

FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN - CHARTRES CATHEDRAL

Clive Hicks, © May, 1999

I regard Chartres Cathedral as one of the great works of humanity. Among buildings, there are a handful that can be regarded as having this quality - Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Istanbul, the Parthenon, the Alhambra in Granada, the Taj Mahal, and probably some building in India and the Far East and in Mexico. In the end, no one has ever succeeded in saying why such works have this quality. Anything that is said becomes more or less peripheral.

WISDOM AT CHARTRES

At Chartres, art was changed, transformed, lifted into a new dimension, to be influential for centuries. This happened because a need coincided with three supplies - a good economy, a revitalized art of building and a group of leaders with real insight. The leaders were the churchmen of the School of Chartres, a leading centre for non-dualist Neo-Platonic Christianity. What does non-dualist Neo-Platonic Christianity mean? Essential truth is always at hand, to be re-expressed in each age, but it gains strength from historical authority. At Chartres there were fragments available from Plato and Socrates, from Boethius and Plotinus a bit later, from Dionysius the Areopagite, from Erigena, and from the Hermetic wisdom of second century Alexandria. The philosophy is summed up in the first words of The Emerald Tablet, the essence of the Hermetic teaching - 'In the One, as above, so below, as below, so above'. There is only the One - if you use the word, God, who is wholly everywhere - there is nowhere outside God. Where God is, is Heaven, and there is nowhere else.

THE TEMPLE

Cathedral of Chartres, is a great temple in the world, meant as a symbol of the home of God. We are the pivot point between above and below, and as we look at the external temple, we have the choice to find within a mirror image, an internal temple. In fact the internal temple is the real one - the external one is just a whole lot of stone.

SECRET KNOWLEDGE

Here I am not referring to Freemasonry, but to the idea that there has been knowledge kept secret, spiritual knowledge, and in particular knowledge of the secrets of art and architecture. After the age of the cathedrals, the Middle Ages, with the Renaissance, and up to the present, the development of humanity in the European tradition turned to the development of the intellect, reason, logical thought, as distinct from instinct and intuition. We have gained enormously from this development, and we can see with a clarity previously impossible, but a combination of ego and rationality has demanded an understanding which commands its subject. An illusory desire for reason to command all, meeting the fact that reason cannot command all, produces the concept of secrets, secret knowledge. There is an essential knowledge, but it is not secret, just difficult to put into practice, so it is sometimes easier to hold the concept of secret knowledge, not available to me. There have been all sorts of ideas about secret schools preserving knowledge of architecture across the centuries, and this usually settles upon geometrical systems of proportion and composition. Harmonious proportions and number symbolism were used, but only as a part of a repertoire of expressive techniques, and these harmonies are inherent in the human mind, and emerge naturally when composition is undertaken by a pure mind. There is absolutely no evidence that the cathedrals are the product of a tradition of secret knowledge - the secrets of the guilds are mostly trade secrets about mortar mixes, the geometry of structure, how to make glass, how to cut stone, and similar craft matters.

The search for secret knowledge is often promoted by people who are avoiding their own self discovery. There have been times when knowledge had to be kept secret from oppressive authorities - time when religious institutions were both decadent and powerful, but even then the real knowledge can be expressed in a way that communicates without offence. Maurice Maeterlinck, author of the play *The Blue Bird*, wrote his book *The Great Secret* about seventy years ago. He said that the secret had been openly expressed again and again, and it told who you really are, something quite simple, but entailing in its acceptance a certain sacrifice, of who you are not, a sacrifice many are unwilling to entertain, and, consciously or unconsciously, prefer to see the truth as hidden from them, requiring a profound search. Your search is hindered only by yourself. No one tries to explain Mozart's music in terms of secret knowledge, and to seek it in the cathedrals is a waste of time. What I offer is that artists with skill, who are given to realise something of their deepest nature (and not necessarily consciously), deliver work that resonates with any of us who are given a little of the same insight. When this coincides with a turning point in humanity, and with a community in a suitable condition, great ages of human endeavour are started. The building of Chartres took place under such conditions

