

Chapter Two

Cross and Pleroma: The New Testament Mandala

Very soon in our study of John's gospel, we shall find ourselves moving within a world constituted by *symmetries*. In the next chapter we shall give special attention to one form of symmetry (familiar to us in the shape of a simple hinge)—called *chiasm*—which appears to be a basic structural principle not only of this gospel but of a number of other New Testament writings. The Johannine symmetry goes further than this, however. Our chiasmic study leads us to the discovery of a *mandalic* form as the fundamental structural pattern of John's gospel. At this point, we find, John converges both with ancient spiritual traditions of Asia and with the psychological wisdom of our own time. The mandala is the centerpiece of a language of "sacred geometry" which has long flourished outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is an archetypal form which reflects, apparently, the fundamental structure of that reality within which we live.

True sacred geometry is not, as a first glance might suggest, a tedious partitioning of the known. Rather, it is the disclosing of unseen boundaries, and an opening of passages to the unknown, the revelation of a plurality of interrelated worlds. And it is an attempt to represent the whole of reality, including that which is invisible, in relation to its unitive center.¹



Among Christian symbols, the cross is primary. This sign has often been taken as summing up the heart of the gospel, and as the sign of Christ the Savior himself. But the Latin cross, to which we have become accustomed in western Christianity, has oriented the understanding of this symbol in a particular way. The western cross invites a response of heart and will rather than the contemplative regard of the mind. This is so not only because our modern crucifix brings before us the suffering Christ rather than the glorified Savior; it is related to the form itself of our cross.² Significantly, in its passage from east to west the cross has become vertically elongated, so that it is no longer a symmetrical figure.

In moving from the Orient, the image of the cross has evolved from a symmetry which suggested the reconciliation of heaven and earth, and thus the bringing together of all opposites, in the triumph of life over death. Receding from the "Oriental light,"³ it has become itself less luminous, casting a lengthening shadow, raising the Savior farther from our earth, suggesting the dramatic enactment of a supernatural mystery *before* us rather than the unification of our fractured being—and of the universe itself—*within*, at a point of absolute centrality. We have no longer interpreted the cross as the symbol of the unification of our own being around its ultimate center.

In the period of the New Testament and the fathers, however, the cross was often seen from a sapiential point of view in which it was precisely the figure of the reconciliation of all being, divine and created, in a fullness issuing from the crucified body of Jesus.⁴ We may be surprised to discover a convergence between this early Christian tradition and contemporary studies of the ancient figure of the *mandala*.

The Mandala

While the word *mandala* has become familiar in recent years even to western Christians, it still has an exotic sound; this is yet another element from our own tradition which, due to our estrangement from that tradition—and partial immunization against it—must be recovered by importation from abroad.

Our recent contact with the notion of mandala has come from two principal directions: the eastern religious traditions⁵ and the Jungian school of psychology.⁶ From the former derives the mandala itself, and, from the latter, its contemporary interpretation in terms of human experience.

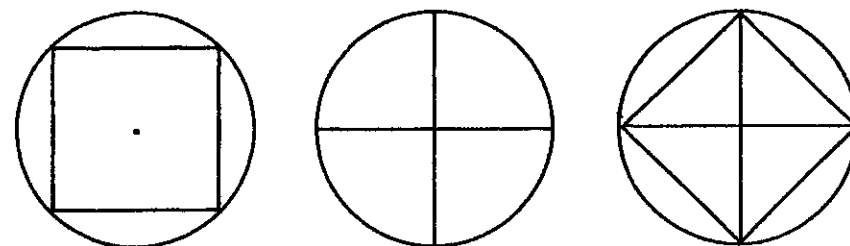


FIGURE 1.1 ELEMENTARY MANDALAS

What is a mandala? In brief, it is a geometrical figure which has a very strongly *centered* character. It combines *circular* form with *quaternity*—combines in some way the circle with the square, and retains within itself the tension of this paradox. It is an image for reflection, for meditation. According to ancient traditions it is an image of the cosmos, the universe, and is also an image of the person, in which all of the levels—bodily, psychological, spiritual—are represented, as well as the journey of the individual toward wholeness.

The Sanskrit word *mandala* means "circle" in the ordinary sense of the word. In the sphere of religious practices and in psychology it denotes circular images, which are drawn, painted, modelled, or danced.... As psychological phenomena they appear spontaneously in dreams, in certain states of conflict, and in cases of schizophrenia. Very frequently they contain a quaternity or a multiple of four, in the form of a cross, a square, an octagon, etc. In alchemy we encounter this motif in the form of *quadratura circuli* (the squaring of the circle).⁷

Mandalas emerge in a situation of psychic disorder, in the role of compensating structures. They present graphically, as it were,

... the "primal order of the total psyche," and their purpose is to transform chaos into cosmos. For these figures not only express order, they also bring it about.⁸

These figures are representations of the archetype of wholeness.

