

Joscelyn Godwin
Swastika and Cross
Polar and Solar Symbolism

Joscelyn Godwin was born in England and emigrated to the USA in 1966, where he is Professor of Music at Colgate University in New York State. His many books include *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth*, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* and *Arktos: the Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism and Nazi Survival* (Thames & Hudson).

When primitive man made his first attempt to understand the cosmos, two things in particular served him as reference points. The first of these was the sun, as it made its daily journey across the heavens. The second thing was the course of the stars in the night sky. The regular alternation of day and night, each with its own sky-phenomena, would have been the first clue to the cosmic order.

At a certain point, early man must have made that abstraction from the sense-world, that transference to the imagination, that *enabled him to understand and not merely to perceive his universe*. In this process, the sun's daily journey is internalized in memory, perhaps in a moment of reflection at the end of the day. Immediately the question arises: Where does it go at sunset? Where does it come from at sunrise? The imagination supplies a place that has never been seen, a place beneath the solid earth. At that moment, a cosmos is born. The universe has been internalized in the human imagination, as it will be in ever varying ways right up to the present.

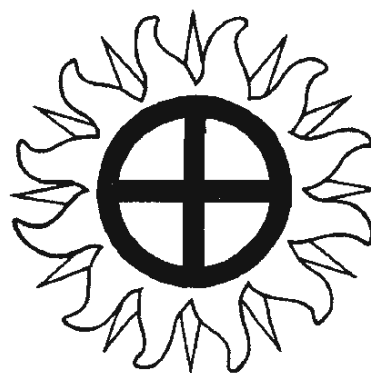
Further reflections on the path of the sun soon bring the realization that this varies in the course of the year, the more so as one lives closer to one of the poles. To grasp the year as an entity, not merely responding to its seasons

like the grass and the migrating birds, marks a corresponding step in the imagination to that which created the path of the sun. Now it is not space but time that is imagined: a whole year is encapsulated in a moment of thought, and the pattern of the cycle is grasped.

To communicate these images and insights, primitive man used myth. The realization that the sun must keep moving at night, in order to emerge at dawn on the opposite side of the horizon, easily gives rise to myths of the sun-boat travelling on an underground ocean, and so on. The annual cycle may explain itself in mythic terms as the cyclical growth and waning of the sun's strength, leading to seasonal festivals to mark the main points of the cycle. In such a way, the insights that must at first have occurred to exceptional individuals (if they were not revealed by so-called gods) are made available to those less gifted in abstract thought. The process continues throughout history: even today one can see it, in the myth of subatomic particles posited on the basis of calculations that are far beyond most of us. The picturesque and sometimes childlike images of the new physics, like the Big Bang and the Charmed Quark, are myths for our time.

There are two basic methods of communicating one's discoveries: one can tell, as in a myth, or one can show, as in a symbol. A symbol is a myth for the eye. The symbol that conveys the knowledge of the sun's annual course is a cross within a circle. This can mean other things, of course, but it is certainly a mnemonic of the quarters into which the year naturally divides. By watching the place on the horizon

where the sun rises and sets each day, one locates the extreme southern and northern points. In the northern hemisphere, the extreme south belongs to the winter solstice, when the sun rises in the south-east and sets in the south-west. At the summer solstice, it rises in the north-east and sets in the north-west. The solstice marks one diameter of the annual cycle. The other beam of the cross is made by the two equinoxes, and the circle, being without beginning or end, represents the endless repetition of the cycle.



The daytime is for work, which for primitive people meant feeding themselves. Understanding the annual cycle enabled them to settle and plant crops, rather than hunting like wolves and gathering like squirrels. Settlement brought about an entirely novel relationship to the earth, to weather, and to the seasons. Calendars were made. Cults of the sun- or sky-god and the earth-goddess flourished. Sacrifices were made to them. Priests and priestesses were appointed. In short, all the apparatus of organized religion gradually came into being.

The sun is unique in human experience. It is the brightest

thing there is, so bright that we cannot look at it in its fullness. There is no doubt that sincere worship of the sun calls forth a response from the depths of the heart, as to something incomparably greater than humanity that nevertheless has a quality of love to it. Long after the period of which I am speaking, Christianity took advantage of this response by grafting onto Christ the symbols of the sun god.

