



EYE *of the* HEART
A Journal of Traditional Wisdom

Issue 2, 2008



La Trobe University, Bendigo

Eye of the Heart is a scholarly journal providing a forum for the exploration of the great philosophical and religious traditions. It addresses the inner meaning of philosophy and religion through elucidations of metaphysical, cosmological, and soteriological principles, and through a penetration of the forms preserved in each religious tradition.

Eye of the Heart is published bi-annually. It is an Open Access Journal freely available online. A print version is available at cost value through La Trobe University, Campus Graphics (via the *Eye of the Heart* website).

Unless otherwise stated all articles are original and have been peer-reviewed in accord with the Higher Education Research Data Collection (Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training) 2008 specifications.

Contact:

Editor, *Eye of the Heart*

Arts Program, La Trobe University

P.O. Box 199, Bendigo 3552, Australia

Tel: +61 3 5444 7243; Fax: +61 3 5444 7970

Email: t.scott@latrobe.edu.au

Website: www.latrobe.edu.au/eyeoftheheart

Publisher: La Trobe University, Bendigo

Printed by Campus Graphics www.latrobe.edu.au/campusgraphics.

Typeface is World Wisdom used by kind permission of World Wisdom Books www.worldwisdom.com.

Cover: *Radha Krishna – The Divine Lovers*. Miniature painting on silk cloth, used by kind permission of www.dollsofindia.com.

Copyright:

© October, 2008. Unless otherwise indicated, all materials published in this issue are copyrighted by *Eye of the Heart* and the respective authors. No reproduction without express written permission, except in critical articles and reviews.

ISSN: 1835-4416



This publication has been supported by La Trobe University
www.latrobe.edu.au

Eye of the Heart 2, Bendigo: La Trobe University, 2008

EYE *of the* HEART

Issue 1, 2008



Nirukta = Hermenei

by Ananda Coomaraswamy

Swami Abhishiktananda: Pilgrim of the Absolute

by Harry Oldmeadow

Golgotha, Athens, Jerusalem: Patristic intimations of the *religio perennis*

by Graeme Castleman

In defiance of natural order: The origins of “transhuman” techno-utopia

by David Catherine

Voices of the Fire: Ancient theurgy and its tools

by Algis Uzdavynys

Remarks on the universal symbolism of the number 72

by Timothy Scott

The symbolism of letters and language in the work of Ibn ‘Arabi

by Pierre Lory

Available at www.latrobe.edu.au/eyeoftheheart

Editor:

Timothy Scott

Editorial Board:

Rodney Blackhirst, Harry Oldmeadow, John Penwill, Roger Sworder,
Algis Uzdavinys

Advisory Board:

Waleed El-Ansary (University of South Carolina), David Burrell (University of Notre Dame, Indiana), James Cutsinger (University of South Carolina), Renaud Fabbri (Miami University), Alan Godlas (The University of Georgia), Peter Kingsley (Warburg Institute), Klaus Klostermaier (University of Manitoba), Livia Kohn (Boston University), Jean-Pierre Lafouge (Marquette University), Patrick Laude (Georgetown University in Qatar), Joseph Lombard (Brandeis University), Constant Mews (Monash University), James Morris (Boston College), Philip Novak (Dominican University of California), Patricia Reynaud (Miami University), Eliezer Segal (University of Calgary), Reza Shah-Kazemi (Institute of Ismaili Studies), Arvind Sharma (McGill University), David Tacey (La Trobe University), Arthur Versluis (Michigan State University)

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Editorial | 3 |
| The Book of Experience: The Western Monastic Art of <i>Lectio Divina</i> by Fr Michael Casey OCSO | 5 |
| Keys to the Bible by Frithjof Schuon | 33 |
| Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy by Algis Uždavinys | 37 |
| The reconstruction of time in the Vedic fire altar by Adrian Snodgrass | 61 |
| Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā: The Trinitarian Mystery of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism by Klaus Klostermaier | 74 |
| Abrahamic symbolisms of the number 72 by Timothy Scott | 86 |
| Creation, Originality and Innovation in Sufi Poetry by Patrick Laude | 112 |
| Contributors | 131 |
| Notices | 133 |



Editorial

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the second issue of *Eye of the Heart*. The response to the first issue has been most encouraging. At the time of writing (just on five months since the launch of Issue 1 in May 2008) the *Eye of the Heart* web site had been accessed nearly ten thousand times by approximately two thousand individual users from around eighty countries. On behalf of the editorial board I thank all those who have supported this venture in one way or another. We are particularly grateful to those people who have volunteered their time and expertise in acting as reviewers.

A debt of gratitude is also due to Fons Vitae Publishing and World Wisdom Books who have both generously supported the Ananda Coomaraswamy Prize which we have been running this year. Entries for this prize reveal a pleasing diversity of symbolisms considered, including: the pearl, bread and bread-making, the Zaqqūm tree of Islamic tradition, the veil, the poetry of Homer, Christian baptism, the Centre, gamelan music, and more. The winners will feature in the May 2009 Issue of *Eye of the Heart*. Hopefully more than just the winners may yet find themselves in upcoming issues.

The second issue of *Eye of the Heart* opens with an examination of the Christian practice of *lectio divina* by Fr Michael Casey, the acclaimed author of *Sacred Reading: The Art of Lectio Divina and Toward God*. Like Ananda Coomaraswamy's, 'Nirukta=Hermeneia' (Issue 1), Fr Casey's essay provides insight into a traditional way of approaching spiritual texts. We hope to see the pages of *Eye of the Heart* graced by more essays using these traditional methods in the future. Fr Casey's essay brought to mind Frithjof Schuon's, 'Keys to the Bible' which, in a certain sense, is a summation of much of what Fr Casey discusses. With the kind permission of World Wisdom Books we are pleased to present a new translation of Schuon's 'Keys to the Bible' as a complement to Fr Casey's essay.

The other republication in this issue is Professor Adrian Snodgrass' 'The reconstruction of time in the Vedic fire altar.' This is a revised version of a chapter from his monumental, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings 2Vols*. In republishing this as a stand-alone essay we hope to

draw attention to the works of this author, who has been too often overlooked. We hope Professor Snodgrass' body of work on architecture and religious symbolism will go some way to opening up to the reader the many and varied areas of traditional wisdom that *Eye of the Heart* seeks to embrace. Again, with this aim in mind, Issue 3 will feature an examination of the spiritual symbolism in the Grimms' tales by Dr Samuel Fohr.

Let me take this opportunity to encourage your submissions. We are particularly seeking articles that deal with those traditions often under-represented by the type of traditional study that *Eye of the Heart* addresses. It is exciting, for example, to envisage a greater sharing of wisdom from the African, Chinese, and Jewish traditions.

Finally, I would like to recommend the heartfelt entreaty to reconciliation between ourselves and the world offered by HRH The Prince of Wales in his, 'East and West: Parables of the Soul.' This article (the text of a speech commemorating the 800th anniversary of Mevlana Jalal'uddin Rumi given in Konya Turkey November 2007) can be found in the Summer 2008 issue of *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Volume 14, Number 1. I mention it here because, apart from its intrinsic worth, this piece might well be seen as pertinent to *Eye of The Heart: A Journal of Traditional Wisdom*. His Royal Highness draws attention to the phrase, "the eye of the heart," as it is found in the Book of Ephesians (1:18): '...Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which [the Father] has called you...'. From this he turns to Rumi: 'God's purpose for man is to acquire a seeing eye and an understanding heart.' Thus His Royal Highness exhorts us to 're-dedicate ourselves to the purpose of re-acquiring an understanding heart.'

The Book of Experience: The Western Monastic Art of *Lectio Divina*

Fr Michael Casey OCSO

We tried to console him with God’s word, but he was not one of the wise ants who, during summer, have gathered what they need to live on during the winter. When things are tranquil people ought to gather God’s word for themselves and store it in the inmost part of their heart, just like the ant who hides in the inner chambers of its nest the fruit of the summer’s labours. If it has a holiday in the summer and does not do this then, when winter comes, there is trouble. If it does not have inside what it needs to feed itself then, necessarily, it will die of hunger. The man of whom I am speaking had not gathered God’s word for himself so that, when winter came, he did not find what he was seeking. He did not have the means to be consoled by God’s word. He had nothing within him. (Augustine of Hippo, *On Psalm 36:2*, 11; CChr 38, p. 354)¹

The medieval monastic practice of *lectio divina*, or “divine reading,” developed from the concern to build an ascetical and mystical life on the foundation of the Bible. In this endeavour the monks were the beneficiaries of Origen’s teaching on biblical interpretation which saw the inspired texts as layered with multiple meanings: doctrinal, moral and mystical. The practice, as it developed experimentally over the centuries, was the result of giving due attention to these various levels of meaning. Figuratively speaking, the medieval monk was trained to read two books simultaneously: the book of God’s word in one hand and the book of experience in the other.² The result of this dual focus was a dialogue between the monk’s inward aspirations and desires with the inspired writing that he reads from the sacred texts handed down to him through many centuries.

¹ [Abbreviations at the end of the essay—ED.]

² For the *liber experientiae* see Bernard, SC 3:1; SBOP 1, 14, 7. Aelred *Sermon* 51:6; CCM 2B, p.42.

One who reads only from the book of the text without giving attention to the book of experience, risks being drawn into fundamentalism, attracted to meanings that are out of context both in a literary sense and with reference to the reader's own situation. Ultimately such a de-contextualised reading leads either to stupidity or to eventual alienation. Too much concern for "objectivity" hardens the heart and genuine receptivity declines. On the other hand, one who reads only from the book of experience is prone to becoming too subjective. It is easy in such blinkered activity, pursued without rigorous cross-checking, to read only what confirms—ignoring what contradicts or challenges one's long-cherished beliefs or invites one to change.

This essay offers an introduction to the history and development of the practice of *lectio divina*, from the Alexandrian tradition of Origen, through the medieval flowering of *lectio* found in witnesses such as William of St Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux and Guigo the Carthusian, to the close parallels that *lectio* finds with such contemporary hermeneutics as those of Hans-Georg Gadamer. But more than a simple history, this essay expounds something of the process of *lectio divina*: the multivalence of Scripture, the anagogic ascent, the holistic nature of this practice, and the transformative experience of this pursuit.

***The Life of Antony* by Athanasius of Alexandria**

The marriage of the book of the text and the book of experience is exemplified in the figure of St Anthony. St Athanasius (295-373) composed his widely influential *Life of Antony* (VA), shortly after the death of St Antony in 356. The narrative was intended to provide a prototype for monks to emulate. 'The life of Antony is a worthy model (χαρακτήρ) of asceticism for monks'.³ From the very beginning the author insists on the two-fold dynamism of Antony's ascetical effort. 'He paid attention to himself'⁴ and 'he paid attention to reading the

³ VA Prologue 3; SChr 400, p.126. See also VA 94:1, p.376: 'Read these things to the other brothers so that they may learn of what kind the life of monks should be.'

⁴ VA 3:1, p.136. See also VA 91:3, p.368. The verb used in these and in all the following instances is προσέχειν, to pay attention to, to be concerned about. To balance this dual attention, Athanasius frequently points out that Antony paid no attention at all to demons: 24:4, p.202; 24:7, p.204; 25:4, p.206; 26:3, p.208; 26:6, p.208; 31:2, p.220; 35:1, p.230; 35:3, p.230.

Bible'.⁵ Indeed, 'he paid so much attention to reading that he allowed nothing that was written to fall away from him to the ground but retained everything so that his memory began to take the place of books'.⁶ It was from the Scriptures that Antony learned how to live his ascetical life.⁷ His singular lifestyle did not take its origin from some weird psychological distortion, but from the call of God clearly heard as the Gospel was proclaimed in the church.⁸ Clearly, Antony was at a tipping-point where the merest fragment of the Gospel proclamation was sufficient to send his life hurtling in a new direction. The revealed word presented itself to Antony as the answer to the question already forming in his mind and heart. The book of the text and the book of experience were singing in harmony.

Not that Antony may be advanced merely as an apostle of intuitive enlightenment when it comes to understanding the inspired text. As one of the stories about Antony indicates, for him the first stage in understanding is the humble avowal of the impenetrability of the text.⁹ Commenting on this, Douglas Burton-Christie writes, 'Stories like this which emphasised the need for silence before the text had a very particular pedagogical aim: to guide the one who would inquire into the meaning of Scripture into the humble way of practice.'¹⁰ From humility the path ahead leads to the hard work of implementing what has been read. It is in obedience to the overt practical meaning of the Gospel text that a beginning is made to mental comprehension. In an age when orthodoxy was of paramount concern, Antony and the other desert-dwellers understood also the importance of orthopraxy. 'Progress in asceticism is the necessary prerequisite to mature spiritual insight into

⁵ VA 4:1, p.140: τῷ φιλολογοῦτι προσεῖχεν; 'He paid attention to the practice of philology'; "philology" was a Christian usage to indicate the reading or study of Scripture.

⁶ VA 3:7, p.138.

⁷ VA 46:6, p.260: ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν. Antony recommended to an inquirer, 'whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures' (cited in *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Antony 3, tr. B. Ward, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975, p.2).

⁸ VA 2:1-5, pp.132-134. Note how the ecclesial proclamation of the Scriptures interacts with his solitary ruminations, themselves occasioned by his reflection on the Acts of the Apostles (see VA 2:2, p.132). The experienced call to conversion is repeated and intensified in VA 3:1, p.134.

⁹ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: Antony 17 (PG 65; 80D Ward, pp.3-4).

¹⁰ D. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.155.

the scriptures, while such exegesis in turn yields understanding which makes possible further progress in both asceticism and contemplation.’¹¹

The perceived interaction between text and experience is a theme not unknown in Athanasius’s writings. In his *Letter to Marcellinus* he outlines the biblical hermeneutic that he had been taught by “a learned old man”.¹²

...And it seems to me that these words [of the Psalms] become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul (τὰ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς κινήματα), and thus affected he might recite them. Indeed he who hears the one reading receives the song that is recited as being about him, and either, when he is convicted by his conscience, being pierced he will repent, or hearing of the hope that resides in God and of the succour available to believers—how this kind of grace exists for him—he exults and begins to give thanks to God... And so, on the whole, each psalm is both spoken and composed by the Spirit so that in these same words, as was said earlier, the stirring of out souls might be grasped, and all of them said as concerning us, and the same issue from us as our own words, for a remembrance of the emotions in us and a chastening of our life.¹³

By his image of the mirror, Athanasius is suggesting that the Scriptures can serve as an instrument of spiritual literacy; they enable us to read what the Spirit is intimating in the profoundest regions of the human heart.¹⁴ Our felt response to the words we hear or read is an indication

¹¹ L. Dysinger OSB, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.63.

¹² *Letter to Marcellinus* 1, cited in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* tr. R. C. Gregg, New York: Paulist Press, 1979, p.101. Some suggest that this person was Antony himself, but there is no evidence for this.

¹³ *Letter to Marcellinus* 12; p.111.

¹⁴ Just as the text is a mirror by which may be known the movements of the soul, so the soul itself is a mirror that reflects the Logos and, thereby, also reveals the Father. ‘For I believe that a soul purified completely and established in its natural state becomes transparent (διορατική),’ VA 34:2, p.228. On this theme see A. Pettersen, *Athanasius*, Ridgefield: Morehouse Publishing, 1995, pp.40-44. Many books of guidance in the medieval period were given the title *Speculum* or “mirror.” See M. Schmidt, art. ‘Mirror’ in DS^p 10, 1979, col. 1290-1303.

of the shape of our interior vulnerability. When we are “pierced” by the words—the image of piercing (κατάνυξις) used here by Athanasius is one continued in the Latin usage of *compunction*—there is a strange collaboration between the objective message of the Bible and the subjective stirrings of conscience. As William of St Thierry (*circa* 1075-1148) wrote, ‘You will never understand David until by your own experience you clothe yourself with the very feelings of the Psalms.’¹⁵ The Bible cannot be read properly without every day paying attention to its message of conversion.¹⁶

If the received meaning of the Bible is married to the daily-changing spiritual exigencies of each person, then it is clear that each text has many meanings, or that the word “meaning” itself must be given a more flexible interpretation. And if the meaning of the text is attuned to subjective dispositions, there must be some method or discipline to ensure that it is truly the text that speaks and not merely the private projections of the reader.

The Multiple Meanings of Scripture

The Alexandrian tradition of biblical interpretation to which Athanasius belonged took seriously Scripture’s claim to revealed truth. Its great master and leader was Origen (*circa* 185-254) to whom is traced the formulation of the teaching about the spiritual, that is the non-literal, senses of Scripture.¹⁷ The problem that the Christian of this

¹⁵ *Ep Aur* 121; SChr 223, p.238.

¹⁶ The use of the phrase “every day” (καθ’ ἡμέραν) is frequent throughout the VA, especially in Antony’s discourse to the monks in VA 14-43, pp.176-252.

¹⁷ For Origen, ‘The foundation of all knowledge [of the mysteries] is reading the Scripture and meditating on it. Its meaning is communicated to the intelligence by grace, sometimes by means of a sudden illumination. A moral and ascetical life is the condition *sine qua non* for this. The knowledge of God cannot enter into a heart that is not pure, or a soul given to sin and subservient to the desires of the flesh’ (translated from Henri Crouzel, ‘Origène, précurseur du monachisme’ in *Théologie de la vie monastique: Études sur la tradition patristique*, Paris: Aubier, 1961, p.36). This was the prevailing attitude among the monks of the Egyptian desert. ‘Origen, the greatest of the Alexandrian exponents of the allegorical approach, exerted a strong influence on monasticism and had many disciples in the desert’ (Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, p.171). The method of interpreting the Old Testament by allegory, systematised by Origen, was also used by Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria, including Philo (d. *circa* 50). ‘Thus the allegorical exegesis of the Fathers is a matter of the religious reality of the Hellenistic world. The taste for symbols was pronounced in the literary world of the Alexandrian age. The truth seemed more desirable if it was surrounded by mystery—

time encountered, as we do also, was that so much of Scripture appeared banal and without any utility for understanding or promoting spiritual life. The long and sometimes scandalous narratives of the patriarchs, the painfully detailed rubrical prescriptions of Leviticus, and the seemingly endless genealogies appeared so irrelevant that the heretic Marcion (d. *circa* 160) and others rejected the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures from the biblical canon. Those who wished to accept these texts as canonical had to find some way to demonstrate their utility. Of what relevance to a contemporary reader in North Africa was the cruel campaign of conquest pursued by Joshua some thousand years before? Origen's answer: 'The wars which Joshua waged ought to be understood spiritually... Marcion, Valentinus and Basilides together with the other heretics refuse to understand these texts in a manner worthy of the Holy Spirit and so have fallen away from the faith and given themselves over to many impieties.'¹⁸

Once the proposition is accepted that the Bible¹⁹ is divinely inspired then it becomes possible to assert that where the text is puzzling to us, this is not only because of our own interior confusion, which sometimes happens, as Augustine asserts,²⁰ but more especially is it due to the intrinsic and transcendent mysteriousness of the divine word. Gregory the Great (540-604) is insistent on this.

Sacred Scripture, because it is divinely inspired, is as superior to the most brilliant human mind as such brilliant people are inferior to God. They can see nothing in of its spiritual loftiness except what is revealed by the good pleasure of the divine goodness... Sacred Scripture has been so wondrously inspired by almighty God that even if it is expounded in many different ways nevertheless there are secrets that remain. It can almost never be so expounded that

and less exposed to being despised' (translated from J. Daniélou, art. 'Écriture et vie spirituelle dans la tradition' in *DSP* 4.1, col. 134. The school of Antioch, on the other hand, preferred more literal interpretations.

¹⁸ Origen, *In Iesu Nave* 12:1-3; *SChr* 71, pp.294-300.

¹⁹ Reference to "the Bible" may be anachronistic for the earlier periods, in terms of the historical questions of the "published" form of the Christian writings; however, this term satisfies our purpose herein.

²⁰ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon* 47:13; *CChr* 41, p.583: 'If you do not disturb the water of your heart you will also recognise the peace [concord] of the Scriptures and you will have peace with the Scriptures and with yourself.'

Casey: The Book of Experience

there are not more secrets remaining in it than are explained today.²¹

The task of the expositor is to penetrate to the heart of the mystery by reducing some of the obscurities of the text. But this is not to suggest that these obscurities were somehow flaws in the original text; rather they can be seen to serve a certain function in cultivating spiritual asceticism. As St Augustine says,

Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness. And I do not doubt that all this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride by toil, and of preventing a feeling of satiety in the intellect, which generally holds in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty.²²

Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-1167) compares this obscurity to a wall that separates the pious reader from Christ—but it is a wall in which there are windows and lattices through which Christ makes an occasional appearance in order that the reader may never doubt that beyond all the riddles and symbolic stories, the Lord is present.²³

The notion of multiple meanings is based on the proposition that a text is understood according to the context in which it is read, that is, the reader's context. An avid botanist looking for data in the Bible may seem to be reading a text different from that being quarried by archaeologists or historians. In each case what is received from the text is shaped by the receptivity of the reader.²⁴ A person trying to garner theology from the Bible will read with heightened sensitivity anything that may seem to yield what is being sought. A believing community will inevitably draw forth from its sacred text more than agnostic or antagonistic readers. Whether this extracted content objectively pre-exists the act of reading, and whether it formed part of what the writer consciously or unconsciously intended to transmit, are legitimate questions, but not ones that can be usefully solved in this present discussion.

²¹ Gregory the Great, *In Librum I Regum* Prol: 3; CChr 144, p.51.

²² CChr 32, p.35.

²³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Homelieae de Oneribus Prophetis Isaiiae* 27:1; CCM 2D, p.246.

²⁴ This recalls the Scholastic axiom: *quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur* ('Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the one receiving').

From the time of Origen, those who wished to propound the Bible to fellow-believers were comfortable in approaching the sacred text with their own most urgent—we might say existential—questions.²⁵ How may this text throw light on the total content of faith and, in particular, on the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ? How may this text serve as a guide to everyday behaviour? How may this text enkindle a more conscious desire for spiritual and eternal realities and thus lead into prayer?

Convinced that God's inspired word was capable of performing these functions, the expositors sought to develop a specifically Christian method of interpretation, that owed something to the Greeks and to Philo, but rested more fundamentally on the conviction that there was an over-arching coherence between God's revealing word in Scripture and God's revealing word in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Nothing true could be said in theology that did not relate to this fundamental and all-encompassing reality. 'The unity of the scriptures and the pervasiveness of Christ in them were the starting points for early Christian exegetes. Difficulties or obscurities in the text were thought by some commentators to protect the deeper meanings from those unprepared to receive them.'²⁶ The knack needed by the interpreter was that of uncovering this essential connection often hidden underneath a banal or puzzling text. Clearly this was a work of some ingenuity.

And so readers who could find nothing of substance in the letter of the text gave themselves permission, on the basis of St Paul's distinction between "letter" and "spirit" (2Cor.3:6; Rom.2:29, 7:6) and his own practice (Gal.4:24), to hunt for a spiritual source of nourishment and an answer to their burning questions.²⁷

²⁵ Two general treatments still worth consulting are: G. W. H. Lampe ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible Vol.2: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, Cambridge: University Press, 1969, and B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 3rd ed. 1983. The definitive study remains Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture* 4Vols., Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1959, Aubier, 1961, 1964; English translation: *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* 2Vols. to date, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 2000.

²⁶ C. Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.91.

²⁷ Thus Bede the Venerable: *In Samuelem Propheta allegorica expositio* Prol; PL 91, 499D: 'If we bring forth from the treasury of the Scriptures only what is old, that is if ... we are concerned only for the literal meaning, then how can we, by reading or

This fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) of Scripture, like the rivers of Paradise, flowed in four streams: history, allegory, tropology and anagogy. Beyond and below its historical or literal meaning, the Bible contained many messages about the content of faith, the conduct of life and the uplifting experience of Christian hope and desire.

John Cassian (360-435) who follows the Alexandrian method of interpretation gives a classic description of the results of an investigation based on what came to be known as “the four senses of Scripture.”

The four figures come together, if we wish, so that the one same “Jerusalem” can be understood in a fourfold manner. According to history it is the city of the Jewish people. According to allegory it is the Church of Christ. According to anagogy it is that heavenly City of God which is “the mother of us all.” According to tropology it is the soul of a human being, which by this name is frequently praised or rebuked by the Lord.²⁸

The Allegorical Method

To answer the question of how a text could express and throw light on the central mystery of salvation the ancient exegetes had recourse to the method of allegory. Latent beneath the overt meaning of the Old Testament text were mysteries concealed from its authors as well as its pre-Christian readers. Accounts of the crossing the Red Sea could be seen as having enough in common with baptism to suggest that the Christian could interpret these texts in the light of the experience of baptism. The manna, the bread from heaven that we read about in the light of the sixth chapter of John, surely points to the gift of the Eucharist. Once this basic assumption is made, then the clever expositor is, for example, able to find all sorts of parallels between the two saving events so that the Old Testament “type” is able to provide a ground for reflection on the New Testament “anti-type.” This is not exegesis, strictly speaking, but more a theological or catechetical procedure. It is poetry; an exercise of the theological imagination. Indeed there is an element of playfulness in proposing an allegorical interpretation. The more extravagant the distance between the text and its interpretation

hearing, obtain correction for our daily sins, consolation amid the increasing hardships of this world and spiritual teaching for the numberless errors of this life?”

²⁸ John Cassian, *Conference* 14:8; SChr 54, pp.190-191.

the more fun it was. When we see how Mt.2:15 uses the text of Hos.11:1, 'I have called my son out of Egypt,' we do not understand this as serious exegesis. When Augustine proposes that the text of Jn.5:5, which describes the 38 years during which the paralytic at the pool of Bethzatha had been ailing, really meant that the man was perfect (40) but he lacked two things: love of God and love of neighbour, he is obviously enjoying himself and trying to keep his congregation amused.²⁹

The ancient expositors used methods that we would regard as spurious, particularly etymology and numerology.³⁰ Regarding the former St Jerome (*circa* 340-420) published a whole book on the literal meaning of proper nouns in the Old and New Testaments, in effect declaring open season for would-be allegorists on any Hebrew names in the Bible. Alphabetically for each book of the Bible beginning with Genesis, he lists all the proper nouns and their meanings, based on the various meanings associated with the roots from which the names were derived.