Because of this significance, the "quaternity of the One" is the schema for all images of God, as depicted in the visions of

Ezekiel, Daniel, and Enoch, and as the representation of Horus with his four sons also shows...⁹

The many variants of the mandala all involve a conjunction of square and circular form.

Their basic motif is the premonition of a centre of personality, a kind of central point within the psyche, to which everything is related, by which everything is arranged, and which is itself a source of energy. The energy of the central point is manifested in the almost irresistible compulsion and urge to *become what one is*, just as every organism is driven to assume the form that is characteristic of its nature, no matter what the circumstances. This centre is not felt or thought of as the ego but, if one may so express it, as the *self*.¹⁰

The spiritual journey and the journey of psychic integration appear as two faces of the same coin in the mandalic representation.

The mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the center, to individuation.¹¹



This language of the *mandala* is not the language of the *cross*. The mandala will seem to some Christians—profound though it may be—to be the perfect example of a “human” wisdom alien to the fullness that is in Christ.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him... (Col 2:8-10).

The word of the cross, absolute core of reality, challenges with its unthinkable density of truth even a sapiential elaboration of the Christ-mystery itself:

I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1 Cor 2:1-2).

...not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power (1 Cor 1:17).

Cross and mandala, then—as the latter is explained by its contemporary proponents—may seem at first to represent two contradictory visions. Where the mandala is interpreted in terms of the integration of opposites, the cross seems to represent precisely the conflict of irreconcilable contraries. Harmony and dissonance, peace and the sword, wisdom and paradox, immanence and transcendence: these two geometrical images seem to bring together the religious philosophies of east and west at their point of greatest contrast.

In part this apparent clash results from the incompleteness of our perspective as we view both east and west. We easily fail to see both the presence of the cross in the eastern traditions and the integrating resolution which is represented by the risen Jesus in our full Christian tradition. In part, however, the clash expresses an evolution in cultural history by which the mandala itself undergoes a new birth through the cross, and the cross ripens into its unitive fullness.

It is Paul to whom we owe our theology of the cross. And for Paul the cross is not only conflict but fullness, not only division but resolution. In fact that which distinguishes the “word of the cross” from every teaching that has preceded it is precisely the *divine fullness* which is released into the world through it. Paul places graphically before us the drama of the death and rebirth of wisdom.

Cross and Fullness: The Paschal Mandala

When Paul preaches the word of the cross, we feel the fire at the heart of the gospel. There are probably no words more powerful than these.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1:22-25).

These words, however, proclaim not only the death of wisdom but the birth of the new and ultimate wisdom: a *unitive* wisdom, “to

those who are the called, *both Jews and Greeks, Christ...the wisdom of God.*" It is "in Christ" that the new unity is born and grows.

The "power" of the word of the cross is inseparable from the *wisdom*, that is, practically, the *unity* which it contains, and which gives birth to a new world within itself.

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a *new creation* is everything (Gal 6:14-15).

In this new unity between Jews and Gentiles which comes about through the cross, there is signified the birth of a new creation in which the *cosmos* itself finds its final unity in Jesus Christ. Unitive wisdom—and its mandalic representation—are reborn. This figure becomes clearer in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth...were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might *reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross*, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Eph 2:11-16).

The center of this figure is Christ on the cross. At this center all of reality is brought together, and this is expressed in terms of two dimensions or axes. First we hear of the joining of Gentiles and Jews at this point; this is the horizontal axis. Then, finally, in the words "*reconcile both groups to God*" we are given the vertical axis. Implicit is the bringing together of all creation as it is joined to God in Christ upon the cross. Because of the pronounced accent upon the reconciliation of Gentiles and Jews here, it is possible to overlook the vertical dimension of union with God.

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:16-19).

The power of this second text from Ephesians develops through a series of geometrical images, gradually constructing the mandalic figure. First the *center* is affirmed—expressed in an avalanche of language: inner man, interior dwelling in the heart, Christ, faith, root, ground, love. Then the four dimensions are extended with rhetorical generality.¹² Finally, with "the love of Christ which surpasses...filled with all the fullness of God," everything is enclosed within the sweep of an exultant circle, inevitable symbol of the fullness.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you (i.e. you Gentiles) who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him... (Col 1:17-22).

Here the spotlight rests upon the center, which is Christ upon the cross. The figure of the cross represents the four dimensions, heaven and earth, Jew and Gentile: God and the world, those first chosen and the totality. It is in the physical body of Christ upon the cross that all of reality is thus brought to unity, for in this body, this center, dwells the fullness of God from which all things have come, in which all things subsist.

A consistent visual image emerges from these texts:¹³ a concentric figure consisting of cross and circle superimposed. The center of the

figure is the crucified Christ. The vertical axis of the cross joins heaven and earth, God and his creation, and the horizontal axis brings together Jews and Gentiles: all in the one body of Christ upon the cross. The circle expresses the *plērōma*, or "fullness," emanating from this center.

