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MAN, GOD AND MANDALA

Man, born in this world, is in search of truth. Truth is reality which is all and whole. The praying man is actually in search of this all and whole, struggling to liberate himself from the sea of time and transience. Accordingly religions developed world-visions, *darśanas* or *weltanschauung*, which present to their respective followers the totality of reality in due order. The traditional pattern of the presentation of a particular world-vision in a diagram is known in India as *mandala*. India developed *mandalas* from very ancient times. In one way or other, they are also used in several Western traditions. *Mandalas* give us the total reality in one glimpse, make us realize where we are in the great divine plan of cosmic salvation and whither we are now heading for. Thus *mandala* becomes a great help for meditative prayer.

In this article we present two different world-visions, one from the East and one from the West expressed in the art of *mandalas*. Rāmānuja a *bhakti* saint is chosen from Indian tradition, especially because he considers the universe as the *Kṣetra* or body of Brahman. Teilhard de Chardin a Christian mystic is chosen from the Western tradition as for Teilhard Christ is the centre of the whole universe. Both are mystics and saints, true devotees who had spent their lives in meditation and prayer. The world-visions they arrive at are the result of their own personal prayer-experience.

I

Rāmānuja, World and Mandala Symbolism

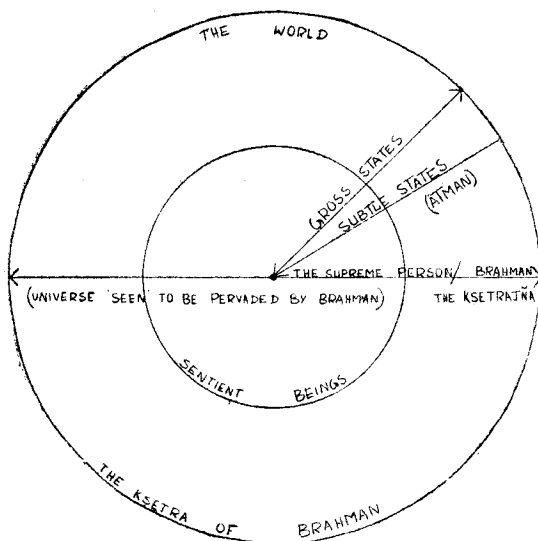
In order to present his understanding of the 'nature of things' namely, the relationship between Brahman and the world, Rāmānuja spoke symbolically of Brahman as the '*kṣetrajñā*' (i.e., the true nature of the individual Self which cognizes the *kṣetra*, or 'field' of experience.)¹

1. See *Gītabhāṣya* (GB), Trans. Sanpatkumaran (Madras : Vidya Press, 1969) p. 383.

Perhaps, a brief consideration of his use of symbolism will lead to a deeper understanding of his 'insight'.

1. Brahman and the world in a mandala

For Rāmānuja, Brahman is a principle of inclusiveness. He animates yet transcends the world. He is both differentiated (in 'names and forms') and undifferentiated ('unevolved'). To present Brahman as this principle of inclusiveness through polarity, Rāmānuja, consciously or otherwise, uses symbolic language: Brahman is the 'I' principle cognizing the world as its 'kṣetra'. Brahman is like the *bindu* of a macrocosmic and microcosmic *mandala*. See Diagram below:



This is the key to his theological insight. His discussion of the body/soul analogy (*sarīra*) is really an illustration of what can only be self-experienced truth. Perhaps too much stress has been laid on his depiction of the world in terms of 'body' (*sarīra*) at the expense of his deeper idea of the relationship between 'form' (*rūpa*) and consciousness (the self). The body/soul analogy was used by him to show one aspect of this relationship only—that of dependence;

Any substance which a sentient soul is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes, and which stands

to the soul in an entirely subordinate relation, is the body of that soul... *In this sense* then, all sentient and non-sentient beings together constitute the body of the supreme Person, for they are controlled and supported by him for his own ends, and we are absolutely subordinate to him.²

That reality is to be conceived in terms of relational unity, and that such reality can only be known through self-conscious realization, is Ramanuja's fundamental presupposition and contribution to the history of *Vedanta*.

