

The Hermetic Countercurrent to Secular Humanism

By Douglas Lockhart

Hermes, n. Son of Zeus, messenger of gods, god of science &c.; - Trismegistus (Thrice-Great), Egyptian god Thoth as teacher of alchemy &c hermetic a. (-ically), of alchemy (hermetic seal, air-tight closure by fusion &c). [Gk]

Pocket Oxford Dictionary 1970

The Hermetic Legacy

The ancient mythical Greek figure Hermes Trismegistos, also known in Egypt as the god Thoth, is recognised as the inventor of writing and patron of all arts dependent on writing.¹ Other writings attributed to Hermes (the *Corpus Hermeticum*) probably date from between the 1st and 3rd century CE, but Hermes is mentioned on the Rosetta stone (196 BCE), the epithet “the great, the great” attached to his name a development from the Egyptian aa aa (great, great, or greatest) assigned to Thoth in a late hieroglyphic.² These writings fall into two categories: popular Hermeticism dealing with astrology and the occult sciences, and learned Hermeticism dealing with theology and philosophy. As it is now known that popular Hermeticism preceded learned Hermeticism, it is likely that this body of writings reflect ideas and beliefs held to be significant in the early Roman Empire, and therefore significant for the religious and intellectual history of our time.³ One thing is certain, however, Hermeticism helped complete the Neoplatonic journey and act as a countercurrent to Renaissance pragmatism.

The most important aspect of ancient Hermeticism was its philosophical stress on “the interrelatedness of all knowledge and the importance of making connections between diverse spheres of learning”,⁴ a notion classified today as basic to all pseudosciences. This was of course an astrological concept where the

cosmos was conceived as a unity of interdependent parts. To understand how this worked, one had to “make this principle effective in practice. . . it was necessary to know the laws of sympathy and antipathy by which the parts of the universe were related.”⁵ The late Richard Leigh’s description of this process in *The Elixer and the Stone* is precise, and pertinent:

By offering a perspective which transcended the rigorously demarcated compartments of knowledge, Hermeticism enabled one to recognise how these compartments fitted together, flowed into, overlapped and nourished each other. And one could discern, too, the fissures and fault lines created by dissociation, fragmentation and segregation.”⁶

And all the result of a “growing distrust of traditional Greek rationalism, and a breakdown of the distinction between science and religion”⁷ during the early Renaissance period. This breakdown, due in part to a growing sense of personal isolation and meaninglessness as the gods were progressively discarded, led to a rebirth or deification of man via the Thoth-Hermes wisdom tradition, a rebirth closely linked to a “knowledge of the one transcendent God, the world, and men”⁸ as revealed in Hermeticism’s intricate philosophy of interrelated cosmic phenomena. There was however no well-defined Hermetic community or “church”, just disparate individuals and groups with an interest in how Hermeticism had fused “Eastern religious elements with Platonic, Stoic, and Neo-Pythagorean philosophies.”⁹

Richard Leigh makes a particularly important observation in his study of Hermeticism: the Renaissance, although rooted in humanist values as exemplified by Martin Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More, may in fact have owed its emergence to the Hermetic tradition of magical correspondences turned sinister.¹⁰ Which suggests, according to Leigh, that the West’s “Renaissance Man”

was not to be found wholly in Luther, Erasmus or Sir Thoman More, but also in the figure of Faust (Dr. Faustus) whose restlessness, curiosity, audacity, hunger for knowledge and defiance of restrictive convention characterises the world in which we now live.¹¹ And Leigh's correlation does not stop there; it extends quite naturally to the realisation that Faust, as he is portrayed in Marlowe's play and in Goethe's dramatic poem, is in fact a replacement personality for Christ,¹² that other magical personage claimed by Christianity as its founder. By this token Western society is Janus-faced; it is nominally Christian and simultaneously Faustian in character. And no more so than in relation to the tradition of "spilt blood" associated with both personalities: the Christ figure's blood is said to form a saving pact with God on behalf of all mankind, whereas the blood of Faust forms a pact with the Devil that damns not only himself, but by association the whole of mankind through the acquisition of forbidden knowledge. And again Leigh homes in on a major point:

There is an important distinction . . . between Marlowe's sixteenth-century treatment of the story and Goethe's, composed during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. At the end of Marlowe's play Faustus' forfeiture of his soul is permanent, irretrievable, irrevocable and irredeemable. At the end of Goethe's poem, the forfeiture - thanks to the intervention of 'das Ewigweibliche', the 'Eternal Feminine' or 'Feminine Principle' - is cancelled, and Faust is enabled to attain redemption and salvation.¹³