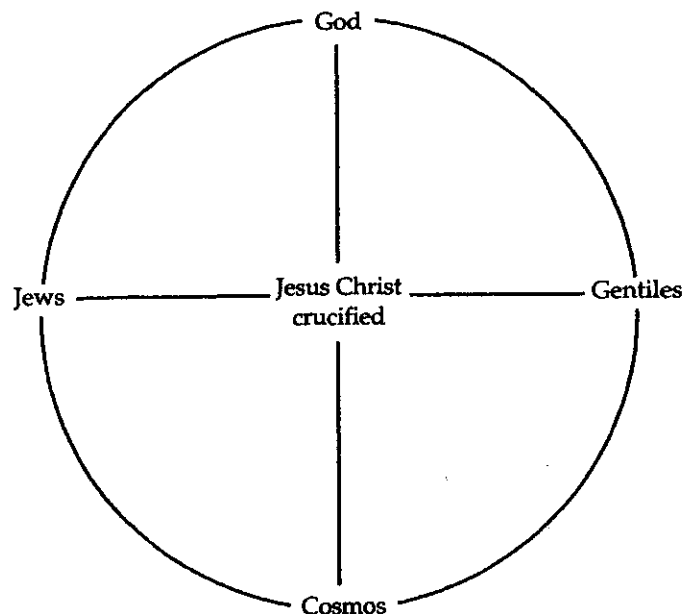


FIGURE 1.2 THE PAULINE MANDALA

While the vertical axis in this figure symbolizes the *ontological* change (that is, the divine-human or divine-cosmic unity finally achieved in Christ), the horizontal axis represents the *historical* progression of this change¹⁴—in which the new creation comes into being—from the Jewish "center"¹⁵ to the Gentile periphery, or the limits of the world.

As usual in these confrontations between the Christian revelation and other traditions, one may interpret the correspondences in more than one way. Does the Christian expression of the mandala derive from the Oriental traditions through some cultural passage, as yet undiscovered? While possible, this seems unlikely. Does the eastern expression constitute some form of "prophetic anticipation" of that which was to be fulfilled by Christ upon the cross? Certainly, in some sense. Perhaps the most illuminating perspective, however, is to see

here a *basic structure of reality*, an archetypal form which is present everywhere, both in the universe and in the human person; and further to see the point of entry of the Word of God into the world, the point of incarnation, occurring precisely at the center of this archetypal form, so that the form of the unfolding of the Christ-mystery in the world corresponds to this pattern. From a Christian perspective, the ultimate archetype of this omnipresent structure is the quaternity of Father, Word, Spirit, and created world.

Fullness, Christian Mandala, and Baptism

The unitive fullness,¹⁶ which the mandala expresses, is born through the cross: that is, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The person who believes in Jesus enters into both this death and the fullness which it brings into being, through *baptism*. The consciousness of this *baptismal* source of the new experience of unitive fullness seems to be so universal in early Christian tradition that it is most often taken for granted and left unexpressed. Sometimes the author will make explicit the baptismal context of these central texts.

For in him the whole fullness (*plērōma*) of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.... When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead... (Col 2:9-12).

Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor 1:13).

It is through the cross of Jesus and their own baptism that these believers have experienced this fullness.

Cross—Mandala in Christian Tradition

Forms of the archetypal figure appear in Christian writers of the first centuries. Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the earliest and most profound expositors of the Christ-mystery, was a disciple of the great bishop Polycarp, who in turn was known as a disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus defends the teaching of the church by demonstrating its con-

sistency, its integrity, its symmetry—and, ultimately, one feels, its beauty. When he must express this totality of the mystery, he turns frequently, as if naturally, to one or another image combining *the four and the one*.

Irenaeus argues, for example, that the number of the gospels could not have been other than four. There are four habitable regions in the world, he says, and four principal winds. Therefore there must be four pillars of the church: living pillars which breathe out the spirit of eternal life to humankind.

From which it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit.

He goes on to recall the vision, in Revelation 4:2-11, of the Lord God enthroned in the midst of four "living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind" with the countenances of a lion, an ox, a man and a flying eagle. Closely reflecting the initial vision of Ezekiel (Ez 1), this quadriform figure of the living creatures in Revelation became consistently applied in the Christian patristic tradition to the four evangelists.