Before pursuing the theme of solar symbolism any further, I turn to the other side of the primordial experience: the course of the stars and moon in the night sky. Here we are in a very different world, both experientially and intellectually. Compared to the behaviour of the sun, that of the night lights is irregular and confusing. Studying them requires one to forfeit sleep, hence it is only accessible to those who are not exhausted by their day's work. The most obvious things are the changes in the moon's shape, and the nightly journey of moon and stars in the same direction as the sun has gone. The scattered stars themselves appear in regular patterns that the human brain organizes into *Gestalts*: the constellations. But sometimes there are extra stars, often the brightest in the sky, that do not belong to any of these constellations. Nor do the stars simply go from east to west, as the sun and moon do: some of them go in a circle, and one or two go nowhere at all. It would have taken the dedicated watching for many clear nights before any sense began to emerge from all this.

Eventually, as we know, early astronomers classified the nocturnal lights into two categories: the fixed stars, whose relation to one another is unchanging, and the planets ('wanderers') which move in relation to the fixed stars. But who is the ruler of the night sky, as the sun indubitably is of the day? Not the moon or the other planets, for they are too unreliable: they keep disappearing.

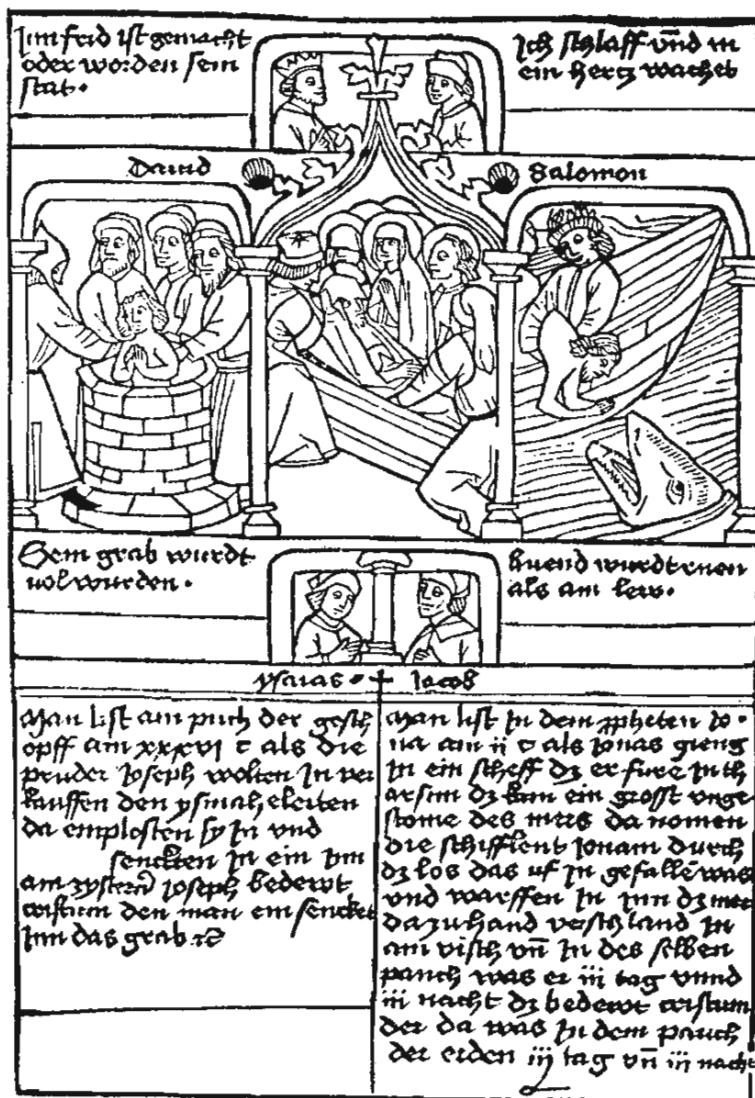
is called for.

The new principle derives from the fact that the fixed stars make a daily journey around a definite point in the sky. There may or may not be a star to mark this point, but there is in any case a central point around which everything circles. This is the celestial pole, north or south as the case may be.

It is not easy for modern people to appreciate the contrast between the nocturnal order and the diurnal one. It helps, of course, to have done some star-gazing and to have verified for oneself the phenomena that we all know from textbooks. Both systems are cyclic, but whereas the centre of the sun's orbit is obviously the earth under our feet, the centre of the star's orbit is an abstract point

far away in the sky. Then there is all the difference between night and day, and the alienating situation of being up while other creatures are asleep. Without a doubt, these nocturnal researches are not for everyone. The study of the sun leads to useful results for agriculture, whereas star-gazing is of no practical use.

