, in spirit, and finally in glory” (1179). This is as close to pure immanentism as Milton gets, and yet such immanentism coincides with Milton’s most abstract and transcendent notion of the Godhead, a Godhead that is palpably absent from the world. In Milton’s works, Abraham Stoll writes that this abstract Godhead is most apparent in *Samson Agonistes*. Despite the fact that monotheism fully depends on revelation, *Samson Agonistes* makes revelation almost impossible. Stoll says that “when Milton leaves Samson to make his choices without an angel, or Common Notions, or any form of reliable revelation, Samson has no choice but to turn to discursive thought. This renders Samson’s knowledge of God’s will partial or even erroneous” (291). Stoll continues:

There is major friction in the ideology [of monotheism] at this point, a paradox surrounding revelation that structures the ending of *Samson Agonistes*. . . . monotheism itself turns out to depend utterly on revelation. The Mosaic distinction [that God is One], as Jan Assmann theorizes it, is unique to monotheism and fundamental to its definition, being the ideological border that defines true monotheistic religion. It is also predicated entirely upon revelation: “There is no natural or evolutionary way leading from the error of idolatry to the truth of monotheism. This truth can come only from outside, by way of revelation.” (296)

The reason why *Samson Agonistes* is as close to pure immanentism as Milton gets, is because it is the closest approximation to a deist world, where divine revelation is totally absent. In a deist world, if God cannot be known immanently, God cannot be known at all, and this leads me to a discussion of Milton's thoughts about the extent to which it is possible to unite with the Divine.

For Milton, the pathway to unity with God was circuitous. To begin with, all individual believers have the "promised" Holy Spirit, which was sent by Christ and dwells inwardly. The Spirit, in turn, directs the heart, which has the internal scripture "engraved" upon it (Honeygosky, "The Mystical in Milton," 48). The Spirit also directs right reason, which unites humans with the mind of Christ (Arnold 95, 102). The internal scripture likewise directs one's reading of the external Scriptures (the Bible), which is why Milton says the following:

No prophecy of the scriptures is susceptible of particular interpretation: for, at the time when it came, the prophecy was not brought by the will of man. . . . The prophecy, then, must not be interpreted by the intellect of a particular individual, that is to say, not by his merely human intellect, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, promised to each individual believer. (*Christian Doctrine* 1297)

Honeygosky explains scriptural "doctrine and prophecy" in that there are "two ways of reading the internal Word" for Milton: "the prophetic (having 'the spirit' which directs one to God) and the mystical (having 'the mind of Christ'—having 'arrived at' or known that delightful, harmonious union to which the Spirit continuously points)" ("The Mystical in Milton," 49; *Milton's House of God*, 221). Honeygosky continues:

The term *mystic* in Milton, then, refers to that relationship with Christ (and the other members of his Body)—a relationship that is spiritual, immediate, direct,

personal, unifying, and permanent, though not always perceivable. This relationship, as expressed in Milton's doctrine, implies an ecstasy of sorts which stems from the awareness that one is ever drawn beyond the finite limits of one's own body and into this infinitely greater Body whose head, that is, operating and governing *mind*, is Christ." (55)

Finally, we see that the mind and the body of Christ are mystically united, the "body" pertaining to the body of the invisible and visible church, and the mind pertaining to the internal Word of God, given through Christ, and "engraved upon the hearts of believers" in the form of the Holy Spirit ("The Mystical in Milton," 48). Honeygosky summarizes as follows:

Of primary importance for Milton's notably Protestant mysticism is his doctrine on Scripture and the 'supreme authority' deriving from it, found in his *Christian Doctrine*. Following the same union of opposite but integrated components that he presents in his discussions of church (invisible and visible), worship (internal and external), and man (inward and outward), Milton likewise conceives of Scripture as consisting of two divergent aspects, the internal and the external." (48)

Regarding the Word and the Son, Milton says "it is certain that the Son existed in the beginning, under the title of the Word or Logos, that he was the first of created things, and that through him all other things, both in heaven and earth, were afterwards made" (*CD* 1173). Milton repeats this, among other places, in book III of *Paradise Lost*, line 170. The Son is also superior to the Holy Spirit, but he is "certainly not one in essence" with the Father (*CD* 1179).