HISTORICAL OUTLINE

I need to give a condensed historical outline. When Roman civilisation collapsed early in the Christian era, centuries of chaos ensued, centuries in which the craft of building was all but lost. After about the first millennium, conditions stabilised in France, partly through the expansion of monasticism, and gradually building skill was revived, so that by the middle of the twelfth century, the great Romanesque churches were being built all over Europe. A new craft tradition had been established in architecture. During this period, the Greek classics were also gradually being introduced into European culture, so that a strand of Neoplatonic idealism was being blended with Christian contemplative mysticism. Thus there was available a sound craft tradition and a people who included mystics who did have that insight into their real nature. That was the social context. What about the local context at Chartres?

LEGENDS OF CHARTRES

There are legends about Chartres that go back to before any church was built. At least they purport to do so, but in fact none of them is recorded at all before about the fourteenth century, long after the present cathedral was built. Nevertheless, whether or not they have physical truth, they have now assumed a psychological truth that is in some respects more real than physical truth. Chartres was said to have been a centre of Druid worship for centuries before Christ, with a grotto and holy well where the virgin birth of a divine figure were celebrated. There is still a well in the crypt, which until the Revolution was the home of an ancient wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, which was brought out on ceremonial occasions, clearly symbolic of birth, and these rites seem to continue pre-Christian ceremonies. It can be added here that Chartres has no tombs, so that it is, probably uniquely, a church not of death, but of birth. The next legend is that after the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea came to Chartres, and finding there centre of worship of a virgin birth of divinity, sent word back to Mary to ask if he might dedicate a church to her there. Chartres is thus said, according to this legend, to be the first church dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

LABYRINTH

There is another strand in this idea offered by the labyrinth on the floor of the cathedral, as in many other Medieval churches, a labyrinth similar to types found all over the world, from all periods. It is a circular path on the floor of the nave, not a confusing maze, but a single path which follows complex convolutions through eleven circles to the centre. It is widely held to represent the spiritual life-journey of the aspirant. However, until the Revolution, there was in the centre a plate with on it pictures of Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur. In pre-classical times, King Minos of Crete required tribute from Athens, and every seven years he demanded seven young men and seven young women to be put into the labyrinth in which was kept the Minotaur, a monster who would then kill and eat them. Theseus demanded to be included with the fourteen, and when he reached Crete, the daughter of Minos, Ariadne, fell in love with him, and gave him a ball of thread, given her by the builder of the maze, which would not only lead him to the Minotaur, whom he could thus surprise and kill, but also lead him out. Although nothing is known of the church's use of the maze, it has been suggested that the relevance was that Theseus was rescued from his trial in the darkness by the help of the virgin Ariadne, as the church hold all are helped in the trials in the darkness of life by the Virgin Mary.

There is a very web of symbolism here, for the labyrinth represents at once an ascent to the light and a trial in the darkness, and also, in the darkness, the birth of redemption, using an aspect of the feminine side of human nature. The journey into the light is the same as the journey into the dark. The real explanation of the marvels of Chartres will emerge more from mythological understanding than from rational analysis, which is always trying to explain the whole from a part. Ideas like this were familiar to the early Gothic builders.

ABBOT SUGER

Chartres Cathedral and the Abbey of St Denis, near Paris, were the two buildings that transformed architecture. Architecture had collapsed during the Dark Ages, and over the period of the revival of civilisation and culture, skill was regained, and a new tradition established. In a flash of inspiration, Abbot Suger of St Denis realized that this tradition could be drawn into new heights of performance in building a church that not only housed the functions of the liturgy, but actually inspired people into a deeper spiritual consciousness, and this he put into practice when the Abbey Church was rebuilt in about 1140. Unusually for the time, he wrote at length about his experiences, motivation and inspiration. He put this verse over the door of the church:

Whoever you are, if you seek to fathom the good in these doors
Then marvel not at the gold or the cost, but find the aim
of the artist.