I think that this is the root of the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion. In ancient cultures, the cult of the sun was for everyone, because we all need warmth, light and food. The cult of the stars was for the few, for those who had both the leisure and the intellectual interest to discover the patterns of the night. The smaller group would soon form an exclusive coterie and regard itself as superior to or wiser



than the masses.

To continue with the idea of the celestial pole, we can build in our imaginations the symbol that expressed the knowledge of it. In the northern hemisphere, the clearest way to perceive the pole is to track the nightly motion of the Great and Little Bears, which are among the most readily 'gestalted' constellations in the sky.

In the course of twenty-four hours, they each perform a circle around the polar point. To draw their positions at each quarter of this cycle gives a diagram resembling the swastika. Probably this symbol originally had a polar meaning, just as the cross within the circle had a solar meaning.

Persistent observation of the heavens during an entire year shows further dimensions of circumpolar motion. While the nightly motion of the stars around the pole is clockwise, each midnight finds them very slightly behind their position of the previous day. This is evident when one compares the position of the Great Bear at midnight in winter to its position in summer: they are reversed. So there are two cycles going on at the same time: a diurnal, clockwise rotation, and an annual, counter-clockwise one. Finding an explanation for this exercised some of the best minds of antiquity. But perhaps we can see the two cycles represented in the twin swastikas, which appear together in decorations from the Bronze Age onwards. (There is no basis whatever to the popular belief that the two types of swastika denote good and evil.)

Just as contemplation of the sun leads to solar worship, so contemplation of the pole must have led to polar worship. What form might this have taken? Instead of aspiration to something warm, nourishing, and intolerably bright, a polar cult aspires to something cold, distant, and far removed from human concerns. It is a religion of transcendence, a nocturnal cult that turns its back on the earth. Whereas the sun-

god (or goddess) goes hurtling in his chariot across the heavens, the pole stays where it is. It is the Unmoved Mover around which everything in the cosmos turns.

The sun and the pole are the two aspects of the supreme god. The sun is manifest; it intervenes in earthly affairs, ruling growing things and making everything visible. It is a personal god, to whom one prays and makes sacrifices in the hope of drawing down its benefits. The pole, on the contrary, is unmanifest and aloof. The only way to contact it is through rising in spirit to its own level, where it is found as an impersonal principle. No wonder that its devotees are few in number.

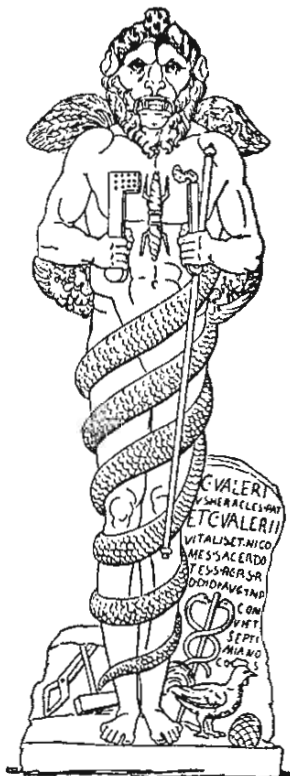
It was probably around 5000 BCE that the esoteric astronomers received the shock of their lives. They realized that the celestial pole was shifting; very slowly, it is true, but any shift was sufficient to unsettle the whole cosmic order. Eventually it became clear what was happening: the celestial pole was making a circular jour-

ney among the fixed stars every 26,000 years or so. But until that was established (and we have no definite evidence for it before Hipparchus), the cosmic order was under constant revision. It was during this process, probably by the Sumerians during the fifth millennium BCE, that the signs of the zodiac were invented as a convenient way of dividing the sky into twelve equal portions. One consequence of this was the ability to map out immense durations of time, by noting what constellation the sun rose in at its spring equinox. Around 4000 BCE it was rising in the latter degrees of Taurus. By 2000 BCE its spring point had moved back into Aries; by the time of Christ, into Pisces, and now, as everyone knows, it is nearly in Aquarius.

Christianity, as is recognized, appropriated the solar cult nearly everywhere it went. Christ, like the sun, is born at the winter solstice and sacrificed at the spring equinox, like the young pagan gods Attis and Adonis, and like the bull of Mithras whose blood fertilized the earth. Christ ascends to heaven to reign in glory at the summer solstice, then descends to earth again as the sun's light wanes. At the darkest point of the year, hope is renewed and a new cycle begins.