So in effect we have two Faust figures, one damned through his acquisition of knowledge, the other rescued from the damning power of knowledge by way of the 'Feminine Principle', which is of course just another way of referring to healing properties deep within psyche. Redemption does not come from without on this occasion, but from within, the salutary tale being that rational excess and

damnation go hand in hand. Which is not unlike what has happened to Christianity since its inception, for it, too, has succumbed to a system of rationalisation where deep strata experience has been swapped for an interpretation of history turned fantastical. In the Christian sense of "belief in Jesus", the mental act of believing that Jesus's death on the cross was a saving act for all mankind constitutes the core of the faith, so making a limited act of conscious awareness more efficacious than an encounter with psyche at depth. All one has to do is decide to believe in the Christian story of salvation and you are saved for all eternity. It is that simple. The magic formula "I believe" is all that has to be articulated to bring this extraordinary situation about. Hence the Gnostic claim that Christians of this stamp were "waterless canals", a not so subtle reference to the idea of their being devoid of the "living water" associated with spiritual understanding. Hermetic gnosis was of a quite different calibre; at its best it was "a direct apprehension of, and integration with, the all-inclusive harmony"¹⁴ constituting self, other and world as an experience. Self, other and world equalled a mesh of interlocking relationships that echoed, reflected and mirrored their individual parts, a reality Leigh refers to as "a living web of correspondences." In the magical parallelism of Hermetic thought, consciousness and reality reflected one another as portrayed in Solomon's Seal, a six-pointed star composed of two interlocking triangles, the apex of one facing upwards, the apex of the other downwards.¹⁵

Sturm and Drang

The psychologist Carl Jung was fascinated by the fact that the images and motifs of Hermetic symbolism could not only be found in myths, fairy tales, works of art and in many religions, but also in the dreams and fantasies of his patients. Forced to conclude that these symbols were common denominator patterns within psyche reflecting psyche's own form of communication, Jung took them at face value and made them into a system of psychological markers. He was on his way to creating an historical bridge between psychology and science, psychology and

organised religion, psychology and philosophy, and between psychology and mythology.¹⁶ But all was not well, Jung's espousal of Hermeticism ended up in the too hard basket for his peers, his reading of the human psyche relegated to the trash can of superseded ideas along with the contributions of most other 19th century thinkers. But as has ever been the case, Hermeticism found a refuge in the arts and quietly blossomed there, traces of its symbolism appearing in writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Proust, Mann, Yeats and Rilke. And in the pages of Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandrian Quartet* where the Hermetica is referred to directly. And prior to Jung in the writings of Goethe who, along with Friedrich von Schiller and Johann Gottfried Herder, attempted to reintegrate the fragmented world around them. Creating the *Sturm and Drang* movement (Storm and Stress), they repudiated scientific rationalism in favour of the psyche's depths.¹⁷

There was however a shadow of Hermetic thought in Renaissance pragmatism; it was marked by an intellectual need to synthesise and relate disparate subject matters and disciplines, a need to find connections where connections were previously not thought to exist. Medieval thinking had been governed by a rigorous Aristotelian morphology of knowledge, an endless set of distinctions and separations, a compartmentalisation in terms of subject matter and methodological principle.¹⁸ Hermeticists had believed in an ideal order of knowledge, an ideal order of being, an ideal order of reality whether social, political, economic or intellectual. There was a hierarchical system of clearly defined, minute subordinations and superordinations, each of which fell quite naturally into an ascending order of dignity and worth, and this order, ordained of God, was also to be found with exactitude in the ecclesiastical, angelic and feudal hierarchies.¹⁹ Renaissance thinkers, on the other hand, conflated theology with philosophy, faith with knowledge, and pagan thought with Christian belief, their attempts at unity more often the result of analogical and metaphorical ingenuity than logical rigour. Which is to say that knowledge and methodology were in a state of transition, and that alternative scientific ideas of order existed

alongside old ideas of hierarchy, universal analogy and symmetrical correspondence.²⁰ Ideas belonging to Plato, Plotinius, the Hermetic writings, the ancient magicians and astrologers, patristic and medieval theologians²¹ nestled together in a state of flux, their insights and discoveries often weakened or obscured by the crisscross of sense and nonsense.

