The Tarot of the Gospel of St. John

by

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Introduction to
The Tarot of the Gospel of St. John

This book takes two great bodies of sacred tradition, Tarot studies and the Gospel of St. John, and combines them into a unified path of Christian initiation. It would be imprudent to make any general promises regarding the effectiveness of this path, although I can say that in the years I have worked on this project—very much in contemplative isolation—and have applied the combined hermeneutics of John's Gospel and the Fool's Path to my own meditation, the rewards have been abundant. It seems safe to assert that anybody who diligently reads and meditates upon the fourth gospel using the cards of the major arcana as mirroring icons into the wisdom of St. John will gain a deeper appreciation of the mysteries of the Christian faith, as well as an enlivened life of thinking. This work is presented as a gift to all those who regard the mysterious promise of Christian initiation as an attainable goal and a genuine impulse for action. It is also offered with warmth to intellectually curious readers who may not be aspiring initiates, but should find this book an engaging study of philosophy, symbolism, and intellectual history nonetheless.

The inspiration for this unorthodox project comes from the work and worldview of Valentin Tomberg (1900-1973), a twentieth-century Christian esoteric scholar, whose life-long studies in Anthroposophy, theology, philosophy, and hermeticism came to rich fruition in the colossal *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, a nearly-seven-hundred-page book that Tomberg published anonymously in 1965. The *Meditations* gives evidence not only of Tomberg's mastery of the varied strands of esoteric tradition, but also

of his devotion to Catholicism, the faith to which he gravitated in the 1940s, much to the dismay and suspicion of his friends in the occult community. Among the core elements of Tomberg's faith, discernible in all his written works, is a deep devotion to St. John the Evangelist, the Beloved disciple of Christ, whose primary work stands alone among the four gospels as a specific testimony to the indwelling Logos.

In recent years, studies of Tomberg's work have come forth in ever-greater volume, revealing a mercurial spirit with a prodigious capacity for scholarship and a warm heart. These qualities are vividly evident in the *Meditations*, which serves as the primary source for insight into Tomberg's character and spirituality. I am reluctant to tread too far into the terrain of his personal biography as it seems that there is enough contested information about him to make any decisive evaluations about his life premature. That said, several things can be confidently reported that demonstrate his courage, persistence and refusal to be cowed by institutional pressure. These are traits we will all need in the coming years; from day-to-day I do my best to emulate them as I situate myself in the intellectual stream he represents. It is my great hope that this work will contribute to a much-needed historical synthesis between mainstream Christianity and Anthroposophy, to say nothing of integrating the work of such booming internet communities as analytical idealism and conscious realism. As one would expect, these various worlds are divided and the differences between them can range from mutual suspicion to bitter hostility—the same is true for the divisions *within* each community. As ever, I suppose, the renewal of the world begins at the personal, not the institutional level, and Tomberg's life of suffering and controversy is ample evidence of this.

Tomberg was born in 1900, of Estonian and Russian parents in the imperial capital of St. Petersburg, and thus spent his childhood and youth witnessing the dramatic unraveling of the Romanov dynasty. Raised in a Lutheran home, he was drawn in his youth to the teachings of Theosophy and the aesthetics of the Russian Orthodox Church, both of which traditions suffered vicious persecution during the Bolshevik revolution. As a teenager he had become associated with a sect of Russian Martinists, a mystical Christian order of various strands whose unifying doctrine centered on restoring—or more accurately "reintegrating" the fallen human species with its spiritual origins. These men introduced Tomberg to the treasures of western esotericism, particularly those of the Marseilles Tarot, inspiring him to weave an eclectic web of tradition, spirituality, and philosophy into his personal worldview. Over the course of the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, Tomberg's study group was driven underground, his mother was executed, and he himself fled the capital for his father's home in Estonia to make his way in the world, doing odd jobs while trying to continue his education.

Having become acquainted with the work of the Austrian adept Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) during his youth, Tomberg wrote to Steiner several times in the early 1920s, asking to be received into his circle of students, and to be given permission to pursue his spiritual vocation in the environs of Dornach, Switzerland, the "headquarters" of Steiner's Anthroposophical movement. Steiner died in 1925, and neither of these wishes were fulfilled, although Tomberg became active in the Estonian Anthroposophical Society, studying, lecturing, and privately pursuing the path of higher knowledge outlined in Steiner's *Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its Attainment.* He eventually became known to Steiner's widow, Marie von Sivers, and was invited to publish in authorized Anthroposophical journals.

