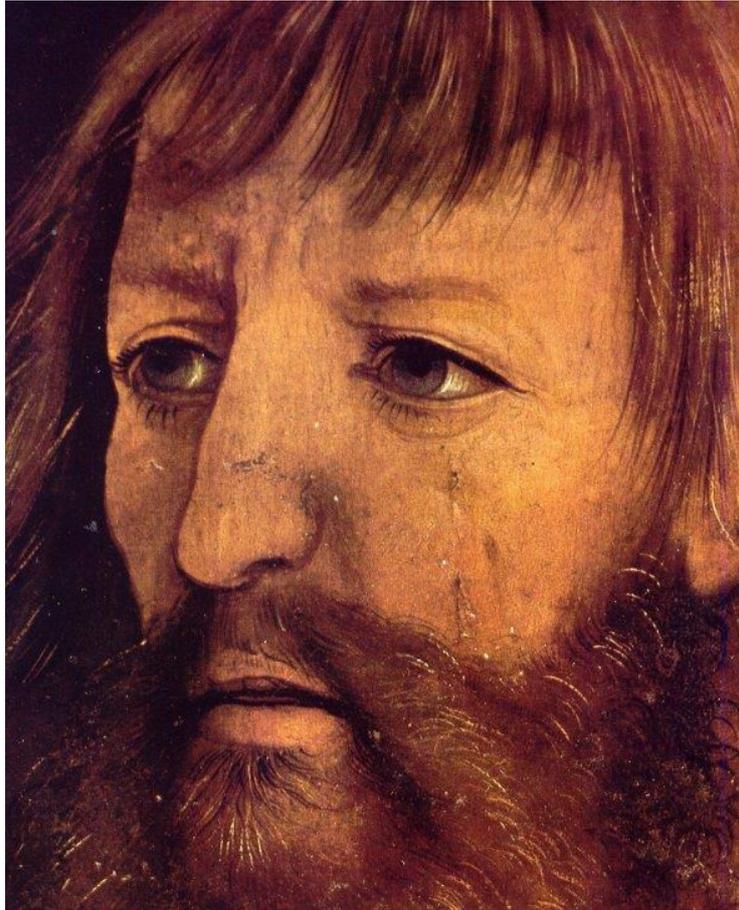


Agnes Hidveghy

# WHAT THE STUDY OF ISENHEIM ALTAR CAN GIVE?



*A map for orientation for all  
whose identity is no longer  
based on the self-understanding of their everyday life*

# WHAT THE STUDY OF ISENHEIM ALTAR CAN GIVE?

## The image of man for orientation

We are searching for a new image of man. An image of man that we can perceive to be true from the innermost heart and that does not involve us in contradictions with science and everyday experience. A model that gives us back our dignity as a human being. Cloudy descriptions, individual subjective perceptions and fragments from the most diverse spiritual traditions of humanity confuse us more than they would contribute to clarity.

We know today that any research gives an answer to the question but is not reality itself. As long as we ask the questions out of a partial understanding, the answers remain also fragmented. It should also be known that a complex entity cannot be explained by its parts – however, this is often not even considered in biological research.

The fact that we only recognize what we know has already been researched enough. However, its consequences are not recognized in our understanding of man, in his holistic structure with his divine task.

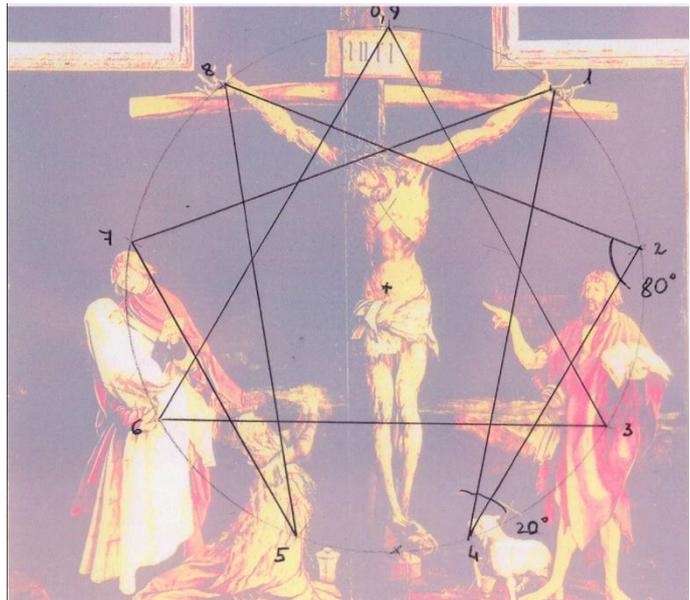
We need a knowledge of the experience of wholeness about what MAN is in the universal happening. Only when we recognize his structure, his function and his possibilities, we can find orientation in our individual life. The red thread is missing – and God is added somewhere as an appendage to our ideas.