2. The function of the 'kṣetra' of Brahman: Self-realization

Because Brahman is the 'I' principle cognizing the world as its *kṣetra*, Ramanuja denotes this 'I' (or 'That') as 'supreme Self' and objectively, as 'the highest Person'. The significance of this choice of words is commonly passed over: this is the nature of reality (i.e., supreme Self-ness) as perceivable to human hearts and minds. And this is the 'insight' communicated through the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gīta*. A clear distinction needs to be made between *purāṇa*-influenced anthropomorphisms in his writings and discussions about the nature of 'the highest Person'. The latter reveals the implicit claim that Brahman is 'attainable' or 'realizable' as Person or Self. The function of the *kṣetra* is to be known; the function of the world is to identify its 'knower' to manifest Brahman. As the 'I' principle (the Self), Brahman is identified only through individual selves. So the human goal is objectified self-knowledge.

This is said to be other than matter. It is to be known as knowledge. It is to be attained through knowledge. It is present with a special relationship in the hearts of all (*Tatparyachandrika of Vedanta Deśika*: This 'special relationship' is "the presence" of the self in the heart as the experience).³

Ramanuja's classifications signify stages in a cosmic process. 'Higher' and 'lower' Brahman; 'sentient' and 'non-sentient' beings in

. *Śrī Bhashya* (SB) Trans. Thibaut: *Sacred Book of the East*, ed. M. Müller Vol. XLVIII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), p. 424.

3. *GB.*, pp. 382-3.

'gross' or 'subtle' states denote the polar possibilities and relational nature of reality's inclusiveness. They also denote *direction* in this person. Perhaps the main distinction between Śankara and Ramanuja lies in their very processes of thinking: Śankara's non-symbolic, highly conceptualized system contrasts with Ramanuja's re-presentation of key symbols within a rational framework. For Ramanuja, the very categories Śankara denied reality (subjective-objective) become the means and end of life itself (i.e., Self-realization through objectified self-knowledge).

3. The necessity for Self-knowledge

Ramanuja points out (albeit implicitly) that human consciousness—human life—is necessary to Brahman, to Self-realization. The *kṣetra* 'centres' on the *kṣetrajñā*; the world 'centres' on Brahman. In Self-realization Brahman, as it were, decentrates and re-centrates through the world. Brahman 'expresses' and 'informs'—consciousness. And this (human) consciousness realizes itself through its own Self-objectification. This is the way Ramanuja infers a cosmic 'telos'. The ultimate 'release' is, for man, the individual's de-centration from ego and *karma* and re-centration in the true Self. Ramanuja speaks of this in terms of 'attaining' the highest Person and His nature. Individuals do not, for him, create or build Brahman so much as reveal It or Him. And this is realized through perceiving Self-pervasiveness. In order to attain this release, the individual soul (*jīva*) has, in Ramanuja opinion, to make the supreme Person the object of his every desire and activity (instead of 'gross' objects, such as the body). This encourages the supreme Self to 'choose' to reveal Himself—to inform his very consciousness.

To this end, Ramanuja advocates '*upasana*' as true *bhakti*. By this he means meditation and worship in the form of loving devotion. He equates *upasana* with knowledge (*vedana*) because for him the object of both is the same. More specifically, he defines *upasana* as 'steady remembrance' characterized by 'immediate presentation' (*sākshātkāra* or *pratyakshatā*): Knowledge of the Lord is "of the form of direct vision: it is continued remembrance: and it is inexpressibly dear."⁴

4. *Ibid.*, p. 525. The best exposition of the nature of *upāsana* is the *Laghusiddhanta* in *SB I*, I, I. Cf. *GB*, p. 195.