As Tomberg's reputation as a writer and teacher spread, members of the Society's governing board began to accuse Tomberg of trying to establish himself as a new master and saw him as a threat to Steiner's spiritual legacy. The accusations failed to deter Tomberg from his work, although he found himself isolated and banished from the good graces of the ruling councils in Dornach. Such acts of exclusion are, unfortunately, not uncommon in the Anthroposophical Society where even today disagreements regarding the proper conduct of the spiritual life—often deriving from disagreements over Dr. Steiner's intentions—have degenerated into petty jealousies and acrimonious squabbles. Steiner, to his credit, abhorred these skirmishes, and in his later years often wondered if the movement would survive the factionalism and generational divisions that already were plaguing Anthroposophy during his life. As for Tomberg, he continued to write and publish, bringing out dozens of articles on Anthroposophical interpretations of the Old and New Testaments, confirming his credibility as a spiritual teacher and guaranteeing his permanent exile from Dornach.

In the early 1930s, Tomberg married Marie Demski, a woman who had escaped from a Bolshevik prison in Russia with the help of one of his friends. The couple had a son, Alexis, in 1933, and the family made its home in Estonia. During these years, Tomberg wrote a series of ambitious commentaries on the Old and New Testaments; these attracted the attention of Anthroposophists such as the astronomer Elisabeth Vreede (1879-1943), who arranged for him to travel to Holland in 1938. At the time, Estonia was caught in a political vise between the Soviet Union, whose presence was a constant threat to its independence, and an anti-communist nationalist government whose leaders harbored some sympathies with fascists in Germany and Finland. As we know, the interwar decades were not good years for the flourishing of democratic republics, and this tendency was more

pronounced the further east one went. Having a place to work in Holland enabled Tomberg to continue writing and publishing, and it also allowed him to make several working trips to England, where helped organize lectures for England's robust Anthroposophical Society. In 1938 he moved to permanently to Holland, maintaining a low profile during the subsequent Nazi invasion and occupation. Finding himself in conflict with the head of the Dutch Anthroposophical Society, Dr. Frederik Willem Zeylmans van Emmichoven, a man who, ironically, had also been marginalized by Dornach—Tomberg bid farewell to the Society for good during the occupation.

In 1944, Tomberg returned to Germany where he began doctoral studies, earning a PhD in 1946. In 1948, he moved back to England and supported his family working for the BBC as an evaluator of Soviet radio broadcasts. As noted above, he aligned himself with the mysteries of the Catholic faith during this period, although it seems unclear if he in fact converted to the Roman Church. He spent his days in scholarly seclusion, continuing as ever to explore and meditate upon the mysteries of the Incarnation of Christ until his death in 1973. His final works, the *Meditations*, and an esoteric study of the miracles of St. John's Gospel, *Covenant of the Heart*, give some indication that maybe he himself was on the way toward making some kind of contemplative bridge between John and the Major Arcana. If so, I am happy to do my part in the construction of this bridge, and most satisfied to have taken up the project to which Tomberg exhorts his readers in the *Meditations*, which is to continue meditating upon and promoting the mysteries of the Tarot.

I first read the *Meditations* twenty years ago and quickly found myself in agreement with the favorable evaluations printed on the back of the Tarcher-Penguin edition. As a lifelong Catholic with a hermetic turn

of mind, to say nothing of being a dedicated reader of Rudolf Steiner since 1989, my religious life has always been something of a minefield. I have suffered the criticisms of both my Catholic friends, who find esotericism either absurd or evil, and a wide variety of New Age associates, who consider any confession of religious orthodoxy a willful derangement of mind. Nevertheless, I have always suspected (and am now completely convinced) that the future of human spirituality will necessarily involve the union of Christianity and esoteric philosophy, and that the *Meditations* are, like John the Baptist himself, a forerunner of the great alchemical wedding of Mind and Matter. I have read the book several times, taught it in several university seminars, and refer to it unceasingly.

It occurred to me during my third reading of the *Meditations*, which is organized into twenty-two chapters, one for each card in the "Major Arcana," that the number of primary sections in the Gospel of St. John is also twenty-two (twenty-one chapters and a prologue). Given that Tomberg's mentor, Rudolf Steiner, maintained emphatically that the Gospel of St. John was a means to a true Christian initiation, in conjunction with Tomberg's central thesis that the Arcana are also a key to true Hermetic development, it seemed to me that these two "journeys of initiation" might be mutually productive if not indeed interactive. In an exercise of intuition and hypothetical speculation, I began studying the cards in the Major Arcana in direct correspondence to the chapters in the Gospel of St. John, if one assigns to the Prologue of the Gospel the number 0, the card that in most interpretations corresponds to the Fool. Surely, I thought, the twenty-two cards and twenty-two sections of the gospels could be mapped upon each other. To my delight and wonder, I found my hunch to be fruitful, and now make bold to claim that the major arcana and the Gospel of St. John are fully functioning keys to one another, and if each are read and meditated upon together, the results succeed in raising

the consciousness of the seeker-after-wisdom to a categorically higher level.

