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Abstract This translated lecture by the German theologian Ernst Benz probes the theological, philosophical, and mystical aspects of *imago dei* (man in the image of God) and its bearing on God's relationship with man, especially as taught by the medieval theologian and mystic Master Eckhart. Benz discusses the true nature of human nobility and the apotheosis (deification) of man, an early Christian doctrine that disappeared in the fifth and sixth centuries but survived in Christian mysticism and is a unique feature of Mormon belief as revealed by its visionary founder, Joseph Smith.

IMAGO DEI: MAN AS THE IMAGE OF GOD

Ernst Benz

(translated from the original German by Alan F. Keele)

Ernst Benz (1907–78) was a professor of church history at the University of Marburg. This distinguished German theologian wrote hundreds of articles and about fifty books.

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If I wished to deliver here a historical-doctrinal discourse about our understanding of *imago dei*—man in the image of God—I would have to begin with Augustine, who, in his work on the trinity, laid the foundation for Christian anthropology—the Christian view of man—in all occidental theology. Augustine poses the question how one can, in an understandable manner, depict the mystery of the divine trinity. Then, after many futile attempts, he discovers the following—and in his opinion, the only—way: Man is created in the image of God, God is triune; therefore traces of divine trinity—*vestigia trinitatis*—must be found in man as the image of God. Augustine now asks a further question: In which aspect of man can such traces be found? As a former Manichaean, it is obvious that for him such traces are to be found not in the realm of the body, but only in the human intellect.

He begins with an analysis of the human epistemological process and ascertains that even in the simple act of sensory perception there exists a trinity composed of the viewer (the *mens*), the viewed object, and the impulse of the will which focuses the *acies mentis* [sharpness

Ernst Benz originally presented this paper at the Eranos conference held in Ascona, Switzerland, in 1969. (See the publisher's Web site at www.daimon.ch for more information about these annual Eranos conferences and for listings of Eranos yearbooks.) Ernst Benz's collected Eranos lectures are found in his book *Urbild und Abbild: Der Mensch und die mythische Welt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974). This essay is on pages 475–508. The astute reader will pick up some of Benz's misconceptions about Latter-day Saint beliefs.

of mind] on the object and triggers the act of recognition. He then sees the same trinitarian principle again in a higher form involving spiritual understanding, where the object of understanding is not a tangible object in the superficial world anymore, but an abstracted idea stored in the “belly of the memory”—*venter memoriae*. The final stage, then, is the act of self-recognition, in which the viewer, the *mens*, takes itself as its own object of understanding and discovers itself as the *imago dei*. And lastly, in the highest spiritual act, the *mens*, driven by its love of God, turns toward the divine archetype itself.

It is not necessary to dwell here on further details; the important thing is that for this context Augustine’s entire perception of the relationship of God’s image to man’s image is based on the symbol of the mirror. The *imago dei* is a reflection of the archetype in the human spirit. The symbol of the mirror provides many graphic possibilities: For one thing, the archetype is only fully mirrored in the reflected likeness when the mirror is fully turned toward that archetype, when the reflection is completely attuned to the archetype. Further, the correlation between archetype and reflection is extinguished or disturbed when the mirror turns from the archetype toward other objects or when the mirror itself is darkened.

The symbol of the mirror clearly brings forth yet another thought—namely, that there exists no essential cohesion between archetype and reflected image. The reflected image is “a symbol, but alas, only a symbol”; it has nothing of the nature of the archetype; it mirrors the archetype on a fundamentally different ontological basis; it is a reflected *creatura* which has nothing in common with the being of the archetype. Ontologically there exists a total discontinuity between archetype and reflected image. The Augustinian opinion even suggests the thought that the relationship between archetype and reflection is totally one-sided: reflected man is dependent on the archetype; he exists only as long as the archetype cares to mirror itself in him. The archetype, on the contrary, is not dependent on its reflection. Its freedom—one is even tempted to say its moods—dictates whether it reflects itself or not. Its being is not impaired whether it is reflected or not.

Thus the doctrine of *imago dei* has given rise to many different theoretical reflections on the relationship between God and man. Indeed, this concept of man has accompanied the whole history of Christian theology and has been a traditional component of scholarly dogmatics. Now, however, in our decade, it has become very pertinent again, for two reasons:

For one thing, that school of theology which invokes Karl Barth and Søren Kierkegaard has, in a kind of reverse dialectical method on the part of the youngest generation of its followers, finally turned dialectics toward God himself and developed a “theology after the death of God” (clearly exploiting Nietzsche’s statement about the death of God, which for Nietzsche, of course, was intended to be understood solely from the standpoint of the anthropological theology of [Ludwig] Feuerbach). These so-called theologians maintain that Christianity is not dependent upon a belief in the existence of a personal God but rather that the object of preaching the gospel should be man’s humanity to man.

I personally think this theology is a joke, an overly subtle cabaret-gag based on a purely cerebral theological dialectic. If God were dead, the only honest consequence would be to close the churches and schools of theology. But this dialectic is so far advanced that our young theologians want to have it both ways: a theology after the death of God and a parish, complete with pension plan, parsonage, and official car. After all, theology after the death of God is spreading, especially in America. The question now is, what will happen to man if God is dead? With the death of the archetype, the image of man is clearly blotted out, and other “revelations” begin to replace the words of the Old and New Testaments, the words of that God who has been declared dead.

This is the mainstay of the so-called theology of revolution. I heard a sermon at the Congress of Churches in Stuttgart on the parable of the good Samaritan. The preacher explained that the actual message of the parable was not the help that the Samaritan proffered the one who had fallen amongst thieves (that was self-explanatory) but rather the abolishment of exploitation—that is, the revolutionary struggle against capitalism (which plunders the proletariat) and against the repressive church (which passed by the man in the figure of the priest).

How such is to be achieved cannot, of course, be learned from the New Testament but rather from Marx and Mao. Such exegesis clearly shows that with the elimination of the image of God, the image of man is substantially changed, and one begins anew to ask about the relationship between the image of God and the image of man.

The other reason for the immediate pertinence of the question of *imago dei* is our changing worldview. Our modern worldview, which has replaced the old geocentric conception (that our earth is the center of creation and salvation) with the concept of an infinite universe and numerous worlds and solar systems, was proclaimed by scholars four hundred years ago but has managed to permeate the popular mind only since the age of space travel and, like a bolt out of the blue, has changed all our feelings about the world and our cosmic consciousness. The famous photographs of the astronauts from Apollo 8 that show the earth floating as a marvelous, bluish, shimmering bright ball above the brown volcanic, dead-crater landscape of the moon, represent the beginning of a new epoch of our cosmic consciousness.