Æthiopia, darkness or gloom; Assyrians, directors; Adam, human being, or earthling, or native, or red earth; Abel, grief, or vanity, or vapour, or wretched. [And so forth.]³¹

Isidore of Seville (*circa* 560-636) also provided instruments for practising allegory: his collection of etymologies, his listing of allegories and his brief foray into the meaning of numbers.³² The much-utilised *Glossa ordinaria* compiled by Anselm of Laon (d. 1117) and his school, decorated the biblical texts with patristic quotations in the margins and between the lines that provided potential expositors with keys to

²⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV* 17:6; CChr 36, pp.173-174: 'If the number 40 has the perfection of the law and the law is not fulfilled except in the twofold precept of charity, who would be surprised that he was languishing who had 40 minus 2?'

³⁰ See T. Scott, 'Remarks on the Universal Symbolism of the Number 72', *Eye of the Heart* 1, 2008, p.121: 'For the sceptic, practices such as *gematria* appear to manipulate numbers to contrive capricious meanings. From a traditional perspective, *gematria* is an expression of a hermeneutic recognition of the interconnectedness of all things.'

³¹ *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* in CChr 72, pp.59-161.

³² *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, PL 82; *Allegoriae quaedam Sacrae Scripturae*, PL 83, 93-130; *Liber numerorum qui in Sacris Scripturis occurrunt*, PL 83, 179-200.

understanding and interpretation, and had the effect of perpetuating certain lines of allegorical explanation.³³

Allegory does not try to communicate any new knowledge or to advance beyond the known to the unknown. It does not attempt any form of apodictic proof. It circles around the text and plays with it, in order to allow readers to come to a more comprehensive awareness of realities and connections that they already know and believe. It provides a channel for the content of the subconscious to come to the surface. It is an in-house method of reflection and instruction for believers.

The Tropological or Behavioural Sense

It is, perhaps, significant that many medieval monastic writers, especially the Cistercians, were reserved about the value of too much allegory, even though they happily exploited Jerome's listing and Isidore's *Etymologiae* if it suited their homiletic purposes. Their preference, however, was with tropology, the moral or behavioural interpretation. To be noted is that their interest was not in the formulation of an objective ethical system, based on or derived from Scripture, but the practical improvement of the everyday conduct of their listeners or readers. 'Tropology is a moral explanation with reference to the amendment of life and practical instruction.'³⁴ Benedict finds appropriate behavioural imperatives everywhere in the Bible. 'What page or what word of divine authority of the Old and New Testaments is not a most correct norm for human life?' (RB 73;3) Pastoral exhortation aimed to lead readers from the ambiguous heights of imagination to the clear and practical imperatives of Gospel living. 'Let us pass beyond the shadows of allegory to arrive at the investigation of moral matters.'³⁵ The moral sense seeks to find a close link between the sacred text and subjective experience, on the one hand, and behaviour, on the other. Aelred explains the difference between allegory and tropology by way of an example:

³³ PL 113-114. Migne wrongly attributes the work to Walafrid Strabo (d. 849).

³⁴ John Cassian, *Conference* 14:8; SChr 54, p.190.

³⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, SC 17:8; SBOp 1, 103, 4. See also SC 16:1 (SBOp 1, 90, 1) and SC 80:1 (SBOp 2, 277, 16); in both case Bernard qualifies allegory as something "darksome." Aelred of Rievaulx, *Homelias de Oneribus Prophetis Isaias* 21:1; CCM 2D, p.187: *Itaque, fratres, de allegoricis montibus ad plana tropologica descendentes...* See also 26:1; CCM 2D, p.235.

According to the laws of allegory the Red Sea signifies the waters of baptism, made red by the blood of Christ. But in the laws of tropology it is the second baptism, that is the tears of confession, which is most suitably indicated by the Red Sea. From this the true Hebrews (that is those passing across) rise up free and cleansed from vices and sins.³⁶

Allegory allows us to find the content of what we believe reflected in the text; tropology touches our own experience and, it moves us simultaneously energising us towards action and guiding our efforts.

Based on the conviction that all the various manifestations of the mysteries of Christ were on our account, *propter nos*,³⁷ the question that Bernard would ask is ‘What has this to do with our salvation?’³⁸ We read the Bible and other texts for formation and not merely for information—our reading is to be such that it increases our openness both to guidance and to grace. It follows that the act of reading attains its integrity only when the content of the text is internalised and appropriated by the reader, and then externalised in behaviour. Hearers of the word are two-a-penny; doers of the word are very much rarer.

The Anagogical or Uplifting Function of Reading

There is some doubt in tradition about whether to distinguish three or four senses of Scripture.³⁹ Gueric of Igny (*circa* 1080-1156), for example, seems to prefer the former.

You can describe what has been written for our sake in three ways: so that there may be an ample meal made up of the three loaves of history, allegory and morality. All the contents of Scripture can be divided into three parts and absorbed like three loaves.⁴⁰

Clearly Gueric is following the approach of St Gregory the Great and

³⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon* 56:15; CCM 2B, p.95.

³⁷ Alberich Altermatt, ‘*Christus pro nobis*: Die Christologie Bernhards von Clairvaux in den “Sermones per annum”’, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 33, 1977, pp.3-176.

³⁸ *Quid hoc ad salutem nostram?* Csi 5:23; SBOp 3, 486, 1.

³⁹ See De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* Vol.1, pp.75-115.

⁴⁰ Gueric of Igny *Sermon* 36:4; SChr 202, p.268. Aelred’s treatise *De Iesu puero duodenni* (SChr 60) has three sections corresponding to the three modes or levels of interpretation.

others for whom the “typical” interpretation includes both allegory and analogy in a single category.

The fourth sense extracted from a biblical text is its meaning in the life of interior discipleship—its capacity to inspire hope, to generate prayer in the reader. The story of the cure of the man born blind in the ninth chapter of John’s Gospel is read not only as a narrative, nor only as an account that tingles with baptismal symbolism, nor even as an instruction in appropriate Christian behaviour. It may also have the effect of encouraging the reader’s confidence in the restorative power of Christ even when things seem hopeless, of giving birth to a prayer for healing of whatever it is that bedevils the reader’s vitality, of uplifting the reader’s spirit. The text seems to act directly on the reader’s experience to cause a renaissance of fervour and love. Sometimes this analogical sense is described as the eschatological meaning of a text—it brings us into contact with the final realities when God’s Kingdom reaches its consummation.



The Pontifical Biblical Commission in its document on biblical interpretation is strongly in favour of the historico-critical methods of exegesis that have developed since the nineteenth century. It does, however, recognise the theological validity of a fuller sense, defined as ‘the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.’⁴¹

Ancient exegesis, which obviously could not take into account modern scientific requirements, attributed to every text of Scripture several levels of meaning. The most prevalent distinction was between the literal sense and the spiritual sense. Medieval exegesis distinguished within the spiritual sense three different aspects, each relating respectively to the truth revealed, to the way of life commended and to the final goal to be achieved. From this came the famous couplet of Augustine of Denmark (13th century):

⁴¹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Rome, 1993, II:B, 2.

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
moralis quid agas, quid speras anagogia.*⁴²

In what does this spiritual understanding consist? Fundamentally it is that enlightenment and energising of the interior faculties which comes about by the action of the Holy Spirit guiding the reader in a way complementary to the guidance given to the sacred authors. In the Alexandrian tradition reading and writing are both regarded as inspired and revelatory, though in different manners.⁴³ The authenticity of an individual's interpretation is, of course, subject to discernment: it must be in harmony with the teaching of the Church. There is, however, another criterion, one drawn from the Gospel: the quality of the reader's life—by their fruits shall you know them.

The Process of Reading Sacred Texts

Monks read the Bible with a view to arriving at a spiritual understanding of its meaning—to be led to a broader appreciation of the faith by which they lived, to find in the sacred texts a key to understanding their experience and a guide to living, and be drawn beyond the present into the mysteries of eternity in hope, desire and contemplation. They were not professional theologians, preachers, teachers or catechists. They opened the Scriptures principally to find God in their own hearts, in their own lives and, transcending the known, in contemplation.

Reading according to the four senses of the text is a holistic experience. It brings into play the reader's reason, imagination, memory, conscience, desire and feeling (*affectus*). Only such a reading does justice to the broad range of conscious and unconscious factors that have contributed to the writing of the text. Just as any book is not a pure emanation from the mind, but the expression of practical

⁴² Biblical Commission, *Interpretation*, II:B. The quoted ditty reads: 'The letter teaches what happened, allegory what to believe, the moral [sense] what to do and anagogy what to hope.'

⁴³ This is the foundation of Origen's exegetical approach. 'Or celui qui a inspiré les auteurs sacrés peut seul inspirer leur interprète, nous avons vu que c'était le principe de l'exégèse d'Origène. Par suite, le prédicateur sera d'abord homme de prière' ['Only the One who has inspired the sacred authors can inspire their interpreter. We have seen that this was Origen's exegetic principle. The preacher must, as a consequence, be a man of prayer'] (J. Daniélou, *Origène*, Paris: La Table Ronde, 1949, p.38).

craftsmanship stamped with every moment of the author's history, so the authentic reading of a book is one in which the reader is totally involved—mysteriously dancing in tune with the author's words. The same dynamic operates in sacred reading as in ordinary reading—the act of reading effects some kind of bonding between writer and reader that transcends the mere communication of knowledge. This is a theme that the novelist David Malouf spoke about not so long ago.

Nothing in the whole heady business of writing is more mysterious than the relationship between the writer and reader... This is what we, as writers, deal in daily, a dimension continuously negotiated, of mind, tone, language, where the writer's consciousness and the reader's imperceptibly merge, in an intimacy where, all conditions being propitious, I and other, mind and world, are one.

There is, accordingly an interpersonal element in their reading—monks come to the Bible with a view to knowing and experiencing Christ⁴⁴ and in that encounter discovering their own deepest selves. This is possible only when attention is paid to the fuller sense of the inspired book. It is not to be found in mere attention to its literal meaning.

Granted this monastic necessity of reading of the Scriptures and its derivatives,⁴⁵ it becomes obvious that reading gives shape to monastic observance, since the cultivation of a lifelong habit of reading by a community of twenty or thirty monks presupposes an ordered lifestyle, a developed economy that makes possible the possession of appropriate volumes, leisure for reading, a place to read, an advanced literacy that facilitates sophisticated reading, and a formation program that communicates these skills to newcomers.

Monastic reading or *lectio divina* is not the same as the ordinary

⁴⁴ 'Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.' *Ignoratio Scripturarum ignoratio Christi est*: Jerome (340-420), *In Isaiam Prophetam* Prol., PL 24, 17B.

⁴⁵ 'Over the centuries, however, we must point out, the term "Divine Scriptures" acquired a much broader meaning in the spiritual literature of the East. It referred not only to Scripture but still more to the writings of the Fathers and also to everything that could be read, once pagan books had been eliminated' (T. Špidlik, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East: Volume 2*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005, p.133. In the West, to be noted is the extended reading list included in RB 73:4-7 and the use of readings from "recognised and orthodox Catholic Fathers" prescribed for the liturgy: RB 9:8.

perusal of a text—for information, instruction or amusement. It is the kind of reading that invites the monk's inner self into a profound dialogue with the page before him, the author of its content, the tradition in which it stands, and ultimately with God who is the source of all its truth. Such a reading can be done only in a supportive ambience. This means that there is an encouragement to read and that there are suitable books available, a place in which to read, an atmosphere of silence and a guaranteed length of time without interruption. Monasteries routinely provided such an environment; those outside monasteries wishing to practise *lectio divina* have to devise means by which comparable benefits accrue.

Lectio divina requires the allocation of considerable time. St Benedict made provision for a minimum of two to three hours daily for each monk, reserving for it the best periods of the day.⁴⁶ Without this massive exposure—think in terms of 1,000 hours per year for a lifetime—the exercise would be qualitatively different. It is the constant exposure to the Scriptures, read in different life-situations, that facilitates an awareness of its deeper meanings. With repeated readings superficial novelty wears off and there is a tendency to appreciate subtler elements of the text hitherto unnoticed.

Three Monastic Witnesses

It is clear from the monastic writers of the medieval period that regular *lectio divina*, whether such reading was heard in the liturgy, as part of the common exercises or done privately in the cloister, was considered a prayer-like activity. William of St Thierry links *lectio* with reflection, rumination, feelings of love, prayer and seeking God. Bernard of Clairvaux sees it as not only as an experience of God remaining within

⁴⁶ It is not always easy for us to calculate periods of time in the ancient world which kept solar time. A daylight hour was the twelfth part of the interval between sunrise and sunset; obviously a winter "hour" was much shorter than a summer "hour." The exact timing depended on latitude and the day of the year. In Melbourne today (11 July, 2008), according to solar computation, a diurnal hour lasts only 49 minutes on the clock; whereas a nocturnal hour drags on for 71 minutes. Benedict's provisions for the balance between *lectio divina* and manual labour are found in RB 48. 'RB seems to give precedence to *lectio* over manual labour. *Lectio* is always done during "prime time" (the morning) and never reduced to less than two hours' (T. Kardong, 'A Structural Comparison of *Regula Magistri* 50 and *Regula Benedicti* 48', *Regulae Benedicti Studia* 6/7, 1981, p.103.

us, but also a source of delight, fervour and evangelical behaviour. Guigo the Carthusian (d. 1188) distinguishes the different aspects of *lectio* to construct a ladder for monks—a means of letting themselves be lifted up to heaven.

William of St Thierry

In his letter of instruction written in 1144 for the novices of the Carthusian house of Mont-Dieu, William of St Thierry describes the manner of sacred reading as it was accepted throughout western monasticism, borrowing ideas freely from the Stoic philosopher Seneca.

Then at definite hours space is to be made for definite reading. For random and varied reading, as if found by chance, is not constructive, but it makes the mind unstable since it enters the memory lightly and as lightly departs. Rather let the mind remain with works of good quality so that it becomes accustomed to them...

Something from the daily reading should, each day, be consigned to memory's stomach and brought up again for frequent rumination: this should be something that accords with your ideal (*propositum*) and seizes your attention so that it holds the mind in such a way that it does not want to think about other matters.

From the reading should be drawn feelings of love (*affectus*) and a prayer should take shape that interrupts the reading. Not that such interruption is a hindrance, since it immediately restores to the reading a mind that is purified for understanding.

Reading is governed by intention. If a reader truly seeks God in the reading, all that is read will work together to this end, captivating the perception and bringing all the understanding of the reading into service for the honour of Christ.⁴⁷

Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard was a man of the Bible, who read the Scriptures 'more wondering than examining'.⁴⁸ His theology is unequivocally biblical.⁴⁹ In

⁴⁷ *Ep Aur* 120, 122-124; SChr 223, pp.238-240.

⁴⁸ SC 62:4; SBOp 2, 158, 3.

addition, so saturated was he with the biblical text that his personal writing style was strongly influenced by Vulgate rendering of the sacred text, heard daily in the liturgy and read and pondered alone.⁵⁰ In his discourses on the Song of Songs there are over 5,000 biblical quotations, about one every second line. These were not deliberately and painstakingly inserted; they simply fell in spontaneously as Bernard dictated his thought.

Bernard recommended his own practice to his monks and mediated the Scriptures to them constantly through his preaching and writing. Above all he wanted the monk not just to skim the surface of the text seeking knowledge but to search for the interior echo so that ‘what he hears outwardly he feels inwardly’.⁵¹

Bernard promulgated a triple imperative that he considered binding on true readers of God’s word: they must willingly receive it, they must remember it and they must put it into effect by action. The integrity of *lectio divina* depends on all three elements being present and so the process of reading, likewise, demands first of all a radical openness and a willingness to continue listening; it requires that the word be pondered, recited aloud, slowly meditated in a spirit of obedience; and the process must be brought to its conclusion by conversion expressed in a new way of acting.

This reading is not merely a burdensome obligation but a source of necessary sustenance and a generator of delight. It is by this means that Christ comes to the soul and remains within it. This is how salvation is brought about. Bernard explains how this happens in one of his Advent sermons.

Keep the word of God in the same way as you would preserve bodily food. For the word of God is a living bread and food for the mind. So long as earthly food is stored in a box it can be stolen or

⁴⁹ D. Farkasfalvy, ‘The Role of the Bible in St. Bernard’s Spirituality’, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 25, 1969, pp.3-13. See also P. Dumontier, *Saint Bernard et la Bible*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1953; De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* Vol. 2, pp.153-162.

⁵⁰ C. Mohrmann, ‘Observations sur la langue et le style de S. Bernard’ in *SBOp* 2 (Introduction), pp.ix-xxxiii; ‘Le Style de S. Bernard’ in *San Bernard: pubblicazione commemorativa nell’ VIII centenario della sua morte*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1954, pp.166-184. Jean Leclercq makes this assertion repeatedly throughout his many writing on Bernard.

⁵¹ *SC* 37:5; *SBOp* 2, 11, 7.

nibbled by mice or it can be stolen or nibbled by mice or it can go bad if it is left too long. But if you eat the food you don't have to worry about any of these. This is the way to preserve God's word; Blessed are they who keep it. (Lk.11:28) Let it pass into the innards of your soul, then let it make its way into your feelings and into your behaviour. Eat well and your soul will delight in the abundance. Do not forget to eat your bread, lest your heart dry up, but let your soul be filled as with a banquet. (Ps.101:5, Ps.62:6) If you thus keep the Word of God, you can be quite sure that it will keep you.

It is constant feeding on the Word of God that sustains a monk in his distinctive vocation; without it the heart dries up and commitment fades.

Guigo the Carthusian

Guigo II, Prior of La Grande Chartreuse from approximately 1174 until 1180 brought together many of the traditional insights into the practice of sacred reading and constructed a kind of ladder by which monks are lifted up from earth to heaven. His description of the stages that link reading and contemplation has become classical.

One day when I was engaged bodily in manual labour, I began to think about the spiritual exercise of the human being, and suddenly four spiritual steps came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. This is a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven. It has few distinct rungs, yet its length is immeasurable and beyond belief, for one end is fixed upon the earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets...

Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, with a concentrated application of the soul. Meditation is the zealous application of the mind seeking to find knowledge of hidden truth by means of one's own reason. Prayer is the heart's devoted attention to God to banish evils or to obtain good things. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and, as it were, suspended above itself, tasting the joys of everlasting sweetness.

Now that we have given descriptions of the four steps, it remains for us to see what are their duties in our regard.⁵²

In the next paragraph Guigo distinguishes the discrete phases on the single action involved in turning away from temporal reality towards God.

Reading seeks the sweetness of the blessed life, meditation finds it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts solid food into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer obtains its flavour, contemplation is the sweetness itself which brings joy and refreshes. Reading works on the husk, meditation on the ear; prayer asks for what we desire contemplation delights in obtaining the sweetness.⁵³



The monastic authors, while being assiduous in their pursuit of the literal meaning of the text of the Bible, understood that the ultimate purpose of their labour was not an advance in technical knowledge of the text or theology, but the benefit of a more Christ-like life. John of Forde (d. 1214), regards the whole importance of *lectio divina* as concentrated in its capacity to bring forth love in the soul.

There are among them vessels of the purest silver, those who are the stewards of your sacred word, keeping the faith of your bride chaste and incorrupt by the purity of their word. They investigate your words in your sevenfold fire [the Holy Spirit], and by their interpretation bring back to love all figures, allegories, parables and riddles.⁵⁴

Later Developments

The cumulative effect of this monastic approach to Bible-reading was what has been termed “monastic theology.”⁵⁵ This was a subject-

⁵² *Epistola de vita contemplativa (Scala Claustralium)*, 2; SChr 163, pp.82-84.

⁵³ *Scala Claustralium* 3, pp.84-86.

⁵⁴ John of Forde, SC 108:8; CCM 18, p.734.

⁵⁵ The classic description of monastic theology may be found in J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, New York: Fordham

centred theology rather than an objective and systematic discourse suitable for the instruction of students in the emergent universities. Its special medium was a free-flowing and reflective discourse (*sermo*) addressed to a monastic audience in order to strengthen the beliefs and values already held. Monastic theology was not dialectical or argumentative; by choice it was reverent, wondering and meditative. It was often couched in poetic language and made use of many rhetorical devices to ingratiate itself with listeners and readers and to win from them an affective rather than a cognitive response. It was experiential in focus and traditional in content, more like a corporate meditation on truths commonly held than an extension of the frontiers of theological thought. It was primarily a life-sustaining theology.

For a while monastic theology co-existed with the new mode of theological discourse. In particular, the Victorines, especially Hugh of St Victor (*circa* 1096-1141), attempted to strengthen the scholarly basis of biblical interpretation to bring it closer to what was being sought in the schools.⁵⁶ As the thirteenth century progressed, however, scholastic theology and methodology were in the ascendant, spurred on by translations and commentaries on the works of Aristotle by Arabic scholars, and localised in the universities rather than in the monasteries. In this more academic approach the Bible was quarried for proof-texts to uphold theological positions: the clash of opinions in dialectic was welcome and texts and commentaries on texts were bandied back and forth. The Cistercian John of Forde was one of the last to maintain the traditional methods but, despite the high quality of his sermons, extant manuscripts indicate that he was not widely read. Interest had swung in another direction, even in monasteries. Scholastic methodology in philosophy and theology was to remain paramount in Catholic circles until the 1960s.

In the wake of the Reformation, Bible reading diminished among

University Press, 3rd ed. 1982, pp.191-235. See also M. Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988, pp.32-37.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Hugh of St Victor, *Eruditionis didascalicae libri septem*, PL176, 759-837; J. Taylor tr., *The Didascalion of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991; also, I. Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's "Didascalion"*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Catholics. It was permitted only through the medium of authoritatively translated and annotated versions, and its liturgical use remained in Latin. It is interesting that the monastic approach to the Scriptures was not considered by Martin Luther as odious as other aspects of monastic life. In particular he retained a great admiration for Bernard of Clairvaux.

In this preface to his German works Luther contrasted prayer and reason. He saw a fundamental dichotomy between *oratio* (prayer) and *ratio*; only the “*orational*,” not the “*rational*,” access is permitted when one approaches the Word of God. Therefore, Luther advocated letting go of one’s own reasoning when interpreting the Bible, since human *ratio* not only cannot achieve anything in divine matters, but will cause one to fall into hell like Lucifer. Luther’s “*orational*” approach was essentially grounded in the fear of God; humility was the beginning point in understanding the Word of God. Therefore, Luther advised, in place of the rational approach one should retreat into one’s private chamber, according to Mt.6:6, kneel down there, and pray to God “with the right humility and earnestness”. One is to pray that God may send through his dear Son the Holy Spirit who may illuminate and guide the person who prays. The Spirit is the only master who gives *verstand* (reason, insight). Apparently, then, only the Spirit-enlightened “*reason*” is ready to read and understand theology, the Word of God. Such understanding can come only by reading the Word of God meditatively “with closed eyes”. This does not mean that Luther dismissed the God-given gift of mental capacity, as his pejorative use of *ratio* may imply.⁵⁷

The use of the fuller sense was termed by Luther “*catachresis*” and he defined this as ‘borrowing a statement from Scripture and playing around with it, but without harming the text and its proper meaning’.⁵⁸ He noted also a mastery of this art in the writings of the Abbot of Clairvaux.

⁵⁷ F. Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999, p.135. See also F. Posset, “Bible Reading ‘with Closed Eyes’ in the Monastic Tradition: An Overlooked Aspect of Martin Luther’s Hermeneutics,” in *American Benedictine Review* 38.3, 1987, pp.293-306. R. L. Plummer, ‘Luther’s Instructions for Studying Theology as a Biblical Hermeneutical Method’, *Tjuringa* 70, 2006, pp.39-48.

⁵⁸ WA 30-II:381, 24-27, quoted in Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, p.158.

Casey: The Book of Experience

Bernard is a wonderful artist in catachreses. For he often connects a passage which should be referred to some specific image with some general meaning. In this manner, of course, it is permissible to resort to a catachresis and transfer a text to something else. This meaning is also good. Nevertheless, one must not do violence to simple grammar.⁵⁹

Above all Luther recommended a method of reading that closely mirrored the monastic practice of *lectio divina*.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard and spoken [the words of Scripture] once or twice and that you have complete understanding. You will not be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.⁶⁰

The Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

In modern times the great exponent of active, as distinct from passive, interpretation of ancient texts has been Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) whose approach has enhanced the credibility of monastic *lectio* as far as contemporary readers are concerned.⁶¹ By “active interpretation” is meant that, in the light of tradition, the interpreter contributes something to the transmission of the integral message of the text and is not merely an archeologist who unearths the meaning it had at the moment it was originally committed to writing. We see this in the realm of law, especially constitutional law, when subsequent applications of the law to new situations expand the scope of the written text by reference to the *mens legislatoris*, and such re-readings are assayed and institutionalised through judicial precedents. In music the notes on a page are one thing: talented conductors and musicians

⁵⁹ WA 44:686; 25-26, quoted in Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, p.157.

⁶⁰ Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings in T. F. Lull ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic theological Writings*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989, p.66.

⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1965.

bring their own experience, passion and history to produce new versions of the same music for each generations.

Every assimilation (*Aneignung*) of tradition is historically different: which does not mean that every one represents only an imperfect understanding of it.. This means that assimilation is no mere repetition of the text that has been handed down, but it is a new creation of understanding.⁶²

Gadamer regards consciously standing within the tradition to which the text belongs is an important factor in reaching an integral understanding of it. For when we read a text we are exposing ourselves to a mere part of a fuller reality: the tradition in which both the writer and the writing stands. The meaning of a text is more than the meaning consciously intended by the author: ‘the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended.’⁶³ This tradition transcends the persons who embody or express it. For this reason the text is most fully interpreted when it is read in the context of its tradition. ‘To stand within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge, but makes it possible.’⁶⁴

Gadamer is adamant that to interpret a text adequately in our own historical context we must bring to it our own experience and work to achieve a “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*).⁶⁵ It is like a necessary conversation with a stranger; we must begin by finding a common language and a common ground on which to stand. Then dialogue, learning and mutual enrichment become possible.

Gadamer’s list of the qualities of sound interpretation apply also to *lectio divina*.

- a. The experienced reader approaches the text with humility, not seeking to master it,⁶⁶ but to enter into dialogue with it.

⁶² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.430.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.335.

⁶⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.324.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.273: ‘Understanding ... is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves.’

⁶⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.323.

