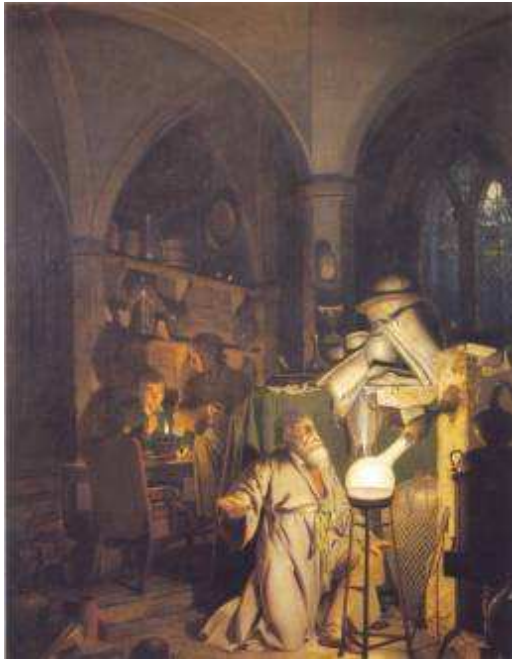


# “Alchemy & Christian Spirituality”

*a talk given to the Contemplative Spirituality Network  
14<sup>th</sup> November 2009*



*10.00am: Session opens with 15 minutes of silence*

*Reading: Malachi 3 v 1-4*

I'd like you to close your eyes and reflect on the idea of God working with you and on you to produce alchemical gold, something pure and noble, wholesome and true, something made in his image. Picture that partnership as an ancient alchemist, or an old-fashioned pharmacist from the days before everything was pre-packaged, or perhaps a chef in the

kitchen, cooking away at some glorious recipe. Hold that image of change and creativity, of the ordinary transformed into the special, the base metal transmuted to gold.

*The painting is by Joseph Wright of Derby and it shows the alchemist Henning Brand in the act of discovering phosphorus.*

## INTRODUCTION

I'm honoured and grateful to Julienne for inviting me to give this talk, and for giving me 18 months' preparation time, which is a great deal more than I usually get for anything! It's been great fun having this project bubbling away in the background for all that time.

As a schoolboy, I always said I wanted to be an artist when I grew up, until someone pointed out that I could neither paint nor draw. History

and geography were mysteries to me, and I was advised to give them up as soon as possible, along with Latin. Modern languages brought complaints from my teachers about French spoken with a Cockney accent – a mild eccentricity for a boy from Gloucestershire with west-country vowel sounds, who'd never been further east than Cirencester. Sports were another utterly hopeless venture, but maths and science were something I *could* cope with and even enjoy, although biology was a bit messy and physics a bit abstract for my liking. Chemistry was the all-consuming passion – the discipline I decided I'd devote my whole life to ... until I became a priest!

And much as the youth of today have espoused a fascination for all things gothic – just compare the dark metaphysical television programmes of today with the clean, crisp, clinical sets of the Star Trek of my youth.



Even so, I became fascinated with alchemy, which was seen as the early and excitingly-gothic primitive history of modern-day chemistry. (It's probably fair to say that alchemists would regard chemistry as a poor, secularised version of their art, rather than its great apotheosis.) At its simplest and most naïve level, alchemy was understood as the scientific quest to turn lead or base metal into glittering gold. Alchemists believed that silver and gold, the higher metals, were produced in the bowels of the earth under intense heat and pressure, sometimes understood as a marriage between sulphur and mercury, and they attempted to imitate this process in the laboratory. And so alchemy's over-riding motivation was understood to be the lust for wealth and fame. The alchemists wanted to find a way to make gold and get rich quickly – it was as simple



as that: alchemy was nothing but a form of avarice, practiced in the laboratory.

Imagine my joy in 1977, part-way through my chemistry degree at university, when I came across a book in a second-hand bookshop, entitled, “The Story of Alchemy and Early Chemistry.” My fascination with alchemy was, at last, to be fed by a book full of knowledge; my thirst was to be quenched. But fate dealt me a bitter blow and the book was mind-numbingly dull. It set out to prove in infinitesimal detail that the alchemical quest was pointless, that gold can never be made from lead, and that all the experimental results described by the alchemists couldn’t possibly be true. I like books, and so it stayed on my shelves, but I never opened it again until earlier this year, just in case it might be of help in preparing this talk ... it wasn’t ... not even remotely!

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ

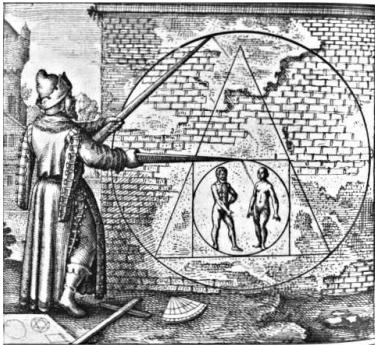
About 20 years ago, I encountered the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator for the first time. I was absolutely fascinated by it and excited by the prospect of tidying all the people of the world away into nice little precisely-classified boxes – humanity in a filing system – what joy! Those of you familiar with the personality indicator will be able to deduce what sort of personality I had in those days, before I went dancing with my Shadow, to quote another title in this series. Fortunately, I soon found out that pushing people into boxes was precisely the opposite of what Myers-Briggs was for.

I knew that Myers and Briggs’ work was based on Jung’s understanding of human personality, so I decided that I’d like to learn more about this, and started reading avidly. In my annual ministerial review, I was invited to suggest areas of study for which I’d like to engage in some training. I filled in my form to say that I’d like to go on a course on Jung – a diocese usually offers to arrange and fund such training ventures. After four years of filling in the form with the same request, I was offered a place to do a GCSE in psychology at Nuneaton Technical College (that’s an O’ level in old money). I had a sneaking suspicion that that might be a little more basic and rather more general than I was looking for, so I gave up asking. You’ll forgive me, I trust, if that sounds a little immodest!

At about the same time, I took on a new curate who also had an interest in Jung, and who’d undertaken a number of training courses, though none of

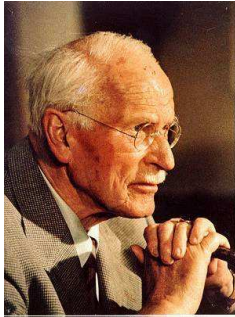
them in Nuneaton. We had three happy years together, talking about Jung and using Myers-Briggs to help us complement each other in working together, instead of letting our different personalities drive each other around the bend. I well remember a conversation when the curate said that Jung had written about a vast range of subjects, including U.F.O.'s, astrology and alchemy. I thought I hadn't heard him correctly, because, from my scientific background, I couldn't see why a psychologist would write about alchemy.

At that time, I had a number of basic introductions to Jung, and looked up alchemy in their indices. There wasn't a single reference to the subject, despite the fact that a significant proportion of Jung's collected works deal with the subject, as I now know. Many writers on Jung just ignore this major theme in his writings as an aberration on his part.



What Jung says about alchemy is that it has to be understood as a kind of allegory. What really matters isn't the quest in the laboratory to effect the transmutation of base metal into the higher metallic form of gold, but something else, something analogous that goes on within the human psyche, as we endeavour to transform our base human natures into something purer and finer. So alchemy is really about an inner transformation, not an outer process. Whatever gold they were looking for, Jung believed that the alchemists had discovered the unconscious. He says that the alchemists were projecting the contents of their unconscious minds onto the processes that they were performing within their alchemical vessels. What they saw in the laboratory was a reflection of what was going on in their souls. The alchemical fire of the laboratory process was both a physical fire and the heat-producing quality of meditation and imagination. So alchemy, in this view, is about psychology; it isn't really about primitive chemistry. These "inner" and "outer" works of alchemy lead to great confusion, and different alchemists place different emphasis on each aspect.

Even Dan Brown's latest novel, "The Lost Symbol," the eagerly-awaited follow-on from "The Da Vinci Code," gives a mention to this other side of alchemy: *"Early alchemists had toiled in vain to transform lead into gold, never realizing that lead-to-gold was nothing but a metaphor for tapping into true human potential – that of taking a dull, ignorant mind and transforming it into a bright, enlightened one."* (p80)



I'm absolutely sure that Jung's right, and the alchemists were engaged in a process of self-understanding and self-improvement, but human nature is such that I'm equally certain that some of them, at the very least, were decidedly interested in the quest for real, tangible gold to make themselves rich!



Jung acknowledges the fact that the psychological journey he describes in his works, the process of individuation, is analogous to the spiritual journeys described by the saints of the Christian mystical tradition and, indeed, by the mystical traditions of other great faiths, and he quotes frequently from books in these traditions. But although he makes this connection between psychology and spirituality, and between alchemy and psychology, he has relatively little to say about the connection between spirituality and alchemy.

As my collection of books on Jung grew, it came to include those that *do* make reference to Jung's interest in alchemy. But some of those make the false claim that Jung was the first to make any connection between alchemy and psychological processes. This is certainly not true by many centuries, and I'll come back to that later.



Jung was astonishingly well-read on almost everything, but especially on the old alchemical manuscripts. He studied a huge range of documents, some say every alchemical text available at the time, and he seemed to understand them, but for most people today they're hugely esoteric and almost indecipherable. Jung believed that the symbols used in alchemy were very powerful archetypal images thrown up by the unconscious and not just fanciful ciphers devised by the alchemists to confuse the uninitiated. As with Jung's view of dreams, contrasted with Freud's, the symbols are there to illuminate and not to conceal, but we'll leave Julienne to look at dreams in her talk next month. Jung believed that many dreams contain alchemical symbolism, even when the dreamer has no knowledge of the subject, because the images originate from deep within the collective unconscious.

Please forgive more personal narrative, but it helps, if nothing else, to show that this topic is something I'm interested in, but not one on which I'm any kind of expert.



The next stage of my personal journey came when I first met Julienne. She came to my church to deliver a talk on Teresa of Avila to a group of spiritual directors from the Willesden Episcopal Area. This was the first time that I'd seen the connection between Jungian psychology and the contemplative tradition, or between Jung and spirituality rather than Jung and psychology. The talk led to a chat over tea in this ecclesiastical high place, or the one next door, and then a series of fortnightly sessions that were my greatest time of personal development, my personal alchemy, my own journey from base metal towards the glittering gold.