The strange result of this view toward the earth from another celestial body is exactly the opposite of that which one might expect. The uniqueness of earth and the uniqueness of man is discovered anew. Astronaut [John] Glenn burst out spontaneously: "O, this paradisiacal earth!" Against the background of a dead orb without atmosphere, without life, without wind, without smells, without water, without plants, without animals, without any future possibility of life, the earth appears as *the* marvelous exception in the universe, as *the* place where those completely unusual, unique conditions are found, under which the step from molecular movement to organic and animal life could occur in paradisiacal manifoldness and then, finally, man: this last step in the development of life, the step up to conscious-being, to being-conscious. To a form of knowing that is much more than consciousness, for this consciousness has the ability to view the particular as part of a system; this consciousness boasts as its greatest miracle its ability to intuit the whole. But that is just one side of the matter. Not only are the various spheres of being on our earth reduced to a totality

in the human consciousness, but in man the universe views itself for the first time.

Whereas it at first appeared that our view into the macrocosm would lead to a complete devaluation of man—who appeared to be no more than a dust speck on the dust speck of the universe—now man appears to be more and more the great exception, in whom the development of life has reached a completely unique stage. The deeper the insights of astronomy push into the manifold, unfathomable marvels of matter by spectral analysis of nebulae and fixed stars and other, newly discovered astral forms, the deeper the gaze of astrophysics penetrates the marvels of the structure of matter, the more unique appears the exceptional position of man.

Pascual Jordan, who has been mentioned by Professor Schmucl Sambursky,¹ is presently working on a project in which he attempts to demonstrate that, contrary to the results of previous probability studies that presume the existence of life on other stars or in other parts of the universe, the greater probability is that man is the only being in the universe who has reached a state of consciousness and in whom the universe has attained a view of itself. Of course, it is possible that somewhere something like organic life has formed, possibly under completely different conditions and prerequisites, but the leap to consciousness is dependent upon such unique conditions that these have occurred only upon our earth in a course of development lasting millions of years and are not repeatable. Man, who saw himself facing total devaluation after the discovery of the plurality of worlds—hence the Catholic Church's opposition to this teaching in the sixteenth century—is now suddenly thrust again as the unique figure into the center of the universe. I said to Pasqual Jordan: "According to your understanding then, we are the aristocrats of the universe," whereupon he answered me: "Yes, but also the anarchists." This then, is our theological task, the task of a theological anthropology in connection with a new cosmology: to theologially rethink our whole world, beginning with a theology of matter.

1. Schmucl Sambursky, "Die Willens-Freiheit im Wandel des physikalischen Weltbildes," *Sinn und Wandlung des Menschenbildes [Eranos-Jahrbuch XXXVIII/1969]*, ed. Adolf Dortmann and Rudolf Ritsema (Zürich: Reinverlag, 1969), 180.

There have already been beginnings, like the book by Conrad Bonifazi, for example, a theological scholar at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, who published in 1968 [sic] his *Theology of Things*,² in which he refers to the hesitancy on the part of traditional theology to deal theologically with the structure of things. Of course, such an undertaking is not new since Friedrich Christoph Oetinger began his theology of the corporeal with a *physica sacra* as the basis of theology, and even the alchemists also knew something about it.

It appears to me that the words of the Christian mystics contain references to these new questions that have suddenly made the topic of *imago dei* pertinent again, and they seem to be important to a new religious anthropology that would do justice to our modern feeling about and consciousness of the world. For the mystics are able to overcome precisely those two weaknesses that adhere to the Augustinian comprehension of *imago* and his orientation toward the mirror symbol—namely, the limitation of *imago* to the purely intellectual sphere and the absence of any substantial connection between archetype and reflected image.

I.

The mystics' view of man is immediately and profoundly determined by their own religious experience, by their personal encounter with the transcendental. Their view of man itself is not an abstract model based on theological premises, but is an attempt to think through, to mentally order their own experiences—their overpowering, stirring, and transforming encounter with the transcendental—and to ask: "How is it possible that this kind of experience could take place within me?" Only after this point is reached can the more general reflections about the question begin: "How must man be, how must God be, so that this kind of encounter can take place? What are the spiritual and psychic presuppositions for this in the structure of man, that such an outpouring of the transcendental can occur?"

2. Conrad Bonifazi, *A Theology of Things: A Study of Man in His Physical Environment* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967).

Mystical theology, therefore, whose major component is a certain view of man, is the *a posteriori* generalization of (and the subsequent attempt to logically understand) an overpowering experience which was at first incomprehensible. The differences in the interpretations of the mystics depend not so much on differences in the *a priori* spiritual bias of each mystic given by his religious training and theological instruction, but primarily on differences in the experiences themselves. In the case of one mystic, the central sphere of experience is a God-mysticism, in which a unification with God is attained; in the case of another, the central experience is an experience with Christ, in which a unification with Christ, the divine *logos*, the resurrected Lord, is experienced. Neither type of experience in any way excludes the other.

In the same way, contact with the transcendental differs depending on the spiritual sphere in which the encounter itself occurs. There is a characteristically intellectual mysticism, in which the encounter with the transcendental is perceived as an illumination of the mind, as a brightening of the intellect; and again there is a mysticism in which the encounter with the transcendental is perceived as a unification of the divine and human will, as a breakthrough of a new divine impulse, as an affective harmony with the divine will, as the ecstasy of the heart, transported into divine rapture. This diversity of mystical experience (intellectual, volitional, and affective mysticism) naturally affects the intellectual interpretation of the experience itself and the conceptual exposition of each individual mystic's view of man.

Now, modern theology is widely opposed to every kind of mysticism because it interprets mystical experiences from a purely psychological point of view as mere interior processes that have nothing to do with the transcendental and that in the last analysis simply amount to the psychological experiencing of mystical conditions of happiness. But it is simple to see that one cannot explain away the phenomenon of Christian mysticism by means of a certain psychological interpretation. The fact is that mystical experiences exist, and the fact is that these experiences have a powerful effect—in the form of a creative transformation—on the lives of the mystics. The

whole history of the Christian church shows that its very backbone is composed of such personalities, in whom the content of historical Christian revelation—transmitted through documents and mediated through the sacraments and symbols of the church—was realized and actualized by direct personal encounter with God, by having Christ dwell within, and by experiencing the outpouring of the Holy Ghost. Thus they became the ones who proclaimed the gospel in the most convincing manner.

When one interprets individually these basic concepts, however, certain thoughts become noticeable in Christian mysticism that overstep the bounds of a traditional dogmatic exegesis of fundamental Christian teachings. For this reason, in the Middle Ages mystics were almost always in conflict with the inquisition, and Protestant groups engaged in regular disputes with church authorities.