But what of the polar cult? Is there any evidence for it in our era? From the Mithraic cult of classical times we have statues of the god Aeon, shown as a male human body with wings, a lion's head, and a serpent wound around him. Aeon is the god of Eternity. His wings span heaven and earth. His lion's mouth devours all things. The serpent symbolizes the cosmic cycles, especially the longest one of all, the Precession of the Equinoxes.

Second, there is the cosmology of the Corpus Hermeticum, composed in the first centuries of our era. Here the soul of man is pictured as rising from earth after death through the spheres of the seven planets—including the sun. At each sphere it sheds something



Mithraic Kronos or Aeon

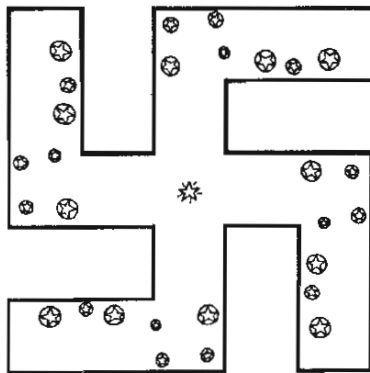
of its personality, so that by the time it reaches the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars, it is totally purified of every earthly taint. Then it can enter the state of the Blessed.

Following the collapse of the classical world, the polar tradition continued in the Near East and Central Asia. From here it passed to the world of Islam, and enjoyed a great flowering in medieval Iran. The Iranian theosophers blended Neoplatonic and Hermetic concepts with their native Zoroastrianism, and managed to find a *modus vivendi* with Shi'ite Islam. Their writings, particularly those of Suhrawardi the Martyr, are full of polar imagery. They turn in worship not to Mecca but to what they call the 'East', but then they make it plain that they really mean the north and what is beyond the north. Some of them describe a spiritual ascent up a column of light, or a deep well—the cosmic axis—which ends with a vision of immaterial light. Thereafter they are called 'Hyperboreans'.

Teutonic mythology appears to have been thoroughly polar in inspiration. It has no absolute god, no creator of heaven and earth, but rather an emanationist system in which primordial beings congeal from an abyss. After the cycles of time, all things will return to that abyss. The Teutonic cosmos is held together by the tree whose trunk penetrates and joins the three worlds, in an image of the axis that joins the pole of the earth to that of the heavens. The Irminsul columns symbolize this tree, each one on its hilltop becoming a miniature axis around which everything in the community turns. In the destruction of the Irminsuls by the Christians, we see the triumph of the solar cult over the polar. The symbols of pillar and swastika were replaced by the emblem of the sun-god, crucified annually on the cross of the solstices and equinoxes.

I said earlier that the solar and the polar cults corresponded to

exoteric and esoteric knowledge. It may be that they also incorporate contrary views of man's being and destiny.



Seasonal positions of the Great Bear around the Pole Star

The solar cult is always dualistic, because the sun's light is always under threat from darkness. Anthropologists believe that sun cults stem from the fear that one day the sun might not rise. Perhaps they are right. In lands that are far from the equator, the annual waxing and waning of the sun's light is ever more apparent, till in the Arctic Circle there are days in the middle of winter when the sun does not appear at all. At the poles themselves there are six months of darkness and six of light. The French astronomer Jean-Sylvain Bailly saw in this phenomenon a possible explanation of the numbers met with in various myths. For example, Wotan is said to spend 65 days of each year apart from his wife. Bailly suggested that this myth might have arisen among a people who lived at the 70th degree of northern latitude, where the sun is indeed absent for 65 days of the year.

The sun cults lead to a world view dominated by dualities: light and darkness, heat and cold, day and night, summer and winter, good and evil, pleasure and pain, reward and punishment, heaven and hell... Such a division of the cosmos is an important matter for the human soul. Where is it going after it leaves the body?

Will it attain the haven of the sun god, or will it be devoured by the darkness? Just as the material world is divided into light and darkness, so the soul world is represented dualistically. Thinking of this kind has formed the Christian world view through images such as that of Christ as conqueror of darkness, descending to Hell to rescue the souls of the Hebrew heroes, then reigning forever in a Heaven of eternal light. Thus the prayer of the Mass for the Dead: *lux perpetua luceat eis*.