- b. This dialogue presupposes a degree of self-knowledge,⁶⁷ which implies an experience of human finitude: a deep awareness of the limitations of humanity learnt through suffering⁶⁸
- c. To understand a text the reader must try to establish a common language with the text.⁶⁹ This means acquiring the discipline of accepting the relativity of one's own culture and striving to understand reality from a different perspective. In practical terms this will often mean learning new languages and appreciating a different culture.
- d. The reader must have the fundamental openness of a listener.⁷⁰ "The hermeneutical experience also has its logical consequence: that of uninterrupted listening."⁷¹ Note this phrase: "uninterrupted listening."
- e. This openness to experience means that the reader needs to be "radically undogmatic";⁷² the reader must be detached from antecedent expectations of what the text contains, somewhat ready to be surprised—or not. "The claim to understand the other person in advance performs the function of keeping the claim of the other person at a distance."⁷³
- f. The reader must accept that listening to tradition involves accepting that 'some things are against myself',⁷⁴ and will therefore challenge complacency. The text cannot be made into the servant of the *status quo*; it is, rather, an agent of change. Integral reading demands that the text retains its independent voice and that includes the capability to challenge the reader's prior convictions.
- g. Every understanding reached must be subjected to testing. The reader needs to return anew to the text to verify that the message received is concordant with the objectivity of the text. As in conversation, the only way to guarantee that the message has been heard is to paraphrase it and check the accuracy of what has been

⁶⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.318, 320.

⁶⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.320.

⁶⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.341.

⁷⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.324.

⁷¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.421

⁷² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.319.

⁷³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.323.

⁷⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.325.

understood. Also like conversation, interpretative reading needs questioning and continual cross-checking.⁷⁵ Often clarity emerges from successive approximations.

Gadamer provides intellectual respectability for the idea of a fuller sense of Scripture and for the subjective meanings that are the grist of *lectio divina*. The monk saw himself as located within the great tradition of humanity addressed by God's self-revelation and, therefore, read the Bible as an insider. In the sacred text he heard echoes of his own experience, and often it was that experience that gave relevance and pungency to the words on the page written so long ago.



As the sun rises above the horizon, the monk makes his way to the place where he normally reads. His mind is rested, cleared by the night of yesterday's concerns. His heart has been awakened by the familiar rhythm of liturgical prayer and there is a lightness in his step as he approaches his reading, savouring already the long period of free time that stretches before him. He sits down and reaches for the volume which has been his companion these past months, and a smile hovers over his lips as the memory of past graces rises in his heart. He utters a brief prayer for enlightenment as he opens the book and gazes appreciatively at the text before him. He finds the place he had been reading yesterday and reads it again, wondering at its power to reveal new facets of its truth with each new encounter. He reads a little and pauses. Maybe he reads it again, his lips quietly forming the words as his eye caresses the text. He stops again, perhaps to listen to the echo of the words in his memory and in his heart. Sometimes he is overwhelmed by consolation and he remains silent and still soaking up the grace that is poured over him. Sometimes he finds a challenge in what he reads and he has to struggle to quell the rising dread and the first stages of resistance. He has to re-affirm his willingness to be led by God to a greater purity of life, to be converted, to be changed. Sometimes he feels nothing at all, except a hollow sense of alienation

⁷⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.330. 'The unfolding of the totality of meaning towards which understanding is directed, forces us to make conjectures and to take them back again. The self-cancellation of the interpretation makes it possible for the thing itself—the meaning of the text—to assert itself' (p.422).

Casey: The Book of Experience

from God and all that in meaningful in his life. Whatever his experience he is led to prayer – the prayer of love, the prayer for divine assistance, the prayer of desolation. Imbued with this reaching out to God he returns to the text, finding there a clearer focus, perhaps, a nuancing of the message received, an encouragement to dig deeper. And so the process continues. Reading. Meditation. Prayer. Reading. Meditation. Prayer. The stages do not always follow one another immediately, on some days one or other element dominates. Sometimes one aspect may be deferred until later in the day. And on some graced occasions just to begin the reading leads rapidly beyond itself to deep prayer. Perhaps the monk picks up a pen and carefully writes down a few words both as a means of impressing them more deeply into his awareness and as an adjunct to memory. There are times when the power of the Word lifts him up above himself and his deeds into the deep upper ocean of contemplative quiet, where all external activity ceases, consumed by an interior fire of love and desire that displaces everything but itself. And then, just as suddenly, he returns: a simple monk seated before a book, his heart and his mind open to its message. Later the moment will come when it is time to close the book, to gather up some memories of what he has read to sustain him during the day. And so the monk goes off to his work; the sun has risen high in the sky and the day is already begun.



Saint Benedict recognised that not all parts of the Bible would at all times yield spiritual fruit to the monks, especially those with weak intellects (RB 42:4). *Lectio divina* in fact is a highly complex exercise, as is any reading. Ink marks on a page are seen by the eyes and translated by the brain into oral-aural words which designate not only concrete realities but also abstractions. Those attuned to their own experience may find more in a text than its authors consciously intended. Persons engaged in *lectio divina* may uncover great mysteries about God and about themselves through this medium, may be converted to a new manner of living, may with years of regular practice grow in wisdom. A simple practice may yield sublime results.

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| CChr | Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina (Turnholt: Brepols); cited according to volume and page. |
| CCM | Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols); cited according to volume and page. |
| Csi | Bernard of Clairvaux: <i>De Consideratione Libri V</i> |
| DSp | Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, (Paris: Beauchesne); cited according to volume and column. |
| Ep Aur | William of St Thierry, <i>Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei</i> ; SChr 223. |
| PL | Patrologia Latina (Paris: Migne); cited according to volume and column. |
| Prol | Prologue |
| RB | Rule of Saint Benedict |
| SBOp | Sancti Bernardi Opera (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses). |
| SC | <i>Sermones Super Cantica Canticatorum</i> . (SBOp Vol. 1-2) |
| SChr | Sources Chrétiennes, (Paris: Cerf); cited according to volume and page. |
| VA | <i>Vita Antonii</i> , St Athanasius' <i>Life of Antony</i> in SChr 400. |
| WA | Martin Luther's works: Weimarer Ausgabe |

Keys to the Bible*

Frithjof Schuon

In order to understand the nature of the Bible and its meaning, it is essential to have recourse to the ideas of both symbolism and revelation; without an exact and, in the measure necessary, sufficiently profound understanding of these key ideas, the approach to the Bible remains hazardous and risks engendering grave doctrinal, psychological, and historical errors. Here it is above all the idea of revelation that is indispensable, for the literal meaning of the Bible, particularly in the Psalms and in the words of Jesus, affords sufficient food for piety apart from any question of symbolism; but this nourishment would lose all its vitality and all its liberating power without an adequate idea of revelation or of supra-human origin.

Other passages, particularly in Genesis, though also in texts such as the Song of Songs, remain an enigma in the absence of traditional commentaries. When approaching Scripture, one should always pay the greatest attention to rabbinical and cabalistic commentaries and—in Christianity—to the patristic and mystical commentaries; then will it be seen how the word-for-word meaning practically never suffices by itself and how apparent naiveties, inconsistencies, and contradictions resolve themselves in a dimension of profundity for which one must possess the key. The literal meaning is frequently a cryptic language that more often veils than reveals and that is only meant to furnish clues to truths of a cosmological, metaphysical, and mystical order; the Oriental traditions are unanimous concerning this complex and multidimensional interpretation of sacred texts. According to Meister Eckhart, the Holy Spirit teaches all truth; admittedly, there is a literal meaning that the author had in mind, but as God is the author of Holy Scripture, every true meaning is at the same time a literal meaning; for all that is true

* [This article originally appeared in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter Vol.1, No.1, 1967; it was republished in J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974. The current version is a new translation republished here by kind permission of World Wisdom Books and the estate of Frithjof Schuon.]

comes from the Truth itself, is contained in it, springs from it, and is willed by it. And so with Dante in his *Convivio*:

The Scriptures can be understood, and ought to be explained, principally in four senses. One is called literal. ... The second is called allegorical. ... The third sense is called moral. ... The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is, beyond sense (*sovrasenso*); and this is when a Scripture is spiritually expounded, which, while true in its literal sense, refers beyond it to the higher things of the eternal Glory, as we may see in that Psalm of the Prophet, where he says that when Israel went out of Egypt, Judea became holy and free. Which, although manifestly true according to the letter, is nonetheless true in its spiritual meaning, namely, that the soul, in forsaking its sins, is made holy and free in its powers' (*Trattato Secondo*, I).

As regards Biblical style—setting aside certain variations that are of no importance here—it is important to understand that the sacred or supra-human character of the text could never be manifested in an absolute way through language, which perforce is human; the divine quality referred to appears rather through the wealth of superposed meanings and in the theurgic power of the text when it is thought and pronounced and written.

Equally important is the fact that the Scriptures are sacred, not because of their subject matter and the way in which it is dealt with, but because of their degree of inspiration, or what amounts to the same, their divine origin; it is this that determines the contents of the book, and not the reverse. The Bible can speak of a multitude of things other than God without being the less sacred for it, whereas other books can deal with God and exalted matters and still not be the divine Word.

The apparent incoherence in certain sacred texts results ultimately from the disproportion between divine Truth and human language: it is as if this language, under the pressure of the Infinite, were shattered into a thousand disparate pieces or as if God had at His disposal no more than a few words to express a thousand truths, thus obliging Him to use all sorts of ellipses and paraphrases. According to the Rabbis, "God speaks succinctly"; this also explains the syntheses in sacred language that are incomprehensible *a priori*, as well as the superposition of meanings already mentioned. The role of the orthodox and inspired

commentators is to intercalate in sentences, when too elliptic, the implied and unexpressed clauses, or to indicate in what way or in what sense a certain statement should be taken, besides explaining the different symbolisms, and so forth. It is the orthodox commentary and not the word-for-word meaning of the Torah that acts as law. The Torah is said to be “closed,” and the sages “open” it; and it is precisely this “closed” nature of the Torah that renders necessary from the start the Mishnah, the commentary that was given in the tabernacle when Joshua transmitted it to the Sanhedrin. It is also said that God gave the Torah during the day and the Mishnah during the night and that the Torah is infinite in itself, whereas the Mishnah is inexhaustible as it flows forth in duration. It should also be noted that there are two principal degrees of inspiration, or even three if the orthodox commentaries are included; Judaism expresses the difference between the first two degrees by comparing the inspiration of Moses to a bright mirror and that of the other prophets to a dark mirror.

The two keys to the Bible are, as already stated, the ideas of symbolism and revelation. Too often revelation has been approached in a psychological, hence purely naturalistic and relativistic, sense. In reality revelation is the fulgurant irruption of a knowledge that comes, not from an individual or collective subconscious, but on the contrary from a supra-consciousness, which though latent in all beings nonetheless immensely surpasses its individual and psychological crystallizations. In saying that “the kingdom of God is within you,” Jesus Christ means not that Heaven—or God—is of a psychological order, but simply that access to spiritual and divine realities is to be found at the centre of our being, and it is from this centre precisely that revelation springs forth when the human ambience offers a sufficient reason for it to do so and when therefore a predestined human vehicle presents itself, namely, one capable of conveying this outflow.

But clearly the most important basis for what we have just spoken of is the admission that a world of intelligible light exists, both underlying and transcending our consciousness; the knowledge of this world, or this sphere, entails as a consequence the negation of all psychologism and likewise all evolutionism. In other words, psychologism and evolutionism are nothing but makeshift hypotheses to compensate for the absence of this knowledge.

To affirm then that the Bible is both symbolistic and revealed means, on the one hand, that it expresses complex truths in a language that is indirect and full of imagery and, on the other, that its source is neither the sensorial world nor the psychological or rational plane, but rather a sphere of reality that transcends these planes and immensely envelops them, while yet in principle being accessible to man through the intellective and mystical centre of his being, or through the “heart,” if one prefers, or pure “Intellect.” It is the Intellect which comprises in its very substance the evidence for the sphere of reality that we are speaking of and which thus contains the proof of it, if this word can have a meaning in the domain of direct and participative perception. Indeed the classic prejudice of scientism, or the fault in its method if one wishes, is to deny any mode of knowledge that is supra-sensorial and supra-rational, and in consequence to deny the planes of reality to which these modes refer and which constitute, precisely, the sources both of revelation and of intellection. Intellection—in principle—is for man what revelation is for the collectivity; in principle, we say, for in fact man cannot have access to direct intellection—or *gnosis*—except by virtue of a pre-existing scriptural revelation. What the Bible describes as the fall of man or the loss of Paradise coincides with our separation from total intelligence; this is why it is said that “the kingdom of God is within you,” and again: “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” The Bible itself is the multiple and mysterious objectification of this universal Intellect or *Logos*: it is thus the projection, by way of images and enigmas, of what we carry in a quasi-inaccessible depth at the bottom of our heart; and the facts of sacred history—where nothing is left to chance—are themselves cosmic projections of the unfathomable divine Truth.

Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

Algis Uždavinys

Thus the universe and its contents were created in order to make known the Creator, and to make known the good is to praise it; the means of making it known is to reflect it or shadow it; and a symbol is the reflection or shadow of a higher reality. ... Therefore, in respect of our having said that a symbol worthy of the name is that in which the Archetype's radiation predominates over its projection, it is necessary to add that the sacramental symbol proceeds from its Source, relatively speaking, by pure radiation (Martin Lings)¹

Symbols as ontological traces of the divine

The contemporary metaphysical understanding of symbol—as opposed to the neo-classical conception of *mimēsis* or “imitation”—is inherited from the Neoplatonic theory of symbolic language. According to this theory the symbol corresponds to that which, by definition, is beyond every representation, “showing” the bodiless by means of bodies. Moreover, the symbol is anagogic, serving as a ladder for ascent to the divine. Our present task is to investigate the Neoplatonic notion of the symbolic in the context of theurgy and in relation to the ancient Egyptian theological doctrines, which were inherited, at least to a certain extent, by the later Pythagorean and Platonic traditions.

In Neoplatonism, divine symbols have a transformative and elevating power. Like the noetic rays of the divine Sun they are regarded as demiurgically woven into the very fabric of Being; they are directly attached and unified to the gods, which are themselves the symbolic principles of Being. One should be wary of the Greek term *symbolon* (“symbol”), which has so many different meanings, sometimes far removed from the realm of metaphysics. What is important is the

¹ M. Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991, pp.1 & 11.

underlying theological and cosmological conception of the divine principles and powers that appear and become visible through certain images, things, numbers, sounds, omens, or other traces of presence.

The iconoclastic Amarna theology, established in Egypt during the reign of Akhenaten (1352-1338 B.C), sought to abolish mythical imagery; yet even in this theology, the sun-disc, Aten, is the One in whom millions live; the Light of Aten creates everything and by seeing this light, the eye is created. As Jan Assmann says:

God creates the eyes in order that they might look on him as he looks on them, and that his look might be returned and that light might assume a communicative meaning, uniting everything existing in a common space of intervision. God and men commune in light.²

The symbolism of light and sound are analogous, so that the light by which God and man commune is the constant with the divine names by which God communicates, which is to say, by which God creates. The divine names constitute the whole “cultic” universe and ensure its cyclic dynamics: procession and return, descent and ascent. The hieratic realities articulated by the ineffable (or esoteric) symbols and tokens (*ta aporrhēta sumbola kai sunthēmata*) of the gods are none other than the “divine words” (*medu neter*, hieroglyphs) that constitute the entire visible world. If the universe is a manifestation of divine principles, as the Egyptian term *kheperu* indicates, then all manifested noetic and material entities are nothing but the multiform images, symbols, and traces of the ineffable One shining through the intellectual rays of *deus revelatus*, the demiurgic Intellect. The Neoplatonic theory of the symbolic is only the late conceptualization—within the Hellenic philosophical tradition of onto-semiotics—of those ancient metaphysical doctrines, such as the Ramesside theology of *bau* powers,³ that constitute the theurgic foundation of ancient civilisations and mythically express the dialectic of the One and the Many.

² J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p.185.

³ Ramesside theology developed during the Ramesside Age, XIX-XX Dynasties, 1295-1069 B.C. (see Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 2002, pp.192-207).

Uždavinys: Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

The gods create everything by means of representations (images which reflect their noetic archetypes) and establish the hidden “thoughts” of the Father through the symbolic traces or tokens (*diá sunthēmatōn*) that are intelligible only to the gods themselves and have the uplifting *heka* power, to say it in the Egyptian terms. As Peter Struck pointed out:

Here the material world is fabricated by representations, but it is meaningful (that is, has a semantic dimension) through its being a *sunthēma/sumbolon*. The image (*eikōn*) marks the material world in its status as a fainter reproduction of a higher principle, but the world seen as symbol indicates its status as a manifestation—that is, something that works according to the logic of the trace, with the capacity to point us back up to the higher orders that produced it.⁴

Sumbola and *sunthēmata*, understood in this particular metaphysical sense, are not arbitrary signs, but ontological traces of the divine, inseparable from the entire body of manifestation (*ellampsis*): the cosmos, as the revealed divine *agalma* (statue, shrine), is itself the Symbol *par excellence* of the noetic realm and the Creator. It represents that which is above representation and is an immanent receptacle of the transcendent principles.

Therefore the demiurgic *Logos* is both the sower and distributor of all ontological symbols or, rather, symbols constitute its manifested totality and these symbols, when gathered, awakened, re-kindled, lead up to the noetic and supra-noetic unity. As John Finamore observes, ‘the *sumbola* become passwords or tokens in the soul’s ritual ascent.’⁵ This is not simply some “bookish” learning; that is to say, a case of development or “increase” in our thinking (if thoughts, *ennoiai*, themselves are not regarded as a special sort of *sunthēmata*). Rather what is really at issue is the manner by which the ritual accomplishment (*telesiourgia*) of ineffable acts and the mysterious power of the

⁴ P. T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p.221.

⁵ J. F. Finamore, ‘Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy’, *Dionysius* Vol.XVII, 1999, p.83.

unspeakable symbols allow us to re-establish the theurgic union with the gods (Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 96.13 ff).

Hence, through the proper actualisation (and recollection) of these divine symbols, the hypercosmic life of the soul is re-actualised. The ascent (*anodos*) through invocations (*klēseis*), symbolic contemplations, and rites (*erga*), results in revelation of the blessed sights (*makaria theamata*) and activity (*energeia*) which is no longer human.

The anagogic power of secret names and tokens

The Greek term *symbolon* (derived from the verb *sumballein*, meaning “to join”) initially denoted a half of a whole object, such as *tessera hospitalis*, which could be joined with the other half in order that two contracting parties—or members of a secret brotherhood—might have proof of their identity. Therefore the symbol appears and becomes significant only when two parties make an intentional rupture of the whole, or when the One manifests itself as plurality, that is, when Osiris or Dionysus is rendered asunder. In this original sense, the symbol ‘reveals its meaning by the fact that one of its halves fits in with or corresponds to the other.’⁶

When viewed in accordance to the “vertical” metaphysical assymetry, one half of imagined *tessera hospitalis* represents the visible thing (the symbol proper) and another half stands for the invisible noetic or supra-noetic reality symbolised by the lower visible part. The initiation and spiritual ascent consists in joining these two separate parts. That means re-uniting the manifested *symbolon* (as a trace) and the hidden principle, which is thereby “symbolised.” In this way Osiris (or Dionysus) is re-assembled, and the symbol itself is dissolved in the symbol-transcending unity (*henōsis*). According to Damascius:

The object of the initiatory rites (*tōn teletōn*) is to take souls back to a final destination (*eis telos anagagein*), which was also the starting point from which they first set out on their downward journey, and where Dionysus gave them being, seated on his Father’s throne, that is to say, firmly established in the integral Zeusian life (*In Phaed.* I.168.1-4).

⁶ J. A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, p.61.

Uždavinys: Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

When symbols are reassembled into a completed whole, this means, in Egyptian terms, both that the microcosmic Eye of Horus (or *imago dei*) is restored and the macrocosmic theophany of *pantheos* (the Lord of All, *neb tem*, the All-Worker) is reaffirmed as the transcendent unity. Within this kind of ancient cosmology, the descending and ascending rays of manifestation are considered as a multi-levelled hierarchy of *sumbola* and *sunthēmata* that constitute the universal “language” of Being and its existential body. Robert Lambertson says:

Just as there are various modes of perception that correspond to the successive modes of being, extending from the total, unified perception exercised by a god down to the passivity of our sense-impressions in this world, so there are different levels of language that correspond to these modes of perception—a hierarchy of systems of meaning, of kinds of utterances—that extend from a creative, divine “language” (not, presumably, recognisable as such by us) down to the “language” that exists on the final fragmented level of the senses. ...Each lower language is actually the “interpreter” (*hermēneus*) of the higher one, in that it renders it comprehensible at a lower level, at the expense of its (opaque, inaccessible) coherence.⁷

The secret names of the gods are anagogic symbols: they function both as *epōdai* (recitations, elevating spells) and as the gnostic passwords for entry into the other-worldly realm, they effect the soul’s subsequent transformation, and noetic rebirth. Therefore the “symbolic life” is the life of knowledge which enables one’s recollection, reintegration, and return to the *archetypus mundus*. The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* says:

As for him who knows this spell (or symbolic utterance), he will be a worthy spirit in the realm of the dead, and he will not die again in the realm of the dead, and he will eat in the presence of Osiris. As for him who knows it on earth, he will be like Thoth...” (*BD* 135).⁸

⁷ R. Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p.167 & p.169.

⁸ *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, tr. R. O. Faulkner, ed. C. Andrews, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, p.123. About the links between Egyptian theology and Neoplatonism see: A. Uždavinys, *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism*, Dorset: Prometheus Trust, 2008.

By knowing the proper words of power (*hekau, sunthēmata*), the Osiris-like initiate or the “deceased” might proceed to the throne of the integral archetypal Osiris and be united (as the *ba* of Osiris) with the *ba* of Ra. The process of transformation, *sakhu*, literally means “making an *akh*” (the shining noetic spirit, divine *nous*). This ritualised transformation is designated as “going forth by (or into) day” (*pert em hru*), that is, ascending to the noetic realm and “going out” from the Duat (the alchemical body of Osiris or Nut) into the intelligible “day” of Ra and appearing as Ra. So in the *Pyramid Texts* the paradigmatic royal initiate ascends on the wing of Thoth, flying up as a falcon and alighting on the divine throne like a scarab, saying:

My seat is with you, O Ra... I will ascend to the sky to you, O Ra,
for my face is that of falcons, my wings are those of ducks... O
men, I fly away from you (*PT 302*).⁹

Thereby one’s *ba* (as a symbol) is made *akh*-effective in the Isle of Fire (the solar realm of Platonic Forms). The theurgic texts to be ritually recited as a means of ascent themselves are regarded as *akhu* that are “pleasing to the heart of Ra.” The Egyptian initiatory rite is based on the mutual *akh*-effectiveness of father and son, as the two halves of the Greek *sumbolon*: ‘*akh* is a son for his father, *akh* is a father for his son,’ both counted before Thoth, the lord of hieroglyphs (*medu neter*) and wisdom.

The ultimate goal (*telos*) of this “symbolic wisdom” is to make the Eye of Horus sound and whole, that is, to restore one’s primordial “golden” nature, like the pure mirror (*ankh*) which reflects the intelligible light of Ra and is “sacrificially” reintegrated into the realm of *akhu*. This means one’s spiritual and alchemical transmutation in the “tomb” built (in the ideal archetypal sense) by the gods themselves, including Seshat, the goddess of writing.

Everything has two designations, one in the realm of terrestrial *sumbola*, another in the realm of the gods whose names are viewed as anagogic passwords known only to the initiate. At the same time, every element in the domain of the temple liturgy, be it a priest, a thing, or a

⁹ *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, tr. R. O. Faulkner, Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1969, p.92.

place, becomes the “name” (*ren*) of a deity whom it reveals or interprets. Likewise, every offering (designated as the Eye of Horus) represents a substance that restored truth (*maat*) and unity (*sema*) or reassembled something that had fallen apart. As Assmann says, it is the symbol of a reversibility that might heal everything, even death:

There is a close connection between cultic commentaries, with their principle of sacramental explanation, and initiatory examinations, with their principle of secret passwords that relate to the divine realm... In the initiatory examinations, there is a secret language, and the initiate demonstrates his mastery of it. He who knows the secret language belongs to the secret world to which it refers, and he may enter it. In the cultic commentaries, there is a sacramental explanation of the ritual by means of which the cultic acts are transposed into the context of the divine realm.¹⁰

In the context of the Hellenic Mysteries and Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, the symbol may be a deity’s secret name, an omen or a cultic formula (that may include the divine cultic epithets, themselves regarded as *sunthēmata*). These symbols allow the initiate to pass into the realm of the gods like the Egyptian pharaoh who takes the night-journey ‘as the representative of all human beings’¹¹ and sails through the Netherworld with the *Ba* of Ra in the solar barque. The acquired Apollonian¹² wisdom enables one to perceive the hidden divine “thoughts,” the immaterial archetypes, or Ideas.

The Pythagorean *sumbola* are also *ainigmata* (riddles, obscure hieratic sayings). The prophetic utterances and sneezes, related to Demeter of Eleusis, are called “symbols” as well. Since understanding of the symbols as a sort of secret code of both demiurgy and theurgy stems from the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition, inherited and conceptualized by the Neoplatonists, Struck rightly emphasizes that ‘the power of the

¹⁰ J. Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, tr. D. Lorton, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005, p.353.

¹¹ T. Abt and E. Hornung, *Knowledge for the Afterlife: The Egyptian Amdua—A Quest for Immortality*, Zurich: Living Human Heritage Publications, 2003, p.24.

¹² “Apollonian” because the pharaoh is a hypostasis of Horus, who was equated with Apollo by the Greeks. According to the late antique Neoplatonic tradition, Apollo is the solar principle of integrity and oneness represented by the ideal king, who is, at the same time, the paradigmatic “prophet.”

symbol is born out of the power of the secret.’¹³ He says: ‘In both the mysteries and esoteric philosophy, symbols are passwords of authentication that just happen to be enigmatic, interpretable speech.’¹⁴

Animated theurgic hieroglyphs of the hidden Amun

The Greeks themselves, contrary to the modern scholarly tastes and prejudices, related the Pythagorean symbolism with the Egyptian theory of “divine speech.” The symbol as hieroglyph (the visible shape of the invisible Platonic Form), as gnostic password and word of power (*heka*), is inseparable from the Egyptian ways of thought. Therefore the ancient Hellenic writers correctly maintained that symbols (or secret names of the gods that work “symbolically,” *sumbolikōs*, and ensure union, *henōsis*) are especially an Egyptian mode of imitating the demiurgic activity of the gods. According to the Plutarch’s trustworthy remark:

Pythagoras, as it seems, was greatly admired, and he also greatly admired the Egyptian priests, and, copying their symbolism (*to sumbolikon autōn*) and esoteric teachings (*musteriodes*), incorporated his doctrines in riddles (*ainigmata*). As a matter of fact most of the Pythagorean precepts do not at all fall short of the writings that are called hieroglyphs (*De Iside et Osiride* 354 ef).