To be sure, even the starting point for the mystical interpretation of the relationship of man to God is boldly presumptuous. The great mystics, who themselves had experienced the *unio mystica* with God, see their experience in a whole new light; they recognize with bewilderment in their encounter with the divine thou, that God and man are dependent upon each other, that they need each other to fulfill their being. This is perhaps the most radical interpretation of the thought that man is created in the image of God.

Man finds his fulfillment in God, but on the other hand, also, God finds fulfillment for his being only in man, in the *unio mystica*. Both the longing of man for his archetype, God, and the longing of God for his image, man, are fulfilled. Here the symbol of the mirror is not prime, but rather that of God's "self-portrayal" in man through procreation and birth. God's "self-portrayal" ensues in the form of his self-realization in the sphere of corporality. God as *mens manifestativum sui* [the mind manifested in itself] actualizes himself in his highest form in his image as man, by procreating and bearing his own image in man. The *mysterium incarnationis* [mystery of the incarnation] is already prefigured, even before the historical birth of Jesus Christ, in the creation of man. Angelus Silesius, who gathered the most important experiences and thoughts of medieval mysticism into aphorisms of the most linguisti-

cally perfected kind—made possible no doubt by his own mystical experiences—expresses this ardent mutuality of the God-man relationship in the following epigrams from his *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* (*The Cherubic Pilgrim*):

God is as much on me, as I on him, dependent,
His being I help be, mine he helps be, resplendent.

I know that without me, God cannot live a minute,
If I should come to harm, *He* must give up the spirit.³

No mystic perceived this dual relationship between God and man more strongly than Master Eckhart. His perception can be expressed in the following simple thought: God does not want to be alone. His innermost being is love. Love, however, can only be fulfilled in the presence of love, freely given in return. God created man in his image and gave him therewith the freedom to turn his full love toward him and to respond to his love in return, but with this freedom, also the possibility of turning from him. Indeed, man has misused his freedom, he has loved himself instead of directing his love toward God. But God cannot stop loving man and expecting from him the fulfillment of his love through love freely given in return. He awakens divine love in man by procreating and bearing his son in human form. The divine, aboriginal *fundus* is an abyss, out of which divine love wafts, before pouring into the human soul to fulfill itself therein.

II.

Even if Master Eckhart can more or less justify on the basis of biblical ideas this one aspect, that God seeks in man the fulfillment of his love, he does not succeed nearly so well in using such biblical and dogmatic proofs to demonstrate his metaphysics of the soul.⁴ His main thought, which he repeats unceasingly in his writings and

3. Johannes Scheffer, *Des Angelus Silesius Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, ed. W. Bölsche (Jena and Leipzig: 1905).

4. *Magister Eckhardi Sermones*, Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke, ed. and trans. Ernst Benz, B. Decker, and J. Koch (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1937–1956).

sermons, is that the soul is inherently attuned to God and to dwelling with God. This thought finds expression in his teaching of the “spark of the soul,” of the “fortress of the soul”—*castellum in anima*—and of the “city of the soul.” The “little spark of the soul” is that highest organ, that “peak” of the soul, in which the entry of God into the soul—the procreation of the Son in the soul—is accomplished and in which the birth of the Son occurs. Master Eckhart also calls this “spark of the soul” the *increated anima*, that which is “uncreated in the soul,” the *fundus*, the “innermost foundation of the soul,” the interior most, purest, and highest part of the soul.” The expression *increated in anima* intimates that here, obviously in the soul itself, the limit of pure “creatureness” has been stepped over, that in the soul a “point,” a substantial predisposition toward God, exists since the soul is “God-tinted”—that is to say, has the color of God in it.

Here also, the chiliastic character of this *manifestatio sui* of God in man becomes obvious. This “self-portrait” is an eternal impulse of self-portrayal, of the self-portrayal of God, who starts anew in each human being and in each human being strives toward his perfection, toward his complete realization. With each human being, the passion and salvation begin anew and strive to reach their goal of raising each man to the level of “friend to God” in whom the love of God is fulfilled, and who fulfills the love of God in love freely given in return.

Here we must say a word about the so-called intellectualism of Master Eckhart. Even if it sometimes appears that the “innermost part,” the *fundus*, the “little spark” of the soul is being identified with the soul’s “rationality,” this is not the case when one looks at the whole picture. The *fundus* of the soul—and Eckhart is especially emphatic about this—is not identical with any certain characteristic or power of the soul, hence, also not with its rationality. The *fundus* itself, rather, is beyond all conceptuality, beyond all differentiating into certain powers; it is beyond all quality, nameless and ineffable; it is there where the soul rests in its actual, dark, undifferentiated being, before any division into will and intellect, into higher and lower powers, has occurred. “The soul in its *fundus* is also ineffable, as God is ineffable.”

This nameless ground of the soul, without qualities, is the actual location for the contact with God. Decisive for Eckhart is the thought that the terrestrial is attuned to the transcendental and can accept it within itself. “The power of the Holy Ghost takes the little spark of the soul and bears it up in that conflagration, in love, as the sun takes from the root of the tree the most pure substance and draws it up into the branch where it becomes a flower. In this way the little spark in the soul is borne up into the first origin and thus becomes completely one with God and is in this actual sense one with God like food becomes one with my body, yea, even more, the purer and the nobler it is.”

Eckhart drew the boldest conclusions from this thought of *unio mystica*, of which only two will be touched on here. He articulated the idea that through the experience of the birth of the Son, within itself, the human soul is drawn into the inner trinitarian life of God. “The Son, whom God procreates within himself, and whom he procreates within me, is the same, and is the Only Begotten Son.” In that human being who experiences the *unio mystica*, the Son himself—not in any derivative sense, but rather in the primeval, original sense of the Only Begotten Son of the Father—is procreated and born.

Angelus Silesius expresses it in this way:

When God for the first time, gave birth unto his Son
He granted Thee and me, a childbed, everyone.

The spiritual birth, which within me was done
Is one with that by which the Father bore the Son.⁵

Probably bolder yet is the thought that the human being who is united with God in this manner participates in the work of God and takes part in God’s creative activity. Eckhart described this connection of the soul with the creative activity of God in two ways, the first by shifting the creative activity of God to within the soul: “Everything that God created six thousand years ago and that God will create one thousand years from now, he creates in the innermost and highest

5. [Likely from Scheffer, *Angelus Silesius*; Benz did not provide citations to several quotations—eds.]

part of the soul. Everything which is past and everything which is future God creates in the innermost part of the soul.”