The Isenheim Altar is more than a great work of art by a brilliant artist, called Grünewald. The altar contains the information that awakens the inherent knowledge in us about the HUMAN as a cosmic being. The knowledge of our place in the universal happening is touched, as only in this, the dignity of the human being is rooted.

The study of the Isenheim Altar takes place on many levels. It is both the study of the cosmos and of man as a microcosm that is an expression of the complexity of universal events.

First and foremost, the study contains the prerequisites for a meaningful interpretation of the content. This happens because we can connect the pictures with our individual experiences from the beginning of the study. The altar is designed to reach people where they are ready to open themselves to a world beyond their everyday lives.

Our being, what we are, communicates only through images, like when we are dreaming. The toddler, living from his being, still understands images directly. Western man is so conditioned that he has become capable of communication through the intellect and has lost the direct relation to his





essence with its inherent knowledge. If we let the images work directly with the help of some clues, this alone causes an inner opening to our being.

In Christianity, the knowledge is clothed in the images. We are losing more and more of our relationship to the expressions of the past. That is why the pictures need their keys, a "translation" into our language of today, which is the one we understand. This way the direct relation to the pictures can be established.

The basic knowledge needed to understand cosmic contexts is not taught by any known institution, and not taught in any university in the world. The search for the necessary fragments is in turn only possible if we know what we are looking for. The different spiritual schools can help with the mediation of valuable aspects.

Readiness to engage with the unknown is the only requirement. Understanding grows through a process of maturation and a direct relation to the statements arises from the inside.

### **The recognition:**

**"In creation there are as many Ways as there are human beings.**

**However: There is only one Way."**

Today we refer to the first half of this statement from the Sufi tradition. The spirit of the time supports us in understanding that we are all unique. The realization that we are all unique witnesses of universal events is made easier for us today. There is a great likelihood of experience awakening to that we are as we are, willed and loved without "buts".

That is the one half of reality. In doing so, we overlook the fact that we are all human beings, we all belong to the same cosmic hierarchy. Just as we all have the same bodily structure, but each body has individual peculiarities, so it is with our body-soul-mind wholeness and the inherent inner Way. All of us have been sent out into the world of manifestation, into time, to find "the one pearl" – with the help of the ways given to us. We are all looking for the way home, guided by longing.

So that we do not lose our orientation on our individual Way, we need the "red thread" of the cosmic basic structure. Through this knowledge, we can tune into our true destiny. This enables us in our lives to ask the right questions and make the right decisions. Only then we will be able to develop

our potential with our individual uniqueness. So that we find fulfilment into freedom. So that our ears become God's ears and our eyes become God's eyes.

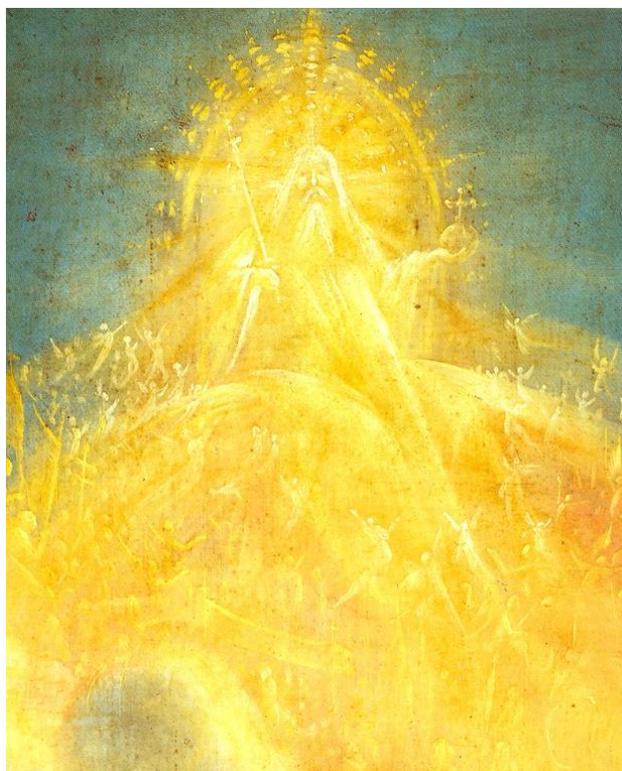
Each of us is a unique witness of an unprecedented and never-returning moment of cosmic happening. No one has the same view in a certain moment than just the one particular person. We human beings – you and me – are challenged actively and consciously to participate in the "each moment-new-happening in creation".