Such insight into the nature of 'knowing' and 'perceiving' is remarkable, and it would be interesting to compare Ramanuja's views with those of contemporary theorists of perception. The role played by symbolization and visualization is obviously important to both.⁵ It must be remembered, however, that Ramanuja clearly believes in an objective (or objectifiable) reality which he denotes by the term 'supreme Person.' He would have to admit, however, that human consciousness enables that Person to 'exist'.

Thus, Ramanuja's soteriology becomes epistemology, because to know or realize Brahman is to perceive one's true Self. And this requires an attitude of devotion, humility, (or 'subservice') and dedication ('continued remembrance . . .):

It is only knowledge in the form of meditation which—being daily practised constantly improved by repetition, and continued up to death—is the means of reaching Brahman, and hence all the works connected with the different conditions of life are to be performed throughout life only for the purpose of originating such knowledge.⁶

To stress the practical side of the path of *upasana* is not to exclude dependence upon grace. "Such meditation . . . originated in the mind through the grace of the supreme Person . . ."⁷ *Upasana* leads to grace; facilitates grace. This balances his notion of the supreme Person 'choosing' to whom He will reveal Himself: *Upasana* . . . "is really the succession of memories which forms the cause of being chosen by the Supreme Self and which itself is inexpressibly dear on account of the object of remembrance being inexpressible dear . . ."⁸ Ramanuja's discussion of *upasana* and the way to release is, in fact, a practical guide to and evaluation of a process of transformation of consciousness. He is alluding to a transfiguration of person or self. The individual is advised to meditate on (or 'worship') his true Self; he

5. Rāmānuja actually says that meditation (*upāsana*) has the character of 'seeing' or 'intuition' because of the "element of imagination in it." *SB.*, p. 15.

6. *SB.*, p. 16.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 699.

8. *GB.*, p. 525.

should objectify in order to identify with the source of his very being. This is the context of *bhakti*.

Such a person can be conceived visually as a *mandala* and fruitfully compared with Tucci's psychological theories of *mandala* symbolism. (See *The Theory and Practice of the mandala*). *Upasana* is a dual activity of 'looking inwards' to seek the true self and 'looking outwards' to visualize and/or objectify that Self, (i.e., 'remembrance' characterized by immediate presentation). Here the important thing is not the soul/body relationship but the self/Self relationship. The self becomes the *kṣetra* of the true *kṣetrajñā*—the Self. Thus release (of self) and Self-realization signify the same (cognitive) activity. This activity is given a very specific location: "The ether of space within the (lotus of the) cavity of the heart."⁹ Perhaps this provides the key to Ramanuja's notion of the world as a soul's 'body' the *kṣetrajñā's kṣetra*. The world is, for him, the *location of divine activity*. In terms of our causal dependence upon Brahman the word 'body' is most appropriate, but in terms of the nature of our 'telos', '*kṣetra/kṣetrajñā*' becomes a more powerful symbol to be realized.

4. Self-realization: a mandala of transfiguration

Brahman is, as we have seen, the 'centre' and 'determinant' of human consciousness. He is supreme Self, the highest Person. He is cognized and realized in human hearts. (It is significant that the centre of consciousness is located in the heart and not the mind). All forms of life are in relationship with him. They are his 'modes' of being; they form his 'body' in that they are identified through Him. How they are identified is through knowledge, and to the 'knowing' and 'seeing' consciousness (the *jīvanmukta*) they are Brahman's *kṣetra*—his field of (Self)-experience. The path of *upāsana*—of knowledge—leads to this '*kṣetrajñā/kṣetra*' experience which is described traditionally as '*moksha*' or release:

... in the state of release, where the soul is unlimited, essential intelligence is not contracted in any way, there is none of those specific cognitions by which the self identifies with the body ... (or) views itself as a man or a god ... (Freed from ignorance and)

9 See *SB.*, P. 314.

recognizing this whole world as animated by Brahman, the view of plurality is dispelled by the recognition of the absence of an existence apart from Brahman.¹⁰

What is referred to here is a total psycho-physical transfiguration through 'entering' and identifying with a symbol of Brahman: the *kṣetrajñā* of the world. Brahman's 'reality' is only confirmable through Self-experience. The 'highest Person' becomes the centre of transfiguration. 'He' is realized through human consciousness.