Continuing on a personal note, I have been enchanted by the tarot since my sophomore year in high school, when one sunny Saturday in the Fall of 1977, I picked up a small book on the tarot with an accompanying set of cards for two dollars at a yard sale near the University of Oregon. Eugene, Oregon in the late 1970s was a place where the activity of "junking" was less a weekend hobby than a blood sport. On any given Saturday, impecunious grad students trying to eke out a bohemian living on the fringe of the university community would find themselves forced to surrender their eclectic worldly possessions to ruthless hagglers from the affluent neighborhoods who badgered them into knocking the price of one-dollar record, paint set, or lamp down to a quarter or less. The two dollars I paid for my first deck of tarot cards was a fairly lavish outlay in this economy, but when I looked at the images on the cards, I knew I had found something special. The middle-aged hippie who sold them to me, along with a crusty bottle of ink and a dip-pen tossed in as a bonus, winked as I stuffed my purchase into my backpack. "Right on, brother! You gonna do some heavy fortune-telling? Have fun!"

Returning home, I repaired to my bedroom in the basement of my parents' house, and furtively broke out my new treasure. While the pages of the book were quite worn, the pack of Rider-Waite cards, replete with iconic images rendered so stunningly by artist Pamela Colman Smith, were unexpectedly new and seemingly unused. It seemed that the guy I bought the set from was more of a student of the tarot than a "diviner." In the ensuing days, I endured the suspicious-yet-hesitant-to-inquire-glances of my parents, as I practiced Celtic Cross readings on my siblings, and steadily became acquainted with the enchanting images on the cards. Although modern by historical

standards, at least when compared to the purported antiquity of the Tarot (the Waite-Rider pack was published in 1909), Smith's paintings brought to life the fullness of Renaissance hermetic consciousness. I was truly enchanted by the deck and felt that the beauty and complexity of the cards made them far more valuable than any pedestrian uses of "fortune-telling" they might be applied to.

Although my subsequent Fool's Journey through college, the US Navy, a prolonged stint in Japan, and a "respectable" career path in academic History took me somewhat far afield of my original Tarot obsession, I have, since that Saturday in 1977, always had a pack among my effects, and have always referred to it for inspiration, aesthetic jump starts, and yes, occasionally, guidance as to what the future might hold. Finding the *Meditations* in the early 2000s reignited my interest in the symbolic importance of the Tarot, and thankfully, my professorial credentials have provided me with some—not a lot, but some—conventional intellectual cover as I strive daily to integrate the arcana into my spiritual life. I find it genuinely astounding today to see how many intelligent and critically minded people are being drawn to the Ideal and the esoteric, even as equal numbers of intelligent, if less inquisitive, people are hunkering down in the warm embrace of materialist normalcy. Both of these "educated and informed" camps can list reasons why the other side has lost *its* way, though neither has any real clue as to where their own side is actually going with their respective "awakened" or "woke" (they are very different things, it turns out) consciousnesses. It seems safe to say that nobody knows what's going on out there, but we have all have a clear idea of what we have deemed beneath our contempt—and although technology is a strong common denominator in all our projects, it has done little to foster any kind of unified human community. It seems impossible these days, to find one's "people," even despite the internet

and the proliferation of digital communities that has allowed every imaginable kind of tribe to claim its place in the sun.

It falls to some of us, in this time of confusion, to take the risk of returning to some old ways and old ideas, to seek art over efficiency, mystery over the "sure thing," spirit over matter, and ultimately, the promise of a beautiful and tantalizing glory over the pedestrian contracts and tedious oppressions of our Ahrimanic culture. Again, it is my hope that this book contributes in some way to making that stride into mystery more satisfying.

The book follows a simple format. The first pages in each chapter are a reader's guide to the *Meditations*, which by any measure, is a difficult book. My commentaries are intended both to summarize and clarify Tomberg's Letters on the arcana, and certainly not to pass off his insights as my own. For this reason, I am assuming that readers of this book will have at their disposal a copy of the *Meditations* and will consult it, if they feel the need, to verify quoted material, and embedded references, all of which are amply cited in Robert Powell's superb English translation. I ask readers to acknowledge and accept this condition in exchange for not having to plow through hundreds of footnotes. In other words, I have privileged readability over mechanical rigor regarding the citation of quotes from the original text. With few exceptions, such as references to material completely outside *The Meditations on the Tarot*, I have chosen to let the original work be its guide to "works cited."

The second part of each chapter is organized into sections called "Initiation Notes," which discuss the pertinent chapter of the Gospel of John through the lens of the given arcanum. The Bible I cite is the New American Bible, Revised Edition of 1986, published by the Catholic World Press, a standard and popular English version. The literary and scholarly purpose of the Initiation Notes differs from the

summaries, which are meant to be fairly straightforward condensations of Tomberg's work. The Initiation Notes, while grounded in the meanings of the arcana provided by Tomberg's Letters, also include non-exhaustive speculations of my own; these are there as invitations to readers to use the Tarot with John for their own contemplative purposes. It is all but essential to use this book with the Gospel of John and the *Meditations* close at hand. Any private insights that may ensue from meditating on these pages are the unique property of each reader.