This noble art has a hidden light that can lift the mind in an inward way
It warms the heart, to turn from daily concern to
heaven within, And opens the door to truth in each of us.

Such art can show how the spirit within can be found in this world:

The dull mind rises to truth through material things,
And seeing this light escapes its former submersion.

THE SCHOOL OF CHARTRES

Little of Suger's abbey remains, but there were close connections with Chartres, confirmed by the way in which Chartres follows many of Suger's theological themes, such as the Jesse Tree and the Coronation of the Virgin. Chartres was reconstructed after two fires, in 1154 and 1194, the first destroying the west front and the second all the rest. The Cathedral had had since 990 a flourishing cathedral school, which was, first, an ordinary school, educating boys for the church, but also a meeting place for all the educated men of the cathedral. It was a centre of Neoplatonism, holding the view that the earthly world was a sign pointing towards the higher heavenly world, while yet knowing that there is only one.

One of the books of the time was the *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris, Bernard of Chartres, subtitled *The All-Encompassing Unity of the World*. This we can now understand as viewing the world with a different consciousness, in the knowledge of immanent divinity, nicely put by Jean Hardy in her book *There is another world - and it is this one*. Another of the books written by a member of the school, Alan of Lille, has the subtitle, *A Saga about the creation of the new man and his struggle for the redemption of the earth*. They were following Suger by saying that there is something waiting to be born in each of us, a new psychological reality, we might say today. This was explicitly put by Meister Eckhart a hundred years later when he said that we each need to become pure again, to become once again a virgin, and then there might be born in us the holy child that will be our redemption. This brings us full circle to the legends of Chartres, to the Cathedral of birth. Here were men who knew something of themselves; here was a flourishing new craft

tradition; and here was a need for a new cathedral, and so, carried forward by the inspiration of Suger's insight, they built a building with such power to evoke self revelation, at a place central to the new cult of the Virgin, that it inspired centuries of supreme architecture. They built a building that affects us: artists who know who they are create works that remind us who we are, and in becoming unified, we experience a taste of joy, Ananda in the Vedantic tradition. How does this happen?

THE LADDER TO HEAVEN

The church was a symbol of heaven, in fact a symbol that the ladder to heaven begins right here, and now, and that heaven is not anywhere else, but right here. At Chartres this is communicated first by the fact that the building was conceived as an Encyclopedia of Christian wisdom of which most survives, so that there are said to be ten thousand figures in the stone and glass. They created a new art of sculpture, and they created a new art of stained glass, as well as creating a new art of architecture.

SCULPTURE

Chartres has three chapters to its book of sculpture. The sculpture of the west front dates from the second half of the twelfth century, and the sculpture of the north and south transepts was started fifty or sixty years later. The west front portrays the second coming of Christ, which is not an event in the future, but a presence which exists across the whole of time, but specifically right now. They transformed Romanesque sculpture, and the slender column figures, for which there is no identification, show for the first time since the sculpture of Olympia in Greece, from 1600 years earlier, the faces of men and women who are conscious of spiritual life. The archivolts depict the seven liberal arts, the four arts of science - arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music and the three arts of expression - grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. They also include the first of three representations of the zodiac, but in this they were probably evoking the cycle of time rather than the divination system now used by some.

The north transept sculpture is more proficient, but less inspired, although there are some exceptional figures. The south side, the side of the sun, of light, depicts the New Testament and Christian history, the coming of the light. The north is the side of shadow, and depicts the Old Testament and those figures whose lives foretold the coming of Christ, those who pointed to the light. There is a particularly telling Creation cycle, with the Creator on one side and the creation on the other, including two wonderful images, the first of which is Adam in the mind of God. The second is God waking Adam to consciousness (which He is doing for all of us all the time, but we ignore Him).