The Holy Spirit, since he is a minister of God, and therefore a creature, was created, that is, produced, from the substance of God . . . after the Son, to whom



he is far inferior . . . . There is sufficient reason for placing the name and also the nature of the Son above that of the Holy Spirit, when discussing matters relative to the Deity, in that the brightness of God's glory and the image of his divine subsistence are said to have been impressed on the Son but not on the Holy Spirit. (CD 1196)

To summarize all of the above, humans have the "promised Spirit" given to us by Christ, which was given to Christ by God. The Spirit guides the heart, the inner and outer scripture, and right reason, all of which unite us mystically with the mind and body of Christ. This, in turn, unites us with God. One of the basic ideas in Honeygosky's *Milton's House of God*, is that the mystic body of Christ bridges in time and space the gaps between the visible church now and the invisible church to come (9). For Milton, then, there is no "rupture between world and spirit" (8), and this is finally the sense in which I have argued that God for Milton is equivalent to the Ground of Being in the Perennial Philosophy. Furthermore, this logic applies to the notion of right reason, as well. Richard Arnold has discussed the Spirit as linking right reason to the mind of Christ, and he cites Michael's speech to Adam in book VII of *Paradise Lost* as evidence: "Michael at this point speaks of right reason or the Holy Spirit as the 'Spiritual Armor' that God will provide to humankind in order to resist Satan as well as all temptations" (95).

It can be seen that in his conception of unity with the mind of Christ, Milton comes closest to that unity with the Ground of Being described in the Perennial Philosophy. As Huxley explains, "knowledge is in the knower according to the mode of the knower" (145), and unity with the Ground can be achieved because "knowledge is a function of being" (vii). A person's spiritual knowledge will be in proportion to the degree that that person practices deep inner

worship. As Huxley says, “the highest form of the love of God is an immediate spiritual intuition, by which ‘knower, known and knowledge are made one.’” (85). In Milton’s words, every believer “has the spirit, who guides truth, and he has the mind of Christ” (*CD* 1298). Stanley Fish also discusses the notions that the Holy Spirit is an inner authority (71), and that knowledge is in the knower according to the mode of the knower (40-45). Knowledge, then, is largely a function of whether a person is identified with the small Satanic “self,” or with the divine “Self,” which transcends the individual ego.

This is what liberals do not understand about time and history—that the knower and the known are inextricably linked, knowing which marks the difference between Perennial and liberal worldviews as they are outlined in this thesis. “Liberals believe,” according to Fish, “that facts (of history, justice, science) are independent of the knower, and that it is the knower’s obligation to approach the task of knowing with as few preconceptions as possible . . . Liberals believe that evidence lies about in the world waiting to be gathered . . .” (56). In Milton’s terms, the “evidence” lying about in the world is no evidence at all if it is not evidence of God, to be known through internal and external worship. Such evidence as Satan finds is not understood with right reason, but rather “analytical thought” in Huxley’s words: “for the habit of analytical thought is fatal to the intuitions of integral thinking” (19), which is to say fatal to the intuitions of right reason.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **STANLEY FISH AND THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY**

*How Milton Works* is a dazzling, rigorous, and unutterably strange attempt to follow the great seventeenth-century poet along the perilous path that leads away

from the temptations of history and politics and into the fair fields of eternal Truth. Why strange? Because the book depends upon a perfect congruence between the fathomless faith of John Milton and the fathomless skepticism of Stanley Fish.

—Steven Greenblatt

I will conclude with a discussion of Fish's *How Milton Works* and the Perennial Philosophy, and this will function as a summary of everything above, and it will also further my argument in several respects. Thus far, I have compared the core doctrines of Huxley's Perennial Philosophy to Milton, but I have only shown the metaphysical skeleton of that philosophy. This section on Fish, on the other hand, will fill out the discussion of Milton and the Perennial Philosophy in broad fleshly outlines, rather than abstract metaphysical detail. While my idea to compare Milton to the Perennial Philosophy came to me over a year ago, I did not read Fish until the day I began writing this thesis. In the first hundred pages of his book, Fish concisely lays out his thesis and main points. One after the other, Fish's points about Milton are squarely in line with the Perennial Philosophy, and this begins with the first page of Fish's introduction.