Out of this uncertain mix came the "universal man" as artist, magician or scientific wonder-worker. If an artist, then also an anatomist, naturalists, physicist, mathematician and master of perspective; if a magician, then cognisant of the hidden, invisible properties and structures of nature; if a scientist, then thirsting for knowledge on all levels of expression. The development of new specialities such as lens grinding, watchmaking and pharmacy followed, plus a demand for new materials and instruments. Three figures - two historical and one literary - encapsulate the above types almost exactly: Leonardo, Paracelsus and Faust.²² In Leonardo's case, "This vastly broadened definition of the artist shattered the medieval distinction between the liberal arts and the so-called 'mechanical' arts."²³ With Paracelsus it was a matter of "magic as a prototype of scientific knowledge".²⁴ With Faust it was "to experience the natural world as an intimate intellectual and spiritual possession"²⁵. Joseph Mazzeo remarks that Faust, "sick of bearing knowledge as mere intellectual baggage, wants knowledge of the sort that will divinise him, knowledge as a mode of ultimate action."²⁶ For the Medieval mind, the highest form of intellectual knowledge was metaphysical and religious; for these "makers" and "doers", it was acts of understanding that mattered.²⁷ But again with a twist, for it was a form of understanding laced with the hope that reality's symbols - Baudelaire would assert two millennia later that reality was a "forest of symbols"²⁸ - could be activated in a practical manner, that they could be manipulated to reveal aspects of reality not yet known.

The principle contribution of Hermeticism, in conjunction with

Humanism, was to help change the orientation of human thought from "supplication" to that of "application"; the gods as agents of change were about to be swapped for processes of mind governed almost exclusively by the human will. But not immediately. The transition period would see all kinds of amalgamations, some sensible, some absurd, some indicative of what was to come in terms of Faustian ambition. For the moment, Humanism, Hermeticism and Christianity would exist in uneasy close proximity, their aims and desires forming a flux of uncertainty from which Humanism would eventually emerge the victor. In the end Hermeticism would marginalise itself: transformation of the individual would turn, via Humanism, into transformation of the society at large; the needs of the collective overpower the needs of the individual. From being a binding agent capable of "healing the religious lesions of the age",²⁹ Hermeticism's integrated approach to knowledge would be replaced by "disciplines" in which individuals and groups would work in something approaching splendid isolation. All but gone would be the sense of cosmos and psyche as mirror reflections of one another; the walls of a new conformity would be rapidly erected, a boundary wall beyond which it would eventually be difficult to stray without censure. The secular Humanist of the 16th century had sought knowledge beyond the constraints of Christian morality in the hope of shattering the Church's conception of knowledge as a fixed hierarchy of value; the secular Humanist of the following centuries would tend to seek knowledge beyond the constraints of morality altogether.³⁰ The trend towards knowledge for knowledge's sake was up and running - Faust was on the loose.

The Magical and the Literary

As noted earlier, "magic" lay at the root of Hermetic thought - philosophy and theology came later - but not magic as we now understand it. The magic practised by Paracelsus, for instance, was the natural magic of the Renaissance period, the magic associated with new methods of observation and experiment. The forces of nature, termed "occult", were the focus of such observation and

experiment, the universe itself conceived as a hub of magical forces constituting a chain of life and sentience of which human beings were an intrinsic part. Trained as a physician at the University of Basle around 1509, Paracelsus followed in his father's footsteps, and in 1513 embarked on a series of journeys that took him across Europe from Spain to eastern Europe, and from there to Russia, Palestine, Arabia and Alexandria. He is even thought to have reached India. But it is the people he met during his travels that are important, for they included such personages as Rufus Mutianus, a friend of Pico della Mirandola, and the Hermetic abbot Trithemius. It is however Trithemius' illustrious pupil Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim who stands out, for this precocious individual from Cologne was himself a figure of Faustian proportions.

Born in 1486, Agrippa was awarded a Master's Degree from the University of Cologne while still in his teens, embarked on a military career under the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, and by 1507 (after being knighted for valour) met up with Trithemius in Paris where, it is said,³¹ he became involved with alchemy and founded a secret society. By 1509 we find him lecturing on the Kabbala at the University of Dole, doing further research in alchemy and soon on his way to England to avoid a heresy charge. During his time in England he completes the first version of a master work - *De occulta philosophia* - but is warned against immediate publication by Trithemius on his return to Paris. Between 1511 and 1517 he studies Kabbala intensely, lectures on Hermeticism, and by 1518 has written an alchemical tract complete with antidotes for the plague. By 1525 he possesses works by Martin Luther and has established himself as a physician, astrologer and alchemist to Louise of Savoy, mother of Francois I of France. In 1533 the complete text of *De occulta philosophia* is published in three volumes.³² Just as importantly, however, he has also revealed himself to be an ardent advocate for a whole new attitude toward women.