Following a positivistic Egyptology *a la* Sir Alan Gardiner¹⁵ the majority of contemporary classicists have, I feel, misunderstood Porphyry’s claim regarding the symbolic (*sumbolikē*) aspect of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Porphyry the Phoenician says:

In Egypt he (Pythagoras) lived among the priests and learned the wisdom and language of the Egyptians, and three kinds of writing, epistolographic, hieroglyphic, and symbolic, of which some is ordinary speech according to *mimēsis*, and some allegorizes according to certain riddles (*kata tinas ainigmous: Vita Pyth.*11-12).

¹³ Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, p.102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁵ Despite being an eminent Egyptologist, Gardiner regarded Egyptian religion as a ‘wilo’-the-wisp by reason of its mystery and in spite of its absurdity’ (A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, p.427).

Uždavinys: Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

Assmann ensures us that Porphyry was right in describing a variant of the Egyptian script as symbolic, because, in fact, there are four distinct forms of writing in Egypt: demotic, hieratic, hieroglyphic, and cryptographic (or symbolic). The latter one was considered as a secret code accessible only to the initiate and based on the priestly notion that this symbolic script (whose signs are laden with the symbolic knowledge) is an imitation of divine demiurgy: here the hieroglyphs are regarded as tokens of creation conceived by Ptah, the Memphite Demiurge, and recorded by Thoth. Consequently, they are imbued with the theurgic function as well. In addition, both script and sacred images in their unity are designated as “gods” (*neteru*). The symbols are gods made visible in stone, the manifest substance of immortality. As Assmann observes:

Iamblichus perfectly expresses the principle of “direct signification” that underlies the cryptography of the late temple inscriptions. ... This specifically Egyptian view is the foundation of the Greek’s mythical vision of hieroglyphs. The mistake of the Greeks was not that they interpreted hieroglyphic script as a secret code rather than a normal writing system. The Egyptians had in fact transformed it into a secret code and so described it to the Greeks. The real misunderstanding of the Greeks was to have failed to identify the aesthetic significance of cryptography as calligraphy. The question then arises whether their misunderstanding might not also have been encouraged by the Egyptian priests. It surely cannot be pure chance that the systematic complication of hieroglyphic script coincided with the Greek invasion and Ptolemaic foreign rule.¹⁶

The members (*hau*) of the animated body may be regarded as symbols that are to be spiritually reassembled into the image (*tut*) of Osiris, itself constituted by the *sunthemata*, which modern scholars conventionally designate by the word “amulet,” not forgetting to add (almost mechanically) the label “magical.” These alleged “amulets” might be viewed as the fundamental theurgic tokens or metaphysical symbols that appear in the form of certain basic hieroglyphs, such as *ib* (heart), *pet* (sky), *kheper* (scarab beetle), *sema* (union), *ta-uer* (the

¹⁶ Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, tr. A. Jenkins, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002, p.419.

symbol of Abydos and its lord Osiris), *bik* (falcon of Horus), *tiet* (Isis knot), *seshen* (lotus), *ankh* (life, mirror), the *djed* column of Osiris, *shen* ring (symbol of eternity, also mirrored in the shape of *ouroboros*), *djeneh* (wing), *shut* (feather), *mehyt* (the papyrus scepter), *uedjat* (the restored Eye of Horus), *sekhem* scepter, *uas* scepter, *menit* necklace and so on.

By putting these hieroglyphs on the eidetic *sah*-body (now habitually called “mummy”), a sort of alchemical Osirian statue is constructed and the symbolic composition of *heka* powers is arranged. The divinized royal initiate is theurgically united with the gods (symbolically identified as hieroglyphs and members of his metaphysical body) and turned into the reestablished *tut neter*, the overwhelming image of the ineffable God, revealed as a Statue of the reassembled pantheon. The initiate pronounces:

I am Ra, continually praised; I am the knot of the god within the tamarisk. ... My hair is Nun; my face is Ra; my eyes are Hathor; my ears are Upuat; my nose is She who presides over her lotus-leaf; my lips are Anubis; my molars are Selket; my incisors are Isis the goddess; my arms are the Ram (*Ba*), the Lord of Mendes; my breast is Neith, Lady of Sais; my phallus is Osiris; my muscles are the Lords of Kheraha; my chest is He who is greatly majestic; my belly and my spine are Sekhmet; my buttocks are the Eye of Horus; my thighs and my calves are Nut; my feet are Ptah, my toes are living falcons; there is no member of mine devoid of a god, and Thoth is the protection of all my flesh. ... I am the Lord of Eternity; may I be recognized as Kheprer, for I am the Lord of the Uereret-crown. I am he in whom is the Sacred Eye, and who is in the Egg, and it is granted to me to live by them. I am he in whom is the Sacred Eye, namely the Closed Eye, I am under its protection. I have gone out, I have risen up, I have gone in, I am alive. I am he in whom is the Sacred Eye, my seat is on my throne, I dwell in my abode with it, for I am Horus who treads down millions, my throne is ordered for me, and I will rule from it” (*BD* 42).¹⁷

There is no member of the divinized initiate (when he is transformed into *pantheos*) devoid of god. This idea is evident in Iamblichus as can be seen when he addresses the problem of how the

¹⁷ *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, tr. Faulkner, p.62.

gods may receive the allotment of multiple places at once, for example, how Athena (Neith) is allotted both Athens and Sais in Egypt. As Iamblichus says: ‘How would any part of the All be completely devoid of God? And how would any place survive entirely unprotected by the superior ones?’ (Proclus *In Tim.* I.145.5).¹⁸ Consequently, everything is theophany, and all manifested reality is “full of gods” (*panta plerē theōn*). The *Logos* which is in the Soul of All (*ho logos ho en tē psuchē pantos*: Proclus *In Tim.* II.309.11) knows everything and rules everything. The liberated *ba* of the theurgist is the *Ba* of the All.

Words and tokens give life to the realities by drawing into the manifest existence the powers that are named or revealed in images. The human figure (as a living statue) itself is *the* hieroglyph: its different positions (like Tantric *asanas* and *mudras*) represent the dynamic ritual of “writing,” which is tantamount to the manifestation of life (*ankh*). The written word might be imbued with the life of the thing represented like the animated hieratic statue or the human body, itself being viewed as a sort of “written word.” Hieroglyphs were virtually regarded as living things: demiurgic and theurgic tokens, able to embody the powers (*sekhemu*) and “textual” epiphanies of the gods. Hieroglyphs are receptacles of the divine powers, and like the statues whose shapes imitate the forms of hieroglyphs, these powers have ‘a magical life of their own.’¹⁹ Hieroglyphs function theurgically: not only within the written text, but within the text-like universe as a whole.

Though symbols by definition stand for something more than they depict or something other than they are as the manifested *kheperu*, the Egyptian hieroglyphic script scarcely suggests a division between “inner” and “outer.” At the same time, the Egyptian symbol clearly presupposes the hidden (*sheta*) dimension, or the hidden meaning (*huponoia*, as it is in the Hellenic hermeneutical tradition). Therefore, as Richard Wilkinson remarks, it is most apt to describe symbolism as ‘a primary form of ancient Egyptian thought’ and, moreover, to say that Egyptian thought was symbolically oriented to ‘a degree rarely equalled by other cultures.’²⁰

¹⁸ *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta*, ed. & tr. J. M. Dillon, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, p.119.

¹⁹ R. H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, p.150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

The Egyptian universe of symbols simultaneously exhibits different meanings and shows different hermeneutical perspectives, even consciously encouraging the ambiguity and theological polysemy in their own symbolism. When we translate this metaphysical language of *medu neter* (the language that constitutes millions of *kheperu*: images, signs, symbols, breaths of life, heliophanies) into the Neoplatonic philosophical discourse, we can say along with Plotinus that ‘all things are filled full of signs’ (*sēmeiōn. Enn. II.3.7.12*), or rather that all things are signs and images of the vast ontological Text. The multiplicity of gods (*neteru*) is the multiplicity of symbols, images, and names of the hidden God (Amun), the One who is one in the many as *Ba* which assumes form in the many gods and, simultaneously, remains concealed from them. As Oiva Kuisma remarks:

Since all things are ultimately dependent on the One, each and every thing can be thought of as hinting at it either directly or via mediating stages. Every particular thing in the hierarchy of being is in this sense a sign, which points towards its causes, either because of similarity or because of analogy.²¹

Like the Neoplatonic term *to hen*, the Egyptian name Amun (meaning “hidden,” “invisible,” transcendent”) is merely an epithet which, nevertheless, might be regarded as the supreme *sunthēma* of the ineffable Principle, simply because every divine name is a name of this hidden God. He is called *Ba*, the paradigm of all life-bearing *bau* that constitute millions of forms (*kheperu*), millions of symbols, but really there is no name for him: ‘His hidden all-embracing abundance of essence cannot be apprehended.’²²

In the language of late Neoplatonism, the ineffable One, regarded as pure unity, is above *dunamis*, power, be it creative or revealing, because it is above division and above the first noetic duality (like Atum’s Heka, *hen on*, is above Shu and Tefnut in the Egyptian theology). But the One is also the source of manifestation (*ellampsis*) and the source of duality of *dunamis*, which results in Being, regarded as “mixture” (*mikton*) that is posterior to the principles of Limit and Unlimited. This triad is

²¹ O. Kuisma, *Proclus’ Defense of Homer*, Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996, p.54.

²² Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, p.197.

approximately analogous to the Memphite theological triad of Ptah-Sekhmet-Nefertum. Being as procession and return is the totality of *kheperu*, which affirm both the divine transcendence and immanence. As J. M. P. Lowry relates:

On the side of division *qua* division being would turn out to be simply nothing or matter: the pure *dunamis* as possibility. On the side of unity *qua* unity being would turn out to be everything simply or the One: the pure *dunamis* as *energeia*. Accordingly, Being can be neither the one nor the other but is the procession and return of the One.²³

Neoplatonic rites of metaphysical reversion

The Neoplatonists maintained that the lowest things are in the highest and the highest things in the lowest (*en te tois prōtois ta eschata kai en tois eschatois ta prōtista*: Proclus *Hier. Art.* 148). In the depths of its own nature, each manifested thing keeps the mysterious and hidden “symbol of the universal Father” (*to symbolon tou pantōn patros*), the secret hieroglyph of Atum, like the unspeakable (*aporrhētos*) token of one’s essential apophatic identity with the One. Realisation of this identity was the aim of the Neoplatonic rites.

For Proclus, the terms theurgy (*theourgia*), hieratic art (*hieratikē technē*), and theosophy (*theosophia*, literally: “divine wisdom,” “wisdom of the gods”) are synonymous. They designate the spiritual path and method of ascent, revealed and established by the gods themselves. By means of this *theourgike techne*, the soul is purified, transformed, and conducted to the divine realm, as if carried “on the wing of Thoth.” The vindicated soul is separated from the mortal receptacle and re-united with the noetic principles. Symbolically (“in the most mystic of all initiations”: *en tē mustikōtatē ton teleton*: Proclus *Plat. Theol.* IV.9, p.193, 38) this separation from the gross body is represented by burying the initiate’s body with the exception of the head. As Hans Lewy observes,

The head is not buried, because the soul which abides in it does not undergo “death.” This sacramental act has an additional peculiar

²³ J. M. P. Lowry, *The Logical Principles of Proclus’ ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΚΗ* as *Systematic Ground of the Cosmos*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980, pp.66-67.

feature: it is the initiate who at the binding of the theurgists buries his own body.²⁴

This separation, purification, and elevation to the realm of eternal, noetic “day” (as well as subsequent return to the ineffable One) is regarded as the existential and metaphysical rite of “homecoming.”

The initiatory priests and the practitioners of the telestic science (*hē telestikē epistēmē*)—those who deal with the divine *sunthēmata*—are called *telestai*. They purify both the body, as material receptacle of the divine rays, and the soul, as the immortal divine seed or the winged bird detached from the inanimate body and the related psychosomatic self-consciousness. As the *Pyramid Texts* say: ‘*ba* to heaven, *shat* (body in the sense of corpse, *khat*) to earth’ (*PT* 474). The priests similarly consecrate (*telein*) cult statues of the gods. Thereby the statues are animated, illuminated, and imbued with the divine powers (*sekhemu*). In both cases, the *telestai* call forth the gods or rather their *bau* (to say it in the Egyptian parlance) that “fill” the purified and properly prepared receptacles, either statues, or the divinized bodies, themselves turned into hieroglyphs.

Eventually, by his own eidetic and henadic nature, the *telestes* worships the Lord of All (*neb tem*), being unified with Him by the soul’s mystic *sunthēma* (or hieroglyph), inserted by the Father Himself *in illo tempore*. This unification is possible, because the Father himself has sown the secret symbols (*sumbolōis arrhētois tōn theōn*) in the soul, according to Proclus (*In Tim.* I.211.1). And these symbols are explicitly designated as *ta arrhēta onomata tōn theōn*, the unspeakable divine names (*In Alcib.* 441.27). In this respect, Proclus follows the Chaldean theurgists, namely, the famous fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr.108 = Proclus *In Crat.* 21.1-2).

In a sense, the paternal symbols, or the unspeakable divine names, are identical with the thoughts of the Paternal Intellect. These demiurgic thoughts are the noetic Forms, manifested as the Chaldean Iynges, as *voces mysticae*, or the hieroglyphic “building-blocks” that constitute the very textual fabric of our existence. Because of its noetic

²⁴ H. Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, Nouvelle édition par Michael Tardieu, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1978, p.205.

origins, the soul has an inborn (albeit temporary forgotten) knowledge of these world-creating, world-ruling, and, simultaneously, elevating names.

As Proclus argues, everything is unified by means of its own mystic *sunthēma*. By becoming one with this re-activated divine *sunthēma*, the telestic priest is theurgically united with the unknowable Source of all good.²⁵ When the essential hidden *sunthēma* is remembered, re-awakened, and re-sounded, the soul, mythically speaking, returns through the fiery ray to its noetic and supra-noetic Principle. But, esoterically, we might say that God returns to God, even if, ultimately, this “return” is only a sort of divine dream, or illusion, when viewed from the point of the all-embracing, ineffable God himself.

Lewy argues that a *sunthēma* which is uttered in the prayers, supplications, and invocations (*entuchiai kai klēseis*) disposes the Paternal Intellect in favour of the soul’s wish to be elevated; this *sunthēma* is identical with one of the symbols which the demiurgic Nous has sown throughout the universe and which are laden with the ineffable beauty of the Ideas.²⁶ These *sunthēmata*, like the divine sparks of the soul, or the internal fiery seeds, enable the rite of *anagōgē* (ascent) and *apathanatismos* (immortalization). Thereby the soul is lifted upwards by means of the solar (noetic) rays of Apollo or the Egyptian Amun-Ra. This ascent is regarded by Lewy as ‘the chief mystery of the Chaldean sacramental community.’²⁷

According to Proclus, every soul is composed of *noeroi logoi* (intellective reason principles) and *theia simbola* (divine symbols). The former are related with the intelligible Forms, reflected or manifested at the level of the soul, and, consequently, with *Nous*; the latter, with the divine henads (the fundamental supra-noetic unities) and the One itself. For Proclus, the One (*to hen*) is God, and the multiplicity of gods is the multiplicity of self-complete henads (*henades eisin outoteleis hoi theoi: ET 114*). He argues that there are two orders of henads, one consisting of self-complete principles, the other of irradiations (*ellampseis*) from them. These irradiations are like the Egyptian *bau* that constitute the

²⁵ L. J. Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus: The Final Phase of Ancient Thought*, New York: Cosmos, 1949, pp.213-214.

²⁶ Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, p.191.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.177.

descending divine series whose members (*bau*) appear at different levels of reality. They may be designated as symbols that function as a means of transformative ascent and re-union of the soul (itself regarded as the *ba* in the multiple sequence of divine *bau*). In this sense, the word *ba* means any noetic and psychic “manifestation” (as an image or a symbol of some higher principle), imbued with being, life, and intelligence, albeit in different degrees and proportions. In the descending chain (analogous to the Neoplatonic *seira*) of theogony, cosmogony, and demiurgic irradiation, for instance, Ra (the solar *Nous*) is the manifested *ba* of the ineffable Principle, Sekhmet is the *ba* of Ra, Bastet is the *ba* of Sekhmet, and every living cat (or rather its hidden *sunthema*, which may indwell the statuette or mummy of the sacred cat) is the *ba* of Bastet.

There are “millions” of such descending and ascending chains, the rays or “sounding breaths” of the intelligible Sun. The “horizontal” levels of these “vertical” rays constitute both the theophanic being itself (its eidetic orders, *taxeis*) and the hierarchy of divine *sunthemata*. However, a range of possible theological perspectives and possible meanings for any given symbol is very wide. So one may equally say that God’s *ba* is Ra “in the sky” (in the noetic realm), his body is Osiris “in the West” (in the psychic Netherworld, *Anima Mundi*), and his cult image is in southern Heliopolis (Thebes, the City of Amun, here standing for the entire terrestrial world).

The rite of metaphysical reversion (*epistrophē*) consists in the soul’s ability to identify itself with its hidden *sunthēma*, and through it with the higher cause.²⁸ However, the telestic priest uses in his rites many different visible, audible, and tangible symbols, including various metals, minerals, stones, plants, and animals, since all of them belong to one or another particular chain of manifestation and, therefore, may lead back to the initial monad.

Accordingly, the theurgic *sumbola* and *sunthēmata* do not merely stand for invisible and divine things, but are inherently connected with them: in a sense, they *are* “gods,” like the being-constructing hieroglyphs are “gods,” and for this reason the manifested reality is sacred both in principle and *de facto*. The *sumbola* of the noetic realm

²⁸ E. R. Dodds in Proclus *The Elements of Theology*, tr. E. R. Dodds, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p.223.

are immanently woven into the very fabric of the material world and constitute its unifying divine foundation.

Proclus compares the animated statues that contain both visible and invisible *sunthēmata* (also regarded as *pharmaka*—drugs, charms, secret means) of the gods to the entire sensible universe, which is constructed by the Demiurge like a statue and contains all kinds of visible and invisible *sumbola* of the noetic and supra-noetic realm. For Proclus, not only words are *sumbola*, but even myths are *sumbola*, which serve as a means of esoteric mystagogy (*arrhētos mustagōgia*). All these symbols are the constituent parts of the manifested cosmos, itself regarded as a divine statue (*agalma*), the well-ordered *sphaira* of light, having many different eidetic faces, levels of being, and chains of irradiation. As Anne Sheppard pointed out:

Thinking of it diagrammatically, we may say that the world was conceived as organised into both horizontal and vertical lines. The heliotrope, on the low level of plant life, is a *sumbolon* of the sun which is in the same *seira*, the same “vertical line,” but on a higher level of being, a higher “horizontal” line. The sun in turn is a *sumbolon* of higher realities in the same *seira* such as the god Apollo, and ultimately, as in Plato *Rep.* VI, of the transcendent Good which is the Neoplatonic One. The belief that such “vertical line” relationships hold between the natural world and the intelligible world, is equally essential both to theurgy and to Proclus’ metaphysics.²⁹

The symbol of the transcendent One, hidden in the soul, is regarded as the essential henadic aspect of the soul (called the “one of the soul”) by which the mystical union with the One is realized. In this sense, the soul-complex must be deconstructed and reduced to this essential *sunthēma*, the hidden and ineffable “flower” (*anthos*), which is tantamount to the self-subsisting unity beyond being and substance.

Hence, to be unified and to be divinized are the same, insofar as all gods, according to Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus, are “self-subsistent hypostases” or *huparxeis* (pure supra-noetic entities) beyond being and

²⁹ A. D. R. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus’ Commentary on the Republic*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980, p.152.

substance.³⁰ At the lower levels of reality, the *sunthēmata* function as receptacles for the gods (for their *bau*), because ‘the gods illuminate matter and are present immaterially in material things.’³¹

Even spices, aromatics, sounds, and numbers may serve as the proper receptacles for the anagogic divine powers. The Demiurge and his assistant *neteru* themselves determine and conduct the theurgic rites that put the soul into correspondence and *sustasis* (conjunction) with the gods. Lewy argues that the term *sustasis* is often applied to the prayer (*logos*) which effects conjunction. He says:

Proclus reports that the Chaldeans communicated in their Oracles the “divine names” of the night, of the day, of the month and of the year which effected the “conjunction.” Thus we learn that “conjunction” was brought about by a recital of the “divine names” (that is, the *voces mysticae*) of the gods who were called upon to participate in it.³²

The ineffable statues of transcendent light

Though the Greek terms *eikōn* (image) and *sumbolon* may be used interchangeably in Neoplatonism, their more technically articulated distinction is based on the assumption that *eikōn* is to be regarded as a mirror-image (a direct reflection or representation of its archetype), whereas a *sumbolon* has no such direct resemblance, even if it mystically “fits together” with the corresponding divine reality or serves as its proper vehicle. According to Proclus, ‘symbols are not imitations of that which they symbolise’ (*In Remp.* I.198.15-16). However, neither images are plain imitations, because any image (related to its archetype as an effect is related to its cause) ‘by its very nature embodies simultaneously the characteristics of similarity and dissimilarity.’³³

³⁰ C. G. Steel, ‘Iamblichus and the Theological Interpretation of the Parmenides’, *Syllecta Classica* Vol.8: Iamblichus: The Philosopher, The University of Iowa, 1997, p.18.

³¹ G. Shaw, ‘Theurgy as Demiurgy: Iamblichus’ Solution to the Problem of Embodiment’, *Dionysius* Vol.XII, Dalhousie University Press, 1988, p.53 (cf. Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 232.14-16).

³² Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, p.229.

³³ S. E. Gersh, *KINHESIΣAKINHTOΣ A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, p.85.

Uždavinys: Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

Proclus (or perhaps Iamblichus, paraphrased in Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*) argues that the Pythagoreans, before their *epistēmōnikē didaskalia* (strictly scientific instruction) usually reveal the subjects under consideration through similitudes and images (*dia tōn homoiōn kai tōn eikonon*). Then they introduced the same subjects through the esoteric symbols (*dia tōn symbolōn aporrhēton*). Thereby the soul's ability to comprehend the noetic realm is reactivated (*In Tim.* I.30.2 ff). In addition, certain causal principles of creation are represented "in images through symbols" (*en eikosi dia tinōn symbolōn*).

John Dillon confesses as being unable to draw any clear distinction between *eikōn* and *symbolon* in Proclus' metaphysics or "system of allegory." He says:

If one takes the most obvious Platonic example, the comparison of the Sun as *eikōn* with the Good as *paradeigma*, we have arrived at the point of difficulty. Why is the Sun an *eikōn* (*Rep.* 509a9), and not a *symbolon*?³⁴

In fact, the Sun indeed is the supreme visible *sunthēma* of both the One and the Demiurge. In such matters of metaphysical designation, we should be wary of one-sided rigidity in our classifications. As Proclus says, certain things may be understood 'in some such symbolic sense... without reading too much into them' (*In Tim.* I.200.2-3).

Since the language of metaphysics is at its best allusive (in both its symbolic and iconic mode), we can speak of the divine things only provisionally (*kata endeixin*). Neither the ineffable One, nor the henads (or *ta aporrhēta symbola*) can be the subject of a discursive philosophical argument. The theurgic symbolism of "divine names" is initially bound with a radical reversion (*peritropē*) of human language. As Sara Rappe asserts:

Thus Proclus and Simplicius both allow that any teaching about realities such as intellect and soul must take place by means of *endeixis*, by means of coded language. ... In Neoplatonic texts, the word *endeixis* is linked to Pythagorean symbolism and conveys the

³⁴ J. Dillon, 'Image, Symbol and Analogy: Three Basic Concepts of Neoplatonic Allegorical Exegesis' in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Baine Harris, Norfolk: ISNS, Old Dominion University, 1976, p.250.

sense of allusive or enigmatic language... As used by Damascius, the word *endeixis* suggests that the language of metaphysics must be acknowledged to be at most a prompting toward inquiry into something that exceeds its own domain as descriptive. The result of this inquiry tells us more about our own states of ignorance than about the goal of our search.³⁵

However, as a symbol of the unspeakable noetic fire, the *sunthēma* of the Sun is ‘the central mystery of Neoplatonic theurgy.’³⁶ In a threefold classification of reality, established by Proclus, the notion of an image is employed in connection with relationship within the noetic realm, though ‘the spiritual world contains images in a strictly relative sense, whereas images proper are confined to the sensible and mathematical realm.’³⁷ In short, the lower reality is present in the higher “archetypally as a cause” (*kat’ aitian archoeidōs*), and is manifested at its own level “accordingly to its *huparxis*” (existential essence). But the higher reality is present in the lower “by participation in a manner of an image” (*kata methexin eikonikōs*: ET 62).

The realities of any higher level of being constitute the meta-language (regarded as an esoteric *theōria*) by means of which the realities of the immediately lower level are to be interpreted or contemplated. Likewise, in the hierarchy of poetic art, the highest poetry proceeds either by pure *sumbola*, which are antithetical and dissimilar to their metaphysical referents, or it proceeds ‘by employing *eikones* to refer to transcendent *paradeigmata*’.³⁸

When viewed in accordance to the schematic duality between “here” (*entautha*) and “here” (*eikei*), the contents of the lower reality are to be viewed “according to the esoteric or unspeakable) doctrine (or contemplative vision)” *kata tēn aporrhēton theōrian*. This point of view implies understanding in the context of first-working causes (*en tois prōtourgois aitiais*) contrasted with the category of understanding *kata to phainomenon*, “according to the apparent sense.”

³⁵ S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.210-211.

³⁶ G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p.227.

³⁷ Gersh, *A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus*, p.85.

³⁸ Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian*, p.215.

Uždavinys: Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

Consequently, the apparent sense of cosmic text and written philosophical, mythological, and liturgical text is to be regarded as a symbolic “screen” (*parapetasma*), which simultaneously reveals and conceals the underlying hidden meaning (*huponoia*). This is because the image of ultimate reality, constructed using tools of language (whose polysemous structure is analogous to the polysemous world it mirrors), inevitably distorts and fragments that reality. These limitations are partly resolved and transcended by rising up to the higher level of unity, that is, by restoring the fragmented Eye of Horus, the unified *imago dei*. As Lamberton says:

The highest and most perfect “life” of the soul is on the level of the gods: the soul utterly abandons its own identity, transcends its individual *nous* and attaches ‘its light to the transcendent light and the most unified element of its own being and life to the One beyond all being and all life’ (Proclus *In Remp.* I.177.20-23). Poetry that corresponds to this condition is characterized by the absolute fusion of subject and object. It is divine madness (*mania*), which is a greater thing even than reasonableness (*sophrosunē*) and fills the soul with symmetry.³⁹

In Neoplatonism, the gods themselves are beyond all representation. However, the divine names are both images and symbols of the invisible gods. H. D. Saffrey assumes that the equation of the divine names with the statues (*agalmata*) which became an important feature of the late Neoplatonic metaphysics, is due to the specific historical circumstances. The Platonists of Athens (the school of Syrianus and Proclus) presumably developed this theory of divine names as spiritual substitutes for the cult statues of the gods that began at that time to disappear from their temples.⁴⁰ Since the Neoplatonic philosophers started to celebrate divinity through the systematic metaphysical interpretation of Plato’s *Parmenides* and the creation of scientific

³⁹ Ibid., p.189.