Fish begins by discussing one of Freud's "speculative" (2) and extremely Darwinian ideas in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which is that "organic instincts" are fundamentally conservative (1). Freud posits that the development of motion in the simplest and oldest organic bodies may have resulted from a stimulus that came from the outside of these bodies. The result is that movement developed not for the sake of genetic progress, but for the sake of returning to the original unperturbed stasis. Thus, as Fish says, "Freud concludes, 'we shall be compelled to say that 'the aim of all life is death'" (2). Fish immediately follows this statement with the following:

Although Freud certainly didn't intend it as such, this is, I believe, a perfect description of Milton's thought and work. All we need do is substitute for Freud's organicist vocabulary the vocabulary of theology, and for his materialist story the story of creation, sin, redemption, and reunion." (2)

According to Fish, then, the originary union that is the "aim of all life" for Milton is to return to God. Union with God was the original state of all organic entities, and all life tends, rather than to death, to God, which is not actually very different. Union with God means extinction as an individual entity, and, in the case of humans, it means extinction of the self. Recall again the words of Raphael to Adam: "time may come when men / With angels may participate . . . Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit, / Improved by tract of time, and winged ascend . . ." (5.493-498). Would this "ascent" not be experienced as a sort of death by the corporeal creature?

The impulse to return to stasis, and the aim of all life being death, are good ways to understand the Perennial Philosophy, for mystical union with the Godhead, or enlightenment, is precisely the death of the ego, "the self with a separate existence," as Fish says (4). Of course, from Freud's point of view, such a death of the self would be to align the self with the unconscious: Freud is famous for equating the "oceanic feeling" of mystical unity or oneness with the longing to return to the womb. Infantile regression, however, is not what the Perennial Philosophy is about. The Perennial Philosophy is, rather, highly rational and moral, and this is what I seek finally to demonstrate. Milton's spiritual impulse was not an attempt to flee from rational life, but, rather, to take ultimate responsibility for life.

Fish goes on to say that "At this point, however, we must leave the analogy with Freud behind, because for Milton the issues at stake are theological . . ." (3). The Perennial Philosophy

shows that the analogy with Freud and Milton is not just an analogy. Between the organicist claims of Freud, and the theology of Milton, there finally lies a metaphysical gulf that cannot be bridged. It is the gulf between two worldviews, both of which may be equally based on lived experience. The longing for death is not simply the result of “organic” impulses—in humans, it is precisely rational. While theological or metaphysical claims may be questionable, the Perennial Philosophy shows that the activity of serious mystics epitomizes rationality. Nothing could be more rational and more human than the ascetic renunciation of desire in pursuit of truth and perfection. Animals do not meditate; only humans do. If Freud’s love of reason compelled him to reject mysticism, mysticism’s love of reason would compel mystics to reject Freud. In either case, while the mysteries of existence remain finally ambiguous, it appears that mystics may demonstrate a profounder embrace of life.

As secular history progressively eclipsed that of the spiritual, it is clear why inner worship should become so much more important to Milton. Yet, in a world governed by the non-dual abstract God of monotheism, there can be no will to separate existence from God. Along these lines, Fish cites a few of the Creator’s words from book III of *Paradise Lost*, which I will reproduce: “Man shall not quite be lost, but saved who will, / Yet not of will in him, but grace in me . . . and soften stony hearts / To pray, repent, and bring obedience due” (173-190). The key words are “but of grace in me,” and “soften stony hearts.” In contrast to this, there is the heightened grace of the Perennial Philosophy, a mystical sense of grace that Milton may or may not have believed in. Huxley explains:

Spiritual grace cannot be received continuously or in its fullness, except by those who have willed away their self-will to the point of being able truthfully to say,

‘Not I, but God in me.’ . . . Spiritual grace originates from the divine Ground of all being, and it is given for the purpose of helping man to achieve his final end, which is to return out of time and self-hood to that Ground. . . . The goal is perpetual inspiration from sources beyond the personal self . . . leading to the charity, which is unitive knowledge of Tao, as at once the Ground and Logos.  
(168-169)

When one is focused utterly on the spiritual path, humility and charity naturally arise. There will be grace, and a softening of stony hearts, and both of these will be felt in excess of what ordinary believers feel.