Let us no longer dis-esteem this noble sex, or abuse its
goodness . . . Let us re-enthroned them in their seats of honour
and pre-eminence . . . and treat them with all the respect and

eneration which belongs to such terrestrial angels.³³

How Hildegard or St Teresa would have loved to have heard those words, words born out of Agrippa's depth experiences. And there are still more surprises, for Agrippa is as cognisant of real science as he is of the need for gender equality. In his writings he refers to the camera obscura, reading techniques, communicating at a distance, methods of insulation against heat, and experiments with drugs which Richard Leigh conjectures may have been with opium, cocaine or cannabis derivatives.³⁴ And it is in these same writing that we glimpse what frightened the Church most of all: Agrippa's textbook suggestions on how anyone could become a magus. Wresting control of the human mind away from the Church, away from Christianity as it had evolved over the centuries, Hermeticists such as Agrippa, Paracelsus, Trithemius, Mutianus, Pico, Bruno, Cardano, Ficino and Leonardo challenged the Church with their deep strata portrayals of what a human life might be in its own right.

For the Renaissance magus "'magic' was more or less synonymous with science."³⁵ Science would eventually displace magic, so making the scientist a magician of sorts, his ability to manipulate physical matter by way of physics and biology, biophysics and biochemistry a fact that delighted some, startled some, and deeply frightened others. Richard Leigh touches on the subtlety of this situation when he differentiates between the scientific and the Hermetic magus in terms of "inner" and "outer" perspectives. The Renaissance magus as secular humanist dealt primarily with what was external, with what was out there; the Hermetic magus, although interested in the science of physical matter, was more concerned with the internal, with the *in here* of human experience. It was in the world of the "in here" that he applied his magic, a magic composed of inner states of awareness conjured into existence by way of tried and tested meditational techniques and special breathing exercises. By this means was the interface between the inner and the outer reached, their interconnectedness experienced as a kind of window through which an alternative reality could be

glimpsed; or, as had been claimed by initiates of the ancient Eluesinian mysteries, by later Platonists and Neoplatonists, and by Renaissance Hermeticists, as a portal through which an initiate could travel.

But there was also ritual magic at large, not the magic of the parlour where potions for baldness, sterility or impotence were concocted, but a form of magic where, as in the magic of Marsilio Ficino, "one might draw on cosmic power, cosmic principles, cosmic energy",³⁶ a form of magic in which the magus became a species of storage cell, or battery.³⁷ This was the magic of "invocation", a literary form of magic where the Faustian-prone ego of the practitioner was either eclipsed by the intensity of the process and transformed by an energy generated within the psyche, or, conversely, inflated beyond the point of decency. Sandwiched between science and the Christian religion, regular Hermeticism attempted to keep alive a system of knowledge safeguarded and developed by such figures as Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus and Porphyry, and as this Hermetic balancing act gave way to science's onslaught via Faust in his profane aspect, a second tier Hermetic countercurrent, or "wave", began to surface: that of the arts in the service of a new spiritual psychology. In his study of magic and alchemy during the Renaissance period, Richard Leigh homes in on this very point.

Inevitably, therefore, Hermetic thought began increasingly to manifest itself through the arts - and to become, during the Renaissance, a primary and dynamic impetus to artistic creation. By the end of the sixteenth century, artists in every medium - from music, painting and literature through architecture and landscape gardening - would be drawing upon Hermetic principles to establish the foundation of a new aesthetic, informed by a new governing vision.³⁸

And necessarily so, for so strong was the drive of secular Humanism to rid itself of everything the Church had for centuries designated as "true" and "real", it almost immediately became excessive in its own claims and demands. Suddenly,

confrontingly, knowledge of self, other and world was no longer deemed part of a divine revelation accessed through the Church's priestly magicians; it was a quite ordinary commodity that could be accessed by anyone intelligent enough to deal with its complexities.