One also finds the other aspect, wherein Eckhart maintains that the soul which is united with God is capable of participation in God’s creation of worlds. During his trial for heresy, of course, Eckhart denied ever uttering in his sermons the incriminating sentence: “I created the world with my little finger,” but one of his writings says this about the soul: “Its becoming is part of the eternal birth: eventually it will be so pure that it has no other being than his. This being is the beginning of all the works which God creates in heaven and in earth. It is the beginning and the basis of all his divine works.”

Here the soul itself appears as the quintessence of the creative cosmic rationality. This is a highly paradoxical expression of the fact that man does not only experience an inspiring contact with God in the *unio mystica*, but rather that this contact awakens a new creative activity within him and makes him the coworker of God. With this, we have the fundamental thought of that religious ethic into which the view of man held by the Christian mystics quite naturally matures. The goal of mysticism is not the enjoyment of *unio mystica* but the freeing of man, which enables him to participate in the work of God in this world.

“Seclusion from the world,” therefore, should not be viewed as a negative but rather as a positive ideal. Master Eckhart said that man should “renounce” all the things of this world, be “secluded” from all things and images, “divest” himself of all things, in order to prepare himself for God to dwell within him. But the goal of *unio* is for God to be fruitful within us. That human being who for God’s sake is dead to all creatures, who has “gone out” of himself, receives in God all things again in their original form and order and receives from God the power to participate in God’s work in this world, to permeate the world with God’s serving love. “He who would therefore go out of himself shall—in the real sense—be given unto himself again.”

In his sermons it was precisely Eckhart the monk who expressly advocated the priority of the active life, the *vita activa* over the contemplative life, the *vita contemplativa*, and turns on its head through a

paradoxical interpretation the traditional thought about the superiority of Mary—*vita contemplativa*—over Martha—*vita activa*.

The fact that in the Gospels Jesus calls Martha twice, proves, according to Eckhart, that she had already attained the status of renewal in the image of God—the second call is the call to the new, reborn person, the “human-human,” whereas he only said of Mary, “Mary hath chosen that good part” (Luke 10:42)—that is to say, according to Eckhart, she would very much like to have the good part, but she does not yet have it; she is yet being held back by her constant looking toward the goal; she must still sit at Jesus’ feet. But Martha has already attained the goal, the renewal of the image of God, the birth of the son in the *scintilla in anima* [spark in the soul] and therefore has achieved the freedom to stand up and work, “careful and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41).

III.

Another unusual mystical interpretation of man, found in the whole tradition of German mysticism from Eckhart to Seuse and Tauler, to Angelius Silesius, and via the pietistic mystics to Protestantism, is the interpretation of man who has experienced the saving contact with God as the “noble man.” The discussion about the true nature of nobility is directly connected to the feudalization of the Christian church, which planted itself in German soil as early as the first attempts to Christianize the Germanic tribes. Feudalization consisted of the noble landlords (who were patrons and donors by virtue of ecclesiastical privileges given to states and principalities) bestowing critical clerical offices, most notably those of bishop and abbot, upon members of the upper nobility—wherever possible, of course, upon members of their own family. This led to the requirement even in many monastic orders that novices be able to show their membership in the nobility before they were admitted. The great German mystics of the high Middle Ages were, for the most part, of the nobility.⁶

6. Ernst Benz, “Über den Adel in der deutschen Mystik,” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 14 (1936): 505–35.

Precisely in Master Eckhart, then, who himself was descended from the noble family of von Hohenheim in Thüringen, one finds a peculiar spiritualization of nobility. For him a noble man is not a man who can point to a noble birth but a man in whose soul God himself has taken residence by means of a divine birth and who has received divine nobility through this divine residence. God alone is noble. He has bestowed upon man his actual divine nobility by creating him in his own image, and this nobility was the original adornment and virtue of man before the fall, the token of his state of original freedom. But man misused his freedom to revolt against his creator; he broke his oath of allegiance to his liege Lord, who had elevated him to the nobility. As punishment for this breach of faith, he lost his original noble status. Only through the birth of the Son in the human soul has man been reelevated to the status of “noble man.”

This thought mostly infuses the German-language sermons and devotional booklets of Master Eckhart, but it reoccurs in the later tradition of German mysticism down to Angelus Silesius, large portions of whose aphorisms clearly represent brief, but poetically perfected synopses of Master Eckhart’s experiences and intuitions:

He who is born of God, who has his flesh and soul
Forsooth ’tis he alone, whose blood is truly noble.

The wise man’s ancestry, of which he well can boast,
Is traced to God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

From God I have been born, begat in God’s own Son.
And through the Holy Ghost, become a noble one.

Am I not noble then! the angels serve me more
The Lord woos me and waits, outside my chamber door.

My highest nobleness is that I am becoming
While yet on earth a king, a God, or what I’m willing.

In one further point of Christian mysticism’s view of man, traits are found that were neglected or forgotten in traditional church teachings. These touch mainly on the Christian understanding of man in

his relationship to the universe, to nature. The Reformation of the sixteenth century led to the emphasis of all religious and theological concern being shifted to the question about the nature of faith, or, as Luther formulated it, to the question “How do I acquire a merciful God?” Confronted with this, the relationship between man and the universe was relegated more and more to the background. The fact that theology ceased to concern itself with the problem of a Christian understanding of the universe did much to emancipate the natural sciences from a theology that had lost nature from its view. Only in the area of mystical anthropology was the old knowledge retained that in the creation, the fall, and salvation is there a real, eternal connection between man and the universe. This connection was still expressed by mystics like Master Eckhart, who treats it as clearly self-evident, and it is expressed in three ideas that occur again and again in later mysticism, as for example in Johann Arndt, the author of the *Four Books on True Christianity*.⁷ But it is prominent also in the nature theology of Jakob Böhme and his heirs right down to Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, until it achieved its last universal audience in the nature philosophy of [Georg W. F.] Hegel and [Friedrich von] Schelling.⁸

The first idea is that there exists an inner connection between man and the universe, even so far as the creation is concerned, since man was created as the “epitome” and “quintessence” of the universe. This is the old Neoplatonic idea of man as the microcosm being resurrected within the framework of Christian anthropology, naturally in a substantially altered form, not anymore the reflection, but the quintessence, the epitome, the “extract” of the universe. In man, all the powers and forms of the universe are brought together; he is the point of intersection and the point of aggregation of all forms and developments of the universe, he is the “final creation” in an almost evolutionary sense. These are ideas that are found again in the Christian mystics among modern anthropologists and paleoanthropologists

7. Johann Arndt, *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Evangelischer Bücher-Verein, 1853).

8. Ernst Benz, *Schellings theologische Geistesahnen* (Wiesbaden: Akademie der Wissenschaft und der Literature, 1955); Ernst Benz, *Les sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande* (Paris: Vrin, 1968).

like Edgar Dacqué, for whom the figure of man has always stood as an inner model and key image behind the whole range of forms of life in the plant and animal kingdoms and, recently, [Pierre] Teilhard de Chardin, who also sees the evolution of life determined by a “hominisation” that strives toward its future fulfillment in a greater cosmic Christ.⁹

The second idea is expressed and hinted at in the words of the apostle Paul: “For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation [Luther: *Offenbarung* = revelation] of the sons of God. . . . Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain [Luther: *mit uns* = with us] together until now” (Romans 8:19–22). Expressed here is the idea that by the revolt of man against God and by sin, not only *man* fell to the status of captive, but also that the entire creation was pulled downward by man in the fall and now awaits with man the day of its liberation through God. The idea in its completely natural sense is not so far removed from our thinking today, when we contemplate the devastation of the animal kingdom, the pollution of the waters and the atmosphere, the destruction of nature by industrial and commercial plundering.