The polar cult is different. The pole is concealed, whether one considers the earth's poles, hidden under inaccessible wastes of ice and snow, or the celestial pole, which is an empty point around which the stars turn. Darkness offers no threat to the pole. Its discoverers had to wait until night in order to begin their work. The spiritual orientation of the polar cult is therefore not dualistic, or if it is so, then the dualism is of an entirely different kind. On the one hand is earthly life with all its unavoidable conflicts and its division into light and darkness, which no living being can avoid. That is the reality of our exoteric life. But when one looks up to the pole, one finds on the contrary a still point beyond light and darkness, pleasure and pain, life and death. One might well place one's hopes for a life after death here, rather than in God's arbitrary assignation of one's soul to heaven or hell. But such an idea is essentially esoteric, because it rises far above the drama of everyday life. The latter continually plunges one into dualities, not least through the physical sensations of pleasure and pain. To escape these takes a certain detachment, even a heroic attitude of indifference to pleasure and pain, while to go further still, to the place where good and evil coincide and vanish, is a challenge even for heroes, for it passes beyond the normal condition of man. This, however, is the logical consequence of the polar attitude. The pole is in every respect

inhuman.

We can see examples of this highest degree of polar spirituality in the warrior cults. One of the most famous is the story of Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: he is the charioteer of Prince Arjuna, who bewails the fact that he is meeting his nearest and dearest as opponents on the battlefield. Far from dissuading Arjuna from battle, Krishna enjoins him to fix his mind on himself (Krishna) as the ultimate reality.

Another example is the samurai warrior of Japan, paradoxically a follower of Buddha's philosophy of universal compassion. However, this compassion does not prevent the samurai from dispatching his opponent to another and happier incarnation. There is a story of how a samurai was once ordered by his overlord to kill a traitor. The warrior found his man, and was on the point of executing him, when suddenly he put up his sword and went home. The reason given was that he had felt anger towards the traitor, and did not want to break his oath of never killing in anger. In other words, he had lost the still centre from which he habitually acted.

These two examples come from the East, where esoteric attitudes are more familiarly discussed than in the West. But it would be quite wrong to attribute anything esoteric or polar to the warrior's state in general. Most warriors are all too solar: they believe firmly that they are in the right, and their opponents in the wrong. Thus they call their opponents 'enemies' and blacken their reputation, while seeing themselves in the brightest moral light.

The esoteric warrior, on the other hand, sees the battle as a kind of chess game (the traditional game of the warrior caste). Because it is improbable that all the moral rightness is on one side, it is not so important which side actually wins as it is to play or fight well and honourably. The samurai in the story found himself playing badly, with the result

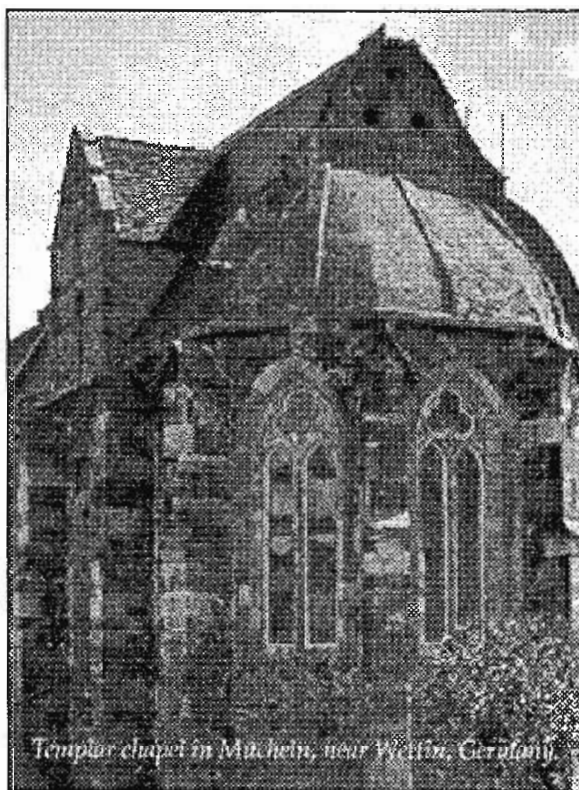
that the guilty party won the game.

There are a few modern writers who have traced the evidence for this spiritual attitude through the past two thousand years with specific reference to the pole. The most important are René Guénon in France, Herman Wirth in Germany, Julius Evola in Italy, and Miguel Serrano in Chile. The English-speaking world has no one of the kind. All these authors refer to ancient tradition that stems from the extreme north, if not literally from the pole. They call it the Hyperborean tradition, and find traces of it in the symbols and myths of the northern peoples: Celts, Nordics, and the shamans

nected thinkers, the Hyperborean is the oldest tradition of mankind, older even than the Atlantean and perhaps coeval with the appearance of Cro-Magnon man, whose origin is such a puzzle for anthropology. Herman Wirth's work is fruitful in this regard: he gathered myths and symbols from all the far-northern and arctic peoples in order to prove that there was once a lost northern race.