STAINED GLASS

Chartres is known by many mainly for the overpowering effect of its full complement of early thirteenth century stained glass, the best of all, with white glass used only for emphasis, and never as a blinding background. It is rich in deep primary colours, which are used for telling effect, recessive in one place and assertive in another. The drawing is powerful, with a strong economy, like the work of the best of contemporary cartoonists. The content of the windows is profound, relating Biblical themes with deep wisdom. The best way to appreciate this is to spend a few days at Chartres, and to listen to the talks given daily in English by Malcolm Miller. The windows and the sculpture form one single coordinated symphony of Christian wisdom, and if the sculpture has the more telling images, the windows have the more powerful overall effect.

THE MODEL OF A MAN

The church is a symbol of a man, both in its layout and in its height. Paul said that a man is made in three elements, body, soul and spirit. The church agonised over this, and at the Council of Constantinople in 869 declared that man is body and soul only (and today some churches seem to regard man as body only). However, the perception of humanity as tripartite is central to many traditions, and truth was not hidden by a church council decision, and the idea was still real to later thinkers, and to the school of Chartres. The human symbolism in the cruciform plan is obvious, but it is also there in the height, with the strong arcade supporting the triforium, and above the illuminating clerestory. They represent not only body, soul and spirit, but also body, heart and head, head here signifying intellect in its original meaning, not just reason. It is interesting that soul and heart are indicated by the two elements in the building, the crossing and the triforium, that are both dark.

NUMBER SYMBOLISM

The cathedral is also full of number symbolism, not the construction of a rational meaning out of numerical analysis, but from an underlying sense that every number, and particularly the numbers from 1 to 12 had a transforming meaning. One was the number of original unity, and two the number of the first division. Three was the number of the divine, and four the number of the world. Seven, the sum of three and four, represented the steps or completed cycle from earth to heaven, and eight, the next, signifying rebirth and new life, and 12, the product of three and four, God and the world, were all also important. Chartres is full of threes and sevens. Apart from the threes inherent in the layout and height of the building, the transepts and the choir each have three bays, there are three portals, each with three doors. and three storeys to each tower. At Chartres, there are seven bays to the nave, seven bays between the crossing and the east window, and seven bays to the apse and ambulatory. The pilgrimage to Chartres, from the secular to the sacred, and the pilgrimage through Chartres, through the sacred to rebirth, can be seen as journeys of seven steps, with, like the chapels of the ambulatory, three principal aspects. Seven is also the number of the gifts of the body and the gifts of the soul, shown in both transepts. Chartres expresses a unifying and transforming symbolism in the very fabric of its architectural design. It was the first high cathedral with only three storeys, the model for all later cathedrals. Internally and externally, height is a principal attribute, and not only height, but verticality. The whole design is expressed in terms

of vertical lines. This is an enormously heavy stone building, which could have been expressed as stable and earthbound, but with all the stone masses expressed as bundles of vertical shafts, and with pointed arches formed like arrows to heaven, the emphasis is upward: gravity is transformed and the building leads the eye upward, an upward emphasis that is read psychologically as a spiritual ascent.

PROPORTION

In visual composition it has been known for centuries that there are shapes and relationships that are seen by the mind as more harmonious. There are a number of systems and possibilities, and it is probable that any system consistently applied will give the design an inherent harmony that will appeal, but of all of them there is one that given pre-eminence, the Golden Section, the ratio of nature, by which plant and animal growth takes place, and which is also inherent in the human body, and almost certainly, mind. It can be generated arithmetically and geometrically, and is in itself a subject of enormous interest. It is roughly equivalent of a ratio of 1:1.618. It was certainly used at Chartres in several places. There have been several attempts to show that Chartres was generated from a complex geometrical pattern, but since the several attempts differ from each other, the issue remain unproven. However, the Golden Section, and other ratios, have been found at Chartres, although this does not mean that they were knowingly used - our analysis might just be the product of our assessment of something that was built with an inherent harmony.