The third idea, however, is that God’s work of salvation is not limited to man but encompasses the whole universe. In the renewal of man and with the restoration of the original divine image in man, the universe is also brought back into the original order. These thoughts were expressed most clearly and powerfully by Johann Arndt in his *Four Books on True Christianity*. Behind the title lies the idea of the fourfold self-revelation of God: (1) God revealed himself in man, whom he created in his image; (2) he revealed himself in Jesus Christ, in whose person he returns to man the divine promise of salvation, which man himself betrayed; (3) God revealed himself in the holy

9. Ernst Benz, *Schöpfungsglaube und Endzeiterwartung: Antwort auf Teilhard de Chardins Theologie der Evolution* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1965); published in English as *Evolution and Christian Hope*, trans. Heinz G. Frank (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

scriptures, which expound the saving desire of God and awaken the faith that leads to salvation; (4) and he revealed himself in nature, which itself is a self-revelation of God.

The fourth book of Johann Arndt, which treats the self-revelation of God in nature, became the basis for all subsequent drafts of a theology of nature. Nowhere else in mysticism is the unique nobility of man on the one hand, and the inner connection between the salvation of man and the salvation of the universe on the other, so clearly expressed as in Johann Arndt.

IV.

The mystical comprehension of the idea of *imago dei*, of the self-portrayal of God in man through the procreation and birth of the Son in man, leads directly, in the last analysis, to the concept of the apotheosis of man. This concept disappeared from church doctrine in the fifth and sixth centuries and never spread to the Roman-Catholic occident, even in the period of the ancient church, but it always remained alive in the tradition of Christian mysticism by virtue of the continuity of the mystical experience. Yet European believers who dared to speak about apotheosis in the Christian sense of the renewal of God's image in man are not to be discussed here, but rather the representatives of an American church, which—based on the experiences and doctrines of its visionary founder—has made the idea of deification the very foundation of its anthropology, its concept of the community, even its social structure: the Mormon Church. By doing this, of course, I break a European taboo—namely, the rule which is still widespread in European theology even after half a century of ecumenical movement, *americana non leguntur* [America doesn't count], and the specific prejudice of German theology that Germans somehow have an hereditary right to theology and that American theology does not even exist.

That American theology which bases itself on a continuation of Old and New Testament revelation in the form of a further, definitive one, especially intended for America, is comprised of the teachings

of the Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁰ A unique transformation of the concept of God is the basis for the teachings of Mormonism—that is to say, in the last analysis, the teachings of the Book of Mormon, which the founder of this church, Joseph Smith, maintained was written on golden plates brought to him by an angel and translated by himself into English with the aid of the Urim and Thummim. This unique transformation of the idea of God led to the astounding achievements that this church has accomplished, achievements that can be demonstrated by the fact that the church has established Zion anew in a unique cooperative effort in the middle of the Great Salt Lake desert in the territory of the modern states of Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and California, after enduring persecutions of all kinds and overcoming obstacle after obstacle in first attempting to establish this new Zion in the state of Ohio and later in Missouri.¹¹

It is unknown what spiritual tradition provided Joseph Smith (the son a simple settler in Sharon, Vermont, who grew up under the difficult conditions of colonization) with his new understanding of God. As a boy he heard the revival sermons of various preachers from various sects who came among the settlers, but what is characteristic about his religious development is precisely that he obeyed the angelic warning to join none of the existing sects but to prepare himself for the immanent revelation of the eternal gospel whose herald he himself was to be. Today historians of Christian theology might presume that he picked up by accident some half-understood bits of Schelling's idea on theogony, this idea of a God who evolves himself in his creation, who grows with it and in it becomes more and more aware of himself—but among the settlers of the Wild West there was no such possibility.

And so the complete reinterpretation that the founder of the church of the Latter-day Saints makes of the orthodox Christian view of God

10. See the Book of Mormon.

11. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Nels Anderson, *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Robert Mullen, *Die Mormonen: Geschichte einer Glaubensbewegung* (Weillheim: Barth, 1968) [German translation of Robert Mullen, *The Latter-day Saints: The Mormons Yesterday and Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966)].

is all the more surprising. To be sure, the holy books of revelation of the Mormons, the Book of Mormon itself, as well as the Doctrine and Covenants, also speak in an apparently completely orthodox manner about the omnipotence and omniscience of God; they testify that he is the Lord of creation and of salvation, but what is decisively new about Joseph Smith's view of God is the idea that God himself participates in the fundamental law of the universe, namely the law of eternal progression. God himself develops himself with his creation and participates in eternal progression.

Connected to this is, in Joseph Smith, the idea that God did not create the world out of nothing—the world is eternal; the elements are eternal and uncreated. In this eternal universe there is no dead matter; matter is full of power and energy; even spirit is matter; spirit and energy belong to the eternal nature of the universe. The activity of God does not consist, then, of creating the universe, but in bringing the existing universe of matter, spirit, and energy into a progressive order, to form this given universe more purely and more perfectly, to bring forth order out of chaos. In this activity he himself grows and becomes God. The Mormon view of God is a theology of progression and evolution.