And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated....¹⁷

Such, then, was the course followed by the Son of God, so was also the form of the living creatures; and such as was the form of the living creatures, so was also the character of the Gospel. For the living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform, as also is the course followed by the Lord....¹⁸

Irenaeus elsewhere will write of the *tree*—at once tree of paradise and tree of the cross. This quaternary form, expressing an ultimate fullness, seems to be, for him, the primordial image of the Christian mystery. The Word of God that had been hidden from us—lost through a tree, he says—was revealed to us once again through a tree, "showing the height, the length, the breadth, the depth in itself...." The two hands of Christ, extended upon the cross, represent the gathering of Jews and Gentiles into one; the head of Christ represents the "one God who is above all, and through all, and in us all."¹⁹

The cross of Jesus reproduces visibly the presence and power of the Word throughout the whole of the universe, which for Irenaeus is quadriform.

So by the obedience, whereby He obeyed unto death, hanging on the tree, He undid the old disobedience wrought in the tree. And because He is Himself *the Word of God Almighty, who in His invisible form pervades us universally in the whole world (sic), and encompasses both its length and breadth and height and depth*—for by God's Word everything is disposed and administered—the Son of God was also crucified in these, imprinted in the form of a cross on the universe; for He had necessarily, in becoming visible, to bring to light the universality of His cross, in order to show openly through His visible form that activity of His: that it is He who makes bright the height, that is, what is in heaven, and holds the deep, which is in the bowels of the earth, and stretches forth and extends the length from East to West, navigating also the Northern parts and the breadth of the South, and calling in all the dispersed from all sides to the knowledge of the Father.²⁰

Elsewhere Irenaeus will sum up the entire mystery of salvation in a single image of creation: a quaternary figure which is strikingly parallel to the one we have just considered. The Father lifts up to his face a bit of earth with his two hands—the Word and the Spirit—and breathes into it the spirit of life.²¹ Irenaeus sees this new human creature as a child, who will be gradually, through the course of history, taught by God to bear the weight of its own vocation to divinity.

⊕

The mandalic pattern of center, cross (or square) and circle, then, is written into the foundations of Christian theological tradition. Here the basic divisions of the biblical vision of reality—between God and creation, between Jew and Gentile—are bridged by the crucified Christ. From the point of consummate rupture, of contradiction and irony—the death of the Son of God—flows the unifying fullness which is new creation. The cosmos is centered in the crucified body of Christ—not statically, but in a continuing emanation of creative power, a continuing process of new creation.

As this comprehensive and cosmic Christian vision fades in the course of history, the dynamic, historical nature of the Christ-event,

the new creation, will also be forgotten. Structures—both ecclesiastical and theological, often too inflexibly static and too exclusively exterior—will prevail.

Many other texts could be cited from Christian tradition, but these early ones have a plenitude, a comprehensiveness and balance, which is rarely found after the second century. This mandalic image, however, is a permanent archetypal reality at the heart of the religious psyche of the west. As it surfaces again in our own time, it expresses the same basic dimensions of human reality. Northrop Frye outlines in this way the imaginary framework within which T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* are to be understood:

Draw a horizontal line on a page, then a vertical line of the same length cutting it in two and forming a cross, then a circle of which these two lines are diameters, then a smaller circle within the same centre. The horizontal line is clock time, the Heraclitean flux, the river into which no one steps twice. The vertical line is the presence of God descending into time, and crossing it at the Incarnation, forming the "still point of the turning world" . . .²²

The same two axes²³ appear again and again in history, the vertical joining earthly realities with the divine, and the horizontal unfolding the same polarity between part and whole, particular and universal, individual and fullness, along the dimension of time: from "first chosen" to "all creation," from the representative to the totality, from the distinctive to the common. The Word of God must expand from its minute point of entry to fill the whole world. The unitive event of incarnation, which brings God and the creation together seminally in the one person of Christ, must be extended into the whole of the creation, and this historical movement—the inner meaning of human history—is the temporal expression of the inner life of God.

We may speak of these two axes as the Johannine and the Pauline, respectively, even though both John and Paul express the mystery of Christ in the totality of its dimensions. The vertical or ontological line is encapsulated in the words of John's prologue, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," while the horizontal or historical line is expressed again and again in Pauline affirmations like this one to the Ephesians:

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles

and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise (i.e. the promise hitherto limited to the Jews) in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:5-6).

The interior structure of John's gospel will also be constituted by these two axes. The outward historical movement, which is explicated by Paul and which corresponds to his personal vocation, remains implicit in John, whose narrative focuses continually upon the revelation of the divine fullness which dwells in Jesus. Along a "horizontal axis" in the structure of the fourth gospel, however, we shall find expressed a dramatic tension between the Jewish nucleus of Judea, Jerusalem, chief priests, Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, on the one hand, and the periphery of Galilee, Samaria, Gentiles, on the other. Along the "vertical axis," meanwhile, the inner fullness of Jesus will be manifested and, finally, poured out.

These "objective" and theological implications of the mandalic figure do not exhaust its meaning. In line with what we have learned from extra-Christian sources, we may also expect to find represented in it both the fundamental structure of cosmic and psychic reality and the inner form of a personal journey.²⁴