PERCEPTION

Already the science of perception has revealed some of the visual qualities that affect us most deeply. Without explicit knowledge of the science of perception, the masons and theologians of Chartres combined insight and skill to meet the need, and we, with the benefit of four hundred years of the development of analytical mind, can see how they built to evoke profound perceptual responses in the brain, responses that integrate mental activity, unifying the mind, reducing mental fragmentation. The brain is divided, both laterally into two halves and vertically into layers, and the elements have different functions. For some centuries our mental development has been in the centres for logical thought and reasoning, in the left half of the brain, and has become very dominant in our mentality. However, spatial awareness, music, and the perception of wholes, is appreciated by the centre for spatial awareness in the right half of the brain, the more feminine side of our mentality. The architecture of these cathedrals is spatially very rich, and this appeals to the right half of the brain with an effect both stilling and satisfying, because it brings the brain into a natural harmony. The brain is also layered, and beneath the cortex is the limbic centre, which acts on basic perception far faster than the thinking mind, and colours our reactions before we experience them. This architecture is rich in characteristics that evoke a limbic response - images of power, richness, order, brilliance, and colour, and by offering this stimulus it broadens the base of our consciousness.

LIGHT

They created an architecture which satisfies basic conditions of the human mind in many ways, but there is one which is of supreme importance, and that is their use of light. Medieval light symbolism was highly developed, and their ideas about light were sophisticated. At its simplest, light was a symbol of God, a sign of God in the world. Chartres is above all the Cathedral of Light. It is light that gives us our overwhelming first impression on entering the cathedral, with windows like great jewels hanging in the black space on every side. Not only do we see light in the darkness, but we see light coming from above, much of it from high above. The symbolism is plain, and its actual perceptual effect on each of us is also plain. The building is rich in intellectual symbolism which appeals to the active mind, and in form symbolism that reaches the senses directly, and it is built to lift the eye, the soul, and the spirit, and in qualities that integrate and unify the mind into its most true condition, so that we can be given an insight into the reality that lies behind the appearance, the heaven that is here on earth, just a mental shift away from us now.

CONCLUSION

The builders of Chartres inherited a tradition of knowledge that combined the Christian and the Classical, that extended back through teachers like Erigena and Dionysius to the Greek Platonists; they were there at a place and time to participate in the renewal of respect for the feminine in society and the individual, through the cult of the Virgin Mary to which Chartres was so important; they had available to them to splendid new craft of building technique, and they were inspired to action by the insight of Abbot Suger of St Denis. From this they lifted the architecture into a new dimension of expression that inspired the next four centuries, so that great new churches were built from Ireland to Czechoslovakia, churches that can still inspire us now. While at Chartres we are at the source, there are in almost any English parish church resources to lift us out of our everyday self absorption. There is no need to wait for a visit to Chartres!

A VISIT TO CHARTRES

I will offer advice if you do visit Chartres. Read your guidebook before you visit, and return to the guidebook later, after you have obtained your first impression. You will need it to understand the themes of the glass and sculpture. But do not bother with the guidebook as you appreciate the building: it will just preoccupy you with words when you will benefit more from experiencing the space and light. Park at the bottom of the hill, and walk up to the Cathedral. The walk up the hill is a pilgrimage that will prepare you for your visit. Walk in silence if possible. Try to appreciate the scale and overall whole of the building. Leave the details of the sculpture and the transepts for later. Go to the west front. The sculpture of the western portal, the Royal Portal, is a high point in European sculpture. It is rich in symbolic meaning, but first go and see the figures nearest the centre. These are the first spiritualized carved faces in European sculpture since the Parthenon. The face of Christ is one of the great works of all art. Inside, try to see rather than to look. Try to keep your

vision wide rather than particular. See your whole field of vision. In particular, be aware of the changing perspective as you walk through the cathedral, the way the vistas change and shift as you you move.

Feel the light coming from above. Sit down and try to be aware of your perceptions without thinking about them. Try not to talk. An open, innocent vision might bring the grace of real perception, of an inspiring insight into the real nature of what is before you and within you. But not if you talk!