As part of those sessions, we talked about my dreams. As I'm sure you've heard tell, Freudians have Freudian dreams and Jungians have Jungian dreams, and Jungians with an interest in alchemy and an O' level in chemistry certainly have alchemical Jungian dreams. The early dreams were exciting and, I guess, pretty standard in their imagery, as I did that dance with my Shadow, but then a sequence of alchemical dreams came my way, beginning with modern-day laboratory scenes, just so I made the chemistry connection, and then more obscure, more obviously alchemical symbols emerged.

The symbol that appeared most frequently was sulphur. I'll say more about sulphur later, but it's absolutely central to the alchemical process. It's an ambiguous symbol, reflecting something of its true chemistry, with which I was very familiar. On the one hand, sulphur is a beautiful, striking yellow element (*pass the jar of sulphur around*); it burns with a clean blue flame to give fire and light. It's a symbol of soul or spirit. On the other hand, sulphur also forms sulphuric acid, which is dangerous, corrosive and destructive – one of the components of 'acid rain'; and it forms hydrogen sulphide, "bad-egg gas," with its foul stench of decay and corruption.

As alchemy is about practical laboratory processes, as well as the psychological and the spiritual, we should engage in a little practical experiment and burn the yellow powder to see it melt and bubble and

then burn with its blue flame. There's *relatively* little danger involved! Sulphur dioxide will be produced, which is a colourless gas, so you won't be able to see it. The sulphur will seem to disappear before your very eyes, like some wonderful conjuring trick! If a tiny quantity happens to make its way to your nasal passages, it will dissolve in the moisture found therein and form a tiny quantity of sulphurous acid – slightly milder than sulphuric acid. You may experience this as a mild tingling sensation, but it's nothing to worry about! Of course, as all this happens, on a deeper level your eternal souls will be purged of all their corruption!

Despite the ambiguity, sulphur is also a symbol of healing and purification. It used to be used in medicine to treat open wounds and prevent infection – the yellow powder was dusted on like talc. It was good for all kinds of skin disorders. Sulphur is the “brimstone” in “brimstone and treacle,” which was thought to be good for your inner health.



Mrs Squeers administers it to the hapless boys in “Nicholas Nickleby.”

My grandfather kept a tub of sulphur in his garden shed, which he dusted over his dahlia tubers after he'd lifted them from the ground in the autumn, to prevent them rotting over the winter.

In another dream, I was chasing around a strange panorama in search of something called “mercaptan.” At one point in the dream, I climbed into a fountain, like a bird bath. When I woke, I had a vague recollection that mercaptan was an old chemical term, no longer

in use. A quick search in a textbook from university days reminded me that a mercaptan was a sulphur-containing *organic* compound, what is now more prosaically called a “thiol.” The dream, perhaps, was about the need to re-unite spirit and body (the organic), an alchemical image that we'll see later, along with the bird-bath fountain.

So, these alchemical dreams of sulphur were more concerned with spirituality than with personal psychological development. I felt that a third tier of understanding had been reached: at first I'd seen the link between alchemy and chemistry, and then, through Jung, between alchemy and psychology, but now, with these bright dreams of sulphur, the link was made between alchemy and spirituality.

A wonderful Jungian synchronicity happened upon me as these sulphurous dreams began. I've always had an interest in complementary forms of medicine, and regularly use homoeopathic remedies to treat everyday ailments. I had a first appointment with a constitutional homoeopath. This is a form of homoeopathy I'd just come across that believes each person has one specific remedy that's right for them and keeps them in balance; it's based on their particular constitution – Myers Briggs in tablet form! I had an hour-long session with the consultant and then she went away to ponder what my remedy might be – and there are several thousand of them, the majority derived from plants.



A few days later, two tiny pills arrive in the post – my dose for three months. As you may have guessed, they were homoeopathic sulphur tablets. So I guess the message was that both body and spirit were in need of more sulphur.

The next remedy I was given was called psorinum. A search on the Internet threw up an article that called psorinum “the Philosophers’ Stone of the healing art.” The Philosophers’ Stone is even more important in alchemy than sulphur, and I’ll return to it later.

Colours were very important in my dreams, and, again, I’ll return to their significance a little later. The last dream in the sequence was about “red sulphur.” I remember waking up and feeling rather irritated, because I knew perfectly well that sulphur was yellow, not red. The Internet was helpful again, and the only relevant reference it produced was to a biography of a Sufi mystic, Ibn Arabi, entitled “The Quest for the Red Sulphur.”



I'd never heard of the book or the mystic before, but he was well-versed in alchemy, and Julienne had already directed me towards the writings of the Sufi mystics, and I was about to take my parish on pilgrimage to Turkey – a trip that included a visit to the shrine of the greatest Sufi mystic, Jala ad-Din Rumi. The fourth layer for me, perhaps, was a realisation that alchemy was inter-continental and inter-faith in its scope, and not just Western and Christian.

Red sulphur is an alchemical symbol that refers to the material capable of transforming silver into gold, a late stage in the great process. In Sufi

mysticism, it denotes the excellence of the spiritual level attained by a saint. [Though I don't think my having a dream about it necessarily indicates my saintly nature! But who knows!]

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In a moment, we'll move on from these personal reflections and into the alchemical laboratory, but first I'll say a few words about the state of alchemy today, apart from its use by Jung.

The Church of today often bemoans the fact that congregations are dwindling, but notes that there appears to be a great thirst for spirituality, which isn't being met by the traditional Church. The Church is trying to address the spiritual vacuum by re-inventing itself in new ways, which might be more widely appealing – these are now called “Fresh Expressions of Church.”



The thirst is also being quenched by a range of alternative spiritualities, vaguely classified “New-Age” or “esoterica.” Native American “dream-catchers” hang over many a Western bed; gemstone crystals are prescribed as remedies for all manner of ills, and no suburban garden is complete without a Southeast-Asian wind chime to charm the spirits! And amongst all of these are a range of expressions of contemporary alchemy, some very bizarre. I purchased a number of books to research this talk, and made one or two huge mistakes, ending up with completely crazy tomes on living the alchemical life today, physically rather than allegorically.

Some contemporary writers, such as Johannes Fabricius (“Alchemy,” 1976), understand alchemy as nothing more than the projection of inner developmental processes that can only be understood in psychological terms, whilst others, such as Titus Burckhardt (“Alchemy,” 1967), see it as a divine science in which great mysteries are encoded in chemical operations. The former is concerned with projection of the unconscious; the latter with the conscious passing on of knowledge from one adept to another. Jung's work is a kind of “middle way,” valuing both points of view. Another key figure of this *via media* is Adam McLean who has translated many alchemical works and produced commentaries on them.

There are books of non-Christian reflections on alchemical illustrations, accompanied by ritual acts and meditations. And there are modern-day alchemy practitioners who believe in a sort of sacramental reverse-projection. They believe that carrying out the physical laboratory

processes actually effects a real inner change in the alchemist, and the more crude chemistry you do the greater you become in the inner person. In this model, the laboratory work itself effects the inner change, rather than the work being an allegory for the change.

I think I'll stick with Jung and the dreams and symbols!

### Alchemy – History & Writings

Alchemy has its origins in the Far East, especially China, two or three centuries BC, and in the West at the same time, centred on Alexandria. In the East, the focus was on producing agents of longevity, but in the West it dealt chiefly with metals and minerals. (Some of the Alexandrian texts are series of teachings for metal-workers' apprentices.) There's a link between the eastern and western understandings, as gold was traditionally linked with the divine and was thought to bestow immortality.

Alchemy is widespread throughout history and diverse cultures, sometimes seen as fraudulent or the work of the devil, and sometimes as a divine art, the highest gift from God. Approximately 100,000 books have been written on alchemy; possibly more than on any other subject. Some kings, emperors and popes outlawed alchemy, others encouraged it, some even practiced it themselves, for example, King Charles II.



A wonderfully obscure character called Hermes Trismegistus (“Hermes the thrice-great”) is sometimes called the “Father of Alchemy” and alchemy is sometimes called the “hermetic art.” He’s most obscure insofar as it’s not clear whether he’s a god or a man, and whether he really existed or not! Some say that he’s a combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth; others say that he was a contemporary of Abraham, others of Moses. Legend says that he possessed a great emerald tablet upon which was recorded all philosophy and wisdom. He’s been credited with the design of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and several of the pyramids, and also with teaching mathematics to Pythagoras!

The 42 books attributed to Hermes, the CORPUS HERMETICUM or “Hermetic Writings,” have been dated to no earlier than the second century AD, which rather rules out the friends of Abraham and Moses, and Babylon’s Alan Titchmarsh! The hermetic writings were hugely influential in Western alchemy, especially during the renaissance, but also in Islamic alchemy.



Alongside Hermes Trismegistus is the equally obscure Maria Prophetessa or Maria the Jewess, called the “Mother of Alchemy,” and sometimes identified with Miriam, the older sister of Moses. She is said to have discovered hydrochloric acid, and among the items of laboratory equipment she used was the “bain-marie” for heating things

gently over water, which is still used in modern-day kitchens.

Maria wrote of the union of opposites that we’ll return to later: “*Join the male and the female, and you will find what is sought.*” And the so-called “Axiom of Maria” was used by Jung as a metaphor for the process of wholeness and individuation: “*One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth.*”

The word ‘alchemy’ comes, possibly, from the Arabic *Al Khimia*, but the precise etymology is uncertain: perhaps from an Egyptian word for ‘black’ – Egypt was known as the land of the black soil – or, perhaps more likely, from a Greek word, relating to fusing metal. Most of the alchemical knowledge and writing was lost to the Western world during the Dark Ages, but it had been translated into Arabic and was preserved in Islamic culture and then filtered back into the West, not least with the expansion of the Islamic world into Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and Christianity’s closer encounter with Islam after the First Crusade (1095-1099). Khalid was an 8<sup>th</sup> century Arab prince from Damascus who wanted to study alchemy, so he gathered a group of Greeks from Egypt who understood Arabic, and they translated alchemical books from Greek and Coptic into Arabic, thus ensuring their preservation. Khalid is said to have been the first Muslim to study alchemy.