The interesting passages Ramanuja selects from the *Upaniṣads* and *Gīta* to describe this self/Self experience refer, quite commonly, to size and place. Once again it is connected with the human heart. The whole person is located in the 'ether of space . . .' and the Person Himself (the principle of integration) is 'the size of the thumb' within that space.¹¹ Just as the 'body' or 'kṣetra' symbolizes divine activity, so the highest Person symbolizes the principle and power of that activity. And consciousness is inextricably linked with form, or non-form as in the case of space. As the supreme 'aham' consciousness or Self, Brahman is potential and actuality—microscopically small, and all-pervading. He is the soul's breath, yet contains the whole world. It is, perhaps, in this retention of relationship between form and consciousness that Ramanuja's fundamental criticism of Śankara lies. A whole is by definition a completion of parts; unity without plurality is meaningless.

On a more personal level, certain words are used by Ramanuja to describe the self/Self experience. In particular, self-luminosity is associated with Brahman as the 'kṣetrajñā', and bliss is associated with this inmost 'heart'. Thus the *jīvanmukta* speaks of light and bliss as characteristic of (his) experience of reality. It is only through his eyes that the world is 'known' as 'kṣetra'.

5. Mokṣa: 'realizing' the Self or 'knowing' the world

It can thus be seen that Ramanuja's thought is primarily symbolic, drawing upon traditional language in the *Upaniṣads* and *Gīta*. What

10. *GB.*, p. 395.

11. *Ka. Up.* II, 4f.

is new is his synthesis of the two, which he presents in a new, symbolic schema: a *mandala* conception of Brahman and the world. Knowledge (of Brahman) is for him a devotional method (*upasana*) of 'insight' or transfigured perception.

His soteriology is outside time; non-evolutionary. It is based on the notion of Self-transfiguration, and that is located in the human heart: the seat (or '*bindu*') of blissful consciousness.

II

Teilhard's 'Vision' of the Body of Christ in the light of Mandala Symbolism.

6. Christ's Body as Ksetra of God

It is legitimate to conceive Teilhard's 'vision' symbolically if it aids understanding. In fact his 'vision' of the body of Christ is, arguably, conceived by *him* symbolically—as a *mandala*—even if this was not deliberate. In any case, his aim in writing was often to teach others how to 'see'—to see God in all things—and this aim is furthered through conceiving his 'vision' symbolically: symbols 'speak' more directly than intellectual argument alone. His 'vision' of God is of the world transfigured through Christ; a world transfigured *into* Christ:

Across the immensity of time and the disconcerting multiplicity of individuals, one single operation is taking place: the annexation to Christ of his chosen; one single thing is being made: the mystical body of Christ, starting from all the sketchy spiritual powers scattered throughout the world . . .¹²

The influences of his personality, his studies in science and theology, his experience in 'things spiritual' and his zest for life, all combine to create, in his 'spiritual' writings, a unique testament to the way *he* saw the world. He left this as a contribution to the human quest. This brief and broad outline attempts to present a new way of bringing out

12. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin* (London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1976 ed.), p. 142.

the depths of his insights. Although necessarily verbal, it is hoped to further a more *practical* understanding of the nature and role of Christ understood from both cosmic and personal perspectives.