But what was God in the beginning? The Mormons' startling answer to this question is: in the beginning God was man. His relationship to the universe is the same as man's relationship to the universe; he attempts to rationally form the given universe and make it useful to him. Since God is subject like man to the law of progression, this has to mean that

God must have been active from the beginning and must presently be engaged in progressive development; and infinite as God is, he must have had less fulness of power in the past than he has today. Just as clear is the fact that God's progression, as in the case of all other beings, began with an act of his will, until he finally achieved a dominion over the universe which, to our finite understanding, appears absolutely complete. We can be sure that the powers that are within him and were born

within him have developed themselves to a Godlike degree. Thus he became God.¹²

This naive, clumsy formulation of that which Schelling made the basis of his nature theology—the doctrine of theogony—presupposes that the first form in which God undertook the progressive organization of the earth was the human form. Brigham Young, who drastically simplified the visionary thoughts of Joseph Smith, expressed it like this: “Adam in paradise was none other than God himself. God himself steps as a man into the course of history and begins to progressively organize the universe.” At this point in the sermon of this robust founder of Zion in the American salt desert, the image of the divine aboriginal man appears, quite spontaneously, totally without clues to any historical sources out of which he might have taken it: “When our father Adam came into the Garden of Eden, he came there with a celestial body, and brought Eve, one of his wives with him. He helped to make and organize this world. He is Michael the Archangel, the Ancient of Days, about which holy men have written and spoken. He is our father and our God and the only God we deal with. Each person on the earth, whether he be a Christian or not, must hear this and will know it sooner or later.”¹³

And later the same Brigham Young said: “I have learned from experience that there is only one God belonging to this people, the first man.”

Here Brigham Young undertakes the bold equation of Adam, God, and the archangel Michael, the Ancient of Days. God enters and becomes involved in history as the first celestial man with a celestial body who brings one of his wives with him. In fact there is some basis for this new theology as early as Joseph Smith. In his document the Doctrine and Covenants, the equation of Adam and the Archangel Michael is already found, and in one place Adam is also called “the ancient of days” (D&C 27:11), one of the names of God which appears

12. John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937), 24–25.

13. [Please note that sources originally in English were translated by Benz into German and thereafter by Keele into English. They do not necessarily exactly reproduce the original English, nor have been able to locate all the original sources—eds.]

in Daniel 7:9 and 22. This doctrine has not, however, been accepted by Mormons as canonized dogma.

Universally accepted is the idea, on the other hand, that God has attained his present state of godhood through his own efforts to organize the universe. In place of the God of conventional orthodox churches who has always been complete, Mormonism knows of a God who has attained by his own activity, by progressive creative organization of the eternal, material, power-laden universe, a relative dominion over the world—a task which in no wise is complete and which needs further refining by means of more eternal progression. The universe is not yet complete; God has not yet attained the highest degree of his “godhood.” He has accomplished a great deal since he engaged as an exalted man in the organization of the universe, but he has yet much to do. Progression is infinite.

In our age of space travel it is astonishing to see that this farm boy Joseph Smith, with his violently opposed visions, built his view of the world into a system of plurality of worlds that opens up all the possibilities of a macrocosmic theology. Each world has its God, who advances with it, who—one is tempted to say—tinkers with it, perfects it, and attempts to organize into higher forms its reluctant powers of spirit and matter, intelligence and energy. Parley P. Pratt, the great first-generation Mormon leader said in 1855: “Gods, angels, and man are all of the same species, they comprise a great family which is distributed over the whole solar system in the form of colonies, kingdoms, nations, etc. The great decisive difference between one part of this race and the other consists in the differing degrees of intelligence and purity and also in the difference of the spheres, which each of them inhabit, in a series of progressive being.”¹⁴

There is, therefore, a great number of spirit beings who are all engaged in the climb toward godhood. There are in the universe numerous Gods, who are all subject to a “Supreme Head,” which itself is still involved in eternal progression.

14. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 40–41.

This idea was also retained in later Mormon theology. Apostle John A. Widtsoe writes in his book *Rational Theology*, which appeared in 1937:

During the upward climb of the Highest Being other intelligent beings are involved in the same way—though with less energy—gaining control over the universe. . . . Next to God then, there may be other spirit beings who in their power are so close to him that they are co-equal with him, as far as our limited understanding can comprehend it. These Beings may be—as far as their power is concerned—immeasurably far from God, but nevertheless are immeasurably superior to us mortals of this earth. Such intelligent beings are for us like Gods. Under this title there may be a great number of beings, who possess in greater or lesser degree the attributes of Godhood.¹⁵

Thus, the image of God and man join in the image of the eternal man. Man is an image of God because he progressively becomes more and more a God and approaches godhood. The anthropology of the Mormons is expressed in the colossal statement which became proverbial even in the early days of Mormonism: “As man is now, God once was; as God is now, man may become.”¹⁶ Again, it is clear that the image of the divine man stands behind this concept. “Man was in the beginning with God” (see D&C 93:29). Man and God are eternal intelligence, members of a great society of eternal beings. In a certain sense, future progression is therefore inherent in the eternal man. “Once in the pre-worldly existence of man the Creator took the intelligence of man and gave it a spiritual form. Man became a spirit and God became the Father of our Spirits.”

But this eternal man does not enter the world in a completed form; he himself has grown in the creation of the world, has become that which he is by a gradual progression, and he is not finished by

15. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, 25–26.

16. Lorenzo Snow, *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, comp. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 2.

any means. Through endless ages man has risen by slow degrees to his present state. Here begins the eschatology of the Mormons: only in the kingdom of God on earth will humans progress, attain its highest degree. The goal of the progressive development of man is the divine man. Man is eternal and as such the possessor of “Godlike attributes,” but these must first be formed, improved, developed, and perfected in a series of progressive changes in order to arrive at the fountainhead, the standard, the climax of divine humanity. Man is of the same family as God and the Gods, but like God himself he must first unfold his being in an act of self-creation through eternal progression.

How is the step taken, however, from heavenly man who was with God from the beginning (or from the heavenly spirit beings—rather, from the heavenly intelligences) to a concrete man of this earth? In the answer to this question, the Mormons’ decisive fundamental anthropological attitude and religious feeling for life is clearly revealed: The heavenly intelligences can only develop and perfect themselves in this world of matter, energy, space, and time. The intelligences press for incarnation in this world of time, space, power, and matter. They receive permission from God himself to take this decisive step that directs their progressive realization of self into the sphere of the body and makes it possible.

Of course, this presupposes one thing: An unlimited recognition of human freedom. The Book of Mormon already stated: “Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life” (2 Nephi 10:23). In 1830, Joseph Smith proclaimed that the Lord has said of man: “Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself” (D&C 29:35).

Hence the single human individual lived free and uncreated in his heavenly homeland as a rational spirit being—“intelligence,” “acting upon its own agency”—and independent in its own sphere as all rational beings are (see D&C 30). On the basis of its own free choice, the heavenly spirit being comes down to this earth to test its abilities in dealing with “coarse” matter and to develop itself in the realm of the body and in time and space. Heavenly man did not ignorantly throw

himself into this world, driven by sheer lust—as the gnostic myth of redemption teaches—but came in full knowledge of the difficulties awaiting him there.