## The beauty of a purposeful creation

Alone through the consistent exploration of the human body, we can recognize that since the Big Bang evolution has created the necessary conditions for the construction of a complex organism, such as the human. Arnold Benz shows that a random development from the Big Bang to today does not have enough time to build complex protein molecules. (Arnold Benz: The Future of the Universe) This statement is based on a statistical calculus of probabilities and is not speculation guided by ideas!

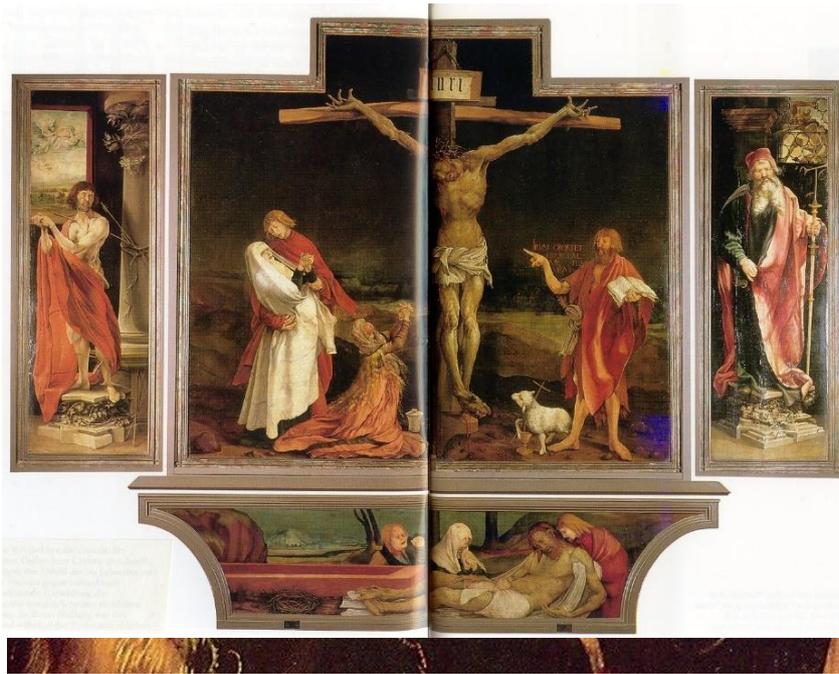
If we assume that this statement is correct, then the question of the goal of the universe is consequent. We can easily see that. it seems hopeless to seek an answer to this question from our ordinary point of view. When we have the courage, we look for approaches to gain more understanding of the larger dimensions.

It goes without saying that we study to get answers to our questions about earthly life. We rely on the knowledge that others have acquired before us. In the same way, it makes sense to search for knowledge about the most essential questions of the human being. Those who have gone before, have found answers and they have left behind reports, mostly in pictures of their time. With a little effort, we can learn to understand their images. We are not the first to be interested in essential issues of our existence. If we are open to what others have already explored, there is still enough to discover in the here and now. Everyone has to verify it for themselves.



## Orientation to cosmic patterns in crises and as support for makings decisions

We have good intentions. With great effort we try to change our patterns of life and our own behaviour; often without success. Thought and imaginative patterns of the past determine our lives. We are narrowed down by them, making false promises through them, which repeatedly lead to disappointments that undermine our intentions or that allow us to drop things that we have begun. These patterns, which have been handed down for generations and are already crystallized in us, do not allow us to recognize and realize our given true attachments. We always get stuck in certain



processes in life at certain points. This will make us pulled down by negative energies in spirals and held in negative emotions. We have the possibility to resolve this restrictive pattern by recognizing its dynamics!

"Cosmic Information" in the paintings of the Isenheim Altarpiece can help us to recognize basic structures behind personal difficulties. They lead us to understand topics that are given to us. They are not religious, psychological or moral answers to our questions.

The study helps us to recognize that our problems are symptoms of unrecognized life issues.

Some examples:

**Depression** arises when the soul is exhausted by a false idea of life and refuses to accept new impulses.

**Doubt** is the consequence of decisions made by lack of clear intent, not wholeness.

**Resistance** cannot simply be fought with "even more will".

**Lack of trust** is often a sign that we have not found what can give us unwavering confidence.

**Self-will** leads us to the limits of the feasible because our **stubbornness** prevents the recognition of the true meaning.