Chapter Zero
John the Baptist, Fool of God

Summary of Letter XXI

As rough a start as it may seem, I will begin this book with an editorial deviation from Tomberg's *Meditations* by putting the Fool where I think he belongs— "In the Beginning," as card zero, despite Tomberg's placement of this arcanum in the twenty-first position, between Judgement (XX) and The World (XXII). Some tarot decks place the Fool at the end, but according to most conventions— especially that of the Smith-Waite deck I am using for this book[1]—The Fool initiates the great symbolic journey of the Soul from Absolute Zero; the *nihilo* from which all creation emanates. Tomberg's rationale for putting the Fool at Twenty-One seems somewhat arbitrary considering the depth and detail he generally uses to justify his positions. As he writes:

> The principal reason [for the transposition] is that the meditation on the "The Fool" cannot conclude the series of meditations on the Major Arcana of the Tarot, which series is a "school" of spiritual training, i.e. an organic "system" of spiritual exercises. For the meditation on the Arcanum "The Fool," as a spiritual exercise," is not of a nature to summarise the whole preceding series of twenty-one meditations on the

[1] Throughout this book, I will use the designation "Smith-Waite," for what is commonly known as the Rider-Waite deck. The common title, which recognizes the publisher (William Rider & Son), and the book author, (E.A. Waite), unfortunately omits Pamela Colman Smith, the brilliant British artist who produced the deck's iconic images. It seems only fair to give the artist primary credit for a collection of images.

> Tarot, i.e. to play the role of the last "point of view" of the experience that symbolism of the Tarot renders possible.[2]

While this reasoning may justify Tomberg's not placing the Fool at the absolute end, it makes no argument for the specific placement of the card at position twenty-one. For this, he invokes a fond memory of a group of Russian esotericists from his youth whose activities were quashed by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution, and whose studies included drawing correspondences between the Tarot and the Cabbala. Typical of Tarot-Cabbalists, this group of Martinists (see Introduction) assigned to each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet an associated card of the Major Arcana, and the letter they assigned to the Fool was *Shin*, which according to Hebrew linguistic traditions, is also the number twenty-one. It is owing as much to the desire to memorialize these long-forgotten men as to any other consideration that Tomberg continues this convention, as well as passing on to us their insistence that the "esoteric name" for the Fool was "Love." As fond as I am of this story—at least to the extent of preserving the Fool's "Love-connection"—I am sticking to the more conventional placement of the Fool as the initial card in the Major Arcana, and I think all doubts regarding this decision should be eliminated as soon as we consider the relationship of the Fool to the opening of the Gospel of St. John, where we are introduced to both the Logos and to John the Baptist.

Before delving into the scriptural relationship, let us consider the imagery of The Fool. The Smith-Waite deck depicts a young man hiking in the mountains and dreamily staring up at the sky, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is about to stride off the edge of a cliff. He wears a rich, black tunic decorated with what appear to be colorful

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[2] Anonymous (Valentin Tomberg), *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 1985), 590.

starbursts, flowers—and possibly mushrooms. The garment is girded with a beaded belt reminiscent of a giant Dominican rosary. He wears tan-colored hose and yellow calf-length boots, as well as a cap of green leaves. In his left hand he carries a white rose, and in his right, a long staff. The man rests the staff easily against his shoulder, like an iconic "hobo" carrying a bindle, although instead of a blanket filled with earthly possessions, the bundle at the end of the Fool's staff is only a small purse. This purse bears an almost exact resemblance to the mysterious handbags that appear in ancient carvings from Iraq to South America. Art historians and anthropologists have been long divided in their opinions as to what these handbags may be. Some say the bags hold the cosmos itself, others argue that they contain divine wisdom, or even hallucinogenic plants.

At the heels of the young Fool, there nips an excited little dog who is either warning his master of impending doom, or cheerfully joining him in it. The sun shines brightly in the upper right corner of the image, and in the background are stunning snow-capped mountain peaks; while the Fool has certainly reached a significant plateau, he is nowhere near the summit of any ranges. Who is this Fool?

According to Tomberg, the Fool is an Agent of the Good and an avatar of Love and appears in the historical imagination as the perpetrator of bold acts of resistance to oppression and treachery. He resonates with such literary tropes and archetypes as Don Quixote (and knights errant in general), Orpheus, and Gilgamesh, in their refusal to let death and corruption stand in the way of Love. The grace and light-filled energy of the fool of Love stands in contrast to the "crystallizing" tendencies of such suffering fools as Ahasverus, the "Wandering Jew" who, according to tradition, was cursed for having mocked Christ and was thus doomed to wander the earth until the Second Coming. The

suffering fool has no lightness to his step, and cast his gaze earthward, forever exiled, and forever looking for a place to rest.