If there is grace, Huxley explains that it can only be had by “a steady will to conform to the divine Tao or Logos on every level of existence” (92). On this point, Fish cites book X in *Paradise Lost*, where Adam tries to make excuses for why he ate the apple: “to [Adam’s] mixture of historical analysis, moral casuistry, self-extenuation, and accusation of deity, the Son replies with devastating brevity, ‘Was shee thy God, that her thou didst obey / before his voice?’” (8). Rather than conforming himself to the Divine, Adam fell prey to the temptations of lust and his fascination with discursive reason. While the Fall of Man is not the reason for conforming oneself to the Divine on “every level of existence” in the Perennial Philosophy, Milton’s lesson to Adam is still relevant to the Perennial Philosophy. That is, to choose one’s independent selfness and discursive rationality over God, over the Tao, is to fall immediately out of grace. As Huxley says, “all our actions must be directed, in the last analysis, to making ourselves passive in relation to the activity and the being of divine Reality” (165). Likewise, Fish says that “Milton’s God demands . . . that you engage with his created fertility *as his*” (13),

which is to say that the world of form cannot be wholly appreciated without acknowledging it as God's. It seems that, when he ate the apple, Adam fell out of touch with the Tao, the Logos, the Word, and the Son's response of "devastating brevity" is as that of the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu, whom Huxley quotes:

Shun asked Ch'eng, saying, "Can one get Tao so as to have it for oneself?"

"Your very body," replied Ch'eng, "is not your own. How should Tao be?"

"If my body," said Shun, "is not my own, pray whose is it?"

"It is the delegated image of God," replied Ch'eng. "Your life is not your own. It is the delegated harmony of God. . . ." (169)

But, discursive reason always wants more answers. Fish explains:

"While 'Was shee thy God?' is definitive, it does not settle everything for everyone; there will still be some (Milton critics among them) who will say 'Yes, but' and immediately reinstate the reasons . . . the Son has just exploded . . . there is little to say for and about the perspective of obedience and worship except one-line reminders like 'Was shee thy God?' . . . [and] there is nothing you can cite to support the little that you do say . . ." (9-10).

There is little to say, in other words, in defense of a non-dual perspective, except one-liners: Was shee thy God? How should Tao be?

Fish explains that "If you regard the world as God's book before you ever take a particular look at it, any look you take will reveal, even as it generates, traces of his presence . . . If, on the other hand, the reality and omnipresence of God is not a basic premise of your consciousness, nothing you see will point to it . . ." (28). In the discussion of pantheism above, it

was seen that if everything is spiritual, then nothing is spiritual. Likewise, if God is everywhere, He is nowhere, if everything, nothing. God is immanent and transcendent. God is the Tao. God cannot be proved, but only experienced. And, Huxley was aware of these things:

The Perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit. Why should this be so? We do not know. . . . Nothing in our everyday experience gives us any reason for supposing that water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen; and yet when we subject water to certain rather drastic treatments, the nature of its constituent elements becomes manifest. Similarly, nothing in our everyday experience gives us much reason for supposing that the mind of the average sensual man has, as one of its constituents, something resembling, or identical with, the Reality substantial to the manifold world; and yet, when that mind is subjected to certain rather drastic treatments, the divine element, of which it is in part at least composed, becomes manifest . . .

(viii-ix)

Of course, when he mentions a mind subjected to “rather drastic treatments,” Huxley is referring to the various exertions and ascetic practices of the spiritual path. Thus, the Perennial Philosophy says that the non-dual God, whom Milton knew mainly if not solely through discursive reason, can be “directly and immediately apprehended.” Of course, Milton did not advocate this type of mysticism. Honeygosky makes this clear, and he quotes Milton on the



point that the term “mystic” “has nothing to do with some gradated and chartable spiritual ascent. It ‘refers to the spiritual mode’ and is ‘much less recipe for getting somewhere than it is splended recognition and frequent remembrance of arrival at union with god through ‘ingrafting’ in Christ”” (42). The fact that Milton did not advocate the type of mystical union with God to be found in the Perennial Philosophy, helps to explain why Fish finds that the “most anxious moments in Milton’s poetry” coincide precisely with those moments when Milton wishes for union, and also fears it. After all, mystical union in God implies the death of the small “self” as we saw above, but without that small self, Milton could not “sing”:

It is the threat of that removal, the threat of having one’s wishes and prayers actually fulfilled, that occasions the most anxious moments in Milton’s poetry.

Recall my discussion in Chapter 8 of the invocation to book VII of *Paradise Lost*, when the poet at once petitions his muse and pushes her away in the fear that were she to grant him his professed desire—to join with her in celestial song and soar above the Olympian hill—his voice would no longer sound, even in his own ears. That is why he takes comfort in the fact that he is now ‘Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole,’ for it is on earth, composed of the dust to which he must return, that he is ‘More safe’ and can ‘Sing with mortal voice.’” (564-565)

Fish says that “Milton notoriously tries to have it both ways” (566). Milton voices the morality and worldview of a monastic, and yet, he does not refrain from singing in verse. Rather than a self-contradiction, however, Milton’s political and poetical engagements were the right things to do, because he bent his “talent” to the service and glorification of God.