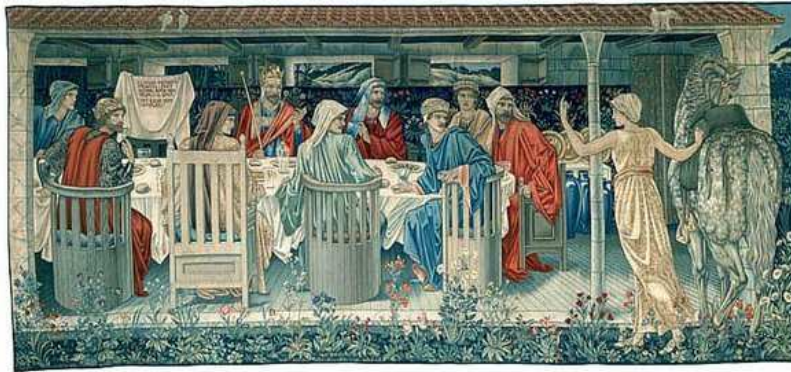


Another great 8<sup>th</sup> century Arab alchemist was the Sufi, Abu Musa Jabir (sometimes written as “Geber”); he was highly revered in the west in later centuries. He introduced numbers into alchemy and used complex systems to calculate

the quantities of materials to be used in alchemical procedures. He also invented numerous pieces of laboratory equipment, many of which are still in use today. (The word “gibberish” is said to have been derived from Jabir’s name, referring to the incomprehensible jargon used in many alchemical writings.) These Arabic texts were translated into Latin in 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain.

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, alchemy was common in most European countries. Sometimes it prospered, even being practised by kings, but sometimes it was in disfavour. The first known parallel made between alchemy and Christianity dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century – “Margarita Pretiosa” by Petrus Bonar of Ferrar, which identifies Christ with the Philosophers’ Stone, the end-point of the alchemical process, and describes its preparation in terms of death and resurrection. But the interpretation of physical processes in more general spiritual terms had been a part of alchemy right from its inception.

The Philosophers’ Stone was also equated with the Holy Grail, and there are some similarities to the Arthurian legends that appeared in Europe at the same time, not least in the importance that both place on an encounter with the feminine principle.



In Burne-Jones’ Grail Tapestries, the knights are called away from their table by a beckoning female figure to go on their mystical quest (“*Knights of the Round Table Summoned to the Quest by the Strange Damsel*”).

Alchemy was actively suppressed by the Reformation, and the rise of modern science made it an increasingly inner discipline, but in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, many were keen to link all academic studies together, including alchemy and theology. Even great orthodox theologians like the Dominican scholar, Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) and his star pupil,

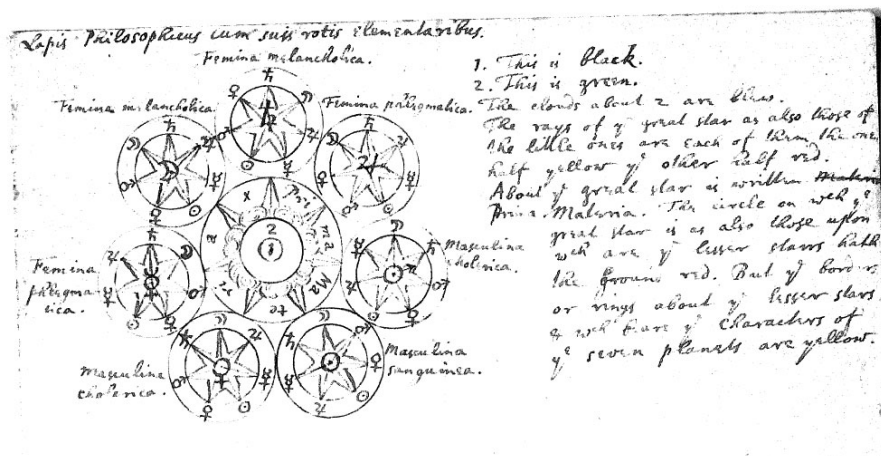
St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), wrote alchemical treatises. The 13<sup>th</sup> century work, “Aurora Consurgens,” has been tentatively attributed to Aquinas, and is a mixture of biblical and alchemical imagery in seven parables, outlining the great work as an alchemical reading of “Song of Songs” from the Bible.



Albertus Magnus listed eight precepts for alchemists in his work “Compound of Compounds”:

1. Be secretive, reserved and silent.
2. Work in a remote private house.
3. Choose your working hours prudently.
4. Be patient, watchful and tenacious.
5. Work on a fixed plan.
6. Use only glass or glazed earthenware crucibles.
7. You must be rich enough to pay for your experiments.
8. Have nothing to do with princes and nobles, as you will have a great deal of annoyance if you do not succeed, and if you are successful you will never escape from them.

Claudio Monteverdi, the great composer, was a practising alchemist and some see alchemy mirrored in his music – I’m not sure how, so, please, no questions on that topic! Alchemy has also influenced countless other works of music, as well as drama and literature. Sir Isaac Newton devoted many years to alchemical experiments, but it’s only for his conventional scientific achievements that he gets remembered.



An unpublished page from Newton on the Philosophers’ Stone.

The British Library has an Epistle written in 1565 by Thomas Charnock to Queen Elizabeth I, offering to make gold for her by his alchemical prowess – but for a price, of course!

Not everyone who sings the hymn by the famous 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and priest, George Herbert (1593-1633) will recognise its allusion to alchemy. The last verse of “Teach me, my God and King” says;

*“This is the famous stone  
that turneth all to gold;  
for that which God doth touch and own  
cannot for less be sold.”*

Christ, again, is identified with the gold-producing Philosophers’ Stone.

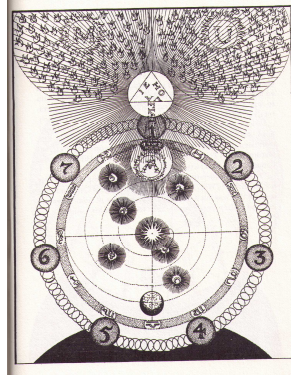


The most important and fascinating character in the alchemical Christian mystical tradition is a German shoe-maker, Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), the leading Lutheran representative of mystical spirituality. Despite his humble origins, his collected works fill eleven volumes. He did much to establish a spiritual interpretation of alchemy, by expressing his inner mystical experiences in alchemical terms. There’s little or no practical alchemy in his writings, and he seems to be a stranger to the laboratory: everything, for him, is spiritual. Boehme was greatly influenced by Theophrastus Paracelsus, the great alchemist from a century earlier (1486-1541). For example, in “The Key” (which was translated into English by no lesser character than William Law – and Law was then criticised by John Wesley for his interest in Boehme) he interprets the seven days of creation primarily in terms of mercury, and the Holy Trinity in terms of mercury, sulphur and salt – the three key elements of alchemy. Because of the many references to sulphur, I’ve tried countless times to read Boehme, but it’s way over the top of my head and utterly incomprehensible to me, because it assumes a detailed knowledge and understanding of the alchemical mind.

[Paracelsus, in passing, was a physician, as well as an alchemist, and is sometimes seen as the father of modern homoeopathy.]

Boehme was keen on devising complex enigmatic diagrams to illustrate his beliefs, full of numerology and symbols, again, very difficult to interpret without advanced knowledge. This fascination with symbols was a characteristic of the age. The main problem with it is that the symbolism wasn’t used in a particularly systematic way, so the same

symbol may mean different things in different texts, and the same thing may be depicted by a range of different symbols in the same text.



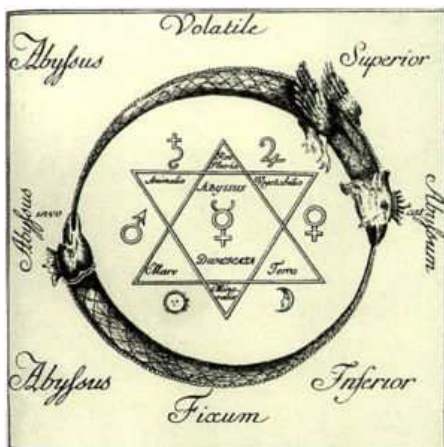
(from "The Key")

Marie-Louise van Franz, in her book on alchemy, shows a high regard for Boehme, saying of those undergoing analysis:

“If you suspect a possible outbreak or invasion of the collective unconscious, you must force as much symbolic knowledge as you can, making them read as much Jakob Boehme and alchemical texts and mythology as possible.” (p191)

One especially confusing aspect of Boehme’s writings is the way in which he mixes up alchemical and astrological terms. The seven metals of alchemy correspond with the seven planets and share the same symbols. (SLIDE) So Boehme might start a sentence by writing about a planet and end it by writing about a metal, which is fine, as long as you know that they both signify the same thing!

- SATURN – lead
- VENUS – copper
- SUN – gold
- MOON – silver
- MERCURY – mercury
- MARS – iron
- JUPITER – tin



**Symbols**

	<i>Saturn</i>	<i>Jupiter</i>	
<i>Mars</i>	<i>Mercury</i>	<i>Venus</i>	
<i>Sun</i>		<i>Moon</i>	

(NB This isn't a page from Boehme – I've only used it to show the symbols used)

You'll note that gold is linked with the sun that nurtures life by day, and silver is linked with the moon that nurtures dreams – the life of the soul by night.

To illustrate the difficulty of studying Boehme today, I'll read a passage from "Signatura Rerum," the "Signature of All Things," which is clearly talking about spiritual things and clearly in the language of alchemy, but it's more than a little difficult to see what he's getting at (XIV.40-43, 50).

First, I'll explain a couple of terms used in the text. "Salniter" is another name for saltpeter, potassium nitrate. The "salnitral flagrat" is an odd expression used by Boehme. The original German is "Schra-ck," which means a sudden shock or fright. "Flagrat" comes from the Latin, meaning burning. If I tell you that saltpeter was one of the three key ingredients in gunpowder, along with sulphur and charcoal, then you might get some idea of the force of the "salnitral flagrat" in Boehme's alchemical process! (I think I can feel another practical experiment coming along ... but I'll restrain myself!)