The holy Fool resonates better with such figures as Don Juan, the servant of Love for Its Own Sake, and Tijl Uelenspiegel, the Flemish tramp whose rejection of authority and law makes him the prototype of the modern Anarchist. The spirit of Uelenspiegel, says Tomberg, inhabits not only the satirical comedian or revolutionary who uses ridicule to oppose oppression, but also the disillusioned *counter*revolutionary who comes to realizes he has been duped by a movement that has become more oppressive than the regime he helped overthrow. The anarchist Fool may deploy his energies vigorously in opposing that which he once supported when that thing has deviated from its holy principles.

The Fool is the pattern of romantic and restless roving; he is the rebel at the fringe of society; of man of action in mad pursuit of an unattainable good. Although his radical individualism, which includes a persistent habit of mocking the established order, may pose a threat to the stability of society, his role is actually redemptive. He is obedient to the divine, faithful to Eros, and he shows a corrupted world that only a loving retreat into the divine can satisfy the yearnings of the individual heart and heal the collective soul.

The difference between the Fool and the disillusioned cynic is that the Fool approaches the world with a positive mindset—he is not driven by despair, but, in the spirit of Kierkegaard, *chooses* the Good and pursues the Good, wherever it leads him. When in doubt (or in despair, which is reverse side of the coin from doubt) The Fool *acts*. The existential doubt-despair which plagues the modern consciousness may be found in germinal form in the personality of Hamlet, whose doubts have rendered him unable to perform any act in faith and contemplating self-destruction as a cure to his existential

ills. In more advanced forms, such as in the character of Faust, the psychic struggle between faith and despair is not resolved in suicide, but through a more strategic destruction of the soul. Doctor Faust, the "Job in the epoch of humanism," renounces all yearning for the world of spirit in exchange for a diabolical deal that delivers him the satisfaction of his material desires. As Tomberg observes, worldly delight is no less effective than worldly sorrow in its capacity to "tear the human soul away from God."

Modern civilization is the historical expression of the "Faustian bargain," and our major political ideologies—capitalism, socialism, and communism, (to say nothing of an embarrassing number of new age psychologies)—have placed at the center of their plans for humanity not spiritual striving, but rather the efficient delivery of material abundance. Unfortunately, Faust lost his soul in his bargain with Mephistopheles, a consequence that is rarely remembered, and little lamented when it is. If our civilization ever anguished over its decision to abandon the Spirit for the sake of "stuff," that struggle has long been forgotten, and we regret not that we have lost our soul, but that we are not getting our stuff. The potency of a cautionary tale is surely lost upon an audience that has determinedly embraced the bad choice of the protagonist.

Now in Goethe's expanded version of Faust, the doctor is *forgiven by the Earth* for his sins, and curiously sets about studying the Gospel of John (!), whose first line he mis-translates to read "In the Beginning was the Deed." The *true* esoteric meaning of the Faustian bargain is that we must (if we still can) prevail over the temptation to substitute worldly satisfaction for spiritual attainment. It is the Fool, not the learned professor, or the successful businessman, or the dynamic politician, who leads the way in this regard.

The Fool has attained his holy "office" by passing severe spiritual tests and overcoming temptations to power and wealth. For several pages in his meditation on The Fool, Tomberg reviews the stories of series of noteworthy esoteric magicians who turned their back on "intellectual magic" for sake of the Gospel. Among these are Cyprian the Mage (St. Cyprian, d. 304), Louis Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803), Eliphas Levi (1810-75), Paul Sedir (1871-1926), Gerard Encausse (Papus, 1865-1916). Each of these men had immersed himself in the waters of practical magic and were either founders or prominent members of secret societies until, in each case, a revelation of the Christian spirit showed them the worthlessness of esoteric ceremonies, rituals, and magical practices. According to Tomberg, who himself may be counted among this group, each of these adepts graduated from the world of "intellect" to the world of "Love," successfully passing the Fool's spiritual test. For modern consciousness, then, The Fool is a sign (and a hope) of metamorphosis, a promise that a return to faith in the divine is the only way out of the secular trap of History.

In prevailing over the temptation of the world and rejecting the Faustian bargain, the Fool has gained great power, and legitimate standing to rebuke the elites of his society. A man who turns his back on the riches and powers of the world for the sake of pursuing the Good will appear to be foolish, but once he makes that step and undertakes the journey to God, he moves from knowledge to love, from ego to spiritual obedience, and from personal consciousness to cosmic consciousness. The Fool is thus the Arcanum of transformation from ego and intellect to Love.

There is, of course, nothing easy about this choice or this journey. The Fool serves as both a model for spiritual striving and a warning that "madness" awaits any person who undertakes his Path. The Dao of the Fool requires a sacrificing of the intellect, which can be done in one

of two ways: 1) by completely abandoning the intellect through the embrace of a primitive quietism, or 2) by placing the intellect in the service of the transcendental consciousness. In other words, we can throw away the intellect entirely (in the radical manner of a Zen monk) or dedicate its operations to the quest for divine Truth. The latter way is the Dao of the Christian Hermeticist, and the path upon which the Fool of the Gospel of John embarks.