The esoteric aspects are more prominent in the other authors named. Evola, for example, associates the quest for the Holy Grail with the remains of the Hyperborean tradition. He sees polar symbols in the unattainable castles of the Grail, sometimes

described as made from glass, and even rotating. According to Evola, it was the Knights Templar who carried this tradition through the Middle Ages. The very idea of the Temple, realized in the many circular churches of the Templars, is a polar symbol, as opposed to the solar orientation of the Roman Church and of Roman church buildings.



Templar chapel in Mülheim, near Weiden, Germany.

of Asia and America. They also believe that after the destruction of the Arctic home, the Hyperborean tradition moved southwards to Persia and India. They find later remnants of it in the cult of Hyperborean Apollo and in the meeting of Pythagoras (6th cent. BCE) with Abaris.

According to this school of thought, or rather to these fiercely independent but spiritually con-

René Guénon wrote several articles about polar symbolism, especially about the sacred mountains that are imagined to rise from the centre of the world, and about symbols of the world axis: columns, axes, and lances; and symbols of cosmic rotation such as the swastika and the spiral.

The polar experience is central to the work and thought of Miguel Serrano, the friend of C.G.

Jung and Herman Hesse. Aside from the Germanic runes, his favourite symbols for it are the Black Sun and the Green Ray. In my book on polar symbolism I have gone into the origins of this green ray: it seems to be a permanent fixture of the polar tradition, at least in the Hermeticism of the West and Islam. The Black Sun is a paradoxical symbol, pointing to a cosmic centre that is different from the visible source of light. One could compare it to the negative theology of Dionysus and Areopagite, the mysticism of Meister Eckart, or the *Ungrund* of Jakob Boehme. These theologians brought elements of the polar attitude into the Christian world, perhaps because they were examples of an authentic polar experience which can occur beyond religion, belief or expectation.

Each people has its own pole, as an image of the unattainable world-pole and a pointer to the hidden pole of the heavens. These local poles are found in the holiest places on earth, often connected to natural formations. It is remarkable that these are also often the cultic centres of the solar cult, for instance, at Stonehenge, where the stones are set up, among other things, for observation of the sun, and at the Externsteine, where the natural rock is bored through with a solar orientation. Many holy places also have zodiac symbolism, or at least that is claimed. For example, the landscape around Glastonbury has been interpreted as a monstrous zodiac; and the work of Jean Richer has argued that the whole area surrounding Greece is divided according to the zodiac, with sacred sites like Delphi and Delos situated appropriately.

The zodiac is always in close association to the sun; but the sun is not its centre, even though it is often represented in the middle of the zodiacal circle. On the contrary, the sun is at any given moment in on or another of the twelve signs, and it is always moving. The sun is a wanderer, like all the other planets. It is the

pole that really occupies the centre of the zodiac.

Imagine for a moment the night sky. There is the Pole Star, with the two Bears or Dippers flanking it. At every season, the appropriate constellations of the zodiac are visible above the southern horizon, and the sun will rise at dawn in the easternmost of these constellations. The only still point is the pole. Every cultic place that is firmly anchored to the earth is an image of this unmoving polar point around which all the heavenly spheres turn. And so it is on earth: the everyday world with all its noise and turmoil turns around the still point of a sanctuary, at which perhaps it is easiest to find the way to one's own still and silent centre.

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Homicide in Kennewick



At last, the controversy regarding the Kennewick Man made it onto British television when Channel 4's Equinox aired a programme with the same title as this present article.

The Kennewick Man is the remains of a 9,000 year old partial skeleton which has features which several prominent forensic anthropologists have declared to be non-American Indian. Unfortunately, the Court, under considerable pressure from the Indians, have instructed the Army to impound the remains and refused further research into them.

The Indians believe that a man's spirit stays with his bones and that 'The Ancient One' will have no peace until he is reinterred. The scientists on the other hand do not care for a man's spiritual wellbeing and just want to investigate further. Of course, the Indians are further concerned that this find may prove they were not the first to inhabit America.

Goði Steve McNallen and his AFA (see web page) have campaigned ceaselessly for the rights of what they see as a probable ancestor whom they refer to as 'The Far-Travelling One'.

The whole matter is currently subject to a million dollar lawsuit and will no doubt take some time to resolve. In the meantime we wish the AFA every success with their endeavours on behalf of us all.☞