7. The Structure of the body of Christ: a Mandala

To Teilhard the universe is evolving. And it is evolving around a central point which he identifies as 'the Christ'—"dead and risen". Christ is "a centre of radiation for the energies which lead the universe back to God through his humanity." As such a centre, he shines, like a 'universal element' or 'ultimate determinant', in each thing around us—to those who 'see', Christ is like the 'soul' of the material universe. His body, however, is limitless. It is co-terminus with the world of matter. It is none other than that universe in its 'divine' aspect—'seen' teleologically, as it were: a divine 'milieu'; the 'milieu' of God. Each thing in the universe has its place. Each individual soul belongs. And through each soul, the world of matter is taken up, divinized and transfigured, becoming part of one great whole—the body of Christ. "In each soul, God loves and partly saves the whole world."¹³

Thus Christ is envisaged as a centre and as that centre's power of attraction and unification. He is the axis, as it were, of a magnetic pole; a diffusion of cosmic energy. Good and evil, growth and diminishment are but different aspects of one and the same force, the same form. And as they variously touch individual lives, they need to be recognized as the touch of Christ in different guises. Each thing or person encountered becomes a lens to be focused by us to allow Christ's light to shine through. We are ourselves like a lens, reflecting and radiating the divine. Teilhard explains the growth of Christ's body in scientific as well as 'spiritual' terms. It is, as we have seen, a 'natural' development—with a 'supernatural' end. The whole of matter passes through different stages or spheres, culminating in a goal of unification and integration in Christ.

8. The Function of the Body of Christ: the Divinization of the World

Christ's body is the agent of unification and integration in the cosmos. Through this activity the world is 'divinized' because re-centered in the divine. Through this activity the world is transfigured

13. *Ibid.*, p. 60

or 'transformed'. Exactly how Christ's body functions is summarized by Teilhard in the following syllogism: "1. At the heart of our universe, each soul exists for God in our Lord. 2. But all reality, even material reality, around each one of us, exists for our souls. 3. Hence all sensible reality, around each one of us, exists through our souls, for God, in our Lord."¹⁴ In other words, Christ's body is still evolving, still working towards completion, and comprises a totality of human effort:

The labour of seaweed as it concentrates in its tissues the substances scattered, in infinitesimal quantities, throughout the vast layers of the ocean; the industry of bees as they make honey from the juices broadcast in so many flowers—these are but pale images of the ceaseless working—over that all the forces of the universe undergo in us in order to reach the level of spirit.¹⁵

Teilhard calls this cosmic activity 'ontogenesis', a vast 'becoming'. And he stresses, in his exposition, the value of individual effort, of even seemingly mundane activity and suffering as being of unique value in the common task. "Owing to the interrelation between matter, soul and Christ, we bring part of the being which he desires back to God in whatever we do. With each of our works, we labour—in individual separation, but no less really . . . to bring Christ a little fulfilment."¹⁶

9. The Necessity for Personal Sanctification, or 'how to see'.

To contribute to the body of Christ, to the 'divinization' of the world, we need, each of us, to learn to 'see' differently; to see, as it were, through the eyes of Christ: this suggests an inner transformation and implies a re-centring "in Christ". This process of changing perception is, Teilhard suggests, "the supreme experimental perfection of life itself". Thus the individual's path to sanctification leads back to the source and centre of life and contributes to the evolution of the cosmos. It is the supreme function of humanity. Teilhard gives specific advice to those waiting to follow the 'mystic path' which leads

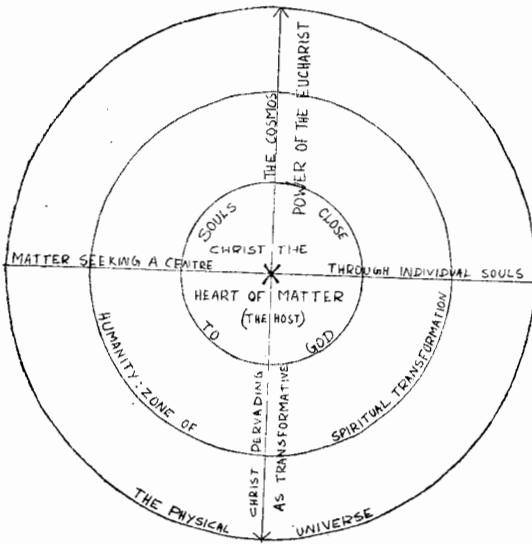
14. *Ibid.*, p.56

15. *Ibid.*, p. 60

16. *Ibid.*, p.62

to the 'Mountain of the Transfiguration'—to those wanting to 'see'. And it may be helpful to present these ideas in the form of a *mandala* for meditation.