*"Now therefore understand us right what we mean by these three words, Sulphur, Mercury and Sal [salt]. In the eternity all is spirit; but when God moved himself with the eternal nature, wherein his own manifestation consists, he produced out of the spiritual essence a palpable and manifest essence, and introduced it into a creaturely being according to the eternal properties, which also consists of spirit and essence, according to the law of eternity. And now I will speak of the outward kingdom, viz of the third principle or beginning; for in the world there is also light and darkness in each other, as in the eternity. God has given this world a sun, as a nature-god of the outward powers, but he rules therein as Lord; the outward kingdom is only his prepared work, which he rules and makes with the assimilate, as a master makes his work with an instrument.*

*Sulphur is in the outward world, viz in the mystery of the great God's manifestation, the first mother of the creatures; for it arises out of darkness, fire and light. It is on one part, according to the dark impression, astringent, bitter and anxious; and on the other part, towards the Deity, as a similitude of the Deity, it is fire, light and water, which in*

*the fire separates itself into two forms, viz according to the mortification into water, and according to the life into oil, in which the true life of all the creatures of the outward world consists.*

*Mercury is the wheel of motion in the Sulphur; he is on one part according to the dark impression the stinging rager, and the great unquietness, and separates itself also in the fire in its mother, viz in the Sulphur, into two properties, viz into a twofold water; for in the mortification of the fire all is turned to water, understand into a living pleasant water according to the light, which produces silver in the brimstone, viz in the seventh property of nature, which is the powerful body, and in the fire its water is quicksilver, and in the astringency, viz in the anguish of the darkness, it is a rust or smoke. Therefore if its outward water-body be cast into the fire, understand that body which it receives in Sulphur from the watery property, then it does fly from thence as a smoke [or evaporate], for in the fire every property separates itself again into the first essence, from whence it came originally, where all things were only a spirit.*

*All things consist of Sulphur, Mercury and Salt. In the salnitral flagrat the element separates itself into four properties, viz into Fire, Air, Water and Earth, which in itself is none of these, but only a moving and gentle walming [seething], not as in the air, but as a moving of the will in the body, a cause of life in the essence. For as the eternal Spirit of God proceeds from the Father, who is a spirit from the fire and light, and is the motion and life of the eternity; so likewise the air proceeds forth continually out of all the properties in the salnitral flagrat in the fire, from an anguish in Sulphur in the forcing mercurial wheel, as an impetuous aspiring motion. It is a son of all the properties and also the life of the same; the fire of all the forms affords it and also receives it again for its life; the water is its body, wherein it makes the seething in the salniter, and the earth is its power, wherein it enkindles its strength and fire-soul.”*

Not the easiest of texts to interpret!

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most people understood alchemy in spiritual terms, and Jung was critical of this, defending his more psychological interpretation.

Evelyn Underhill, in her great work on “Mysticism,” makes many references to Jacob Boehme and to alchemy more generally, and suggests

that the alchemists deliberately set out to confuse the uninitiated by their confusing use of symbols and lack of consistency.

Alchemy has clearly had a profound impact on Christian spirituality, but an impact that's often omitted from textbooks, because of its complex symbolism. But I think it's the symbolism that offers something valuable to us today. The texts themselves are so difficult to read that I doubt many would find them spiritually uplifting, but some of the illustrations in the books are wonderful things to sit with and ponder contemplatively – not those that illustrate laboratories and their equipment, but those that are symbolic in nature. The illustrations are clearly meant to be meditated upon, and they show countless different allegories of spiritual development.

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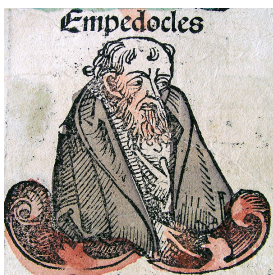
The first step is to get an outline understanding of the symbolism used.



And so, now let's venture into the alchemists laboratory! The first thing to say is that there's very, very little consistency in what the alchemists say about their process and the stages involved, because they all tried different ways of achieving the great work. The WET WAY was the noblest method, as it took the longest and used less heat; often the vessel was kept only at body temperature. The DRY WAY used temperatures of up to 1000°C. There was

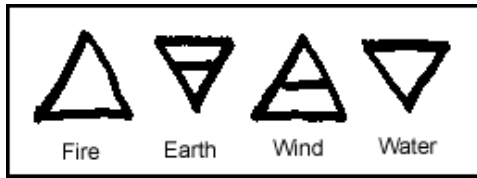
also the MIXED WAY, with elements of both wet and dry, and the BRIEF WAY, which was said to take as little as four days!

Similarly, different people experience psychological growth to maturity and spiritual growth in a range of different ways. Some may have great Pauline “Damascus road” experiences, or “Billy Graham moments,” while others may experience a more gentle and gradual process of growth. We also see great similarities between the contemplative traditions in a range of world faiths, but each expresses itself in subtly different ways.



The Greek philosopher, Empedocles (~490-430BC), first suggested the idea that everything was made up of the basic FOUR ELEMENTS – earth, air, fire and

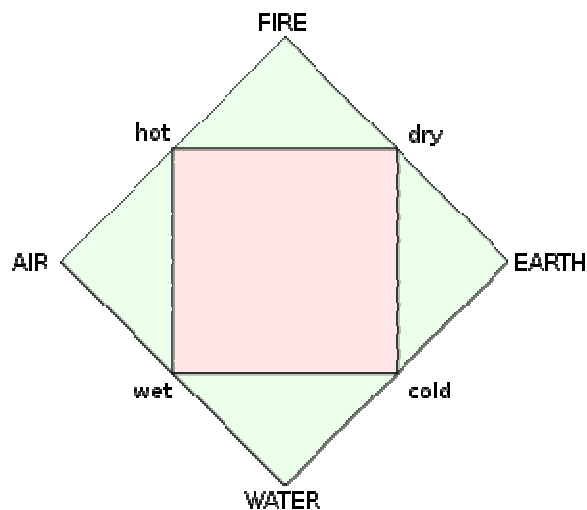
water. He argues that they were governed by the twin principles of LOVE and STRIFE.



Aristotle (384-322BC) refined this, a century later, and said that each element had two of four QUALITIES – hot or cold, and dry or moist.

AIR: hot and moist  
FIRE: hot and dry  
EARTH: dry and cold  
WATER: cold and moist

Transformation of one element into another was possible by changing a quality in each – eg driving the moisture from air would produce fire.



This language of the elements and their qualities has also been used of people's personalities and their spiritualities.

Aristotle also suggested that the heavens, being perfect and unchanging were composed of a fifth element, which didn't enter into earthly substance. This is the "quint-essence" pursued by the alchemists and by Jungian psychology. Spiritual books on alchemy identify this quintessence with Christ.

In alchemical diagrams and drawings, the four elements are represented by a range of symbols from nature, not used in any systematic way, and alongside the specially-designed symbols shown earlier and a range of others:

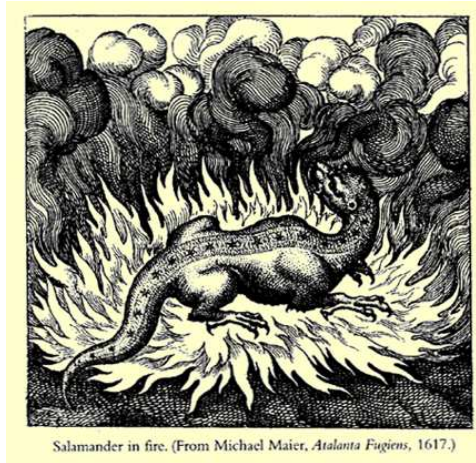
EARTH – deer, unicorn, animals  
WATER – fish, mercury  
AIR – birds  
FIRE – salamander

Real animals, mythical creatures and heraldic beasts all serve side by side as symbols in alchemy, red and green lions, sometimes with wings, alongside more conventional black ravens. For example, the start of the alchemical process is often symbolized by the green lion or the toad, and the process' end by the red lion.

So, what might appear simply to be a decorative border in this plate from the great alchemical book “Splendor Solis” is really a rich collection of symbols:



And here's a classic print of the salamander in his fire:



Either Aristotle or someone later – there’s debate about this – taught that the world originated from PRIMA MATERIA, a single substance that separated into the FOUR ELEMENTS. Some equate the prima materia with the waters of chaos that existed before creation in the opening verses of the Bible. When re-combined in varying proportions, the elements of the prima materia make up all the physical objects in the world. Gold was believed to be the perfect balance of all four elements. So by separating and re-combining the elements, it’s theoretically possible to turn one thing into another, lead into gold, or anything else.

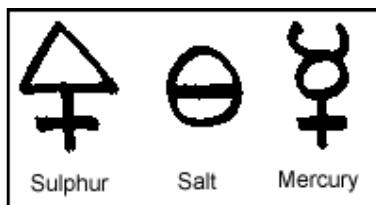
The alchemists sought to isolate the prima materia, separate it and then re-combine it in the correct way to produce a miraculous new substance, which they called the PHILOSOPHERS’ STONE or the TINCTURE (sometimes NOBLE TINCTURE) or the ELIXIR OF LIFE (*Elixir Vitae*). The mysterious QUINTESSENCE plays a key role in the conjunction process, the union of opposites. In some writings, the alchemical process itself transmutes base metal to gold; in others, it’s the Philosophers’ Stone that effects the change. (This is now well-known to most of the world’s population, having been included in the title of a Harry Potter book.) In some traditions, when the Stone is immersed in molten lead, it melts and transforms to gold.

In our psychological and spiritual interpretations of alchemy, different aspects of ourselves and our personalities are made clearer by separation, by disentangling their complexities and pulling them apart; then begins a process of reunification in a more mature and productive fashion. Differentiation and integration are terms often used for this.

Despite its name, the Philosophers’ Stone, which, of course, nobody ever succeeded in making (as far as we know, and assuming Harry Potter to be

a work of fiction), isn't usually described as stone-like, but as a powder, a wax or a liquid. And, despite the connection with a search for instant wealth and prosperity, the gold produced by the Stone is understood to be different from normal gold; "alchemical gold" is much more mysterious, and you can't spend it in the shops! The Philosophers' Stone could also cure all diseases – it was called the PANACEA. It was also the key to knowledge, which only the wise could use responsibly. In this respect, alchemy can sound similar to Gnosticism, with its emphasis on secret wisdom from God passed on to those deemed worthy.