⁴⁰ H. D. Saffrey, *Nouveaux liens objectifs entre le Pseudo-Denys et Proclus.* - Recherches sur le Neoplatonisme apres Plotin, Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1990, p.241.

theology, the worship allegedly was reduced to the *religio mentis*, an entirely intellectual process.⁴¹

However, it seems that Saffrey is subtly incorrect in this respect, because even in pharaonic Egypt hieroglyphs functioned as the “divine names” in the form of *agalmata*, be it visualized mental figures, written pictures or the divine statues made of stone and precious metals. The divine names are objects of adoration like the statues of the gods, because the demiurgic Intellect produces each name as a statue of the gods, according to Proclus:

And just as theurgy by certain symbols (*dia dē tinōn symbolōn*) invokes the generous goodness of the gods with a view to the illumination of statues artificially constructed (*tēn tōn technētōn agalmatōn ellampsin*), so also intellectual knowledge related to divine beings, by composition and divisions of articulated sounds, reveals the hidden being (*tēn apokekrummenēn ousian*) of the gods” (*Plat. Theol.* I.29.124.12-125.2 Saffrey-Westerink).

In his *Commentary to Plato’s Cratylus*, Proclus speaks about the *eikastikē dunamis*, the certain power by which the soul has the capacity to make images and assimilate itself to the gods, angels, and daimons. For this reason the soul makes statues (*agalmata ... dēmiourgei*) of the gods and superior beings. Likewise, it produces out of itself (with the help of *lektikē phantasia*, linguistic imagination) the substance (*ousia*) of the names. Proclus says:

And just as the telestic art by means of certain symbols and ineffable tokens (*dia dē tinōn symbolōn kai aporrhēton sunthēmatōn*) makes the statues (*agalmata*) here below like the gods and ready to receive the divine illuminations (*ellampseōn*), in the same way the art of the regular formation of words, by that same power of assimilation, brings into existence names like statues of the [metaphysical] realities (*agalmata tōn pragmaton*: *In Crat.* 19.12-16).

⁴¹ H. D. Saffrey, ‘From Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius’ in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality. Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A. H. Armstrong, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, p.253.

Uždavinys: Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy

Accordingly, the names are images and symbols of the gods as well as intellective statues (*agalmata*) of the divine realities: primarily they are the names of the noetic Forms and secondarily the names of sensible forms. As the “vocal statues” (*agalmata phōnēenta*), these names are identical with the theurgic *sumbola* and *sunthēmata*. As Gregory Shaw points out:

Neither Iamblichus nor any of his Platonic successors provide concrete examples of how names, sounds, or musical incantations were used in theurgic rites. There is a great wealth of evidence from nontheurgical circles, however, to suggest that theurgists used the *asēma onomata* according to Pythagorean cosmological theories and a spiritualization of the rules of grammar.⁴²

By these incantations and contemplations that constitute the complex set of the hieratic “work” (*ergōn*), the theurgist tried to join the gods through his inner ascension and assimilation to the Demiurge, thereby (by means of the ineffable symbols) entering the solar barque of Ra.

⁴² Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p.183.

The reconstruction of time in the Vedic fire altar*

Adrian Snodgrass

The Hindu temple is an *imago mundi*; its configuration is a semblance of the cosmogenetic procedure of finite space from the Infinite; it is also a similitude of the production of time from Eternity. The cosmogonic procession from Unity to multiplicity, through the deployment of the directions of space from the Centre, is commonly expressed by the symbolism of a heavenly sacrifice. The reintegrative Return of multiplicity to Unity is, in turn, expressed in terms of terrestrial sacrifice. This is formulated in Brahmanic literature and physically expressed in the construction of the Vedic fire altar. The Vedic fire altar is the prototype of the Hindu temple, which assimilates its meanings.¹ The construction of the Altar is a reconstruction of time; the temple incorporates this symbolism.



In the beginning Prajāpati, the Lord of Progeny (*prajā*), who was One, desiring offspring, emptied himself out into existence.² Prajāpati is

* [This article is a revised version of chapter 16 of A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings 2 Vols.*, Śata-Piṭaka Series Indo-Asian Literatures Vol.356, New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990. Republished here by kind permission of the author.]

¹ See S. Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946, p.72 ff. (New edition, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2002).

² 'Now this Person (*puruṣa*) Prajāpati desires, 'May I be more (than one), may I be reproduced'. He toiled, he practised austerity... He created the Waters out of the Word (*vāc*)... He desired, 'May I be reproduced from the Waters... Thence an egg arose. He touched it. 'Let it exist! Let it exist and multiply!', so he said... And that which was the shell became the earth' (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VI.1.2.1 ff, tr. J. Eggeling, 5 Vols., London, Clarendon, 1882; herein ŚB). Cf. M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas Vol.1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, London: Collins, 1979, p.228; J. Gonda, *Les Religions de l'Inde 2 Vols.*, Paris: Flammarion, 1962, p.227.

Unity; his “children” are the fragmented and discrete parts of the world of differentiation and separateness. His emptying out, or emanation (*visrj*, from *srj*, “to flow” and *vi*, “asunder,” expressing dispersion) is a passage from integral concentration of the One to the decomposed dispersion of the multiple. By passing into his “children,” who are the separate entities of the sensible world, the whole and unified body of Prajāpati is severed and disjointed: ‘After Prajāpati had emitted the living beings, his joints were disjointed.’³

Prajāpati’s disjointing is a sacrifice (*yajña*).⁴ The cosmogenesis is a sacrifice of Prajāpati’s body into the world, and Prajāpati is Ātman⁵ and the unmanifested Unity-Totality. He is also time, the Year: ‘Now Prajāpati is certainly the Year, and his joints are the two joinings of day (that is, dawn and twilight), the full moon and the new moon, and the beginnings of the seasons.’⁶

Prajāpati, dismembered into manifestation, is mortal, and afraid of his mortality: ‘Prajāpati, the Year, has created all living beings and things, gods and men; having created all he felt like one emptied out and was afraid of death.’⁷ Prajāpati is time, but time is also death, and ‘the gods were afraid of this Prajāpati, the Year, Death, the Ender.’⁸ The Year is mortality and ‘beyond the Year lies the immortal.’⁹ To conquer mortality, the deadly toll of time, the gods must reverse Prajāpati’s sacrificial act and must rejoin his dismembered joints. Having emptied himself out into time, ‘Prajāpati was unable to rise with his joints loosened; and the gods healed him by (the ritual of) the *agnihotra*,

³ ŚB I.6.3.35.

⁴ On the sacrifice, see S. Levi, *La Doctrine du Sacrifice dans les Brāhmaṇas*, Paris, Hermann, 1898; A. Coomaraswamy, ‘Āmayajña: Self Sacrifice’ in *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1977, p.107 ff; 1943a, 19 ff.; *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1943; Gonda, *Les Religions de l’Inde 2Vols.*, p.227 ff; Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas Vol.1*, p.227 ff; *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, p.109 ff; P. Mus, *Barabudur: Éskisse d’une histoire du bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes 2Vols.*, Hanoi-Paris, 1935; reprinted in one volume, New York: Arno, 1978, p.144 ff; herein *Barabudur*.

⁵ *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* I.68, tr. R. Vira & L. Chandra, *The Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa of the Saṁveda* (Sanskrit), Nagpur, 1954.

⁶ ŚB I.6.3.35; cf. VII.1.2.11, etc.

⁷ ŚB X.4.2.2.

⁸ ŚB X.4.3.3.

⁹ ŚB X.2.6.4.

strengthening his joints.¹⁰ The gods reassembled Prajāpati by building up the fire altar according to instructions given them by Prajāpati:

Prajāpati then spoke: “Lay ye down 360 enclosing stones and world-filling (bricks), lay ye down 10,800 and ye will be laying down all my forms and will become immortal” ...¹¹ The sacrificer (the self offerer), doubtless, is he who knows, “This my (new) body is procured thereby”. And even as a snake frees itself from its skin, so does he free himself from his mortal body.¹²

Prajāpati unceasingly spends himself in ever-proceeding sacrifice and by this sacrifice the world passes into existence. But the production of the multiple is the production of mortality: both Eternity and perpetuity are fragmented, and for all existent things time must have a stop. But mortality, the concomitant of fractioned time, is overcome when the gods rebuild the body of the Year in the fire altar.

What the gods did “in the beginning,” man repeats. His performance of the *agnihotra*, in which he builds up the altar as the body of the Year, is a *mimesis* of the primordial act of the gods whereby time and death were vanquished. Man’s performance of the ritual of sacrifice repeats the archetypal and primordial Sacrifice. The dismemberment of Prajāpati, which is the production of the universe, is reflected in the ritual as in a mirror, inversely. The sacrifice is a reversal of the cosmo-generative process whereby the manifold proceeds from the One. The sacrificer disjoins the mere-seeming cohesion of the partite sacrifice so as to reveal its impartible essence, which is one and whole. Whereas Prajāpati divides himself, making himself many so as to enter into his offspring in whom he is swallowed up and hidden, so in their turn his progeny empty themselves out, dismembering here for a remembering there. The body and self of the sacrificer, or of his ritual surrogate, the victim or Holocaust, are taken apart at the terrestrial level to be reassembled supernally. Multiplicity is immolated, Unity restored. The oblation, disintegrated here, is reintegrated above.¹³ The sacrifice is

¹⁰ ŚB I.6.3.36.

¹¹ ŚB X.4.3.8. The significance of the numbers is given in the following.

¹² ŚB X1.2.6.13.

¹³ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1985, p.47 f.

a dismembering of partite time and a reassembling of the impartite Year; it is a rebuilding of integrated and divisionless Eternity.

The building of the fire altar is a sacrifice. The body of Prajāpati, the Year, dispersed and exhausted in the production of time, is reconstituted and rearticulated in the ritual of constructing the altar: ‘This Prajāpati (the Year) who became disjointed is now the same fire altar built formerly.’¹⁴



The *agnicayana*, the rite of constructing the fire altar,¹⁵ lasts a year, since Prajāpati is the Year. In the first part of the ritual a horse is made to approach the site and snuffle upon the first layer of bricks. The horse represents Prajāpati and the Sun¹⁶ and the bricks of the first layer of the altar are Prajāpati's progeny, all the beings of the worlds. The horse's snuffling or exhalation is the blowing of the Gale of the Spirit, coincident with the raying of light from the Sun, by which all living things are enspirited: ‘Just as he, the priest, makes it snuffle at these bricks, so yonder Sun strings to himself these worlds upon a thread,’¹⁷ and ‘so bestows the Breath indeed upon them.’¹⁸

¹⁴ ŚB II.6.1.3.

¹⁵ The rite is described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *passim*. See Eggeling, 1882, pp.41, 143; A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upaniṣads*, Harvard Oriental Series 32, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925, p.254; Gonda, *Les Religions de l'Inde 2Vols.*, pp.1, 231 d.; Krarnrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, p.68 ff. The following, in the main, is a repetition of materials in Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*, p.47 ff.

¹⁶ Prajāpati is the Year, and he is also the Sun. The year is nothing other than the sun moving on the ecliptic; so similarly, the Year is nothing other than the stationary Sun.

¹⁷ ŚB VII.3.2.12.

¹⁸ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* V.2.8.1; V.3.7.4 tr. R. E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principle Upaniṣads* 2nd ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1931; herein TU]. The rite pertains to the *suūtrātman* or “Breath-thread” doctrine, according to which we are all connected to the Sun-source by a ray of spiritual Light or thread of Breath. The doctrine is a recurrent theme in the writings of Coomaraswamy. See e.g., *Selected Papers Vol.1: Art & Symbolism*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1977, p.387, note 28, and cf. Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*, p.112 ff. On the symbolism of the horse's snuffling upon the bricks of the altar and the concepts it engenders such as the doctrine of the extromission of the senses to their objects from a central point of Consciousness, see Coomaraswamy, ‘The Sun-kiss’, *Journal of American Oriental Society* 60, 1940, p.47 ff.

The first layer of the altar having thus been enlivened, a golden plate is laid down upon a lotus leaf. The plate is the Sun: ‘The same man who is in that (Sun’s) disc, it is he whom he now lays down (on the altar),’¹⁹ and it is immortality,²⁰ the lotus leaf is the primordial Waters, Agni’s womb.²¹ The Sun and the Waters are a progenitive pair whose union produces Prajāpati, the altar, and as a sign of this production a Golden Man, an image of Prajāpati, the immortal Person (*puruṣa*) of the sacrifice is next laid down upon the golden plate. Next a tortoise, symbol of the cosmos²² and the vital sap of the world,²³ is built into the altar, and above this five layers are constructed, representing the five seasons and the five directions: ‘... of five layers consists the fire altar (Agni); five seasons are a year, and the year is Agni.’²⁴ The heads of sacrificial animals are built into the layers: a human head,²⁵ and the heads of a horse, an ox, a ram and a goat.

The altar is an *imago mundi*. Each of its component parts has a cosmic reference.²⁶ The erection of the altar is a *mimesis* of the construction of the cosmos. The water used for mixing the clay of the bricks is primeval Water; the clay is the Earth, the side walls are Midspace; and so similarly for all its components. The altar is also an image of the Year. Its erection is a reconstruction of Time. As Paul Mus says, the altar is “time materialized.”²⁷ There are 720 enclosing bricks, 360 for the days and 360 for the nights in the year:

The altar of fire is the Year... the nights are the stones surrounding it and there are 360 of them because there are 360 nights in the

¹⁹ ŚB VII.4.1.1.

²⁰ TU V.2.7.2.

²¹ ŚB V11.4.1.8; TS V.2.7.2.

²² In Chinese mythology the tortoise is an *imago mundi*; this is explicit in the account of the Lo-Shu number diagram that was inscribed on the tortoise that came to Yü the Great; see M. Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1950. See A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity*, Ch.30 ‘The Symbolism of the Chinese Hall of Light.’

²³ ŚB VII.5.1.1.

²⁴ ŚB VI.1.8.15.

²⁵ The human head is of someone “killed in battle or by a thunderbolt” (*Āpastambīya-śrautasūtra*, quoted by Gonda, *Les Religions de l’Inde Vol.1*, p.231).

²⁶ ŚB VI.5.1.1 ff.

²⁷ Mus, *Barabudur*, p.384; M. Eliade, ‘Centre du monde, temple, maison’ in *Symbolisme cosmique des monuments religieux*, Series Orientale Roma 14, Is.M.E.O., 1957, p.68; *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, p.372; *Images and Symbols*, London: Harvill, 1961, p.25.

year; the days are the *yajusmati* (self-perforated) bricks, for there are 360 of them; and there are 360 days in the year.²⁸

The altar contains 10,800 bricks, which is the number of hours in the year (the day having 30 hours (*muhūrta*) of 48 minutes, giving a total of $30 \times 360 = 10,800$ in the year).²⁹ When the enclosing wall is being constructed 1200 syllables are recited at the laying of each brick, which number is obtained by multiplying 15, the number of hours in the day and in the night, by 80, the number of sections in the *Vedas*. There are 360 stones so that $360 \times 1200 = 432,000$ syllables are built into the altar,³⁰ which is the total number of syllables in the *Rg Veda* and the number of years in a *manvantara* or total world cycle, being a multiple of 25,920 the number of years in a precession of the equinoxes.³¹

The altar has five layers, which are the seasons:

... of five layers consists the fire altar, and five seasons make a year, and the year is Agni (that is, the altar) ...³² and that Prajāpati who became relaxed is the year; and those five bodily parts (*tanū*)³³ of his which became relaxed are the seasons; for there are five seasons, and five are those layers: when he builds up the five layers he thereby builds him up with the seasons.³⁴

²⁸ ŚB X. 5.4.10.

²⁹ ŚB X.4.2.18. The day and the night are divided into 15 parts each, corresponding to the 15 days of the waxing moon and the 15 days of the waning moon making up the lunation month. Cf. ŚB X.4.2.17. The 10,800 bricks of the altar also correspond to the 10,800 *panktis* of the *Rg Veda*, that is, the number of verses formed of five feet (*pada*) of eight syllables. See Mus, *Barabudur*, p.281; Eggeling, 1882, pp.42, 112, note 1. The three *Vedas* together have $10,800 \times 80 = 864,000 = 2 \times 432,000$ syllables. On the predilection for calculations involving the number 80, see Eggeling, *idem*.

³⁰ ŚB X.2.4.30; and see Eggeling, 1882, pp.43, 354, note 2, on the method for determining the number 360.

³¹ Guénon, *Formes Traditionnelles et cycles Cosmique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, p.22 [*Traditional Forms & Cosmic Cycles*, tr. H. D. Fohr, Hillsdale N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2003]; ‘Quelques remarques sur la des cycles cosmiques’, *Études Traditionnelles*, 1938, *passim*.

³² ŚB VI.1.8.15.

³³ The *tanūs* are the two groups of five qualities or “powers” which constitute the “inherent body” or bodily self of Prajāpati (ŚB VI.1.2.17 ff.). There are five *tanūs* that are mortal (hair, skin, flesh, bones and marrow) and five that are immortal (mind, speech, breath, sight and hearing). See ŚB X.1.3.4. Each of these two groups of five qualities is identified with the five layers of the altar.

³⁴ ŚB VI.1.2.18.

The piling up of the altar thus replicates the course of the year, which is a reduced image of the Great Year, identified with Prajāpati. The five layers are also identified with the five directions:

...and those five bodily parts of his, the seasons, which became relaxed, are the regions (the four directions and the zenith); for five in number are the regions and five those layers: when he builds up the five layers he builds up Prajāpati with the regions.³⁵

Thus the fire altar has five layers which correspond simultaneously to the five directions (north, south, east, west and the centre) and the five seasons. The correlations are ritually established by the five animal heads—man, horse, ox, ram and goat—that are immolated within the layers. The myth establishes that Agni, who is at once the Fire and the Altar, is the son of Prajāpati, engendered in Uṣas, the Dawn.³⁶ As soon as he was born Agni began to howl because he had no name, and so Prajāpati called him Rudra, “Howler.” But the infant god was not satisfied and said, “Give me yet a name,” and Prajāpati gave him seven more names: Sarva, Paśupati, Ugra, Aśani, Bhava, Mahān Deva and Īśāna. The child Agni entered into these forms in turn.³⁷ These eight forms of Agni are the regents of the eight directions of space.³⁸ They are subsumed within the single form of Agni, who occupies the centre: when Agni enters into these forms he unifies them within himself, the directions are reintegrated within their centre. Agni represents there constructed unity of the dispersed world.

Perceiving Agni’s wholeness and desiring it for himself, Prajāpati pursued Agni, who hid by splitting himself into five parts and entering into five animals—a man, a horse, an ox, a ram and a goat. But Prajāpati recognized Agni in the five animals and prepared to sacrifice them to the five gods of the directions: the man to Viśvakarman, the horse to Varuṇa, the ox to Indra, the ram to Tvastṛ and the goat to Agni. These

³⁵ ŚB VI.1.2.19.

³⁶ Given in ŚB VI.1.3.8 ff. The following considerations are elaborated in Mus, *Barabudur*, Ch. XV, ‘La réconstruction de Prajāpati et l’unité de l’univers’, p.495 ff. Cf. Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*, p.47 ff.

³⁷ ŚB VI.1.18-19.

³⁸ With the exception of Mani, who is replaced by Bhima, the list of names is that of the eight regent gods in the cardinal and intercardinal directions given in the later Hindu texts, where they are described as eight forms of Śiva.

five gods are regents of the directions and the seasons: Agni is the god who governs the east and the spring, Varuṇa governs the west and the autumn, Tvaṣṭṛ is in the north, the direction of winter, Indra rules the south and summer and the centre and the fifth season are given over to Viśvakarman, the Architect and Creator, the Maker of all things, whose four faces turn towards the four cardinal points and who is identified with Prajāpati himself and with his cosmo-productive activity. The five gods form a pentagram of the spatial and temporal world; they constitute a schema of the quincuncial divisions of space and of time; and they are the five divided portions of the body of Prajāpati, “emptied out” into the world. They are his emanations, the dispersal of his original unity into multiplicity.

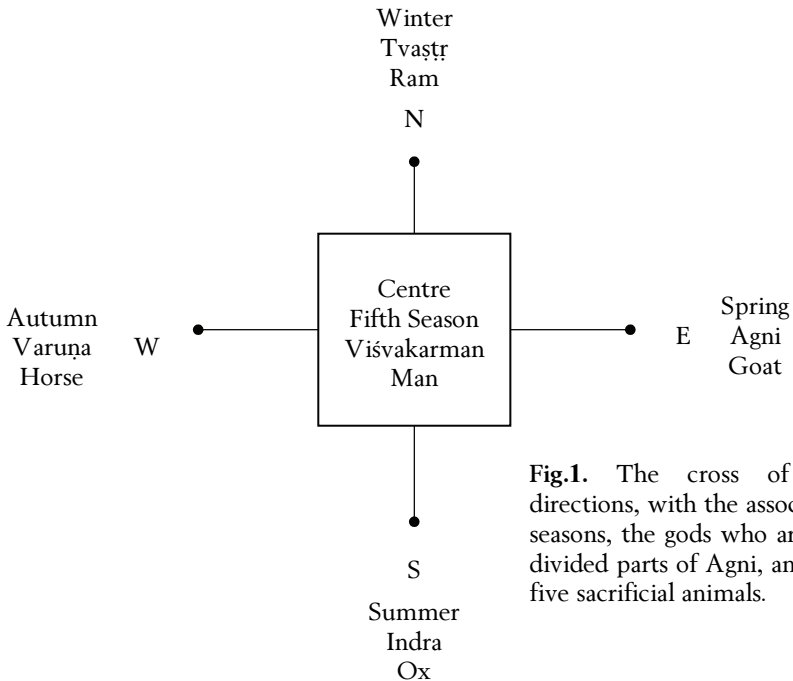


Fig.1. The cross of the directions, with the associated seasons, the gods who are the divided parts of Agni, and the five sacrificial animals.

As he was preparing to sacrifice the five animals containing the hidden portions of Agni, Prajāpati began to have second thoughts. If he sacrificed these portions to the gods of the directions and of divided

time, he would affirm their dispersal and thus reinforce his own division. The sacrifice would merely enhance his own exhaustion. He began to realise that to sacrifice the five animals to the regents of the directions and the five seasons would be a fatal error. ‘He thought, “For different deities, indeed, I mean to sacrifice now; but I myself desire Agni’s forms; well then, I will sacrifice them as (the objects of my) desire”.’³⁹ Thus thinking, the disjointed god decided to sacrifice the five animals to the unified Agni, and thereby regain his own wholeness. He therefore seized the five animals and sacrificed them, but at the same time built up the five-layered altar, identifying each layer with an animal,⁴⁰ and thereby with a direction and a season.

The five animals are the five parts of Agni. By incorporating them within the single altar Prajāpati built a single, whole Agni—with whom he identified himself, and thus made himself whole again. Agni became Prajāpati’s own self: ‘(the victims) are five; for there are those five Agnis, to wit, the five layers. For them he lays down five homes: and seeing that, Agni turns unto him.’⁴¹

In the *agnicayana* ritual of constructing the altar—which is Agni—the builder re-enacts the myth. By building up the five layers and sacrificing one of the five animals at each layer, the performer of the ritual, in imitation of Prajāpati, reintegrates Agni’s five parts, which are the directions and the seasons. He reunifies the scattered parts of the two coordinates of the sensible world, space and time, within the Principle whence they derive. The altar is the image of time unified in the Timeless. ‘Assuredly, these (five) layers are the seasons,’⁴² and ‘The fire altar has five layers, (each layer is a season), the five seasons make a year, and Agni is the year.’⁴³ Agni, the altar, is the unified Year, time reconstructed in Eternity.

Prajāpati creates all living creatures, animals and men, from his “breaths,”⁴⁴ and from his breaths he “creates” the five sacrificial animals immolated within the layers of the altar. The five animals, the sacrificial

³⁹ ŚB VI.1.2.6.

⁴⁰ ŚB VI.2.1.11; VI.2.1.16.

⁴¹ ŚB VI.2.1.16.

⁴² ŚB VI.2.1.36.

⁴³ ŚB V1.8.1.15.

⁴⁴ ŚB VII.5.2 ff.; J. Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the people of India, their Religions and Institutions 5 Vols.*, London, 1868-1874, Vol.1, 1968, pp., 24 & 28.

victims, identified with the directions of space and the divisions of time, are the disjunct portions of Prajāpati's body: the man is Prajāpati's self (*ātman*), the horse is his eye, the ox is his breath, the ram his ear, and the goat his voice. Building the animals into the altar is a reassembling of the dismembered parts of his body, which are the portions of space and time. Built into the altar the animals are unified, as are the directions and the times they signify. The construction of the altar signifies that the "breaths" of his senses, which overflow and pour out to perceive spatial and temporal extension, are withdrawn back to the source of their dispersal, the indwelling Spirit.⁴⁵

In this way the directions, times, the body of Prajāpati, man's sensing of the outside world, are identified. The building of the altar is the integration of all of these; the doctrine is concerned with the reunification of fractured time within the Present that eternally abides at the innermost centre of everyman.

The building of the altar is a sacrificial act. The body of Prajāpati, which had been fragmented and dispersed in the cosmogenesis, is reconstituted and rearticulated—healed—by the sacrificial ritual of constructing the altar: 'This Prajāpati who became disjointed is now the same fire altar built formerly.'⁴⁶

The being, who is a portion of Prajāpati's body, is likewise scattered, dispersed, discontinuous and deprived of cohesion. The creature and the creation are both subject to time—and time is the destroyer: the Year is Death.⁴⁷ Days and nights are the arms of Death that squeeze man. They are the waves that swallow everything.⁴⁸ Partite and divided, the being partakes of desolation, disorder and death.⁴⁹

The construction rite restores Prajāpati's lost unity and by the rite the sacrificer is likewise made whole again. Prajāpati, who was dismembered in the beginning, is reassembled (*samskr̥*) in the altar. By constructing it the sacrificer identifies himself with Prajāpati. The building ritual identifies the sacrificer, the altar and Prajāpati: the extent of the base is that of the outstretched arms of the sacrificer, the bricks

⁴⁵ The theme of the outflowing of the senses to their objects and their withdrawal to the central Inner Controller is developed in Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stūpa*, p.58 ff.