When we choose the Dao of the Fool and place our intellectual gifts at the service of the divine, we find ourselves facing the dichotomy between human wisdom and divine wisdom, because even if we want to "replace" our intellect with spirit of Truth, we are required to surpass the bounds of our own thinking in order to invite the Spirit into our souls. Tomberg calls this the "marriage of opposites," inasmuch as our wisdom appears to God as folly (and vice versa). While difficult to perform, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of divine and human wisdom opens new pathways into gnosis and magic by opening us to the various dimensions of the Hermetic dictum, "as above, so below."

Tomberg reminds us that the Cross is the most vivid emblem of the coincidence of opposites, citing the First Letter to the Corinthians, in which St. Paul observes that where the Jews demand signs (miracles), and the Greeks wisdom (intellect), the early Church preached Christ crucified. The opposition between intellect and spirit does not reduce or resolve into a tidy Hegelian synthesis, but rather leads first to a parallelism in which spirit and intellect co-exist. The best historical example of this parallelism may be seen perhaps in the development of medieval thought, in which Greek philosophy, both the Platonic stream championed by Origen and Augustine and later the Aristotelian stream of Albertus Magnus and Aquinas, worked side by side with Christian revelation to build the intellectual and spiritual

foundations of Western Civilization. Under the Dominicans (Order of Preachers), says Tomberg, this "conversation" reached its summit in the elegant and lofty tradition of Scholasticism.

The creative parallelism of Scholasticism though, was not a real "fusion" of the traditions of Greek philosophy and the Christian gospel; the two lived in a hierarchical relationship. As the intellectual conflicts of the late medieval period would reveal, Theology, the erstwhile "Queen of the Sciences" treated philosophy as its handmaiden, and the task of the medieval intellect was to "save the appearances" of Scripture as interpreted by the Roman magisterium. The true *union* of spirit and intellect, which Tomberg calls "the Philosopher's Stone," would have to await the dawn—or better, the rebirth—of Christian Hermeticism during the Renaissance.

The story of how the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismegistus entered the consciousness of Western Europe is as tortured as that of the Tarot itself. Whether or not the antiquity or authorship the *Tabula Smaragdina* can be verified, it is beyond dispute that the spiritual alchemy of the *Emerald Tablet* was being studied and applied with fervor by early modern Hermeticists. Of particular interest to Tomberg, again, is the alchemist's dictum "as above, so below," which governs the great work of generating the philosopher's stone—a project that has, under various guises been underway throughout the modern period. Tomberg points to such intellectual luminaries as the gnostic Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), existentialist Nicholas Berdyaev (1874-1948), evolutionist Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), and psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) as participants in the alchemical work, although not one of these men explicitly declared himself to be a Christian Hermeticist.

As "the work" demands an active cooperation from "above" and "below," it is necessary for avatars to come to Earth as forerunners to

the Incarnation of Christ, and for Buddhas to ascend to the heavens as forerunners of an awakened humanity. Only to the extent that people can reawaken the divine within them can the will of God be realized. True "humanism," then, is the awakened conduct of the righteous, directly revealing the image of God on Earth—not the self-celebration of evolved primates who never lift their gaze from the earthly human realm. Building the philosopher's stone is again, is historical and developmental, not explicitly reformist or antiquarian. It is not enough to conserve primordial truth, or even to restore it, but rather to make all things new through the cooperative ascent of the human spirit with the descent of the godhead.

Only in Jesus Christ, says Tomberg, do we find the perfect union of divine revelation and human wisdom, and Jesus Christ marks the focal point of all the ascents and descents of the human and divine will throughout history. The Incarnation of Christ was an act of divine magic; an act of pure love whose object was the salvation and transformation of humanity as well as the natural world. Jesus is thus the incarnate Way and the true Gate. To tread the Dao and enter the gate, we have, like the Buddha, to become awakened from the sleep of "passive acceptance, the stupefying influence of transitory desires, and the hypnotic force of the totality of human conventions."

Christ differs from other historical avatars in that he performed an expiatory sacrifice and offers to Man a choice beyond either the renunciation or affirmation of life. We can now transform life—not merely "liberate" it. The Christian Hermeticist embarking on the path of initiation is called to take part in the redemptive transformation of the earth and the salvation of the entire fallen world, and it is the Fool who initiates this salvific work. The Arcanum of the Fool is the mystery of divine work in the historical world, the Christianization of the world, and the human participation in that Christianization.