Paracelsus replaced the four elements of Aristotle (earth, air, fire and water) with the THREE PRINCIPLES of alchemy (salt, mercury and sulphur). (Some writers draw great significance from the fact that two of the symbols for these principles include the cross.) Alchemy had already identified the importance of sulphur and mercury, but Paracelsus added salt to make up the three.



Just to confuse things, some texts explain that these three principles are themselves made up of Aristotle's four elements in differing proportions. Mercury, the liquid metal, having a greater proportion of water, salt a greater proportion of earth, and sulphur being rich in fire. Other texts suggest that the three elements of alchemy represent earth (salt), air (sulphur) and water (mercury), with fire being added in the furnace to complete Aristotle's quartet. Still others suggest that mercury, salt and sulphur are all things of the earth, so the alchemical process adds air, fire and water to the equation. Confused?! You should be!

The three elements are said to correspond with body, soul and spirit in some books; body, mind and spirit in others. Salt is always equated with body, but there's no consensus on whether sulphur is spirit or soul; even Jung is inconsistent, reflecting the inconsistency in the vast array of texts that he read. Again, complex symbolism is used to depict body, soul and spirit. So, here, we're in familiar territory, exploring relationships between body, soul, spirit (and possibly mind), those essential components of our human nature. Paracelsus said that salt, the body, unifies soul and spirit, and is the element within which the alchemical work takes place.

[Greek philosophy had said that humans were composed of a mortal body and an immortal soul; St Paul added the third dimension of the spirit. The spirit is generally defined as the part of the soul, which is concerned with religious truth and action, and is directly susceptible to divine influence.]



In this illustration (from the “Book of Lambspring,” 1625) the soul and spirit are represented by two fish, swimming in opposite directions in a sea that represents the body. “Lambspring” is a text in the alchemical tradition, but it’s clearly impossible to see anything of the laboratory in this type of picture.



In this illustration, from the same source, the stag of the soul and the unicorn of the spirit meet in the forest of the body.

Sitting contemplatively with either of these symbolic pieces of art could be time well spent, assuming you know something of the symbolism.

The obscurity of alchemical language and the difficulty we might have in relating it to spirituality or psychology are illustrated by the text that goes with the first picture, which is nothing if not mystical!



*“The Sages will tell you  
that two fishes are in our sea  
without any flesh or bones.[ie not body]  
Let them be cooked in their own water;  
then they also will become a vast sea,  
the vastness of which no man can  
describe.  
Moreover, the Sages say  
that the two fishes are only one, not two;  
they are two, and nevertheless they are one,  
Body, Spirit, and Soul.[which, by my count,  
is three!]*

*Now, I tell you most truly,  
cook these three together,  
that there may be a very large sea.  
Cook the sulphur well with the sulphur,  
and hold your tongue about it:  
conceal your knowledge to your own advantage,  
and you shall be free from poverty.  
Only let your discovery remain a close secret.”*

The three elements, mercury, salt and sulphur, are also identified in some works with the three persons of the Trinity in Christian theology, but again with no consensus.

To add further to the chaos, mercury is both mercury the liquid metallic element, and Mercury or Hermes the messenger of the gods, even in



Christian writings, which one might reasonably expect not to contain references to pagan gods! So, many texts write of Mercurius taking an active role in the process, but as a trickster character, sometimes working for good, sometimes acting more playfully. I think this arises from the fact that mercury disappears into a vapour when you heat it strongly – “now you see me, now you don’t!” But for all the trickery, it does suggest a *divine* hand in the process; it isn’t something we achieve by our own unaided efforts. In Jung’s psychology, Mercury is also a symbol of the unconscious. This bust of Hermes sits on my desk at home, not because I’ve become an ancient Greek or a pagan, but because of all that the symbol communicates and represents.

So, on the table before you, you see the three principles in one form or another.

Some methods take the three principles, mercury, sulphur and salt, in various proportions and put them through various processes; others endeavour to reduce the prima materia to the three principles, separating soul and body and driving off the spirit (rather like distilling whiskey, and using not dissimilar apparatus). They then recombine them, although nobody seems entirely sure what the prima materia is or where you get it from. It’s often symbolized by mountains, suggesting either something quarried from the earth, or something divine, because mountains in the Bible and other traditions are where you go to draw closer to your gods.

Some texts suggest that the prima material, this closely-guarded secret (sometimes called “the corner stone, which the builders rejected,” taking liberties with the biblical meaning), is an everyday substance, often overlooked. Early European alchemists took this to mean that any particularly nasty starting substance would do. With his characteristic coarseness, Chaucer (in the Canon Yeoman’s Tale) suggests:

“...poudres diverse, ashes, dong, pisse and cley.”

Others suggest blood, hair, bones and spittle. The more sophisticated alchemists felt that it wasn’t a common substance, but a mysterious ingredient of the universe. Some suggested it should be or should be like the black River Nile silt from Egypt, or that it had to be metallic if it was to produce gold, but not, they said, something we usually think of as metallic! Well, that’s helpful! Sir Isaac Newton started his processes with ANTIMONY and Nicholas Flamel used MERCURY itself.

In some texts, it’s difficult to define the difference between the prima materia and the Philosophers’ Stone, the starting point and the end, because the Stone is said to be “released” from the base material in the process. Similarly, we might talk about releasing our true potential from within ourselves. And at the beginning and the end of a process of spiritual and psychological journeying we could regard ourselves both as being the same person as ever, and also a very different person. In one sense, I am still me, but I am also someone very different; “a new me,” one might say.

Trying to be helpful, “Rosarium Philosophorum” says that “our Stone is of an animal, and of a vegetable, and of a mineral substance,” which isn’t much help in a game of twenty questions.



The prima materia is also associated with the OUROBOROS – the circular serpent or dragon, eating its own tail. The alchemical serpent is linked with mercury, the transforming agent in the process. (Medieval alchemists linked the ouroboros to cyclical processes in nature, fecundity and self-renewal, the idea of there being creation out of destruction, and life out of death.)

The ouroboros and the dragon are said to unite the four elements by being able to live in each: hoarding treasures in the earth (in fairytales, the dragon must often be overcome to reach the precious gold it guards),

flying through the air, swimming in the sea, and living in fire (as the salamander).

The mysterious starting substance, *prima materia*, was reduced to the original elements by any or all of the processes of *SOLUTIO*, *SEPARATIO* or *SUBLIMATIO* – it seems to suit alchemical writers and modern translators to leave such important terms in Latin, presumably to heighten the sense of mystery and the arcane! For the O' level chemists among you, the processes are solution (dissolving something in a solvent), separation and sublimation (the process by which certain solids turn to gases without first passing through a liquid phase, or, more simply and less technically in these alchemical texts, evaporation of anything). *COAGULATIO* or *CONIUNCTIO* (coagulation or conjunction) is the process of recombination that brings the new substance into being.

Those of you with any knowledge of chemistry will recognise that these processes are essentially physical rather than chemical, and they won't necessarily effect any real scientific change in the substances used. However, strong acids were sometimes used as well as heat to effect separation of the elements.



The spiritual nature of the alchemical process is shown by the frequent depiction of the alchemist, kneeling in prayer beside his furnace.

In the alchemical laboratory, solution and coagulation would be repeated over and over again, often several hundred times, usually with prolonged heating in a furnace, to achieve the transformation.

Back in the spiritual sphere, this perhaps serves to remind us that the contemplative path is a slow and painstaking process. The popular paperbacks on the shelves of the high-street booksellers that promise us ways to get happy in 14 days are probably dealing in false hopes and promises.

And the timing of events was considered by many alchemists to be crucial, with astrology defining propitious moments in time when the planets and other celestial bodies were in their most appropriate configurations. Each planet corresponds with a particular metal, as we saw in Jacob Boehme's writings, and the metals were believed to "grow"

in the earth at an accelerated rate when their own planets were strong in influence. So, if you're trying to make silver and gold, then there will be an optimum time to do that.

One of the most favoured times to begin the great work was the VERNAL EQUINOX, when "the sun moves into Aries, the first point of the zodiac." Some of you may understand what that means better than I do!



The process takes place in the alchemical vessel, the ALEMBIC, which is heated in the ATHANOR, the furnace. (The long downward-pointing spout on the alembic is where the spirit or soul emerges when it's been distilled out of the vessel! Those of you who illicitly distil your own whiskey at home will be familiar with such things!) For our summer holiday this year, we went to Jerez in Andalucia, the main town of the sherry-producing region of Spain. In one of the bodegas, I saw an old copper still shaped exactly like the alembic in this picture. We also saw a modern still for producing brandy and discovered that the Spanish word for a still is "*El alambique*." I commented at the time that I'd just found a few more sentences for my talk on alchemy!

In most symbolic illustrations of the alchemical process, the alembic is usually shown as a sealed vessel without the side spout.



The number and sequence of stages varies from text to text, but the number is usually symbolic – eg seven for the days of creation, or twelve for the signs of the zodiac, or forty days, like Christ in the wilderness.

Whilst the repetition of processes makes little sense to modern chemistry or to an attempted scientific understanding of alchemy, it does make more sense as a symbol of constant renewal in our spiritual lives, constant repentance and turning, constant growth in love. The contemplative use of the JESUS PRAYER might be analogous to this repetitive process, or the recitation of the rosary. Teresa also makes the point that the mansions in her Interior Castle aren't in a chronological sequence, and first-mansion encounters with the lizards and snakes are to be expected even in the most advanced mystic, as are occasional glimpses of the divine glory for the beginner on the journey. So, we may re-experience different aspects of the journey many times over.

Jung argued that the alchemists were working on INDIVIDUATION. In attempting to liberate gold from the prima materia, they were bringing the Self into consciousness from the unconscious. For the Christian, the process is about finding the image of Christ within us, or, in Teresa's model, finding God at the centre of the Interior Castle.

So this first image of separation and recombination is something to ponder and use as a way of drawing closer to God, allowing ourselves to be broken down into our component parts and then reconstructed in an altogether more golden way.