In thinking about Milton, rather than politics, there is the basic problem of why, if Milton was so dedicated to God, would he spend all of his time writing political and poetical works. As Fish says, Milton “wants at once to celebrate humility and to be celebrated as the celebrator of humility” (7). I tend to think that Milton made the right decision, because he knew perfectly well that he was going to write poetry that would stand for all time, and that he could use his poetry to justify God’s ways to man. Nevertheless, that Milton was conflicted over his decision to become a poet, and about whether he was thereby fulfilling his earthly mission is evident, for instance, in *Sonnet 19*, where Milton laments the loss of his eyesight (“my light is spent”) and the fact that he feels he is not accomplishing enough (“useless”), and, yet, he is not sure that he is being called by God to do anything but “wait”:

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide,  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide,  
“Doth god exact day labor, light denied?”  
I fondly ask; but patience to prevent  
That murmur soon replies, “God doth not need  
Either man’s work or his own gifts . . .  
. . . . .  
They also serve who only stand and wait.” (1-10, 14)

Despite Milton's resolution to be patient, the "chiding" God in this sonnet and Milton's imaginary "murmur" against that chiding stands in contrast to the spiritual certainty of Sonnet

22. Milton says, "Yet I argue not:"

Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot  
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer  
Right onward. What supports me dost thou ask?  
The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied  
In liberty's defense, my noble task,  
Of which all Europe talks from side to side.  
This thought might lead me through the world's vain masque  
Content though blind, had I no better guide. (6-14)

It is possible to see Milton going back and forth within himself about his duty to God and his poetic ambitions. As Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon remark, Milton's "confidence in God's guidance is far more settled and serene here than in the turbulent *Sonnet 19*" (160). That Milton should experience uncertainty over the major decision of his life is a testament to the fact that even though Milton *did* believe in revelation, he could never be absolutely certain whether he was acting in the service of Truth or in the service of his own ego. This major anxiety in Milton's life goes to show how very absent divine revelation was from Milton's world, and from Milton's personal experience. Hence, the supreme importance Milton placed on inner worship—and I assume that inner worship is what freed him to write poetry in the first place. Milton experienced such anxiety precisely because God's will is ambiguous in any given moment, and even his belief in the Bible and in the Trinity was secondary to inner worship.

Beyond the particulars of what Milton did or did not believe about the Trinity, about Scripture, or about the visible and invisible church, Milton's inner relationship to God was paramount.

Milton was, thus, a finger pointing to the moon, and the particulars of his faith—the *forms* of his faith—were all secondary to his immediate consciousness of God, to his immediate consciousness of this one true moment in which humans face the only true choice they ever face: to align themselves with Divinity instead of their egos, and with Perennial history instead of liberal history. The distinction between Perennial and liberal history can be seen in Michael's words in book XII of *Paradise Lost*, as he explains to Adam what will transpire in the post-lapsarian world. The liberals:

To their own vile advantages shall turn

. . . . .

Then shall they seek to avail themselves of names,

Places and titles, and with these to join

Secular power, though feigning still to act

By spiritual, to themselves appropriating

The Spirit of God, promised alike and giv'n . . . (510, 515-519)

“Secular power” here is liberal power and liberal politics, and “Places and titles” are the prideful accoutrements of Satanic humans.

Milton's Way, like the Tao, was to be aligned with Divinity in every moment, and this is what makes Milton virtually a Perennialist. It might also be clear now why I spent so much time above discussing negative theology and immanentism. Despite all of the particular beliefs that Milton held, the “forms,” in other words, to which Milton was particularly attached, God

Himself is no form, and the aniconistic absence of revelation in history places the utmost responsibility upon individuals to align themselves with Gods will in every moment. God is both present and absent in every moment, and the only way to know God is to seek out His presence at all times. The point is to “live in God,” literally. God thus becomes the Ground of Being. He is every moment, and every moment becomes supremely important—so important that there is really only one moment and only one choice and only one meaning: to align oneself with Divinity. This is the Way of the Perennial Philosophy. As Fish says, “This is not quietism; it is faith, faith in an order whose springs are not always evident in the working of the visible world, an order whose stability and perdurability are radically independent of the patterns of cause and effect that seem so conclusive in the visible world.” (569).

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