⁴⁶ ŚB II.6.1.3.

⁴⁷ ŚB X.4.3.3.

⁴⁸ Gonda, *Les Religions de l'Inde 2Vols.*, p.236.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.228.

are the length of his foot, the navel (*nābhi*) is a square with the dimensions of the span of his hand. The Golden Man, built into the courses of the altar, represents the immolated sacrificer. In analogous ways the sacrificer is identified with the sacrificial animal and with the consuming fire: the officiant is the altar, the holocaust, the sacrificial fire and the God to whom the sacrifice is offered.⁵⁰

When the sacrificer builds the altar he is renewing himself in unity. By the performance of the sacrifice he is reintegrated. Retracing the course of Prajāpati's descent into the world he returns from multiplicity to unity. He passes beyond space and time, is reborn, and attains immortality.⁵¹

Prajāpati is Unity or Being fragmented into the diversity and flux of manifestation. In his essence he is Puruṣa, the Person, the unchanging, eternal and indivisible Essence of man and the cosmos. In an alternative version of the cosmogonic myth it is Puruṣa who is scattered into manifestation. Puruṣa is sacrificed by the gods (*deva*) at the beginning of the world. From his dismembered body proceed the animals, the liturgical elements, the castes, the sky and the earth, the gods.⁵²

By way of the five layers of the altar the five divisions of the year—the centre, the equinoctial and solstitial points—are correlated with the five directions and with the five parts of the cosmic body of Prajāpati.

⁵⁰ Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*, London: Perennial Books, 1967, pp.20-21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵² *Ṛg Veda* X.90.1, tr. R. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Ṛg Veda 2Vols.*, 1963, repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973. Cf. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas* Vol.1, p.224; Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, p.17 ff.; Krarnrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, p.68; J. Auboyer, *Le trône et son symbolisme dans l'Inde ancienne*, Paris: Falmmarion, 1949, p.144; Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts Vol.5*, p.367 ff.; Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 11.1.4 (tr. Hume, 1931). The gods who sacrifice Puruṣa are the Intelligences ("Angels") or "distributive essences" (*vibhūṭaya*) (*Aitareya Āraṇyaka* II.1.7, tr. A. B. Keith, *Anecdota Oxoniensia Aryan Series 9*, 1909; *Bhagavad Gīta* X.10, tr. Nikhilananda, New York, 1944) whose operation is our consciousness (Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, p.337.). They are the powers of the soul, the delegations and extensions of the power of the Spirit, sent forth by him to do his bidding. The Spirit indwells man and so likewise do the powers of the Spirit: 'Having made him their mortal house, the gods inhabited man' (*Atharva Veda* XI.8.18b, tr. W. D. Whitney & C.R. Lanman, *Harvard Oriental Series 7-8*, Cambridge Mass., 1905); 'All these gods are in me' (*Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* I.14.2ff, tr. H. Oertel, 'The Jaiminīya or Talavakāra Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 16, 1896, pp.79-260); and 'They are neither in the sky nor on earth: whatever breathes, therein they are' (*ŚB IX.2.1.15*).

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* specifies other correlations. The five “forms” of Agni are identified with “powers” belonging to the performer of the ritual:⁵³ Agni is the voice, the eye, the mind, the ear, and the breath, which latter is his supreme form, since the other forms are sustained by and dependent upon it.⁵⁴ The text then indicates cosmic equivalents: the voice is fire, the ear is the four directions of space, the eye is the sun, the mind is the moon, and the breath is the wind.⁵⁵ The passage concludes by stating that at death he who understands the doctrine

passes into fire by his speech, into the sun by his eye, into the moon by his mind, into the quarters by his ear, and into the wind by his breath; and being composed thereof, he is identified with that one among their divinities who corresponds and is at peace. “⁵⁶

By ritual means the sacrificer is identified with the altar, which, we have seen, is identified part by part with the total body of the universe. His five “breaths”—voice, eye, mind, ear and breath—are identified one by one with the layers of the altar, which in their turn are identified with the directions and the seasons and with fire, the sun, the moon, the quarters and the wind. Those who practice the sacrificial ritual come to realise this identification of the “breaths” or faculties with those of the universe and likewise realise their reconstitution within the Unity which the altar represents: at his death he does not perish, but returns to the One.⁵⁷

To construct the altar is to return the scattered parts of Prajāpati, the body of the cosmos, to the Centre: spatial extension is brought back to the geometric centre, the navel (*nābhi*) of the altar; temporal duration is reconcentrated at the *viśuvat*, the central day of the ceremonies; and the bodily elements and mental faculties of the person performing the ritual are withdrawn to the centre of his being, the “immortal centre,” which is coincident with the centre of Prajāpati. These three centres coalesce

⁵³ Mus, *Barabudur*, *p.144 ff.

⁵⁴ Compare this doctrine with that given in *Chandogya Upaniṣad* V.1.7-15 (tr. Hume, 1931) and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* VI.7-14 (tr. Hume, 1931), where it is taught that when these functions cease man becomes dumb, blind, mad or deaf, but when breath is withdrawn, he dies.

⁵⁵ ŚB X.3.3.1-6.

⁵⁶ ŚB X.3.3.8.

⁵⁷ Cf. Mus, *Barabudur*,*p.146.

in the rite, and whatever operates for one operates for all: the construction rites performed in space are simultaneously performed in time, and exercise their influence on the celestial powers, on the universe, and on the person of the sacrificer.⁵⁸

The altar is the image of the universe in both its spatial and its temporal aspects, for not only does it embody the days and nights and seasons of the year but it is also oriented according to the four cardinal directions, each governed by a season.⁵⁹ ‘The altar is imbued with the substance of the world;’⁶⁰ it is the hypostasis of the cosmos; its construction brings together the directions and all times—the seasons, the months, the days and nights—into a single, reintegrated whole. It is the coalescence of all space and all time within a compounded Unity.



As in the Vedic Fire Altar, in the mandala that prefigures the plan of the Hindu temple time is transmuted into space. The mandala abstracts the sequential and successive from the cycles of becoming and renders them in their instantaneity. The divisions of time are made whole, reintegrated, brought back to Unity; the disjointed and dispersed fragments are reintegrated within a punctual Now. The mandala shows the world as the similitude of the timeless; it is a diagram of the world as it abides in the equilibrium of stasis, in which all times are seen as so many successive projections of the eternal Instant.

⁵⁸ Gonda, *Les Religions de l'Inde 2Vols.*, p.234.

⁵⁹ See Mus, *Barabudur*, *p.97 & pp.733-789; Eliade, ‘Centre du monde, temple, maison’, p.68.

⁶⁰ Mus, *Barabudur*, *p.112.

Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā: The Trinitarian Mystery of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

Klaus Klostermaier

In the history of religions strict monotheisms are relatively rare. More common are dual high-deities: World Parents, Heaven and Earth, Divine Couples. Trinitarian, or triadic,¹ conceptions of divinity are also quite frequent; interestingly enough these are often presented in combination with assertions of the Oneness of the Supreme.

Trinitarian theologies reflect the intuitive perception that the triad is the universal basic dynamic reality principle. In the words of C. G. Jung:

Every tension between Two Opposites demands resolution in a process, from which a Third originates. In the Third the One is reappearing, that was lost in the tension of the Two. The absolute One is unknowable.... The Trinity is an explication of the One and makes it thus knowable. The Triad is the knowable Unity, which without the resolution into the opposition between the First and the Second would have remained in an indeterminable condition.

Unity cannot be One, being the Whole which cannot be differentiated from the Two, because in it are re-absorbed all the antagonistic aspects, which are in opposition to each other, such as left and right, high and low, before and behind, round and square, the whole of yang and the whole of yin. All that together, Unity and Pair, if one wants to express it in numbers, is found in all odd numbers and first in the Three (1+2). The series of numbers begins with the Three.²

¹ The term, “Trinitarian,” is used advisedly to allude to some of the conclusions that I herein suggest.

² C. G. Jung, *Symbolik des Geistes*, Zurich: Rascher, 1948, p. 336.

Marie-Louise von Franz adds a comment of her own: ‘Therefore in China Three is the symbol for “unanimity,” and as they also say in the West, the Trinity represents complete harmony, a viewpoint, which is emphasised in the designation of the Holy Spirit as *vinculum amoris*.’³

According to modern genetics the DNA code consists of triplets, made up by four bases (Adenine, Thymine, Guanine and Cytosine). The code structure of the messenger RNA (ribonucleic acid) are also based on triplets. Von Franz, commenting on this amazing pattern, remarks:

This very astonishing congruence appears to support more than any other fact Jung’s hypothesis, that numbers are a common ordering principle of the psyche as well as of matter: the same numerical pattern which underlies the fundamental processes of our memory, its inheritance, and with that the substratum of our entire process of consciousness, has been discovered on the one hand in China through introspection in the unconscious Psyche and on the other hand in the West through genetic research in the living cell.⁴

While genetics has found triplets by looking within the physical cell, the great sages and metaphysicians of the past had found this pattern by also looking within, that is to say, by “introspection.” The ancient Indian traditions, for example, recognised the dynamic of the triad as intrinsic to all processes of spirit and life. *Prakṛti*, the base “substance” of existence, is constituted of three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) without whose interaction there would be no creation. In light of our comparison with DNA it is interesting to note that the term *guṇa*, often translated a “tendency,” has the original meaning of “one of the filaments constituting a rope.”⁵

If, as is suggested by the above, the triad is fundamental to life as well as to consciousness, it would not be amazing to discover that it has also been applied to conceptions of the deity, intuited by perceptive seers in all parts of the world. While its translation into ordinary language, and more, its transmission through the minds of ordinary people, often distorted its true and original meaning, the existence of

³ M-L. von Franz, *Zahl und Zeit*, Stuttgart: Klett, 1970, p.100, n.5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.103f.

⁵ See A. Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods Of India*, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1991, p.24.

many triadic notions of deity testifies to the universality of such an idea. It also stands to reason that the mythological background of each culture would offer the foil in which that triadic pattern is expressed. Not all cultures developed systems of abstract thinking, called philosophy in the pre-modern Western cultural tradition (or more specifically “Theology” in the more restricted context of the Christian Churches), through which conceptual models of that intuitive “seeing” were constructed. Some did: the continuing controversies over the “right” concepts and the “right” understanding of these, shows how difficult it is to come to an agreement.

Bonaventure found in the structures of nature the traces of the Divine Trinity: ‘The created universe is like a book in which is reflected, represented and read the creative Trinity according to a threefold grade of expression, namely by way of vestige, image and similitude.’⁶ More specifically Bonaventure sees the Father reflected in the “vestige,” which, he says is found in all creatures. The Son is reflected in the “image” that is found only in beings “endowed with intellect or spirit.” The Spirit, finally, is reflected in the “similitude” that is found only in “god-likes.” He also asserts that it is a “natural” process by which humans come to know this Trinitarian Deity.

Using quite consciously the language and the ideas of Plato, Bonaventure sees the Divine Unity mirrored in the “primary name” of “being” (*esse*), whereas the Divine Trinity is mirrored in the name “good” (*bonum*)—“goodness” (*bonitas*) being one of the qualities of God as *principium* which is recognised as *vestigium*, i.e. accessible to all and recognisable in all creation.

From the Neo-Platonic notion that the existence of the world is due to an inbuilt necessity that “the good is spreading itself out” (*bonum est diffusivum sui*) Bonaventure concludes that the Godhead has by necessity to be a Trinity and that in that contemplation of pure goodness as existing in the three persons of the blessed Trinity is found ‘the perfect illumination of the mind,’ and the recognition of the human person being made into the image of God.

The high regard in which Bonaventure holds Plato and the Neo-Platonists would make us assume that he credited them with a sufficiently high degree of illumination with regard to the Trinitarian

⁶ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* II, 12, 1.

nature of the deity—indeed his main criticism of Plato does not concern his theology but his devaluation of nature into a shadow-reality.

The Hindu school that offers the closest parallel to Bonaventure’s Exemplarism is Madhva’s *Bimba-pratibimba-vāda*.⁷ According to Madhva, Brahman as *bimba* (original image) determines the existence (*satta*), functioning (*pratīti*) and creativity (*pravṛtti*) of the *pratibimba* (counter image). For Madhva ‘the entire universe is thus an expression of the Divine Will.’⁸ The material universe is the actualisation of the potentialities of primary matter and the finite souls under the influence of the Supreme. Thus the universe is a “souvenir” of God. Human consciousness is mediated through a consciousness of the manifestations of God in the universe. The mirror-image relationship between soul and God is the truest and most beautiful permanent bond with the Supreme Being. It is the purpose of philosophical instruction progressively to make students realise their being a reflection, a mirror image of the Ultimate. The perfection of human beings consists in recognising the Archetype, the *bimba*, and understanding themselves as mirror image or manifestation (*ābhāsa*) of the Supreme. This recognition goes hand in hand with a universalizing: As Brahman is the Whole, so the recognition of oneself as counter image of Brahman entails a realisation of oneself as universal.

In contrast to Śāṅkara, who considered the physical universe a creation of *māyā*—an illusory mimicry of Brahman / Reality—Madhva sees in it the material manifestation of the creative power of Brahman. It exhibits at its most fundamental level a quality, which reflects the nature of Brahman itself: order, symmetry and movement. Especially, it exhibits itself as Unity: in spite of the myriad beings, which constitute it, it is unified at its most subtle as well as on its most extensive levels.

It is probably not accidental that the Bengali monk, Caitanya (1486-1534), took initiation from a Madhva follower, that his movement became associated in the 18th century with the Gauḍīya *sampradāya* (“the Bengali tradition”), and that the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology accepts Madhva’s version of Vedānta as its foundation, which it

⁷ Shri Madhvacharya (1238-1317) was the chief proponent of Tattvavāda (True Philosophy), popularly known as *Dvaita* or dualistic school of Hindu philosophy.

⁸ Madhvacharya, *Dvadasa stotram*, tr. Vaisnavacaran, Madras: Dharmaparakash, 1975. (The moniker “Vaisnavacaran” is probably a pen name; it means “one who is following the Vaiṣṇava mode of life”).

developed into what became known as *Acintya Bhedābheda*, and that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism developed a Trinitarian notion of deity.

Bonaventure would agree that Madhva and genuine philosophers of all cultures at all ages could find intuitively, through a contemplation of the structures of created nature, the Trinitarian nature of the Deity. A Trinitarian understanding of the Deity is neither a Christian invention nor a Christian privilege. Being a baptized Christian does not guarantee an adequate understanding of it; nor does not being a baptized Christian exclude from comprehending it. The terms used for expressing it are in all cases taken from the already existing cultural religious imagery: in the case of Christians from the New Testament, in the case of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

While the authorities of the Catholic Church and probably also of some of the Eastern Churches and of the more conservative older Protestant ones would judge the “orthodoxy” of a Trinitarian theology by its conformity to Trinitarian dogmatic formulations, it is hard to fathom what kind of understanding ordinary Christians and the members of the thousands of more recent Christian sects connect with the Trinitarian formula of baptism and Trinitarian forms of blessings. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas with many other Hindus would see the criterion of the “rightness” of their understanding of their conception in its fruitfulness as a *sādhana*, or spiritual practice: the active inner participation in the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *līlā*⁹ and the inner satisfaction, the *ānanda* gained from a *sākṣātkāra* (“direct meeting”) testified by the great representatives of the tradition.

The case I wish to make is (a) the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava conception of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā¹⁰ as a mystery needs to be understood on the level on which Christian Trinitarian theology is operating; and (b) it is as valid an interpretation of the mystery of the inner-divine dynamics as the Father-Son-Spirit terminology.

Among the divine Trinities in the history of religions some are fairly openly tri-theistic and would as such not be reconcilable with strictly monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam, who reject them as idolatrous. Hindu-India too knows several such “Trinities”: the best

⁹ Rādhā is the consort of Kṛṣṇa in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Their divine play, *līlā*, is the source of all creation.

¹⁰ The Sanskrit term *premā* means “love”; see *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 1.6.17.

known is probably the Trimūrti of Brahmā [creator], Viṣṇu [preserver] and Śiva [destroyer].¹¹ In that form the Trimūrti is a mediaeval Hindu construct designed to bring the three major streams of popular Hinduism together and allow the followers of one to grant equal status to the others. Typically, however, Vaiṣṇava theology speaks of three functions or manifestations of the one deity Hari, who as Brahmā, issuing from Hari's body creates the universe, sustains it as Viṣṇu, whose living body it is, and destroys it as Śiva-Rudra, reabsorbing it into the un-manifest form of Hari.

Christian Trinitarian theology has rejected tri-theism and the Church forbade early representations of the Trinity in the form of three men side by side. (I still saw in the 1950's such a wall-painting in an archaic little cave chapel in the Abruzzi.) The "orthodox" Trinity paintings, which are quite frequent, show a God Father—usually in the form of a seated elderly gentleman with a white beard—holding a junior Christ-Son on the crucifix and a dove, representing the Holy Spirit, hovering above God Father's head. By restricting the representation to symbolic figures (at least in the case of the Holy Spirit) the Church wanted to say that the Trinity is a mystery that cannot be adequately represented in the sphere of the senses. The attempt to conceptually express this mystery, which took centuries to mature, resulted in the most abstract and abstruse of all Christian dogmas, virtually inaccessible to the ordinary Christian.

The erotic sounding language in which the *Kṛṣṇa līlā* is presented in many Hindu texts, such as the Tenth Book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* or the even better known *Gītāgovinda* by Jayadeva (both texts are used in Vaiṣṇava worship contexts), has brought about on the one hand a distancing of serious Christian theologians from that complex and on the other hand a romanticising of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. The involvement of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopīs* of Vrindāvana and the emphasis on the *parakīya* nature—the "love affair"—of Kṛṣṇa's involvement with Rādhā has further alienated those who expect ordinary human morality not to be violated in a religious context. The Indian intellectual who publishes under the name of Krishna Chaitanya calls this particular Vaiṣṇava tradition a "betrayal of Kṛṣṇa" and wants

¹¹ Also the triad of Jagannātha, Balabhadra and Subhadra worshipped at Jagannathpuri represents a tritheism rather than a Trinity.

his fellow religionists to return to the Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. Krishna Caitanya had a problem not only with the eroticizing of Kṛṣṇa, the statesman and spiritual teacher, but also with the multiplication of divinity: Rādhā, after all, shares all of Kṛṣṇa's divine attributes.

Serious theologians in all religions (including the openly polytheistic ones like the ancient Greek and the Hindu) have insisted on the unity and uniqueness of the Supreme Being and preferred a “no-god” language to a “many gods” theology. The Jews in Jesus' times were scandalized by his claim of Divine Son-ship and the early Muslims considered the belief in a Divine Trinity one of the greatest aberrations of Christianity. If Christians understood the Trinity the way non-Christians conceive of it that would indeed be the end of Christian Monotheism. Susil Kumar Maitra, a well-known Indian professor of philosophy in his time, once explained in a seminar presentation at the Vrindāvana Institute of Indian Philosophy the Christian Trinity as the result of the amalgamation of the Jewish Jahwe, the Christian Jesus and the Hellenic Nous.

Christian theologians took a long time to develop formulae that resolved to their own satisfaction the contradiction between One God and Three Divine Persons. In spite of the ingenuity with which concepts like nature and person, subsistence and relationship and similar notions were defined and refined by generations of Christian theologians, for the ordinary person also in the West (including Christians) there remains a problem, and Goethe's frivolous quip in his *Faust*, “one is three and three is one,” has become more popular than Athanasius' *perichōrēsis*, the mutual inter-penetration and indwelling of the Father and the Son—“*the Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father.*” Let us also remember that the Inter-Christian Trinitarian quarrel over *homo-ousios*, “same substance,” versus *homoi-ousios*, “similar substance,” fought out among a well informed group of professional Christian theologians resulted in a centuries long split of Christianity.

The Christian Trinitarian dogmas are very Greek. It is extremely difficult to explain them in any modern Western language without recourse to Ancient Greek. It would be impossible to translate them into Sanskrit, not to mention a living Indian language. (I remember having seen a Sanskrit translation of the Athanasian Creed by the German Indologist Paul Hacker—it does not make any sense

whatsoever to a Sanskrit trained traditional Indian.) The Trinitarian dogmas are part of a Christian abstract conceptual universe that is *sui generis* and cannot be translated into any other. Not to mention the outsiders' association of such terminology as the love-relationship of Father and Son, resulting in the misconception of the Spirit as an "offspring," and even the perception of an incestuous homo-eroticism.

Typically the Christian Trinity consists of three males: the New Testament term for the Holy Spirit, *parakleitos*, "comforter," is grammatically masculine. While the Greek *pneuma* is grammatically neuter, the Latin *spiritus* is masculine, and in all languages that have gendered nouns "the Holy Spirit" is masculine.¹² The few existing anthropomorphic pictures of the Trinity show three male figures side by side. By the time of the formulation of the Trinitarian teachings misogyny was a widespread "Christian" attitude. Christian theology as a whole and Trinitarian theology in particular is the product of celibate monastic minds—the religious ideal was always that of the unmarried male and the theological ideal a high degree of abstract intellectuality.

By contrast Vaiṣṇavism in general, and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in particular was always a family oriented religion and its theology reflects the experience of marriage and of parenthood. Whereas early Christian theology was strongly influenced by abstract, impersonal Greek philosophy, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism theology lives and moves in an emotional universe of feelings. Which brings us to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā, a more natural looking association of Woman and Man united in mutual Love.

If the Father-Son God of Christianity can be made meaningful for believers on a transcendental level, so can the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa union of Vaiṣṇavism be understood as a Divine mystery that opens up only to those, who immerse themselves in its very depth. For the celibate monastic mind the union of male and female is a sheer organic animal-like sensual activity—the very opposite of the spiritual union which a religious person associates with the divine relationships. For a loving couple the union of bodies as an expression of the oneness of minds is a

¹² It is doubtful whether the Hagia Sophia is dedicated to the "Holy Spirit" in the Trinitarian sense or whether "Divine Wisdom" is meant in a more general sense. Feminist theologians tried to see in the *Sophia* of Eastern Christian traditions a feminine element.

profoundly human and spiritual experience! The fact that this act can be misused for the brute satisfaction of animal urges in situations of rape does not take away from the fact, that it is the most intimate exchange of genuine love between two human beings and that no human being exists that does not owe its existence—body, mind and soul—to this act!

If the tradition, which focuses its spirituality on the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā operated the way outsiders are prone to understand it, its centres would be filled with eroticism and would attract sex maniacs from all over the world. As a matter of fact—as I can attest from my living for two years in Vrindāvana, the holiest place for the devotees of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and from visiting other centres of pilgrimage in Braja, which are connected with events in the life of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa—they appear far less eroticized than most modern big cities with their giant-size posters of sex-icons selling cars, holidays or jeans. I must admit that I did not feel comfortable at the beginning in Vrindāvana and that I was initially quite critical of the public expressions of religiosity there. But that discomfort had other reasons: I did not like the noise of the loudspeakers that broadcast day and night scriptures like the *Bhāgavatam*, the incessant clanging of bells and the factory-like chanting of hymns by hundreds of paid people, the audacious soliciting of the *pandas* and the beggars, the—in my eyes—demeaning gestures of submission by devotees towards their gurus. It took me a while to get accustomed to all these things and not to pay any undue notice to them. As far as the deeper religiosity of the tradition was concerned and its scholarly exposition I could not find anything objectionable: On the contrary, I found much that I could genuinely appreciate and I really enjoyed the *bhajan* sessions, the *Rasalīlās*, the temple celebrations, the *darśanas* of famous gurus, local figures like Dīna Śaraṇa Dāsa and Bankey Bihari, and regular visitors such as Śrāddhānanda and Ānandamāyī and many others. After a year or so I felt at home in Vrindāvana and I did not entertain any missionary urge to improve upon its religious life. Of course there were crooks and impostors also in religious garb, abuses that needed to be remedied—but all these things had nothing to do with the substance of the theology of Vaiṣṇavism and could easily be found duplicated in any popular Christian place of pilgrimage.

I noticed one thing especially: the focus of religion in Vrindāvana was not on concepts or creeds but on experience and preparatory practices for it. In my two years there and in the many contacts, which I had with local gurus and devotees, I was not once asked what I believed, but was often asked about my *sādhana*, i.e. the practices I used to further my inner life. The *sākṣātkāra*, which constitutes the highest religious aim of the Vaiṣṇava consists in a vivid inner beholding of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā which so fills the minds and hearts of those who have achieved it that they have no further desire. Irreligious people ridicule such exercises in gross and offensive terms, revealing more about themselves than about the mysteries, which they desacralize.

The God-realisation teaching of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas does not begin with a description or analysis of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa relationship but with a process of acquiring *premā* in a quite down to earth fashion. The aspirant initially is to practice *sādhana-bhakti*, whose first stage consist in exercising *vaidhi-bhakti*, a love that is proving itself in works: A lengthy list of do's and don'ts comprising sixty-four injunctions has to be faithfully implemented and followed to show the seriousness of the devotee. As long as these acts are performed out of fear from the injunctions of the *śāstras* it is *vaidhi-bhakti*, a devotion that is based on external command. 'When the same acts are performed out of one's own heartfelt wish to serve the Beloved Prince of Vraja the devotee has *rāgānuga-bhakti*, or a devotion that is based on desire.'¹³ At that stage 'one should joyfully remember Kṛṣṇa and those most dear to him and one should listen with enthusiasm to stories and always dwell in Vraja. In *rāgānuga-bhakti* the most important practice is *smaraṇa*, "remembrance" which consists in 'mentally with one's feelings entering the sports of Kṛṣṇa and his beloved.'

All this has to be accomplished before the applicant is considered worthy of the second stage of *bhakti*: *bhāva-bhakti*. As the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* says: 'When *sādhana-bhakti* has become mature, *bhāva-bhakti* (the experience of love) arises through the grace of Kṛṣṇa or of his devotees.' Its signs are the "nine sprouts of love": forbearance, avoidance of waste of time, distaste for sense objects, freedom from conceit, no longer entertaining expectations, eagerness, enthusiasm for

¹³ Viśvanātha Cakravartin, *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* X. All quotations from my translation in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94/1 Jan.-March 1974, pp. 96-107.

the singing of the name, attachment to the practice of the recitation of His attributes, and a preference for living in His abode. In a person in which these nine qualities are found the “sprout of emotion” has taken root. A person thus equipped is capable of Kṛṣṇa *saksatkara*, a direct corporeal vision of Kṛṣṇa. An important feature of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *līlā* is its permanence: it is always going on in the celestial Goloka, the eternal abode of Kṛṣṇa. In imitation of this eternal *līlā* devotees perform *satsaṅga* and *bhajana* round the clock.