What exactly lies at the end of this journey? The Second coming of Christ? The appearance of the Maitreya Buddha? The victory of the Tenth (Kalki) Avatar over the forces of darkness? All of the above? The twentieth century was filled with apocalyptic prophecies of both hope and doom, and Tomberg reminds us that the Theosophical Society, intuiting the end of the "Kali Yuga" (Age of Darkness) at the turn of the twentieth century, enthusiastically (and wrongly) heralded Jiddhu Krishnamurti (1895-86) as a messianic "Coming World Teacher." Rudolf Steiner, who despite leaving the Theosophical Society precisely because of its fetishization of young Krishnamurti, nevertheless expected the imminent arrival of a Boddhisattva. He established the Anthroposophical school for the express purpose of providing an environment in which this Bodhisattva could work. Tomberg, who as we have noted (See Introduction), had a few axes to grind with the Society, declared that Anthroposophy had failed in its mission, although this failure did not derail the cosmic process. The personage is coming, and moreover, the Maitreya and Kalki Avatar will be the same person. This Buddha-Avatar will "not only speak *of* the good, but he will speak the good," and will embody in his life and mission the fusion of prayer and meditation. The appearance of the Buddha-Avatar will be the culmination of centuries of attempts to bring into union the principles of prayer and meditation. The traditions of Lamaism, Christian contemplative mysticism (St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa), and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola are all prefigurations of the coming Buddha-Avatar, and all authentic modes of the Fool in action.

Ignatius in particular followed the Dao of The Fool. His life and career, which took him from the battlefield to contemplative convalescence, from impoverished peregrinations in the Holy Land to devoted missionary labors in Europe as the founder of the Society of Jesus, showed the "transformation of mental turmoil—the schizophrenia of

two consciousnesses not in harmony—into wisdom." The coming Bodhisattva will be the fulfillment of three acts of will: "seeking, knocking, and asking." The mighty intellect of this Avatar will not put forward opinions or theories but will rather be moved by spiritual revelation alone.

The spiritual seeker on the Fool's path replicates the process of the *coincidentia oppositorum.* He begins with an awareness of the *gap* between his own intellectual powers and the spiritual powers of the divine. He then allows these streams of powers to operate in parallel, until they begin to co-operate in the creation of the Philosopher's Stone. The emergence of the Philosopher's Stone coincides with transformation of (human) formal logic, into (divine) moral logic. Tomberg distinguishes here between *formal logic*, which is the logic of three-dimensional analysis and abstraction, *organic logic*, which is the logic that informs the functioning of systems, and *moral logic*, which is the logic of sacred value, and the source of creation of the world. Using the axiomatic phrase "the part is less than the whole," Tomberg shows that this idea is true only when dealing with quantities of things in the objective world. A window, for example, is less than a house. When it comes to the functioning organism, however, the part (for example, the heart in the body) may in fact be equal to the whole body, because its removal would lead to the death of body. In the realm of moral logic, we find that the part may be *greater* than the whole. Tomberg cites the case of the high priest Caiaphas who decided that it would be expedient for one man (a part of Israel) to die in order that the whole nation might live. Moral logic, in contrast with formal and organic logic applies to all realms of valuation, and has little relation to grammar, analytical math, or biology. It is thus the only logic applicable to the spiritual world, and its ultimate expression, which is Love.

Our understanding of the Spiritual world is revealed in our grasp of moral logic, which unites the head and the heart, and opens the dialogue between meditation and prayer. In prayer we raise our consciousness up to the Spirit world, while in meditation we open a space for the divine to descend to us. Prayer, which "asks, thanks, worships, and blesses," is magical when it uses formulae and incantations; gnostic when it takes the form of "inexpressible sighing," and mystical when it enters into silence and communion with the divine. As for meditation, it consists of concentration on a subject to the point that one becomes able to grasp the entirety of that subject's relationships to the whole of Reality, thereby opening the doors to metaphysics, which we can think of as the union of the human intellect with the eternal and unchanging principles.

Christian meditation, not unlike Cabbalism, seeks to deepen the connection between Scripture and Creation, all the while drawing the human consciousness into an awareness of Christ's redemptive work. Accordingly, the pinnacle of Christian meditation is the contemplation of the seven stages of the Passion of Christ:

1) the Washing of the feet
2) the Scourging,
3) the Crowning with thorns,
4) the Way of the cross,
5) the Crucifixion,
6) Death and burial,
7) Resurrection

Meditation is most effective when it engenders *thinking* and brings new concepts into being. We can see then that meditation brings about the transformation from formal logic to organic logic and ultimately to moral logic. This, Tomberg concludes, shows us vividly the "alchemical marriage" of prayer and meditation that takes place in the

soul of the person who meditates upon the arcanum of the Fool; the person who unites revelation with human wisdom, and moves from Intellect to Love while keeping madness at bay.

Initiation Notes: Prologue to the Gospel of John

Keeping the conflict between love and madness in mind, let us look more deeply at the Prologue of the Gospel of St. John, the "zero-chapter" of what many Christian theologians call the "Gospel of Love." The Prologue relates, without question, to The Fool, and tells us unambiguously who the Fool is. John the Baptist is known to Christian tradition as the quintessential "wild man," a dweller in the wasteland who is as great a magnet for the penitent Jews of the Jordan Valley as he is an irritation to the Scribes and Pharisees (the "Jews from Jerusalem") who eventually engineer his downfall. For some reason, the fourth gospel is the only one that does not *explicitly* depict the Baptist as an unhinged and wild-eyed prophet living outside the pale of social respectability, but this reputation was established long before in the earlier gospels. Matthew and Mark describe him as wearing "clothing made of camel's hair" and a "leather belt around his waist." They tell us that his diet consisted of locusts and wild honey, and his primary occupation, performing baptisms with Jordan River water, was liberally accompanied with threats of hellfire and rebukes for the hypocrisy and false pride of those seeking the proto-sacrament of purification and healing.