The underlying Hermetic point being made in relation to the arts was that there was a correlation between human beings and the universe, between microcosm and macrocosm. Pythagoras had taught that the universe and man were constructed on the same harmonic wavelength, so it was a matter of "tuning in" to the same frequency. Which takes us back to the mystery schools of ancient Greece where music and dance were used to induce altered states of consciousness.³⁹ It was necessary to "tune the inward lyre and adjust it to the divine musician";⁴⁰ we were innately capable of transcending our limited natures if we understood the body's inner rhythms. Hence the liking for dance; dance could unlock those inner rhythms, set them free, and in doing so set us free from the mind's incessant perambulations. We understood that without being told. And the same applied to singing, and musical accompaniment, and to the drum beat. Each constituted an aperture within the self through which the self could slide if made aware of their inbuilt Hermetic properties. Leigh's research in this area ranges from the seven vowels uttered in succession by Egyptian priests when praising the gods, to the way in which the vibrational power of music was used by the Hermetic magi of the Renaissance in conjunction with the vibrational power of words. He also refers to the practical application of Hermetic magic to the sounds of specific words as intoned by the human voice, to the harmonious integration of these components, and to the vibrational power generated being used to "shatter the barriers between dimensions of reality".⁴¹

The Hermetic notion of harmonic proportion linking magic, mathematics and music, also applied to painting and sculpture. Leonardo is reputed to have said that music was the sister of painting, and was himself an accomplished musician.⁴² Music and painting conveyed harmonies through chords and proportion, the latter allowing for the depiction of perspective and a

whole new orientation of the visual senses with a corresponding influence on historical perspective. In Hermetic paintings of the Renaissance, harmonic proportion is conveyed through the Golden Proportion, Golden Mean or Golden Section, and signified "a specific and constant ratio derived from a precise geometric relationship."⁴³ Harmonic proportion was not an invention of the mind; it was integral to nature, integral to the human form, and as every practising Hermeticist knew, integral to the human brain. And so art and mathematics were fused together, the significance of both based not on fancy, or on imagination, but on experiments and observations brought to a cutting edge perfection. Paintings by Leonardo, Piero della Francesca and Durer all exhibit this underlying geometry, and it can be detected even in Poussin a century and half later.⁴⁴

Undivided Knowledge and Wholeness

Much more could be said in relation to the harmonic ratio, particularly its use in architecture, for instance, but it is the relationship of human beings to physical matter that is my prime concern here, not the wizardry spawned by that ratio. It would be some time before the idea of "undivided knowledge" and "undivided wholeness" dawned on the scientific community, a conception of interrelatedness with distinct Hermetic overtones addressed by the physicist David Bohm in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

A centrally relevant change in descriptive order required in the quantum theory is thus the dropping of the notion of analysis of the world into relatively autonomous parts, separately existent but in interaction. Rather, the primary emphasis is now on undivided wholeness, in which the observing instrument is not separate from what is observed.⁴⁵

Which is to say what the Hermeticists already seemed to know from experience, that the world, indeed the universe, is not "a collection of separate but coupled things; rather it is a network of relations."⁴⁶ So says Paul Davies, but Werner Heisenberg was already on to this fact: "The common division of the world into subject and object, inner and outer world, body and soul is no longer adequate",⁴⁷ he tells us; self, other and world is all of a piece. Newton's idea of the universe as a gigantic clock "unwinding along a rigid, predetermined pathway towards an unalterable final state"⁴⁸ was not correct; we live in a universe in which "it is only in the flowing river of time that we can perceive ourselves."⁴⁹

Well, that is one aspect of our being sentient beings; the other is that we can not only become philosophically cognisant of our embeddedness in this flow, we can also push further still and experience this flow in deep strata trance states. For that is what a meditative or contemplative state is, it is a state of deep trance within which the constantly engaged ego-mind is stilled to a point of profound immobility.

In his paper 'The Truth Value of Mystical Experience', the psychologist Harry Hunt writes of "The astonishing malleability of the expanse of space and flow of temporality in meditative and psychedelic drug states, as determined by their 'felt depth and power', can seem reminiscent of the curvature of Einsteinian space/time in relation to gravitational force."⁵⁰ Reminiscent? Reminiscent in the sense that there are quite extraordinary parallels between theoretical descriptions of space/time, dark matter and dark energy being matched by realisations of the 'void' and of 'black luminous space' and 'black dense space' in meditational reports.⁵¹ There is even the notion of unitive, frontier meditative states being an evolution of consciousness that can afford a "direct intuition of a physical cosmology [and] the explosively repeated creation (and annihilation) of the universe."⁵² And "still more precise parallels between the principles of quantum microphysics and introspective phenomenologies of ordinary moment by

moment consciousness."⁵³ But only in prolonged, sustained meditational states. Which causes Hunt to ask: "Could mystics sense a continuing presence of some version of the singularity before the big bang?"⁵⁴ As advanced mystics and cosmological physicists seem to be describing similar things, the question has to be, how is that possible?⁵⁵ What does it tell us about the nature of consciousness, never mind the nature of reality? Might it be that the Hermeticist's and their mystically-oriented forebears had access to such realms of experience? Or are we only dealing with projection? There again, how do you project something you know absolutely nothing about? Is it not easier to conjecture an underlying unity of consciousness and matter that deep forms of meditative trance inadvertently reveal? Christian contemplatives experience what they believe to be the presence of God, non-Christian meditators an opening out into an experience of Ultimate Reality. Question: is Ultimate Reality and God the same fundamental experience?