The individual soul as a *pratibimba* of Kṛṣṇa, a mirror image of Kṛṣṇa, defined as “embodiment of the nectar of all sublime feelings,” also consists essentially of feeling: *Premā*, God-Love. *Premā* becomes the highest purpose of life (overriding all other *puruṣārthas*). Although *Premā* in its fullness is the result of a long process of maturing of *bhakti*, in its latent form it is present from the very beginning in the *jivatman* and determines like an entelechy the development of the *bhakta*. Only Kṛṣṇa, or his earthly representative, the guru, can rouse the latent *Premā* and bring it to perfection.

Rūpa Goswāmi thus sketches the eightfold path of *bhakti*: ‘In the beginning there is *śraddhā* [faith and trust], then *sādhu-saṅgah* [keeping company with good people], then *bhajana kṛīya* [acts of worship], *anārtha-nivṛtti* [purification from everything worthless], *rucih* [constancy], *āsakti* [attachment], *bhāva* [experience of divine emotions] and finally arises *Premā* [perfect love].’

The relevance of a triune theology lies in its being reflected in nature and the processes of growth and development and in providing a pattern for human aspirations at various levels, as Bonaventure tries to demonstrate. It makes contemplation of God possible—otherwise it would be a simple arresting of all mental activities.

Viṣṇu Purāṇa I, 12, 69 speaks of the three *śaktis* of which the essence of Viṣṇu is composed: *hlādinī sandhinī samvit tvayyeka sarva samsthītau*. Jīva Goswāmi explains this in his *Tattva-Sandarbha* and *Prīti-Sandarbha* in the following way: “*Sandhinī śakti* is the power through which being is established and communicated to others, through which all existence of things in time and space is caused...*Samvit śakti* is the power of cognition through which knowledge is communicated...*Hlādinī śakti* is the power of enjoyment, through which knowledge becomes enjoyment’. According to Walter Eidlitz, the *samvit śakti*, through which God knows himself, is *bhakti*:

‘*Bhakti* is not a human faculty, it originates in God. But it can be obtained through listening to a true *bhakta*’s narration of God’s *līlā*.’¹⁴

Bonaventura attempts to show in his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* a practical path to the innermost secret of the Trinity. Compared with the teachers of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava School Bonaventure’s approach looks abstract and academic and I do not know of any other systematic attempt to translate the Trinity into the spiritual life of a Christian. I remember seeing a book-title *The Holy Spirit: The Forgotten Deity*, that pretty much reflects Christian spiritual practice.

By contrast, the *sādhana* of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā is very practical and fully fleshed out in Rūpa Goswāmi’s *Bhaktirasamṛtasindhu*¹⁵ and similar works that often are abbreviations or popularisations of it. This “Trinitarian” teaching does reach the heart of its practitioners and keeps them entranced and visibly enchanted. It obviously is more than a theological formulation of an impenetrable mystery or an attempt to rationalise philosophically what is beyond the intellect.¹⁶ An ordering of one’s life according to ethical principles and worship tradition is the basis for the more specific practices that entail a systematic sensitizing of the higher faculties of the soul. Eventually a point is reached where God-Love becomes a habit of the soul and transforms the personality in such a way that it becomes one with Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-Premā.

¹⁴ W. Eidlitz, *Kṛṣṇa Caitanya*, Stockholm: Almquist & Wicksell, 1968, p. 32.

¹⁵ *Bhaktirasamṛtasindhu* by Rūpa Goswāmi, Dilli: Dilli Viśvavidyālaya, 1963.

¹⁶ I have detailed this “education in God-Love” in my essay: ‘Eine indische Wissenschaft der Gefühle: Rūpa Goswāmi’s *Bhaktirasamṛtasindhu* und *Ujjvalanīlamanī* als *Rasāstra*’ in E. Weber ed., *Indien in Deutschland*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990, pp.137-150.

Abrahamic symbolisms of the number 72

Timothy Scott

Introduction

The metaphysical and mystical significance of numbers is a well recognised phenomenon throughout the world's religious traditions. In the West, for example, Plato is said to have recognised numerology as the highest of the sciences.¹ The esoteric traditions of the three Abrahamic religions are all marked by number symbolism. In the Hebrew tradition, where letters also serve as numbers, this type of symbolism is of the highest order with the very Name of God intimately associated with certain numbers. These associations are far from arbitrary. The *Shemhamphorasch*, or the 72 lettered name of God, is not simply called this because it has 72 letters, but because of the nature of the number 72. Annemarie Schimmel sees 72 as universally expressing the concept of “plenitude.”² The number 72 occurs across many religious traditions where marked similarities in its use suggest a coherent symbolic underpinning. This should be seen in light of René Guénon's remark that ‘there are symbols which are common to the most diverse and widely separated traditional forms, not as a result of “borrowings,” which in many cases would be quite impossible, but because in reality they pertain to the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’³ Guénon's reference to “the Primordial Tradition” has proven controversial with some arguing for a single “people” from whom all civilization is descended; for our part it may be simpler to say that what is at issue is a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles constituting

¹ *Epinomis* 976 e. It is generally accepted that Plato was not in fact the author of this appendix to the *Laws*; still, even if this is so it nevertheless represents one of the first “Platonisms.” Plato does, however, talk of the “invention of number” as coming from the “supremely beneficial function” of sight, which was a gift from the gods (*Timaeus* 47a-b).

² A. Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.266.

³ R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.27.

the *philosophia perennis*. The symbolism of 72 reveals definite features throughout the world's traditions because of the metaphysical integrity of the number 72. As Plotinus says, 'Numbers exist before objects described by them. The variety of sense objects merely recalls to the soul the notion of number.'⁴ Questions of shared transmission, dependence, or influence are entirely secondary, which is not to deny the value of these types of enquiry, nor to deny that these type of "borrowings" do in fact occur, which quite obviously they do.

The fundamental symbolism of 72 is that of the transmission or transformation from the creative Principle to creation itself. This is not to deny other readings, for true symbolism is multivalent; nevertheless this is "fundamental" in the sense that this is the cosmogonic symbolism, where the cosmogony is the fundamental act of expression and hence the origin of symbolism *per se*. Of course to simply say that the symbolism of 72 is the transmission of Principle to creation hardly does justice to the vast body of symbolisms that this entails and the complex hermeneutics that explicate these. I have considered these ideas in greater detail in my previous exploration of the universal symbolism of 72.⁵ The following is a general overview of the conclusions developed there:

1. 72, like all derivatives and multiples of 7, carries with it the idea of wholeness and perfection.
2. 72 expresses the creative Principle; in some cases, such as the Judaic Name of God, this is explicit.
3. There is a relationship between 70 and 72 as between Principle and manifestation or between cause and effect; as with these "pairs" the expression of this relationship is a matter of perspective—celestial or terrestrial—meaning that these two numbers can be, and in fact are, used interchangeably.
4. The creative Principle manifests, or causes manifestation to come to be, by an "expansion," that can be symbolically described both vertically and horizontally. Throughout the world traditions both of these aspects are consistently described by reference to 72. This is

⁴ *Enneads* 6.6.9.

⁵ 'Remarks on the universal symbolism of the number 72', *Eye of the Heart: A Journal of Traditional Wisdom* 1, Bendigo: La Trobe University, 2008, pp.119-140.

to recognise that what was potential and implicit in the Principle becomes realised and explicit in creation.

5. Creation is defined by the two fundamental aspects of space and time. Spatially, the sphere (the ideal form of three dimensional space) is based on the number 7, while the dodecahedron—Plato’s “receptacle of becoming”—is underpinned by the 72 degrees of each pentagon. Temporally, the measure of a cosmic cycle is expressed by a form of the number 432; this number is in turn an expression of the Principle (symbolised by 72) developed through all of the 6 cosmogonic directions. (i.e. 72×6).

This article explores this symbolism further through an examination of some key occurrences of the number 72 in the Abrahamic religions. Here my aim is to show that various traditions, which often seem to have little or no connection, do in fact share a particular cosmogonic symbolism. This homologous nature is rooted in the metaphysics that underpins these symbolism rather than in historical connections, albeit that these may also exist. Moreover, I am not particularly interested in whether the “author” of these accounts, where such an author might be identifiable, intended the cosmogonic symbolism I am suggesting, or whether they simply transmitted elements of the tradition unconsciously, so to speak. Questions of authorship—identity, date, intention—have historical significance but, again, they are secondary to the metaphysical meaning that resides in the *sophia perennis*.

In referring to the symbolism of 72 in the “Abrahamic traditions” I wish to draw attention to a consistent use of the symbolism of 72 in the three monotheistic religions, rather than any particular connection of this number with the figure of Abraham. If I have focused on the Jewish tradition it is because of the wealth of examples available and because the symbolism under consideration is particularly well developed therein. However, this does not mean that the cosmogonic interpretation of 72 in either Christianity or Islam is any less apposite, as I aim to show.

The story of Babel (*Genesis* 11) sets the stage for our investigation. This is primarily considered in terms of its cosmogonic symbolism. Questions of the relationships between these symbolisms, vis-à-vis primacy, contradiction, inversion, perspective and context, move beyond the scope of this paper. The biblical account of Babel is

explored in detail because it identifies the key elements of the symbolism of 72: the movement from Unity to multiplicity, the principal symbolism of “the Name” (the metaphysical Sound, Language, Word, Breath, Power, Spirit—*creatio per Verbum*), the vertical axis mundi, and the horizontal dispersion or “scattering” of spatio-temporal creation. Similarly the accounts of the ratification of the covenant presented in Exodus 24 and especially Numbers 11 are given close attention for the manner that these develop the relationship between the numbers 70 and 72, explicitly connecting these symbolic numbers to the divine creative Power. As with the account of Babel, Numbers 11 connects the symbolism of 72 with the creative axial descent of God. This passage similarly develops the symbolism of the horizontal expansion of spatio-temporal creation through the pattern of the Israelite encampment. This symbolism is in turn traditionally taken up in the cosmological symbolism of the Temple, which I have only alluded to herein given that it is already so well known.

The second half of this essay takes up two of the key symbolic elements: the axis mundi and the symbolism of the Name/Word. Adopting a more thematic approach, we survey a range of occurrences of 72 (or its variants) in the Abrahamic religions to show how these consistently and often explicitly express these elements.

Babel

In the Abrahamic traditions it is said that the destruction of the tower of Babel splintered the primordial language into 70 or 72 languages. Viewed in terms of cosmogonic symbolism, 70 expresses the creative Act from the point of view of the perfection of its potential and 72 expresses the extension or development of this potential. Neither number is mentioned in *Genesis* 11; rather they are derived, according to haggadic tradition, from the ethnological table given in *Genesis* 10, where 70 grandsons of Noah are enumerated, each of whom, it is said, became the ancestor of a nation and the founder of a language. The *Septuagint*, counts 72 grandsons of Noah, hence 72 nations and languages. The *Sefer ha-Jashar* tells how God sent His 70 ministering angels to confuse the speech of the builders of the tower.⁶ This

⁶ *Sefer ha-Jashar* cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, ed. A. S. Rappoport, London: Gresham Publishing Company, 1995, p.237.

demonstrates a link between this number and the celestial hierarchies, a link that we will see developed further below. St. Augustine prolongs the use of the number 72;⁷ it is in turn repeated by the venerable Bede⁸ and Remigius.⁹ In the *History of the Prophets and Kings*, by the 9th century Muslim historian al-Tabari, it is Allah who destroys the tower of Babil and confuses the language of mankind, formerly Syriac, into 72 languages.

The *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* records that the tower of Babel reached a height of “seven mils.”¹⁰ Obviously 70 is a derivative of 7 and, as has been noted, ‘All derivatives or multiples of seven carry with them the idea of wholeness.’¹¹ Also recorded here is the idea that the tower was built by 600,000 men.¹² As Gershom Scholem notes, there are said to be 70 “faces” of the Torah shining forth to the initiate;¹³ however, the sixteenth century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria, taught that there are 600,000 “faces” of the Torah, as many as there were souls in Israel at the time of the Revelation.¹⁴ In both cases the number is an expression of the totality of peoples (Israelites) that constitute human existence, which—in the context of Gen.1:27 and the Lurianic *Adam Kadmon*—is to say, Existence *per se*.

The tower of Babel offers us an image of the metaphysical *axis mundi*, the link between earth and heaven.¹⁵ This story then marries this architectural symbolism to a corresponding verbal symbolism. This homogeneity is explicitly recognised in Judaic tradition, as we read in *Proverbs*: ‘The Name of Yahweh is a strong tower’ (18:10). The words used for “name” (*shem*; שם) and “tower” (*migdālāh*; מגדלה) are the same for both Pr.18:10 and Gen.11:4. *Migdālāh* is derived from $\sqrt{g\ddot{a}dal}$, which has the meaning of “to be large,” hence “tower,” but the

⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.3 (527-28).

⁸ Bede, *Commentary on Genesis: Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 118A, 161.

⁹ Remigius, *Commentary on Genesis: Patrologia Latina*, ed. Minge, 131, 81c.

¹⁰ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* Ch.24, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.237.

¹¹ J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, p.867.

¹² *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch.24 *ibid.*, p.237).

¹³ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.210. This number comes from the 600,000 Israelites that left Egypt with Moses (Ex.13:37).

¹⁵ On the symbolism of the *axis mundi* see M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

ontological sense is strong also.¹⁶ The idea of the whole world speaking “one language” is associated with the tower that rises to heaven, that is to say, unity is presented as a cognate of the Principle. God is said to have “confused” the languages of the people so that they were scattered over the world. Guénon suggests that the symbolism of that which has been “scattered” refers to the passage from Unity into multiplicity: the act of creation.¹⁷ In terms of the symbolism of the vertical axis this passage is described by the downward movement, while the upward movement indicates a return to Unity.

To view the story of Babel in terms of a cosmogonic symbolism presents certain difficulties. The common reading of this passage is that of a moral warning against hubris, and no doubt this meaning exists. On the surface, the people who spoke “one language” do not fit with the idea of the divine Principle, in that they revolt against heaven and are rebuked and punished by God. However, this symbolism of the cosmogonic revolt is not unfamiliar: one thinks of the story of the revolt of the angels and the mythological war in heaven, which resulted in the expulsion of Sammael (Lucifer).¹⁸ This revolt is rooted in a presumption of equality with God (see *Is. 14:13-14*)—the very definition of hubris. In Christianity hubris is found with the cardinal sin of Pride, the original

¹⁶ *√gādal* properly means “to twist” in the sense of twisting a *thread*. Two cosmogonic symbolisms immediately suggested themselves: weaving (see René Guénon, ‘The symbolism of weaving’ in *Symbolism of the Cross*) and the “churning of the ocean” (for example *Bhāgavata Purāna* 8 and *Rg Veda* 10) in which creation is born out of the “twisting” of the cosmic axis. This “twisting” suggests the image of the ziggurat, as depicted for example in Breugel’s painting. Again this image of “twisting” suggests the spiral of “cosmic currents” that Guénon mentions in his essay, ‘The Bridge and the Rainbow’ (*Fundamental Symbols*); these are the complementary currents (*catabasis* and *anabasis*) of the vertical axis. This idea is found in the traditions of the tower of Babel where we find the workers who carried the bricks up the tower ascended on the east side, while those who descended had to go down on the west side (*Sefer al-Jashar; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch.24, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.237); this does not necessarily contradict the idea of a spiral passage, particularly if one takes the mention of ascending in the east and descending in the west to refer to the movement of the sun, which, because of the rotation of the earth, maps out a spiral ascent and descent between the tropics.

¹⁷ R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.204.

¹⁸ See *Yalkut Rubeni*, § 3; Rabbi Behai (Bahya), *Commentary on the Books of Moses*, section *Achare Moth*; Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judentum Vol.1*, p.831, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.56, n.1 & 2; see also *1 Enoch* 6-13; *Jubilees* 5:6; and *Rev.12:7-9*.

and most serious of the seven deadly sins, and indeed the cause of Lucifer's expulsion from heaven. These ideas offer two connections to the symbolism of the tower of Babel, the first scriptural and the second typological.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul proclaims that the *parousia* of Christ cannot happen 'until the Great Revolt has taken place and there has appeared the wicked One, the lost One, the Enemy, who raises himself above every so-called God or object of worship to enthrone himself in God's sanctuary and flaunts the claim that he is God' (2Th.2:4). Although there is debate about the nature of this "revolt" and the identity of "the wicked One" it is not implausible to see this eschatological battle as the complementary symbol to the war in heaven.¹⁹ This is strengthened by Paul's use of *Isaiah* 14:13—'I shall scale the heavens; higher than the stars of God I shall set my throne ... I shall rival the Most High'. The parallel to the story of Babel is obvious: 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall' (Pr.16:18). This connection is found again in the Christian tradition with Jesus quoting *Isaiah* 14:13-15 when telling the "72 disciples," whom he sends forth to spread the "word," that they should tell Capernaum 'did you want to be raised high as heaven? You shall be flung down to hell' (Lk.10:15). We will consider the 72 disciples who spread the "word" later; for now it is enough to recognise the scriptural thread that links the 72 disciples of the "word," given us in *Luke*, with the 72 languages born out of the destruction of the tower of Babel, bound by *Isaiah* 14:13-15.

Lucifer's fall is not only moral but, as Guénon observes, it is identified with the symbolism of the "stone fallen from the sky" (*lapsit exillis*).²⁰ In the *Zohar* this symbolism is employed to describe the vertical descent of the cosmogonic act.²¹ This axial descent offers a typological analogy to the axial symbolism of the tower. In *Genesis* 11 the building of the tower is immediately followed and qualified by the

¹⁹ Many Christian Bible commentaries do in fact read the war in heaven as an eschatological vision. In the current essay I am taking the war in heaven as a mythological symbolism of a primordial state, in line with *1 Enoch* and *2 Enoch*. Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, treats this myth in the same manner, although it might well be argued that his Satan is a product of Humanism rather than a traditional archetype.

²⁰ See Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Ch.46.

²¹ *Zohar* I, 231a-231b; II, 222a-222b.

declaration that the people should ‘make a name for ourselves, so that we do not get scattered all over the world’ (Gen.11:4). The pretension of “making a name for ourselves” is that of claiming equality with God, for the divine Name is synonymous with God.²²

Tradition offers two sources for the name Babel, both of which illuminate a cosmogonic reading. On the one hand, Babel is taken as a Hebrew reading of the Akkadian name *Babilu* (Babylon) meaning “gate of god” (from *bab* = “gate” and *ilu* = “god”). The symbolism of the Gate of God suggests that of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the “Sundoor,” which is located, so to speak, at the pinnacle of the *axis mundi*.²³ It is suggested that the Hebrew *babel* can also mean “gate of god” from *bab* = “gate” and *el* = “god.” The word offered here as “gate,” *bab*, is properly *bābāh* (בבה) meaning “to hollow out” or something *hollowed*, as in a “gate.”²⁴ Interestingly this is then used to refer to the *pupil* of the eye, in the sense of it being “hollow”; this suggests a pertinent connection for the Sundoor is also the “eye of the needle” (Matt.19:24, Mk.10:25, Lk.18:25). These connections are informative in the sense that they suggest certain etymological links which operate according to what Hindu tradition calls *nirukta*, folk etymologies of which the value (and truth) resides in their symbolism rather than the accuracy of their historical etymology.

²² In the Islamic tradition we find al-Jīlī declare: ‘the Name is the Named One Himself’ (*al-insān al-kamīl*, tr. T. Burckhardt, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983, p.30).

²³ Further to the web of symbolism being developed, it is worth remarking that the city of Babel is built in a valley in the land of Shinar (Gen.11:1); the name Shinar is suspected to be of foreign origin, however, we might note that the Hebrew (שנער) only differs by a transition from an *ayin* to a *yod*—a symbolic movement from “eye” to “hand,” where God’s “seeing” is related to His “doing”—from the word *S’nyr* (שניר), which means “to be *pointed*” and denotes “a *peak*.” It is at the peak of the cosmic mountain that distinction is resolved into unity through the *coincidentia oppositorum*; this unity is beyond comparative description instead being “described” by such amorphous symbolism as a “cloud of unknowing.” All of this is of course suggestive of the theophany on Sinai.

²⁴ Let us also remark that Babel is built in a “valley” of Shinar, which is to say, a “hollowed out” area. The word translated as “valley” is *biq’ah* (בקעה), deriving from *bāqa’* (בקע) which means “to *cleave*” generally indicating the making of an opening, suggesting the “opening” between the uncreated and the created. In this connection it is worth observing that the primitive root *shānan* (שננ), which is closely related to *S’nyr* (שניר) means “to *point*” and implies “to *pierce*”—this in turn leads one to think of the “pierced one” (Zc.12:10) and of course, Christ, who is the Christian *coincidentia oppositorum par excellence*.

The word translated as Babel is *Bābel* (בבל) denoting “confusion.” This derives from $\sqrt{b\bar{a}l\bar{a}l}$ (בלל) meaning “to overflow,” and thus by implication “to mix,” hence the sense of confusion. What is most interesting is the fact that this root has the specific sense of overflowing with *oil*. Now this is in perfect accordance with the symbolism at hand for the symbolism of oil in Judaism (as in other traditions) is that of the divine Essence that flows forth through the “Gate of God” bringing creation into being.²⁵ Oil is similarly identified with the divine Light that shines forth through the divine Eye.²⁶ The divine Light, in turn, is intimately identified with the divine Sound, as in the symbolism of the *Fiat Lux*. The Persian mystic-poet, Jalāl al-din Rūmī, offers the following image of the creation which beautifully encapsulates these ideas: ‘But when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.’²⁷ The connection between *shāman* (שמן; “to shine”) and *shemen* (שמן; “oil”) is further extended to the word *shēm* (שם) meaning “name,” particularly the divine Name. Thus, as we read in *The Song of Songs*, ‘your name is an oil poured out’ (Sg.1:3). The divine Name is the archetype of all “communication” and thus of the principle at the heart of all symbolism of language.

The divine Principle is Unity (one language; one people); this Principle establishes itself in the valley of Shinar (the first Point; the divine Centre), which is “hollow” in the sense of being uncreated. From this primordial and uncreated Point proceeds the irruption of the creative Power (name-language; oil; light). In this context it is worth

²⁵ Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1310), who stands with Moses de Leon as one of the key figures of Kabbalah, observes that the symbolism of “oil” is that of ‘the essence of all the Spheres [the *Sefirot*]’ (*Gates of Light [Sha’are Orah]*, tr. A. Weinstein, Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1994, p.314). Gikatilla cites the vision of Zechariah of the two olive trees from which flow “golden oil” through the two golden “openings” or “tubes” (Zc.4:12). These two olive trees and subsequent two openings express the symbolism of duality, through which the Essence flows forth to enlighten the world, which, moreover, is expressed in Zechariah’s vision by the “seven lamps” (the seven ontocosmological “directions”) that are fed by this oil.

²⁶ *Shāman* (שמן), meaning “to shine,” gives rise to the word *shemen* (שמן), meaning “oil,” especially that of the olive, the allusion being that oil or grease is used to polish and thus to make shine. The creative Light flows forth from the divine Eye; in accord with the “law of inverse analogy” the human eye is a receptacle through which light, as we perceive it, flows in.

²⁷ *Mathnawī* I, 835 (tr. M. G. Gupta, Vol.1, Agra: M. G. Publishers, 1997, p.74).

remarking that these people came to the valley of Shinar by travelling “eastward”; the word here is *qēdmāh* (קדם) from $\sqrt{qādem}$ (קדם) meaning “to *project*.” This projection is symbolically described as “downwards.” Here one might paradoxically describe the construction of the tower of Babel as “inverted” in the sense that the *axis mundi* proceeds (projects) from the Principle “down” into the world (which it in turn symbolises and manifests). This is to view the creative act from a celestial perspective; from a terrestrial perspective the image becomes one of the destruction of the tower from its top to its bottom.²⁸ This architectural symbolism is then aligned to the movement from one language to a “scattered” multiplicity, which tradition describes by 72 languages.

The ratification of the covenant

The use of the “number” 70/72 to describe the descent of the divine Power is again found in the account of the ratification of the covenant in *Exodus* 24 and *Numbers* 11. Here Moses collects 70 elders of the people and positions them around the Tent of Meeting where Yahweh descends in a cloud. Yahweh, we are then told, took some of the spirit that He had placed on Moses and put it on the 70 elders (Num.11:25). The Tent of Meeting is the tabernacle; the tabernacle contains the Temple *in principle*, and by extension and analogy, the Temple contains the cosmos. As Guénon remarks, “The Tabernacle of the Holiness of *Jehovah* in which the *Shekhinah* [“indwelling”; the divine Immanence] resides is the Holy of Holies, which is the heart of the Temple, which in turn is the centre of Zion (Jerusalem), just as Zion is the centre of the Land of Israel and the Land of Israel is the centre of the world.”²⁹ As with the city and tower of Babel we again have the association of the number 70/72 with the architectural symbolism of the *imago mundi*.

As Rabbi Gikatilla remarks, it is ‘through the medium of this *Ohel Moed* (tent) one is spoken to [by YHVH]’.³⁰ Here again the verbal symbolism is encountered. Leo Schaya recognises the connection

²⁸ On this type of symbolism see Coomaraswamy, ‘The Inverted Tree’ in *Selected Papers Vol.I: Art and Symbolism*, pp.376-404.

²⁹ Cited in R. Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.112, n.12.

³⁰ Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p.30.

between the divine Language/Word/Name and the divine Presence in the world:

Moses erected the tabernacle for God's "indwelling" (*shekhinah*), and Solomon erected the temple for God's "name" (*shem*). Thus their two works were essentially one, just as God is truly present in His name, this being precisely His "indwelling" or "habitation."³¹

The link between the tabernacle and the *Shekhinah* is developed by Rabbi Gikatilla who notes that the 'Aramaic root for *Ohel* is *mishKaN* ["*mishkān*" denotes the tabernacle], which is the essence of [and shares the root of] *Shekhinah*'.³²

The symbolism of the Tent entails the creativity of both sound and light. In the *Zohar* the "Opening of the Tent" is equated with the *Shekhinah*; the *Shekhinah* is in turn symbolised by "light."³³ Adrian Snodgrass observes this symbolism in the Islamic tradition: 'The Tent symbolises the Supreme Intellect, the Nous, identified with the Muhammadian Light (*al-nūr al-Muhammadi*).'³⁴ This symbolism is evident in the very word for "tent," for the Hebrew word *ohel* (אֹהֶל) derives from \sqrt{ahal} (אָהַל) meaning "to be clear" and "to shine."