Macrocosm of the Divine Milieu : The Cosmos: Transfigured as the Body of Christ¹⁷



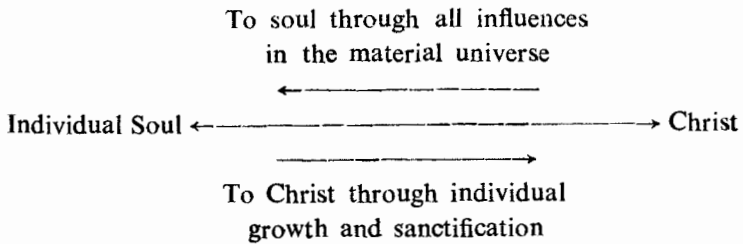
Begin, he says, by considering the "spread of our being".¹⁸ Take elements of the conscious life and perceive the intricate relationships which connect our life with that of the whole world. This is a way of finding our 'centre', and source of life. The unknown forces of the cosmos are seen to touch us on every side, and we have to make the leap of faith to trust that these are the very 'form' of Christ: they reveal the divine impulse. Thus in the difficult task of learning true passivity in the 'hands' of God, we need to recognize his presence in all the apparent diminishments and failures we encounter. Through this growing awareness of Christ as our divine milieu we begin to trans-

17. Macrocosm of the divine milieu, the cosmos : transfigured as the body of Christ. "Christ—for whom and in whom we are formed, each with his own individuality and his own vocation—Christ reveals in each reality around us, and shines like as ultimate determinant, like a centre, one might almost say like a universal element. As our humanity assimilates the material world, and as the Host assimilates our humanity, the Eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread upon the altar. "Le Milieu Divin" p. 125.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 59

figure our sufferings by letting them become the means of a closer union with God; a means of 'ex-centring' ourselves and re-centring "in Christ." The forces that diminish us are like 'angels', Teilhard says of God's 'triumphant activity'.¹⁹ "Not everything is immediately good to those who seek God; but everything is capable of becoming good . . ." ²⁰

The other part of an individual's path to 'seeing' lies in his own activity. He must learn to see Christ not only in all he undergoes but also in all he does. And in this, the totality of his effort as well as his intention is important. In man's activity, he adheres to the creative power of God. We need to perceive the connexion between all our activities (even the most trivial) and the building of the body of Christ—the 'kingdom' or 'rule' of God. (The 'rule' of God is, Teilhard explains, the maximum spiritual yield of objects. Hence we must always love someone or something, realizing he/she/it may always become greater).²¹ These two components, the active and passive, constitute the spiritual life. We need to harmonize the two, like breathing in and out, in order to grow. Human endeavour and 'attachment' in their most material sense should be balanced by true detachment, (because of increased centring "in Christ"). "...What makes or mars (an individual's life) is the degree of harmony with which the two factors of growing for Christ, and diminishing in him, are combined in the light of the natural and supernatural aptitudes involved."²²



Ultimately, this new way of 'seeing'—of seeing God in all things—is a gift, like life itself. So the individual should pray, intensely and

19. 'Mass on the World' in *The Heart of Matter*, (London: Collins, 1978), p. 133.

20. *Le Milieu Divin*, p. 86.

21. *Ibid.*, Fn 3, p. 100.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

continuously: "Lord, make me see." Perhaps meditation and reflection on the body of Christ as a *mandala* is one way, a practical and, effective way, of 'making' this very prayer.