Hunt then refers to the research of Jung and Pauli in relation to a "common archetypal *unus mundus*",⁵⁶ having previously referred to the cognitive psychologist Benny Shanon in the context of "mutually exclusive archetypal or mythological dimensions described in both Buddhism and psychedelic research."⁵⁷ Archetypal or mythological dimensions? This seems to take us back to Jung's discarded 19th century notion of a cross-cultural base to consciousness, a symbol-packed substrate which each culture views through its own particular religious lens.⁵⁸ Or is he referring to something else? Perhaps to the possibility of there actually being realms or dimensions of experience other than the one we are so familiar with? Suffice it to say that there are psychologists and physicists who have ventured into this highly controversial area of research where Bohm's notion of "undivided knowledge" and "undivided wholeness" helps resolve "the paradoxical loop that the macroworld - the world of daily experience - determines the microscopic reality that it is, itself, made of".⁵⁹ It might just be

that the Hermetic idea of interrelatedness is not just some idiotic Medieval conjecture, but actually an intuition of something basic to reality.

God and Unitive Mystical States

In this vein, Paul Davies raises some important issues in *God and the New Physics* (1983), a book of far-reaching conclusions, and consequences. All the chapters are important, but for me chapter 9, the one titled "Time", stood out from the others. My reason for this preference is because Davies bites the bullet on the nature of God. And he doesn't pull his punches; he calls the reader to account on the basis of what ought to be obvious, but for some extraordinary reason, isn't. God, as he is commonly conceived in the Christian imagination, is an outright contradiction in terms; you simply can't have a God who indulges in human emotion such as "love", "hate" or "jealousy" being thought of as transcendent, that is, as not being bound by time, space, or anything human. An eternal, everlasting God is a God caught firmly in the jaws of time without end, and that in spite of the word "eternal" having an out-of-time ring to it. If God were truly outside of time, then he would by definition be unchanging (something that is in fact claimed for God), but that is obviously not the case given that he is said to exhibit "love", "hate" and "jealousy", symptoms of human "temperament". The cry of "unfair, unfair" is undoubtedly sounding at this point, language being named the culprit due to inadequate modes of expression. But that will not do. God is either transcendent, or he is not transcendent, unchanging, or subject to change, beyond ordinary, everyday human emotions, or subject to such emotions. You can't have it both ways. To posit a God who "thinks" and arrives at "decisions" is to place God in an unenviable position; it is to strand him/her/it simultaneously in time and outside of time.

Given the religious mess we have been in for centuries, and continue to be in due to literalist minds in all three of the Abrahamic faiths making the same kind of category mistake, it is perhaps time to consider a fresh approach to God's existence, and, for that matter, his equally vaunted non-existence. Perhaps God as he is presently understood by Christians, and by just about everyone else due to

the influence of Christianity on Western culture, should be conceived not as a “being” who loves or punishes for all eternity, but as a profound, unjudging silence within which we can judge ourselves. Truth is, we don’t need a cosmic judge now or later, what we need is a “clear psychic space” within which our silly ideas and prejudices can melt clean away. And that is not a cop out; it is an invitation to sanity, albeit one that requires a little mental work. For it is, in essence, to put the experience of God back where it belongs, in the depths of the human mind and heart as an ultimate experiential frontier. In its highest form, unity with God is not us in some incomprehensible sense lost in God like a drop of water in the ocean (I dislike that metaphor for multiple reasons); it is, I think, better understood as our limited inner silence changed into a form of silence so profound, so all-encompassing as to become a conduit for a particularly intense form of creative insight. And not beyond registration or creative appraisal afterwards. Which tells us that mystical silence is not just a dramatic reduction of mental noise, more the penetration of another dimension of reality, a dimension beyond space and time where the ego, by degree, finally has no option but to stop interfering. In this sense, unity with God could be described as a quality of perception freed from all mental distraction, an apprehension of what is in terms of a frontier of mind in which time and space collapse into one another.

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