For the descent of the heavenly man into this world was preceded by the “great council in heaven,” in which God taught man that it is possible to develop his power and knowledge with a full consciousness of the difficulties awaiting him there, including death. The spirit beings who press for incarnation know that death is a condition of corporeal life in time and space, that suffering death is one of the tasks they have to perform in this world. This great plan was laid before the free spirits for their decision. In a decision of the free will, man enters the path of eternal progression, “of that great law of increasing complexity, the law of endless development of all his powers in the midst of a universe becoming increasingly complex.”

Especially revealing in context with this anthropology is the reinterpretation of the devil. Satan participated in “the great council” in heaven. He proposes to God that in view of the difficulties of man’s test in this new condition of terrestrial existence that his agency be taken away—that is, man’s freedom be taken away—and in its place, that he, Satan, be allowed to lead the human family by the *Führer*-principle in order to bring them all to perfection without allowing anyone’s wrong decisions to endanger him. But God forbids Satan to encroach upon man’s freedom and to make him subject to his will. Anger about this refusal of God is the reason for Satan’s fall from God (see Moses 4:1–6). After his expulsion from heaven he now attempts to thwart the great plan of God on the earth and rob man of his free will (see D&C 93:39). Thus man comes to this earth to continue his development in a universe which is itself still in development.

Evil is a lessening or stealing of freedom. This explains why Mormons refuse all stimulants like alcohol, tea, and coffee, and even Coca-Cola, as well as all mind-altering drugs, so that man will not be in a condition in which his free thinking and decision-making processes are hindered.

This anthropology represents the most radical counterpole to the Calvinistic doctrine of original sin. Mormons do not deny the exist-

tence of sin, but they interpret sin to mean the choice of wrong means of self-actualization and self-progression. Consequently, there is no original sin and therefore no punishment for original sin: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression” (Article of Faith 2). The existence of death belongs to the earthly process of the perfection of man. The heavenly spirits already know in advance that death awaits them as a condition of being on the earth in space, time, and corporality, but they choose this form of progression in the full consciousness that overcoming these difficulties is a means of progression: precisely at this point salvation through Christ begins to acquire meaning.

For this progression of man does not end in death but continues on in life after death. This further progression, too, is dependent upon the fulfillment of God’s commandments in full freedom and clear understanding. In a revelation of the Lord to Joseph Smith we read: “For if you will that I give unto you a place in the celestial world, you must prepare yourselves by doing the things which I have commanded you and required of you” (D&C 78:7). Earthly life is a preparation for future life, a preparation which consists of keeping the commandments of God as they have been given through the revelations in the Bible and through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The mode of existence after death is also of a corporeal character. Mormons do not hold with a *pure*, that is, body-less existence. “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes” (D&C 131:7). “An immaterial being is a contradiction in terms. Immaterialness is just another word for nothingness and is the negation of all existence. Spirit is just as much matter as oxygen or hydrogen.” Thus the concept of the resurrection of the body plays an important role in Mormonism and determines in a decisive way their expectation of the coming kingdom of God.

Directly connected to the concept of these heavenly intelligences desiring a body out of free will and in order to be tested and perfected here on this earth is a doctrine that was of the greatest significance to the preservation of the Mormon community but which is so strange

to us that we would hardly make the connection, namely the teaching and practicing of polygamy. Spirits press forward to earth and desire a body. The ruling system of monogamy in nowise does justice to the population pressure of the spirit world. The problem of overpopulation is a problem for heaven, not a problem for the earth. Earth has room for all, but the process proceeds too slowly; the spirits who press for incarnation are getting impatient. Monogamy offers only modest possibilities, with the help of only one spouse, of doing justice to the spirits who desire bodies. So the establishment of polygamy makes room here, shortens the queue for those spirits waiting for incarnation. Joseph Smith had exactly the opposite concern of his contemporary, Pastor Malthus, who died in 1834, four years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, and who in his alarming treatise, "Essay on the Principle of Population," which first appeared anonymously in 1798, depicted the menacing danger of the overpopulation of the earth: The Prophet Joseph's optimistic doctrine of the eternal progression and development of life in the universe would have made Malthus's fears seem laughable to the Prophet—in the event he knew about them—because he was concerned about the overpopulation of heaven, the population pressure of the heavenly spirit beings who wished to come down to this earth to get the chance to perfect themselves, but who were hindered in their arrival on this earth by laws requiring monogamy that had been passed by apostate Christians of the first centuries in contrast to the order of polygamy of the Old Testament. Mormon polygamy, which later was repealed under the pressure of U.S. legislation, and after a highly brutal campaign of federal police against Mormon polygamist families, was taken from the earth but kept intact by Mormons for the coming paradise in heaven—one can today as a Mormon take more than one wife from among those who are deceased—Mormon polygamy has nothing to do with sexual debauchery but is tied to a strict patriarchal system of family order and demonstrates in the relationship of the husband to his individual wives all the ethical traits of a Christian, monogamous marriage. It is completely focused on bearing children and rearing them in the bosom of the family and the Mormon community. Actually, it exhibits a very great measure of selflessness, a willingness to sacrifice,

and a sense of duty. Historical accounts of polygamous Mormon marriages are free from all risqué scenes and contain, rather, anecdotes like the following, in which a grown-up daughter says to her father upon his arrival home after one of his many visits to his other families. “You have to sleep in the barn tonight; we already have enough hungry mouths in this house!” The door to the spirit world is slammed shut, and the father, who possesses the keys to the opening of the spirit kingdom is relegated in the name of some unknown Malthus to a lonely bed in the barn! The earth is “off-limits” to the spirits.

But the purpose of polygamous marriages is not only fulfilled on this earth. Polygamous marriage is an essential part of the process of perfection and eternal progress and reaches beyond this earth into eternity; at least the true, religious marriage does.

Mormon marriage practices are of two types—marriage for time and marriage for time and eternity. Marriage for time binds the marriage partners until “death do you part”; this is the lower form of marriage. The second, religiously desirable form, of marriage is “marriage for time and all eternity.” It is based on a sacramental ordinance performed in the temple, the “sealing” of the marriage partners, parents, and children to each other for eternity.

There is yet a third form, “marriage for eternity.” This form of marriage is performed with women who have already died, but who were either not married in life, or who had only been married “until death” and are hence marriageable again after their death, that is, eligible for “marriage for eternity.”

These marriages “for time and eternity,” as well as those “for eternity,” will be continued in the next life. Marriage for eternity, therefore, provides the basis for the mutual cooperation of the partners in the infinite progression of the universe. The fathers of great polygamous families will find their greatest exaltation in the life to come and “they shall abide with the angels and Gods, who reside there, to their exaltation and glory in all things” (see D&C 132:19). Thus polygamy, by which a husband seals himself into an eternal family unit with several wives, is the true path to godhood, the way of eternal progression that best leads man above.