10. The Divine Milieu: a Mandala of Transfiguration

Structurally, God is the divine centre and milieu for all things. Incarnate as 'Christ', his 'body' comprises the universe of matter divinely centred. 'Christ' activates all things with the divine impulse. He incarnates the world by centring it in himself. (And strictly speaking this is a process of separation and aggregation.) Even 'the foes of hell' have their place—they are one manifestation of the one cosmic energy (another manifestation being the 'fires of heaven').²³ And the source of all energy is God:

Each element of the world, whatever it may be, only subsists, here and now, in the manner of a core whose generatrices meet in God who draws them together—(meeting at the term of their individual perfection and at the term of the general perfection of the world, which contains them). It follows that all created things, every one of them, cannot be looked at, in their nature and action, without the same reality being found in their innermost being—like sunlight in the fragments of a broken mirror—one beneath its multiplicity, unattainable beneath its proximity, and spiritual beneath its materiality. No object can influence us by its essence without our being touched by the focus of the universe... (We are compelled) *by the very structure of things* to go back to the first source of its perfections. This focus, this source is thus everywhere.²⁴

The function of a centre being to unify and integrate, Christ fulfils that function with respect to the material universe. He 'sur-animates' or 'sur-creates' the world. Those whose perception deepens 'see' the earth as "the body of him who is and of him who is coming."²⁵ For them the world is transfigured; it takes on the 'lineaments of a body and a face'—those of the risen Christ. As the perceiver 'sees' more

23. *Idid.*, p. 149.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 114. Cf. *The Heart of Matter*, p. 122.

25. *Le Milieu Divin*, p. 155.

clearly, he is aware of fire at the heart of this body: . . . "the more I fix my gaze on its ardency the more it seems to me that all around it the contours of (Christ's) body melt away and become enlarged beyond all measure, till the only features I can distinguish . . . are those of the face of a world which has burst into flame . . ." ²⁶ Thus, for the mystic seer the world is seen to be a divine body; Christ is 'seen' to be a world transfigured:

Glorious Lord Christ: the divine influence secretly diffused and active in the depths of matter, and the dazzling centre where all the innumerable fibres of the multiple meet; power as implacable as the world and as warm as life; you whose forehead is of the whiteness of snow, whose eyes are of fire, and whose feet are brighter than molten gold; you whose hands imprison the stars; you who are the first and the last, the living and the dead and the risen again; you who gather into your exuberant unity every beauty, every affinity, every energy, every mode of existence; it is you to whom my being cried out with a desire as vast as the universe, 'in truth' you are my Lord and my God. ²⁷

11. Salvation: Integration into the Body of Christ

Through conceiving Teilhard's vision symbolically, as a *mandala* of the body of Christ, a union of God and the world, of the individual and Christ, is demonstrated. The whole of nature's cosmic process is seen to be divine. ²⁸ The act of conceiving the vision, of 'creating' the symbol, is a lesson in 'seeing'; a lesson in seeing God in all things. And to 'see' that is to be changed, because it implies a degree of 'centredness' in Christ. (In order to see through his 'eyes'.) To increase that 'centredness' we push our individual growth forward and lose it in the divine milieu newly perceived. 'Losing ourselves'—ultimately through death—in Christ's body, is our measure of 'salvation': integration into God's 'glory';—his 'aura'—as Christ. Salvation is thus seen to be a matter of integration and transformation through centring ourselves in the divine:

26. *The Heart of Matter*, p. 131.

27. *Ibid.*

28. See 'In the Form of Christ,' *The Prayer of the Universe* (London: Collins, Fontana, 1973), p. 23.

Christ acts upon us as a form, and the totality of souls ready to receive it is the matter which interiorly (substantially) takes on form in him.²⁹

But the term to which the whole universe is moving is described by Teilhard more in terms of the 'Pleroma', and consummation of all things: this is the fulfilment of the integrative and transformative process, the ultimate union of the whole of matter with its divine source.³⁰

29. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

30. See *The Heart of Matter*, p. 129.