Luke enlarges the profile of John by invoking an identification between him and the prophet Isaiah who saw the coming of a voice "crying out in the desert" warning the people of Israel to "prepare the way of the Lord," and to "make straight his paths." Beyond merely giving warning, Luke's Baptist, after roundly chastising the "brood of vipers" for their hypocrisy, urges them to practice charity, to stop complaining, and to deal patiently with their suffering. He reminds

the crowd that he is not the Messiah, but merely a forerunner, and exhorts them to keep faith until the Messiah comes. The chapter ends with an abrupt statement that Herod (Herod Antipas, the Roman appointed tetrarch of Judea), added to his "evil deeds" by arresting John the Baptist for an undisclosed transgression of *lèse majesté* having something to do with "Herodias." Mark gives us more detail on the matter, filling in the backstory that John had publicly censured the king for having married Herodias, who had previously been married to his brother, the tetrarch Herod II. After languishing in prison, John was beheaded, according to Mark, at the urging of Queen Herodias. As the story goes, Salome, the daughter of Herodias had bedazzled the King with a dance at a state dinner, inspiring him to promise the girl anything she wanted. After consulting with her mother, she came back and asked for the head of John the Baptist. In making this request in front of the assembled guests, she forced the king to make good on his promise, although he himself was not enthusiastic about executing a local folk hero. Both Matthew and Mark declare that the king believed that Jesus was the reincarnation of John the Baptist, although in each gospel, Jesus clearly knew the exact nature of his relationship to John.

In Luke the two men are blood relatives through their mothers Elizabeth and Mary, who were cousins. The familial relationship between John and Jesus is not mentioned in the other gospels, although according to some stories, largely in the Gnostic tradition, Jesus and John had both been members of an Essene community, and Jesus had possibly been one of John's disciples.

The Baptist of John's gospel, interestingly, is neither a raving preacher of repentance, nor a fly in the ointment of political authorities, but rather an emissary of the Almighty testifying to the Light and Life of the Creator of the Universe. John is, to be sure, a holy fool, and never fails to tell his hearers that whatever good he can bestow through

baptism is a small thing compared to the grace of the coming Christ. Like the Fool of the Tarot, whom we see striding boldly on his mission and his Path, John is a fearless and uncompromising warrior against wickedness.

The Prologue to John is perhaps the loftiest statement of Christian metaphysics ever uttered, a prayer that not only amplifies the prologue of the Bible itself, *i.e.*, the Genesis creation story—but audaciously proclaims Christ as the agent behind the mystery of Creation.

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.

The Gospel presents for us here a perfect statement of the fusion embodied in the Fool, a pre-dialectical Reality in which Logos (the intellect) and the spirit (God) are co-equal, co-existent, and co-original. The Prologue and the Fool both speak of Beginnings, and direct our thinking straight to the Book of Genesis, which declares the following statement of origins:

"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light."

The Prologue of John elaborates upon this old creation story, telling us that God (or *Elohim* in Hebrew, which is actually a plural form, indicating not the Almighty but rather members of the angelic choir of Powers) was accompanied by the Word (*Logos* in Greek, a multivalent word that refers to the informing wisdom and logic of Creation itself,

and has always served as a synonym for Christ). John thus tells us that Logos, or Christ, was present at the foundation of the world, and was the primary agency for creation.

All things came to be through him
and without him nothing came to be

Genesis tells us that what "came to be" at the moment of creation was the "heavens and the earth," and proceeds with the story of the seven days of creation and rest. John goes a bit deeper than this, however, suggesting that what precedes the phenomenal world is the substratum of Life, and equating this Life to the metaphysical Light.

What came to be through him was life
and this life was the light of the human race;
the Light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

According to Steiner, these initial five verses of the Prologue were "the means whereby (John's) soul was led to perception on the astral plane.[3] " So profound were the contemplative value of these opening ideas that Steiner made them the core of his own Christian-Gnostic path, recommending that the would-be initiate meditate on these verses every morning, immediately after awakening.

A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.
The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

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[3] Rudolf Steiner, "Lecture I," *The Gospel of John,* a Lecture given 19 February 1906 in Berlin. The Rudolf Steiner Archive, GA 94.
https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA094/English/UNK1980/19060219p01.html

He was in the world,
and the world came to be through him
but the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own,
but his own people did not accept him.
But to those who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his Name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice, nor by a man's decision but of God.
And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father's only Son
full of grace and truth.
John testified to him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'"
From his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.