On the same morning that I put this section of the talk together, there was a picture in the Church Times of Michael Ramsey, the great Archbishop of Canterbury and man of prayer. Perhaps rather conveniently, he was wearing a great *golden* mitre on his head! Under the picture was an ordination prayer he wrote:

“Lord, take my heart and break it: break it not in the way I would like, but in the way you know to be best. And, because it is you who break it, I will not be afraid, for in your hands all is safe and I am safe. Lord, take my heart and give to it your joy, not in the ways I like, but in the ways you know are best, that your joy may be fulfilled in me.”



I suppose a modern-day alchemical spiritual exercise might reflect on God as the Trinity of elements, and ourselves made up of these elements properly combined, by pondering their properties and symbolism. We'll keep a little time of quiet in a moment to do just that.

SALT is ordinary, down-to-earth, and un-reactive, yet gives flavour to food, and is essential in cooking. It's used to preserve foodstuffs, and there's a parable about salt in the gospels. Salt represents the body in alchemy; it must perish and then be resurrected, a symbol of ourselves, entering into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, dying and being re-born to walk the risen life with him. There are times when our lives and our spiritualities need bringing down to earth and rooting in reality.

Those of you who've played with MERCURY in chemistry lessons, before it was deemed far too toxic for such idle use, will know that it's volatile, and it shoots all over the place in little silver spheres that easily run together, hence its common name "quicksilver," and it dissolves other metals. In my laboratory days, despite wearing rubber gloves to handle mercury, I occasionally used to get little grey splodges on my gold wedding ring where the mercury had combined with it. Amalgam is the word for a metal dissolved in mercury – the same root as amalgamation. (Filling teeth with dental amalgam is a form of poisoning that is only now becoming politically incorrect!) Mercury represents silver and the moon, and all things feminine. It's the messenger of the gods, linking our realm with theirs, bringing divine wisdom down to us on earth. One of its symbols, linked with this, is the eagle, the highest-flying bird, the symbol of St John the Evangelist, the most spiritual of the gospel-writers. Mercury is the trickster, sometimes helping, sometimes hindering. Mercury, as the soul, mediates between body and spirit and performs the alchemical transformation at each stage. There are times when our lives and our spiritualities need a sense of mystery and wonder.

SULPHUR is bright yellow and fiery, a source of heat and light. (Etymologically, "sul" means light, like "Sol" for the sun; and "phur" is fire.) Sulphur plays a key role in proteins, so it's important to life. Sulphur represents the sun and its energy, and both represent gold and the masculine principle. But sulphur is also corrosive and stinks of corruption and decay. It reminds us that growing closer to God is about learning to love our darker sides as well as our light, and is not about being only pure, spotless and untainted. Sulphur, as spirit, must soar like an eagle towards God and attain knowledge, just as mercury does. There are times when our lives and our spiritualities need fire and passion.

The alembic, the alchemical vessel, perhaps reminds us of the idea of a sealed or sacred space in counselling, spiritual direction and analysis, or

the idea of the “tenemos,” the sacred space enclosed by a temple, the meeting place of heaven and earth, of the divine and the human. And the furnace, the athanor, in which the work takes place, is a key spiritual theme in the works of the mystics, who talk of the transforming fire or flame of God’s love.

.....

Another valuable aspect of alchemy, for reflection, is the way in which particular colours are associated with the stages of the process; changes of colour are a visible indication that a transformation is taking place. The alchemists would repeat their processes many times over, waiting for the colours to emerge.

Heraclitus (~535-475BC) described four such stages:

- MELANOSIS – blackening
- LEUKOSIS – whitening
- XANTHOSIS – yellowing
- IOSIS – reddening (sometimes synonymous with purple)

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the yellowing stage was usually omitted, and three Latin names came into use, replacing Heraclitus’ Greek:

- NIGREDO – blackening
- ALBEDO – whitening
- RUBEDO – reddening

[CITRINITAS is the Latin term for the yellowing stage.]

Jung saw this as psychologically significant; we might also see it as spiritually significant. The three coloured stages are analogous to the three traditional stages of the mystic way:

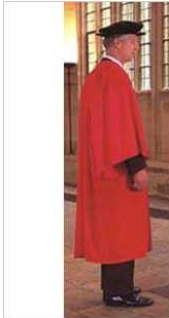
- BLACK – purgation
- WHITE – illumination
- RED – union

(The background to the Powerpoint slides is red, today, in honour of the rubedo, except the yellow background for the avaricious golden sovereigns!) Colours are immensely evocative in art and life; we talk of being red with anger, purple with rage, green with envy or revulsion, yellow with cowardice, black with guilt, white with fear and lily-white with innocence. Blue may be the melancholy of the singer who sings the blues, or the vulgarity of the stand-up comedian. Some women can be

scarlet, and the ecologically aware can be another shade of green. The ‘Spitting Image’ puppet-makers depicted the alleged dullness of Prime Minister John Major with a model made all in grey.



At different points in history, certain colours have been reserved to royalty and the noble classes, and peasants could be prosecuted for presuming to wear cloth dyed red. Bachelor graduates and masters of our universities wear black cloth gowns; but doctors are robed in scarlet!



Colours speak to us, powerfully.

Colour symbolism is also important in the Christian tradition, not least in Eastern Orthodox icons and Catholic vestments: white and gold for the great festivals of Christmas and Easter, purple for penitence and red for the blood of passion and the fire of the Spirit.

There was a certain naivety about these colours in alchemy, and a belief that if you wanted to turn a silver-coloured metal into gold, then you’d need to add something yellow, like sulphur, or something red. Sometimes the red colour was achieved by the addition of copper, which is linked with the planet Venus and the feminine. In the real world, mercury combined with sulphur produces mercuric sulphide, which is found as the mercury ore, cinnabar and the brilliant red dye, vermillion. So this all made perfect sense to the alchemists, just as mixing yellow and blue paint to make shades of green makes sense to an artist today.

Jacob Boehme and others made a link between the planets and colours, and, thus, presumably between the corresponding metals and colours. This passage is from “Signatura Rerum” (VIII.36); it uses the example of an apple’s colour and taste as an illustration of the influence of the planets on its growth:



*“There are commonly four colours, as white, yellow, red and green. Now according to what colour the fruit (as an apple) is most signed, accordingly is the taste also in the salt [ie the body of the apple]; as white with a clear thin skin somewhat inclining to dark gives sweetness, which is of Venus property; if the sweet taste be strong and powerful, then Jupiter is potent therein; but if it be weak and fulsome, then the moon is strong therein; but if it be hard and of a brown colour, then Mars is strong therein; but if the white colour be of a greyish-brown, then Saturn is strong therein. Venus yields a white colour, Mars red, and bitter in the taste; Mars makes Venus’ colour light, Mercury gives a mixed colour, and opens the green in Mars; Jupiter inclines to blue, [hence the blue apple in the slide] Saturn to black, almost grey; the sun makes the yellow colour, and gives the right sweetness in the salt, and casts forth the pleasant smell, which takes its rise from Sulphur; Saturn makes astringent [sharp] and sour; and each property represents itself externally, as it is internally in the dominion, so also by the form of the leaf or branches.”*

All of that probably proves my own view that the Cox’s Orange Pippin is the finest of all apples!



In NIGREDO, separation (separatio, solutio) of the elements in the prima materia occurs through treatment with fire or acid – often described as two DRAGONS at war with each other. Often, one dragon is winged (spirit) and the other is without wings (body); sometimes they are shown as a double ouroboros – each eating the other’s tail. The separated elements are then grouped into MALE and FEMALE opposites, depicted by a king and queen. These are brought together in a union (coniunctio, coitus). The product of the union then dies (mortificatio, putrefactio, calcinatio [burning to ash]) through the operation of more heat, to produce the blackening, often symbolised by the raven or the crow. Jung saw this as our encounter with the negative aspects of the self and the associated feelings of guilt and worthlessness.



In this rather gruesome depiction of the blackening, the ravens of the nigredo peck at

putrefying corpses, dragged out of their graves. (Ravens and the death's head are the classic symbols of the nigredo.)

In Teresa's "Interior Castle" terms, nigredo is the lizards and the snakes of the first mansion. For St John of the Cross, this corresponds with the "dark night of the soul." This putrefaction, this encounter with darkness and shadow is an early stage in the mystical experience described by many holy souls, both Christian and in other faith traditions.



ALBEDO, whitening, results from the washing (ablutio, baptisma) of the products of the nigredo, and is symbolised by the swan the dove or any white bird. Often, the pelican pecking her own breast to feed her young is used as a symbol of albedo, as it is of Christ. Other symbols are a drowning king, a unicorn and a white rose.



Rather more down-to-earth pictures of washer-women at work in a laundry are also used to depict this stage. The soul (ANIMA), which "died" in the nigredo is released and refined; it remains in the sealed vessel, condenses in liquid form and is re-united with the revitalized materia (it "returns" to the resurrected or re-vitalised body) to produce a display of many iridescent colours, the peacock's tail (CAUDA PAVONIS), also symbolised by the rainbow or the starry sky.



recombined.)

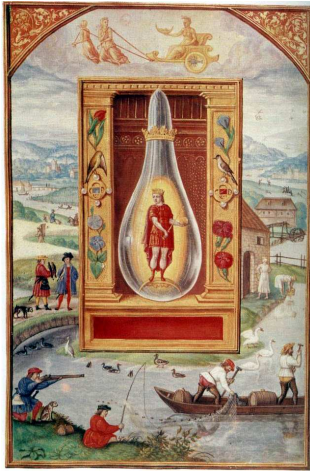
Partway through our spiritual journeys, we may gain a sense of pride at what we have achieved, like the "look-at-me" posturing of the peacock, but the process doesn't conclude with this moment of glory and splendour. (It has to be said that there's great inconsistency between different texts about whether the spirit or the soul is driven off in the alchemical process and then

The product of the union is shown either as a combined hermaphrodite figure with two heads, male and female, or as a more conventional child offspring. The child of the union of the queen and king (or the hermaphrodite) is nurtured by adding a liquid distilled off earlier in the process. With more heat, this whitens (albedo), containing all colours like white light. (Experiments with prisms showed that white light can be separated into all the colours of the rainbow, so all the colours of the rainbow could be combined to produce white light.) The WHITE STONE which has been produced is the Elixir in its first degree, and it can transmute metals to silver, but no further. This is associated with the symbolism of the white rose, the moon and sunrise, and leads to the final stage.