The theory and practice of birth control naturally finds many vigorous opponents among Latter-day Saints. “The doctrine that married men and women should not bring forth children, or should limit the number of children born to them, is contrary to the spirit of the great plan and is a great mistake. Let the waiting spirits come down! Let the children be born on this earth! Let fatherhood and motherhood be the most honorable vocations on this earth!”

In no other Christian doctrine is the connection between God and man so closely conceived, the idea of man as the image of God so concretely and literally interpreted, man brought into such close proximity to God, God, on the other hand, so strongly directed to man as in Mormonism. The thought of apotheosis in mysticism, which expresses itself there in the idea of the spiritual divine birth in man and in the spiritual procreation of the Son in man and in the progressive deification of man, has been translated here into a theology of evolution and progression, where the path that man travels from his prehistoric to his earthly form of existence and to his future corporeal mode of existence in the kingdom of God is understood as the path of eternal progression determined by the “great plan” of God, which makes possible his ascent to godhood. It is not the path, however, of the lonely, celibate mystic, but the way of a great and ever-growing family of saints in whom the creative, conscious organization of the universe is perfected.

V.

One can think what one wants of this doctrine of progressive deification, but one thing is certain: with this anthropology of his, Joseph Smith is closer to the view of man held by the ancient church than the precursors of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin were, who considered the thought of such a substantial connection between God and man as *the* heresy, *par excellence*. We must remember here, that for the ancient church salvation stood in direct correlation to incarnation. Athanasius, the great bishop of Alexandria, the head of the church in all Egypt, summarized the Christian doctrine of salvation in the words: “God became man so that we may become God.” The

goal of salvation is deification and Athanasius invokes in this context the words of Jesus: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

A study of the biblical interpretations of the Greek fathers, on which their dogmatic doctrines were based, leads to the surprising discovery that a passage of holy scripture that plays an outstanding role in the biblical foundation of anthropology has totally disappeared from occidental sermon and liturgy—namely, Psalm 82:6: “I have said, ‘ye are gods,’ and all of you are children of the most high”—*ego dixi, Dii estis et filii excelsi*.

In the gospel according to John, this concept plays a decisive role in the understanding of man and the portrayal of the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus: In John 10:22, the discussion between Jesus and the scribes is depicted. There Jesus speaks the colossal phrase that comprises the key to his messianic self-consciousness: “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). This phrase appears to the assembled orthodox Jews to be such a great blasphemy that they raise stones to extract—right on the spot—the punishment prescribed by the law to the party guilty of such blasphemy:

for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God. Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God? (John 10:33–36)

Jesus takes the passage from Psalms literally as a promise spoken about mankind generally: “Ye are gods,” with a view to the fact that the word of God came to man, to which thing Jesus clearly attributes the power of deification. Jesus specifically insists that this promise made by God to man—“Ye are gods”—has and will retain its validity. The further thought process of Jesus is a conclusion that is common to rabbinic exegesis, *a minori ad maius*: If God calls all those “god” to whom he has directed his promise, how much more then is that true

for me! Jesus interprets the promise: “Ye are gods” in the sense of salvation for everyone, a divine promise to all men. He does not dispute the universal validity of this phrase but intentionally emphasizes it and brings it out, in order to then draw the conclusion about his own divine Sonship.

The theologians of the ancient church were not afraid of making this phrase—*Dii estis et filii excelsi*—the basis of their theological anthropology nor of connecting it with their doctrine of man as the image of God. Thus Clement of Alexandria, the teacher of the Alexandrian School of catechism, writes about the perfection of the true gnostic: “The same occurs with us, whose archetype the Lord was:

By baptism we are illuminated
By illumination we receive the Sonship
By Sonship we attain perfection
By perfection we gain immortality.

He [the Lord] states: ‘I have said: Ye are gods, and all together are sons of the most high.’”¹⁷ The same Clement of Alexandria writes in another part of his *Miscellanies*: “This gnosticism leads to an infinite and perfect goal,” and he describes the life which is attained in this goal as a life that

is given unto us according to the will of God, in the community of the “gods,” after we are freed of all chastisement and punishment which because of our sins we have to endure, for the sake of our betterment, which brings salvation. After this release from punishment, praise and honor are granted us, for we shall attain perfection. . . . If we have become “of pure heart” then renewal awaits us in the form of our Lord throughout an eternal present, and such people then receive the name of “gods” since they are enthroned together with

17. Clement of Alexandria, *Werke*, ed. Otto Stählin, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1905–1936).

other “gods” who have received the first place under their Savior.¹⁸

Now this idea of deification could give rise to a misunderstanding—namely, that it leads to a blasphemous self-aggrandizement of man. If that were the case, then mysticism would, in fact, be the sublimist, most spiritualized form of egoism. But the concept of *imago dei*, in the Christian understanding of the term, precisely does *not* aspire to awaken in man a consciousness of his own divinity, but attempts to have him recognize the image of God in his neighbor. Here the powerful words of Jesus in Matthew 25:21–26 are appropriate and connected by the church fathers to *imago dei*. Jesus speaks here about the last judgment and describes the great surprise of them who are being judged. The judgment of the ruling Son of Man will be either acceptance into the kingdom of God or expulsion from the kingdom of God depending on the attitude of each individual toward the Son of Man. The Son of Man says to those on his right hand: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me” (Matthew 25:34–36). The blessed ones on his right hand are very astounded by this communication and ask: “Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick or in prison, and came unto thee?” (Matthew 25:37–39). Thereupon they receive the answer: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). And the same answer is repeated for the damned at his left hand: “Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me” (Matthew 25:45).

Hence, the concept of *imago dei* does not lead toward self-aggrandizement but rather toward charity as the true and actual form of God’s love, for the simple reason that in one’s neighbor the image of

18. Clement of Alexandria, *Werke*.

God, the Lord himself, confronts us. The love of God should be fulfilled in the love toward him in whom God himself is mirrored, in one's neighbor. Thus, in the last analysis, the concept of *imago dei* is the key to the fundamental law of the gospel—"Thou shalt love . . . God . . . and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27)—since one should view one's neighbor with an eye to the image that God has engraven upon him and to the promise that he has given regarding him.

This comprehension of one's neighbor as the image of God is contained best in a phrase upon which Ernesto Buonaiuti bases one of his Eranos lectures—the words of the Lord not contained in the canonized gospels but passed on to the Latin fathers of the second century, especially Tertullian, and certainly authentic, for the phrase represents a summary of the Lord's words just cited from the Gospel of Matthew: "*vidisti fratrem, vidisti dominum tuum*—if thou hast seen thy brother, then thou hast also seen thy Lord."¹⁹

19. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, vol. 1: *Evangelien* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959); vol. 2: *Apostolisches, Apokalypsen und Verwandtes* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964).