**Giving up** is cured by the recognition of man's cosmic mission.

**Panic** disappears when we realize it is never too late

**What can we do,  
so that we recognize the possibilities given to us  
and are able to realize them?  
The key is: Understanding**

## The Isenheim Altarpiece

Millions of pilgrims travel every year to Colmar to see the Isenheim Altarpiece – today, the museums are the guardians of "holy" objects. All those who allow themselves to be touched by the altarpiece will come again. It is not just Christians or believers, but people who have not completely lost or who have regained contact with their own being. The images work directly, without intellectual understanding. The mind is short-circuited – we seek the explanations afterwards.

Through my work, I aim to create a connection between individual, innermost experiences and the images that have arisen from the knowledge inherent in each human being. Through this connection, a mental healing process can begin. It helps to recognize the basic structures of life processes and to dissolve the difficulties to which we remain attached.

The processes we experience in life concretely have all a basic structure. This structure is called «law of the octave». We can trace the knowledge of it back to Pythagoras. This structure was also made

audible in Western music. In the cathedrals it became space: Not – as it is often interpreted, to express the harmony of the music, but to make the cosmic pattern directly tangible for the human being. On the Isenheim altar, the octave is woven into the pictures, they act directly on the viewer in different places from different perspectives. We take patterns with our wholeness, mostly unconsciously. It may be useful to ask: Which patterns have shaped us? And which patterns do we pass on?

Since antiquity, knowledge has been transmitted through art directly to human beings in public squares and sacred places. The Isenheim Altar contains this knowledge. In the images are contained information of cosmic order (the ideas, in the sense of Plato), on which our soul listens, because in the souls slumbers the same knowledge, which is awakened by touch. Today we have only very little time to let the pictures affect us directly. When we get the key to the structures of the images through the mind, we can receive their message. In this way they can give us orientation on our individual Way.

The scenes of the Isenheim Altar describe the inner states and processes of man, which are clothed in Christian images, based on a cosmological model. This model is much older than Christianity. Only through a knowledge that is confirmed by our heart, we can understand, classify and transform our concrete experiences to the substance of our being. In the light of this knowledge we can fully exploit the possibilities that exist in our lives.

Even today, there are still knowledgeable people who stand by their tradition. The altar is a so-called winged altar. It can be opened twice and consists of three different openings. These three openings contain a total of twelve scenes: ten of them are panels painted by Grünewald (1470 – 31st of August 1528) and two are carved, three-dimensional representations, by an unknown artist.

The iconography of the pictures differs in various places from the prescribed representations of the time. Due to the art-historical approach, many such deviations are incomprehensible. However, these images are authentic witnesses of the experienced stations of the inner path. They are very exact, pictorial formulations of states that are ingeniously composed in their complexity.





About Grünewald we know for sure only that he was not called Grünewald. The creator of the Isenheim Altarpiece received this name only in 1675, 147 years after his death. However, there is strong evidence that the painter of this monumental work of art was a professional artist called Mathis Gothard Nithart, who later called himself Mathis Gothart ("Strength in God"). About his life are very scant information available. The date of origin of the altarpieces dates with certainty in the years 1512-16. In the life-work of the artist, the Isenheim Altarpiece is a unique work, in addition, there are a few existing single images.

The original location of the altar was in the church of the Antonite Preceptory in Isenheim. There are no reliable indications as to how the Isenheim Altarpiece was handled at its original location. We only know that the sick have been brought to the altar. The only way to get closer to its content is to know the environment of its creation and the spiritual tradition that underlies it. This defines its use.

### Example of lived spirituality

The Brotherhood of the Antonites was founded in 1297 and charged with the care of the sick who suffered from the so-called St. Anthony's fire (Ergotism). The preceptory in Isenheim (about 20 km south of Colmar) was built in the 12th – 13th Century on the Pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela. The Isenheim preceptory was one of the most important of the three hundred or so throughout Central Europe.



The Brotherhood was strictly hierarchical in structure and so the leader, the Preceptor, was responsible for both the spiritual and pastoral, as well as for the medical, construction, artistic and economic sectors. Most of the members were trained, well-educated men who were able to bring together all areas from the practical economic, organizational, health and spiritual matters as a single entity. At the same time, they were interwoven with their social environment.

The Anionites did always commission the best artists: Frescoes and paintings were part of not only their churches, but also the halls, which housed 6-12 patients each. The sick who had been admitted were full members of the Brotherhood, and they could also be sure that they would receive the best possible care at the time of their death, both medically, humanly and pastorally.

In our time the ideas of Antonites are more relevant than ever. In the new Aquarian Age, there is only one way to live spiritually: Actively, in the middle of life.