In the albedo, a series of pairs of opposites again become apparent – body/spirit, silver/gold etc, in another stage of separation. These must later be brought together to complete the work. In the alchemical vessel a distillation process takes place, rather like making whiskey, and the distilled liquid is seen to be the essence of spirit, but what remains is seen as the essence of matter, the soul having been driven out of them in the process. Again, recombination of the two or three things you've just gone to great lengths to separate is the next step.

Those of you familiar with Myers-Briggs will see the connection here. The process helps us to identify our favoured ways of judging, perceiving and relating to the inner and outer worlds. Our initial chaos, our prima materia, is prised apart to reveal the opposites of extraversion and introversion, sensing and intuition, feeling and thinking. Our work is to develop the less-developed functions so that we're able to hold opposites together in a more creative tension. We learn to differentiate between our various functions, and then re-integrate them in a more balanced way.

In spiritual terms, we identify our darkness, or Shadow, as well as our lighter side, and then learn to love both, as God does, bringing them back into conjunction. We might also encounter the opposite-gender sides of ourselves, the creative feminine anima aspect for men or the masculine animus for women, and having recognised its existence, we reincorporate it in a more wholesome way. (Jung makes this gender distinction between men and women, but in alchemy, it's difficult to discern different processes for each, as the final stage is always linked with a masculine sun and gold, and the earlier stage is depicted by the feminine, the moon and silver. There's no politically-correct, egalitarian form of alchemy!)



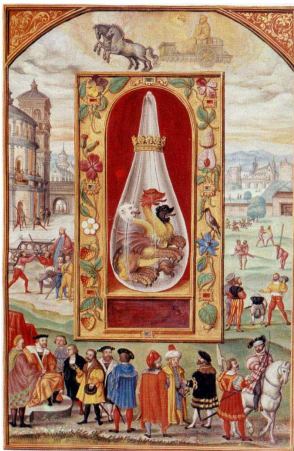
In RUBEDO, the white (associated with the queen) becomes united with the red (associated with the king) who arise and perform the union of opposites again (CONIUNCTIO OPPOSITORUM), symbolized by the conjunction of the archetypal masculine and feminine in the “chymical marriage” (HIERO GAMOS). This results in reddening and the formation of the PHILOSOPHERS’ STONE – the hermaphrodite embodying the united king and queen, sometimes symbolized by a red rose. The king and queen perform their coniunctio and melt into a single being with two heads, or they give birth to another child of the union.

Mercury, this element and messenger-god, is often seen to be instrumental in resolving the opposites and enabling the conjunction. The king and queen are usually shown being immersed in a bath of mercury – the “mercurial fountain.”

We might possibly interpret the first union as a reconnection with ourselves, and the second as a more spiritual union with God or with all people.

The Philosophers’ Stone is identified with Christ in Christian spiritual alchemy – the one who brings about our transformation, the one we aim to be like, the goal of the entire process, the one in whom we are baptized and washed. Both Christ and the Stone share the symbol of the PELICAN, and one of the vessels used in alchemy, the ALEMBIC or RETORT, is shaped like a pelican, as we’ve already seen.

With all the bird imagery, the process is often shown as a bird emerging from an egg after gentle warming. The egg itself is used as a symbol of the soul, and can represent the alembic in which the process takes place. The yolk of the egg represents the gold that is waiting to be brought forth.



Again, the alchemical sequence of colours warrants reflection. The black of those things that are most difficult to encounter, the white of forgiveness, purity and all the colours and opposites united, and then the red of fire and light and passion and spirit, turning silver into gold: the

purgation, illumination and union of the mystical way.

.....

To give you a further taste of the obscurity of alchemical texts, and to encourage you to engage contemplatively with the symbolism of colour and change rather, perhaps, than reading the original manuscripts, I'll read a passage from a 17<sup>th</sup> century "Treatise on *Salt*" sometimes attributed to Sendivogius. You may find it difficult to recognise the salt you put on your chips! A slightly tacky modern alchemical illustration is shown – see how much symbolism you can spot, as I read!



*“A certain thing is found in this world, which is also everywhere, and in every place,  
it is not earth, nor fire, nor air, nor water,  
however it wants neither of these things,  
nay, it can become fire, air, water, and earth;  
for it contains all nature, in itself purely, and sincerely,  
it becomes white and red, is hot and cold,  
it is moist and dry, and is diversifiable every way,  
the band of sages only have known it,  
and they call it their salt:  
it is extracted from their earth,  
and it has been the ruin of many a fool;  
for the common earth is worth nothing here,  
nor the vulgar salt in any manner,  
but rather the salt of the world,  
which contains in itself all life:  
of it is made that medicine, which will preserve you from all maladies.  
If then you desire the elixir of the philosophers,*

*without doubt that thing must be metallic,  
as nature has made it,  
and has reduced it to a metallic form,  
which is called our magnesia,  
out of which our salt is extracted;  
when therefore you shall have found this thing,  
prepare it well for your use,  
and you shall draw forth of this clear salt,  
its heart, which is very sweet,  
make its red soul come out likewise,  
and its sweet and excellent oil.  
And the blood of the sulphur is called,  
the sovereign good in this work;  
these two substances may generate for you,  
the sovereign treasure of the world.  
Now, how must you prepare these two substances?  
By the mean of your salt of earth,  
I dare not write it openly,  
for God will have it concealed;  
and one must by no means give to the swine  
a viand made of precious pearls.  
However, learn from me, with all fidelity,  
that no foreign thing must enter into the work;  
as ice, by the heat of the fire,  
is converted into its primitive water,  
it is necessary also, that the stone  
become a water in itself:  
it has need but of a gentle and moderate bath,  
in which it dissolves of its own accord,  
by the means of putrefaction.  
Separate the water therefrom,  
and reduce it into a red oil,  
which is that soul of a purple colour.  
And when you shall have obtained these two substances,  
bind them gently together,  
and put them into the philosophers' egg,  
closed hermetically.  
And you must place them on an athanor,  
which you must guide according to the exigency, and custom, of all the  
sages,  
in administering to it a very slow fire,  
such as a hen gives to her eggs to hatch her chickens;  
then the water, by a great effort, will attract to itself all the sulphur,*

*insomuch that there will no longer appear anything thereof,  
 which however can not last long.*  
*For by its heat and siccity* (siccity=dryness)  
*it will strive to make itself manifest again,*  
*which on the contrary the cold Luna will endeavour to hinder.*  
*Here will begin a great conflict between these two substances,*  
*during which, the one, and the other will ascend*  
*on high, whether they raise themselves by an admirable mean;*  
*but the wind constrains them to descend downwards,*  
*notwithstanding which they fly again upwards,*  
*and after they have for a good while continued these motions and*  
*circulations,*  
*they remain at last stable below,*  
*and there become liquefied with certitude,*  
*in their first chaos most profoundly.*  
*And then all these substances will become black,*  
*as does the soot in the chimney,*  
*that is called the head of the raven,*  
*which is no small sign of the grace of God.*  
*When that shall have happened, you will see in a short time*  
*colours of all sorts,*  
*the red, the yellow, the blue, and the others,*  
*the which will nevertheless all soon disappear.*  
*And you will see afterwards more and more,*  
*that the whole will become green, like the leaves, and herbs.*  
*then at last the light of the moon shows itself*  
*wherefore the heat must then be augmented,*  
*and be left in that degree;*  
*and the matter will become white like a hoary man, whose aged*  
*complexion resembles ice,*  
*it will also whiten afterwards like silver.*  
*Govern your fire with a great deal of care,*  
*and afterwards you shall see that in your vessel,*  
*your matter will become altogether white as the snow;*  
*and then your elixir is perfected as to the white work;*  
*which in time will likewise become red.*  
*For which reason augment your fire afresh,*  
*and it will become yellow, or of a lemon colour all over:*  
*but at last it will become red like a ruby.*  
*Then render thanks to God our Lord,*  
*for you have found so great a treasure,*  
*that there is not in the whole world anything comparable to it for its*  
*excellency;*

*this red stone tinges into pure gold,  
tin, copper, iron, silver, and lead,  
and all the other metallic bodies whatever:  
it effects and produces moreover many other wonders;  
you may by its mean drive away all the maladies incident to mankind,  
wherefore render thanks to God with all your heart;  
and being enabled by it, give freely your assistance to your neighbour,  
and employ the use of this stone to the honour of the most high,  
whom it may please, to receive us into his kingdom of heaven.  
Glory, honour, and virtue forever to the holy, holy, holy sabbath, God  
omnipotent, who alone is wise, and eternal, the King of kings, and the  
Lord of lords, who is encompassed with an inaccessible light, who has  
hindered the violence of death, and who has produced, and set in the  
light, an imperishable spirit. Amen.”*



Jung described the set of 20 woodcuts in the “*Rosarium Philosophorum*,” (the Rosary of the Philosophers, published in 1550) as “the most complete and simplest illustration” of the importance of the *hieroglyphos*. I think I’d call them *relatively* simple, although still somewhat obscure. (It should be noted that Jung only used the first ten plates; he felt the others were duplication.) The woodcut images draw on older alchemical sources, especially the German “Book of the Holy Trinity” from 140 years earlier. The text that goes with the pictures is made up principally of lengthy quotations from other works, rather than addressing the plates directly. The text includes comments on both physical and spiritual alchemy.

We’ll run through them at a pace to give you some idea of the symbolism used of the whole alchemical process. I’ll try and remember to pause at each slide, to give you chance to look for yourselves.

The original woodcuts are uncoloured; the coloured slides are from Adam McLean’s edition, so references to the symbolism of colour are only based on his choice of tint, except where it’s fairly obvious, eg the gold of the Sun.



In the first plate we encounter the prima materia. A fountain with three spigots represents the three principles, sulphur, mercury and salt, mingled in the waters of chaos (cf Genesis). The presence of opposites is alluded to by the sun and moon, and

by the double-headed beast. Around this dragon are words, saying animal, vegetable and mineral. In addition to the three spigots, the fountain rests on three feet (like those of an animal) and it is capped with a three-part flower. The cloud represents the presence of God, and the six-pointed stars represent the heavenly realm. PAUSE



The opposites of sun and moon, male and female, king and queen are now apparent: the process of separation has begun. Their union is prefigured by the joined hands and the presence of the heavenly dove of the spirit or mercury, the mediating principle. Spiritual grace is vital for the great work to proceed.

Jung believed that the joining of the LEFT hands represents the dark or unconscious side of their nature. The right hands of the conscious realm offer flowers to each other, but aren't yet joined.

There's a certain similarity to pictures of the annunciation, with a man (or angel) a woman, a lily and the dove of the Spirit.

This second picture reminds me of two people about to begin a fencing match, with their swords crossed and the referee holding his sword with them – this fits nicely with the “warring opposites.” PAUSE



The union gets closer, as we see the opposites naked and grasping each other's flowers. Jung labels this “The Naked Truth.” The veils of consciousness are removed and the two opposites can now see each other clearly. The stalks in the last plate had twin flowers, now they have a single flower. The dove still has a mediating role. The scrolls read, “O Luna, let me be your husband,” “O Sol, I must submit to you,” and “It is the Spirit

which vivifies.”

In the second and third plates, the figures stand on a sun and a crescent moon. The moon is, thus, only partially seen. The sun represents daylight and visible things; the moon represents darkness, shadow, hidden things, the night and dreams. PAUSE



Both now sit in the water of a bath, which is hexagonal – I’m sure that’s significant, probably as two lots of three, but I’m not sure. PAUSE



The characters now get on with the business of coniunctio. The sun and moon sit in the pond alongside their king and queen. This time the moon is full and no longer a partially-hidden crescent. PAUSE



Their bodies are now joined in hermaphrodite form, two heads with one crown. The bath is now tomb-shaped. (Note that the product of the union in this case is the hermaphrodite rather than a child figure.) PAUSE



Putrefaction now occurs, as they die and the masculine soul figure departs from the body. The commentary in the book says, “Here the four elements are separated, and the soul is most subtly severed from the body.” PAUSE



Washing (or baptism) occurs, both through immersion in the bath of the unconscious and through the washing from on high. PAUSE



The putrefied body, at the stage of nigredo, blackening, symbolized by the ravens, prepares to be revived by the return of the soul from on high. The raven on the left is emerging from hiddenness, rather than being buried. The two perhaps represent two stages of penitence, dealing with shallower sins and then deeper issues. The emerging raven represents the dawning of a new consciousness, sometimes referred to as the “Ortus.” PAUSE



The first stage of the process, the “lesser work,” is complete; the hermaphrodite queen, reborn from the tomb, has gained wings and stands on the moon. Albedo has been achieved. The joined opposites are shown by the “tree of moon heads” at the left. The darkness remains with us; it’s part of what’s in the coniunctio, and the hermaphrodite grasps serpents in its hands; they’re still present. PAUSE



In the final stage, during a parallel transmutation, the opposites are again separated and we see a distinct king and queen once more, both winged, as they have achieved some spiritual progress so far. A parallel sequence follows, with the queen taking the dominant role this time. A more passionate coniunctio occurs, as the queen touches the king’s phallus, and the king touches her breast and supports her head with his hand. You may have noticed that each of the two conjunctions is set in a swamp-like pond rather than the stone bath; whether this is a comment on the physical activity taking place or not I don’t know! This second stage is sometimes called the fermentation, to distinguish it from the first conjunction. PAUSE



Death occurs again, as Sol, the masculine sun, is drowned in mercury. PAUSE



Again we see the fused hermaphrodite of the coniunctio, this time with wings and dying once more. The queen is still on top. PAUSE



Death occurs, as the feminine spirit figure ascends. The text says, "Here ends the life of Luna (the moon) and the spirit subtly ascends of high." The figures have now lost their wings. PAUSE



Another washing follows, with dew from on high. PAUSE



And the female figure descends again (rather confusingly, it's labelled soul rather than spirit, which was what ascended two slides back; generally, soul is the feminine 'anima,' and spirit is the masculine 'animus') This is all parallel to the previous process in albedo, but at the deeper level of rubedo. PAUSE



The new winged and clothed hermaphrodite is seen and the silver moon tree of heads of the earlier plate is replaced with the golden suns tree

of the final product. But the final figure incorporates the moon as well as the sun, our darkness and shadow as well as our light. The serpents are still there in the figure's hands, and it stands no longer on a crescent moon, but on three serpents around a rock, biting each other's tails. These symbolise the union of spirit, soul and body. The serpent, generally, is a symbol of the feminine and the moon; the way in which a snake periodically shed its skin was likened to woman's monthly cycle, itself linked with the moon.

By contrast, the unchanging golden lion stands behind, representing the masculine and the sun, and the pelican in her piety symbolizes Christ and the Philosophers' Stone.

Partway through the process or the spiritual journey, we may feel that we've reached its end; we gain lovely white feathery wings like a bird or an angel, but there's more work to do. The final set of wings is slightly disconcerting, looking more like a bat – a mammal like us, and a creature of the night. Even at the conclusion of the process, our darkness is still an integral part of us. I'm not sure whether the butterfly wings of Teresa's soul are more like those of a bird or a bat, but they're wings nonetheless! PAUSE



The green lion that represents the prima materia, eats the golden sun, showing that illumination, previously regarded as something exterior, has now been assimilated into the subject's being. PAUSE



The spiritual nature of the process is shown by the plate of the coronation of the Virgin Mary, with the three elements of the Trinity shown, and the dove of the Spirit from the early plates. In the sequence we might see a similarity to the Mary story from annunciation to coronation. And the fountain at the start, with its three

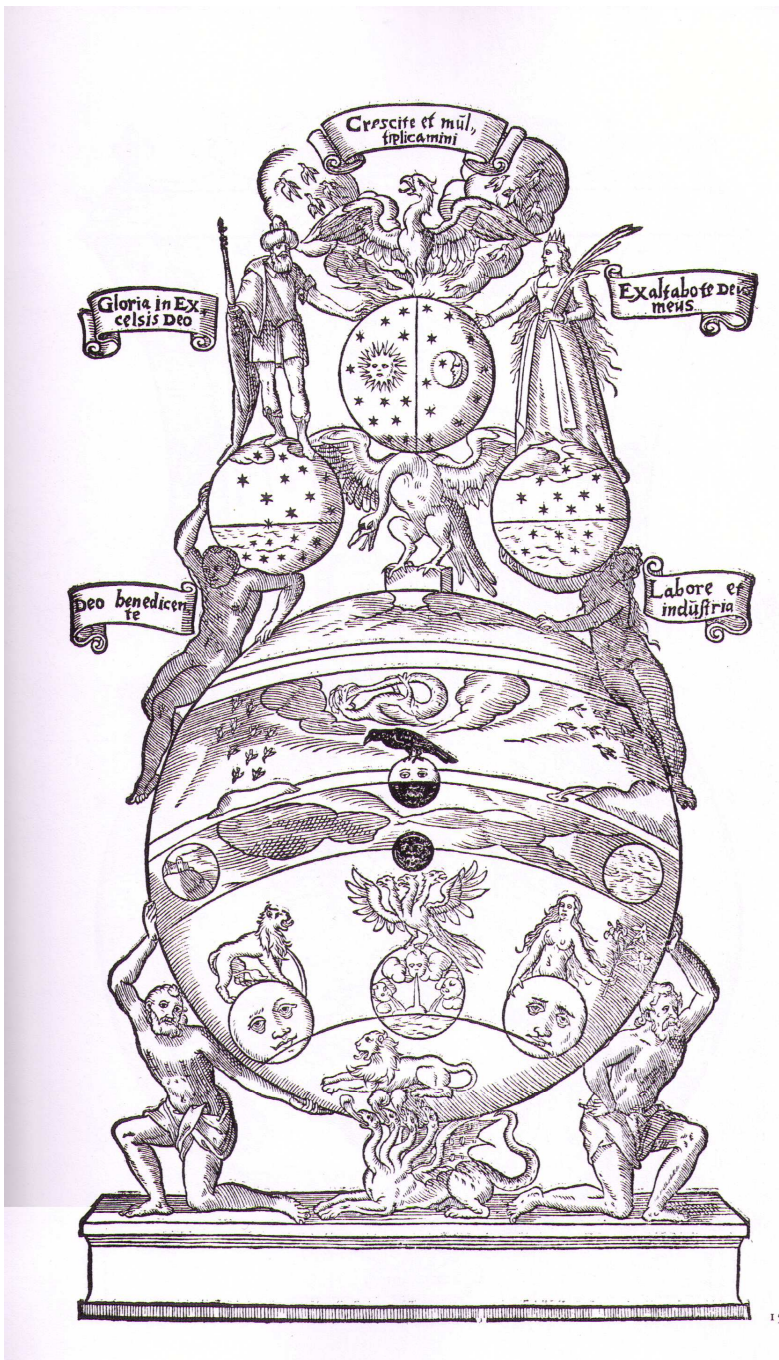
spigots, has become this unified Trinity, surrounding the Blessed Virgin Mary, the crowned alchemist. PAUSE



The Christian nature of the process is made absolutely clear, as the last plate in the sequence shows the risen Christ emerging from a tomb in the same shape as the bath in the earlier plates. Again, the Jesus story from annunciation to resurrection is present in the sequence. The alchemist has completed the process, united the conscious and the unconscious, and experienced a transformation likened to resurrection. PAUSE

For my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, my wife gave me a nicely-bound copy of the 'Rosarium' pictures, which I sat with and pondered during the three hours of the Watch one Maundy Thursday. It was a wonderful thing to do! I think the woodcuts were intended for this sort of meditation, so that we find our own meaning within them, rather than being constrained by one commentator's interpretation, be it Jung, Adam McLean or anyone else.

## FINAL SECTION



through contemplation and the mystical life.

In this plate from Andreas Libavius' "Alchymia" of 1606, the whole alchemical process is shown together. You may be able to recognise some of the symbols already, but I've provided a sheet of brief notes to help you along. I suggest we draw the session to a close by reflecting quietly on the work that goes on within us, as we move towards perfection,

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*including Adam McLean’s Commentary on “Rosarium Philosophorum.”*