The account presented in *Numbers* 11 is of particular interest to us as it sharpens the distinction between the numbers 70 and 72. At verse 24 we read: '[Moses] collected seventy of the people's elders and stationed them round the Tent. Yahweh descended in the cloud. He spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the spirit came on them they prophesied',³⁵ at verse 26 we read: 'Two men had stayed back in the camp; one was

³¹ L. Schaya, 'The Meaning of the Temple' in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin 1974, p.360.

³² Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p.30.

³³ The *Shekhinah* is symbolised by the changing light of the moon, whereas the Principle (the *sefirah Tiferet*) is the Sun (see *Zohar* 111, 248b, *Raya Mehamna*); *Tiferet* is the unchanging white flame of the lamp, *Malkhut* (the *Shekhinah*) is the lower part of the flame, which is constantly changing colour (*Zohar* 1, 50-b-51b). Rabbi Gikatilla refers to the *Shekhinah* as the "light of God" (*Gates of Light*, p.45).

³⁴ A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990, p.421.

³⁵ As Isaiah Tishby observes, 'the *Shekhinah* was the channel through which prophecy was transmitted' (*The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.406, n.159).

called Eldad and the other Medad. The spirit came down on them; though they had not gone to the Tent, their names were enrolled among the rest. These began to prophesy in the camp.’ The name Eldad (עלדאד) means “*God has loved*”; the name Medad (מדאד) also connotes the sense of “*loving*.” Medad derives from *yādad* √דד (“to *throw*”) and this in turn from *yād* (יָד; “the *open hand*”), which connotes both *power* and suggests *giving*. This web of symbolism is further developed by the word translated as “camp” (Num.11:27), *machāneh* (מַחֲנֶה; “an *encampment*”), which derives from √חנח (“to *incline*”; by implication, “to *decline*,” especially of the slanting rays of the evening sun); moreover, *chānāh* is used specifically in the sense of “to *pitch a tent*,” recalling this symbolism. *Chānāh* is also the root of the name Hannah and, in turn, Anna. Hannah is the mother of Samuel (שמׁוּאֵל; “*heard of God*”, but also carrying the sense of “the Name of God,” as in *Shēm* = name); Anna according to the *Protevangeliūm of James*, is the mother of Mary, who in turn is the mother of the Word made flesh (Jn.1:14); this symbolism is developed by the idea that Anna and Mary are, to a certain degree, symbolically synonymous: according to Epiphanius, Jesus had two sisters, the name of the first being either Mary or Anna and the second being Salome.³⁶ In the first case there is identification between that from which Jesus “comes forth”; in the second case we have Salome who the *Protevangeliūm of James* says was one of the midwives at Jesus’ birth, that is, that which “brings forth.”³⁷

The names Eldad and Medad suggest God’s creative Power (*yād*), which is His Giving (Charity and Mercy) and Love. As we read in the *Talmud*:

The Pentateuch begins with an act of benevolence [Charity; *gemiluth chasadim*, “the bestowal of loving acts”] and concludes with an act of benevolence. At the beginning it is said, “And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them” (Gen.3:21); and at the end it is said, “And he buried him (Moses) in the valley” (Deut.34:6).³⁸

³⁶ *Ancor.* 60; *Pan.* 78.8; cited Schneemelcher ed., *New Testament Apocrypha Vol.1*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991, p.472.

³⁷ *Protevangeliūm of James*, 20.1-3.

³⁸ *Sotah 14a*, cited in A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, New York: Schocken Books 1995, p.225.

This Power is manifested in our world, the “camp,” which is the extension of the Tabernacle, and here we must recall that the pattern of the Israelite encampment was based on the 12 tribes circling the Tabernacle—the number 12 expressing the spatio-temporal symbolism of cosmological existence. This creative Power is given once, in Eternity (*aeternitas*), and forever (sempiternity); God *has* loved (Eldad) and *is* loving (Medad).

Numbers 11 associates the symbolism of 70 with the Tabernacle, the “location” of the divine creative Power *in divinis* or *in potentia*. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant observe, ‘Seventy is ten times seven—a superlative equal to twofold perfection’.³⁹ But this potentiality is also made manifest *in actua*, and this involves the development of this number in duality (the world of distinction), which is to say, through the “two” (Eldad and Medad); and this brings the “totality” of creation to 72. The number 72 symbolises the manifestation of the created 6 (Gen.1)—the 6 days of creation envisaged as the 6 principal metaphysical “directions”—through and in the spatio-temporal twelve.

The axial symbolism of seventy-two

The axial symbolism associated with the number 72, evident with the tower of Babel, is found in several other Jewish traditions. The *Second Targum of Esther* describes 72 golden lions set out upon the steps of Solomon’s Throne.⁴⁰ The “throne” is analogous with the tabernacle and, as such, is the principle of the temple (*imago mundi*); moreover, the “throne,” as Leo Schaya says, ‘is the first and spiritual crystallization of all creatural possibilities before they are set in motion in the midst of the cosmos. When the “throne” assumes its dynamic aspect and cosmic manifestation begins to move, it is called the divine “chariot” (*merkabah*).’⁴¹ Elsewhere Schaya remarks on the relationship between the tabernacle and the *merkabah*:

The tabernacle had provided the presence of God [*Shekhinah*] with no permanent habitation, for it was set up after the model of his

³⁹ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. J. Buchanan-Brown, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996, p.867.

⁴⁰ *Second Targum of Esther*, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.3*, p.237; see 1Kgs.10:20; 2Ch.9:17.

⁴¹ L. Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, tr. N. Pearson, New Jersey: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.84.

heavenly “vehicle” (*merkabah*), in which he would lead His people through the wilderness to the fixed “centre of the world,” Jerusalem.⁴²

The tabernacle and the *merkabah* are *imagines mundi* in dynamic mode. The throne is an *imago mundi* emphasizing the fixed Centre, complete and Eternal, both Transcendent and Immanent.

The “steps” leading “up” to Solomon’s Throne are analogous to the rungs of the celestial ladder (Jacob’s Ladder). In discussing the symbolism of the ladder, Guénon distinguishes between the “axial” nature of the two vertical posts, leading both up and down, and the more “peripheral” passage through the hierarchic states one by one ‘even though in both cases the final goal is necessarily the same.’⁴³ It should come as little surprise then to find the Midrash describe the ladder of which Jacob dreamed as having 70 rungs, upon which angels of each nation descended and ascended.⁴⁴

A close homologue of the ladder is the celestial tree, one of the most common symbols of the *axis mundi*. The rungs of the ladder equate with the branches of the tree. The *Greater Holy Assembly* of the *Zohar* talks of the “Tree of Life” as having 70 branches: The “holy tree,” it is said, ‘was perfected in the earth ... similar unto the Supernal One, in having twelve limitations and seventy branches’⁴⁵ S. L. MacGregor Mathers notes that this is the Tree of Life (*Autz Chaiim*) ‘composed of the *Sephiroth* and the *Shemhamphorasch* [the 72 lettered name of God], the former being ten and the latter seventy-two. The twelve limitations are the twelve sons of Jacob, and the seventy branches the total number of the combined families.’⁴⁶ This “branch” symbolism is again found with Josephus, where the Temple menorah is comprised of 70 parts. According to Josephus, if one looks upon the description of the

⁴² Schaya, ‘The Meaning of the Temple’, p.360.

⁴³ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.266.

⁴⁴ *Midrash Tanhuma, Vayetze 2*: ‘Said Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahman: “These are the princes of the nations of the world..which the Holy Blessed One showed to Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended 70 rungs and descended. Of Medea, 52 and descended. Of Greece, 100 steps and descended. Of Edom, it ascended and it is not known how many...”’

⁴⁵ *Ha Idra Rabba Qadisha* 692 in MacGregor Mathers tr., *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991, p.197.

⁴⁶ MacGregor Mathers tr., *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, p.197, note.

tabernacle and the Temple, “without prejudice and with judgment,” one will find these ‘made by way of imitation and representation of the universe.’⁴⁷ He interprets the 70 parts of the candlestick as the astrological *Decani* (the 70 divisions of the planets); the 7 lamps as the course of the planets; the sardonyxes as the sun and the moon; and the 12 stones as the Zodiac.

The association of 72 with a symbolism that is both axial and astro-temporal is again found in an Islamic tradition, narrated by Al-Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib:

I was sitting in al-Batha with a company among whom the Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) was sitting, when a cloud passed above them.

The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) looked at it and said: What do you call this? They said: *Sahab*.

He said: And *muzn*? They said: And *muzn*. He said: And *anan*? They said: And *anan*. AbuDawud said: I am not quite confident about the word *anan*. He asked: Do you know the distance between Heaven and Earth? They replied: We do not know. He then said: The distance between them is seventy-one, seventy-two, or seventy-three years. The heaven which is above it is at a similar distance (going on till he counted seven heavens). Above the seventh heaven there is a sea, the distance between whose surface and bottom is like that between one heaven and the next. Above that there are eight mountain goats the distance between whose hoofs and haunches is like the distance between one heaven and the next. Then Allah, the Blessed and the Exalted, is above that.⁴⁸

The word *anan* that is used in this *hadīth* to describe the “cloud” corresponds to the Hebrew *‘ānan* (אָנָן; “to cover,” hence “a cloud”). Interestingly *‘ānan* is closely linked—differing by the shift from the final *nun* to a final *pe*—to the word *‘ānaph* (אָנָפֶה) which indicates “a branch.” It is easy to see how the branches of a tree may be said to cover the world. Furthermore, the Hebrew male name, Chanan, is said to mean “cloud,” where this meaning obviously derives from the root

⁴⁷ *Antiquities*, 3.7.7 (180).

⁴⁸ Sunan Abu Dawud, Bk.40, *hadīth* 4705, tr. A. Hasan (University of South Carolina Compendium of Muslim Texts: Hadith Database, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA>).

chānah (“favour”) in the sense that the bestowing of God’s “favour” is manifested by the falling of “rain,” which, as Guénon, observes, ‘is frequently used to symbolise this descent of celestial influences.’⁴⁹ ‘Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the clouds pour down saving justice’ (*Isaiah* 45:8). As mentioned, *Chānah* is also the root of the name Hannah, generally taken as meaning “grace.” This is God’s Grace or Mercy,⁵⁰ His creative Power descending from on high. Moreover, the rain pouring from heaven is synonymous with the “declining” (*chānāh*) rays of the sun, reaching down to earth.⁵¹

The Arabic term given above as *anan* derives from ‘*amā*’, which indicates “a cloud.” In the hands of Ibn ‘Arabī ‘*amā*’ becomes “The Cloud,” which he identifies with the Breath of the All-Merciful; it is the *Barzakh* standing between God and nothingness, and in which the entire cosmos takes shape.⁵² This type of cloud symbolism is recognisable in the theophany on Mt. Sinai (*Ex.19:9*) and again in the mystical tradition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. According to Ibn ‘Arabī’s intention, it is not simply the case that God manifests within or under cover of a cloud, distinct from the created world; rather God *manifests* “within” the Cloud and that manifestation is Creation itself; the “Cloud,” in turn is none other than the unlimited ontological Substance, the *material prima* of alchemical tradition.⁵³ In *Exodus* the cloud in which Yahweh is said to reside is described precisely as a “pillar” (*Ex.13:22*). This pillar expresses the axial symbolism that is described in the above *hadīth* as the distance between Heaven and Earth,⁵⁴ and in turn explained in terms of the symbolism of 71/72/73. Moreover, this “pillar of cloud,” is itself identified—as we shall see below—with the angel Metatron,

⁴⁹ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, p.97, n.2.

⁵⁰ In the Qur’an rain is a symbol of Allah’s “Mercy” (*Sūrah* 7:55).

⁵¹ See Guénon, ‘Light and Rain’ in *Fundamental Symbols*.

⁵² See *Futūhūt* 310, 311, 420; see W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 125-126.

⁵³ See J. Morris’ note on this subject in Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations Vol.1*, New York: Pir Press, 2002, p.321, n.31. Morris observes that Ibn ‘Arabī is referring to the following *hadīth* concerning the Prophet’s response to the question “Where was our Lord before He created the creation?”: “He was in a Cloud [*amā*], without air above it and without air below it, and He created His Throne upon the Water” (tr. Morris, found in the collections of Ibn Māja, Tirmidhī and Ahmad b. Hanbal).

⁵⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī refers to ‘the state of His being in the “Cloud”’ as the same as ‘the state of His being upon the earth and in heaven (Qur’an 43:84, etc.)’ (tr. Morris, *Futūhūt* 367 [*The Meccan Revelations Vol.1*, p.208]).

who is intimately related to the 72 Names of God and again expresses an axial symbolism.

According to the Babylonian Talmud, there is an angel who is given the same name as his master: this angel is Metatron.⁵⁵ Metatron, in turn, is portrayed as having an angel who is his “brother,” Sandalfon (the name is Greek, συνάδελφος = “co-brother”).⁵⁶ Sandalfon, one of the oldest angel figures of *Merkabah* mysticism, is described as “the tallest of the angels”: ‘He stands upon earth and his head reaches to the level of the *Chayyoth* [the celestial creatures of Ezekiel’s vision]. He is taller than his fellow-angels by a space equal to a journey of five hundred years.’⁵⁷ According to the *Zohar* it is Metatron who is higher than the creatures by a distance of “five hundred years.”⁵⁸ As Isaiah Tishby notes, Metatron also represents the *sefirah Yesod*, a homologue of “the Tree of Life”;⁵⁹ moreover, Tishby observes that in the *Raya Mehemma* and the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* Metatron is even said to be the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁶⁰ Sandalfon is conflated with the prophet Elijah, which is in accord with the axial role Elijah plays in ascending to heaven in a “whirlwind/chariot (*merkabah*) of fire” (2Kgs.2:1-13).⁶¹ Sandalfon fits a universal archetype epitomised by “giants,” such as Atlas, who act as *pontifex* between earth and heaven. He is also the conduit through which God’s creative Power, symbolised by His Name, flows “down” from heaven to earth, which explains this aspect of his relationship with Metatron.⁶²

⁵⁵ See B.T. *Hagigah*, 15a; B.T. *Sanhedrin*, 38 a; B.T. *Avodah Zarah*, 3b. Scholem remarks that the explanation to this tradition is to be found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, where the angel Yaheol says to Abraham, “I am called Yahoel ... a power in virtue of the ineffable name is dwelling in me.” The name Yaheol is the first in the various lists of the “Seventy Names of Metatron” and it appears that many of the attributes of Yaheol are transferred to Metatron (see *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp.68-69).

⁵⁶ Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p. 53; see Naphtali Herz (‘*Emek ha-Melek*, p. 104a) and Jellinek (*Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik*, p. 5) cited in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*: ‘Sandalfon’ (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>)

⁵⁷ *Chagigah* 13b, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ *Zohar Hadash*, *Yitro*, 39d-40a.

⁵⁹ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.2*, p.643, n.53.

⁶⁰ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.2*, p.629.

⁶¹ Moses Cordovero, *Hekaloth*, Ch. 14; also *Mahzor Vitry*, pp. 324 et seq., and *Yalkut Hadash* ed., Presburg, pp. 66-69 cited in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*: ‘Sandalfon.’ (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>).

⁶² In light of our previous comments on rain it is interesting to note that Guénon observes one of the most interesting hypotheses advanced for the origin of the name

The Name of God

The Name of God is not other than God.⁶³ This identity between the name and the thing named—which is at the heart of all theurgy—has its pre-eminent principle in this divine prototype. In discussing the Kabbalism of Abraham Abulafia, Gershom Scholem observes that the Name of God is ‘something absolute, because it reflects the hidden meaning and totality of existence’.⁶⁴ Elsewhere he says that ‘the whole of the Torah, as is often stressed by the author [of the *Zohar*], is nothing but the one great and holy Name of God.’⁶⁵ Rabbi Menahem Recanati remarks, ‘that the kabbalists say that the Holy One, blessed be His name, is the Torah.’⁶⁶ The Torah, it will be recalled, has 70 “faces”; similarly the Divine Name is associated with this symbolism, there being the 72 lettered name of God (the *Shemhamphorasch*) and alternatively 70 and 72 Names of God.⁶⁷

Shem ha-Mephorash (“divided name”) is an epithet for the 72 letter Name of God derived by medieval kabbalists from *Exodus* 14:19-21:

¹⁹ And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them:

²⁰ And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness [to them], but it gave light by night [to these]: so that the one came not near the other all the night.

²¹ And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Yahweh caused the sea to go [back] by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry [land], and the waters were divided.

Metatron is its derivation from the Chaldean Mitra, ‘which means “rain,” but relates through its root form with “light”’ (The Lord of the World, Moorecote: Coombe Springs Press, 1983, p.15).

⁶³ For universal examples of this idea see W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, pp.1031-1036.

⁶⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.133.

⁶⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.210.

⁶⁶ Rabbi Menahem Recanati, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Mizvot* (Basle 1581), 3a, cited in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, p.284.

⁶⁷ There are other forms, such as the 42 letter Name, the 12 letter Name and the Tetragrammaton.

ויסע מלאך האלהים ההלך לפני מחנה ישראל וילך מאחריהם ויסע 19
עמוד הענן מפניהם ויעמד מאחריהם:
ויבא בין | מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל ויהי הענן והחשך ויאר 20
אתהילילה ולא־קרב זה אל־זה כלהילילה:
ויט משה את־ידו על־הים ויולך יהוה | את־הים ברוח קדים עזה 21
כל־הילילה וישם את־הים לחרבה ויבקעו המים:

Each verse is composed of 72 letters; a further 72 “names” are found by reading the letters of the three verses following boustrophedon form so that the second line is reversed, and then grouping the letters in columns of three.⁶⁸

The angel who went before the camp of Israel is described as a “pillar of cloud” and a “pillar of fire” (Ex.13:21-22) and identified with the angel sent to precede and guard Israel (Ex.23:20). Yahweh proclaims of this guardian angel that ‘My name is in him’ (Ex.23:21), which leads to his identification with Metatron.⁶⁹ The images of the “pillar of cloud” and “pillar of fire” suggest the ascension of Elijah who is taken up to heaven by a “whirlwind” (2Kgs.2:1) that is also a “chariot of fire” (2Kgs.2:11). This is not unconnected for, as noted, Elijah is conflated with Sandalfon, who is Metatron’s “co-brother.”

The ascension of Elijah places him in the direct tradition of Enoch, who is said to have ascended alive to heaven: “Enoch walked with God, then was no more, because God took him’ (Gen.5:24). According to apocalyptic tradition, the ascended Enoch was transformed into Metatron (*3Enoch* 4.1-3). This blessing was increased with Metatron being given “72 wings”: ‘36 on one side and 36 on the other, and each single wing covered the entire world’ (*3Enoch* 9:3). The symbolism of 72 is found throughout the literature of Enoch. It is in *3Enoch* that we find the 70 names of God (48B), and, the 70 names of Metatron (48D). Metatron’s 72 wings correspond to the 72 kingdoms (*3Enoch* 17:8) of which Metatron is in charge (3:2). The kingdom’s are under the supervision of 72 angels who act under the angel Rahati’el to control the cycles of the constellations (17:6). These are identified with the 70 “shepherds” given control of the exiled “sheep” (*1Enoch* 89:59); these sheep are immediately the exiled people of Israel after the destruction

⁶⁸ The total number of letters in the whole passage leads to a further 216 lettered Name.

⁶⁹ B. T. *Sanhedrin*, 38 a.

of Jerusalem; they also appear to be derived from the fallen angels (88 & 89 *passim*.) and are in turn related to the 70 nations created with the “burning of the tower” [of Babel] (89:67).

Metatron is not only the Name of God, but also the recorder and transmitter of this divine knowledge. In the heretical vision of Elisha b. Abuyah Metatron is described as the Heavenly Scribe.⁷⁰ In the Babylonian Talmud Metatron is described as co-operating with God in the teaching of the young.⁷¹ These descriptions lead to the identification of Metatron with the Biblical priest-king Melchizedek (Gen.14.).⁷² Recall then that Metatron is considered to be the transmogrification of the ascended Enoch. This tradition bears a marked similarity with that of the ascension of Melchizedek (2*Enoch* 72.1-11). In both instances the protagonist is removed to safety to avoid the destruction of the Flood. According to the account we are given in *Genesis*, Melchizedek bestows or transmits God’s blessing to Abraham. As noted in the *New Jerusalem Bible*, a ‘blessing is an effective and irrevocable word which, even when pronounced by a man, produces the effect which it expresses, since God confers the blessing.’⁷³ The blessing *par excellence* is none other than the blessing of the creative Word—*creatio per Verbum*. God’s blessing is His creative Power, and this is the Power and knowledge of his Name. Hence the bestowal of God’s blessing is also the transmission of the knowledge of His Name; this idea leads to Melchizedek also being portrayed as a “teacher,” again drawing a parallel with Metatron. This link between Melchizedek and Metatron—whose name is the same as his Master—is further developed in the Midrash where Abraham questions his *teacher* “Shem-Melchizedek” on the virtue that merited the saving of his father, Noah, and his brothers on the ark.⁷⁴ In the Jerusalem Targum it is similarly said that it was Shem ‘who was now priest of the most high God and ruled at Salem under the name of Melchizedek’.⁷⁵ The name *shēm* connotes the divine Name, so that the identification of Melchizedek with Shem explicitly indicates the

⁷⁰ *Chagigah* 15a, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, pp.53-54.

⁷¹ B.T. *Abodah Zarah* 3b.

⁷² See for example Z’ev ben Simon Halevi, *Kabbalah: The Divine Plan*, HarperCollins, New York, 1996, p.14; *The Way of Kabbalah*, Rider & Co., London, 1976, p.16, n.73.

⁷³ *New Jerusalem Bible*, see 14:19 note h.

⁷⁴ *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Genesis*, 8: 16.

⁷⁵ J. T. *Genesis Rabba* 44.

homology of Metatron and Melchizedek. In turn Melchizedek is conflated with the archangel Michael,⁷⁶ who is hierarchically aligned with Metatron.⁷⁷

The types of homologues we are considering can become unhelpful, if not dangerous, if we are seduced into trying to find “identifications” of the sort that see the archangel Michael equated with Christ⁷⁸ or, in fact, Metatron equated with God!⁷⁹ What we are interested in is the web of symbolism that evolves from these connections and the manner in which it informs our appreciation of the symbolism of the number 72, and hence the symbolisms associated with this “number.” This is important to note because, of course, Melchizedek is subsequently seen as prefiguring Christ (Heb.5:6). Now Christ is both “the Word” (Jn.1:1) and the “light of the world” (Jn.8:12). This connection between the divine Word and the divine Light, is similarly found with Metatron with the Midrash and the *Zohar* describing the *Fiat Lux* (Gen.1:3) as the “light of Metatron.”⁸⁰

In Jewish tradition the Power of God is found in the divine Name; in Christianity this is expressed by the Word ‘through whom all things came into being and without which not one thing came into being’ (Jn.1:3). We are given this formulation by the evangelist John and this in itself offers us an interesting connection to the symbolism of 72. René Guénon suggests that the symbolism of the name John (Ιωάννης), from the Hebrew *Yōwchānān* (יוחנן), is what is really at issue when we

⁷⁶ M. De Jonge & A. S. Van der Woude observe that ‘This identification is only found in certain medieval Jewish texts. W. Lueken mentions *Jalkut chadasch* f.115, col. 3 num. 19: של מִיכָאֵל נִקְרָא מַלְכֵי מַעְלָה צַרְקָדְהֵן אֶל עֲלִיּוֹן שְׁהוּא כְהֵן שֶׁל מֶלְחִיזֶדֶק...the priest of the Most High who is priest above’ and M. M. Kasher quotes the following tradition on Gen.xiv. 18 from *Midr. Haneelam Lech*. 25: “R. Hiyya the Great taught: When the soul of the righteous who led others to repentance leaves the body, Michael, the great prince who sacrifices the souls of the righteous to the Creator, goes forth and bids it welcome. For it says: *And Melchizedek*, etc. Now, this is none other than Michael, head keeper of the gates of righteousness” (‘11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament’ from *New Testament Studies* 12, 1966, p.305)

⁷⁷ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p.92. De Jonge & Van der Woude note the description, in *11QMelch* of an *other* shepherd [who] writes down everything, identified with Michael (‘11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament’, p.304, n.2) which bares a marked similarity to Metatron as the Heavenly Scribe.

⁷⁸ As for example associated with the Seventh-day Adventist’s prophet, Ellen G. White.

⁷⁹ Hence the heretical nature of Elisha b. Abuyah’s vision.

⁸⁰ *Midrash ha-Ne’elam; Zohar Hadash, Bereshit*, 8d. Metatron is also called ‘the light of the luminary of the *Shekhinah*’ (*Zohar* II, 65b-66b).

consider the connection between John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, and in both cases this must be seen in terms of the sense of the “bringing forth” of the Word, that is to say, the act of creation.⁸¹ In the case of John the Baptist this is signalled, so to speak, by the descent of the dove. Now the Hebrew term for “dove,” *yōwnāh* (יונה), is the same as the name Jonah, *Yōnāh* (יונה). J. Ralston Skinner remarks on this while also claiming that the name *Yōnāh* is the same as the name John.⁸² Philologically the identification of *Yōnāh* (יונה) with *Yōwchānān* (יהונן) is questionable at best, although Skinner is not alone in suggesting this connection.⁸³ Nevertheless, considered in terms of their symbolisms the “identification” of these two words is most interesting. According to *gematria* the value of יונה (Jonah, dove) is 71, a variation on 72. The descent of the dove gives us an obvious axial symbol. The dove is also well recognised as being the Spirit, which is the transformative “power” of God. The baptism offered by *and through* John is a transformative and even cosmogonic process with obvious parallels to the passage through the waters which Jonah undergoes. As John Metford observes, Christian tradition recognises Jonah’s three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish (Jon.2:1) as typologically symbolic of Jesus’ entombment, a parallel made by Jesus himself (Matt.12:39).⁸⁴ These three days and three nights give us a period of 72 hours. In the case of Jesus’ entombment there is some debate that this could not have been 72 hours given that Jesus is said to have died on Friday and been resurrected on Sunday, which it is argued cannot allow for an exact

⁸¹ See also Guénon, ‘Concerning the Two Saint Johns’ in *Fundamental Symbols*.

⁸² J. R. Skinner, *The Source of Measures: Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery* (1894), San Diego: Wizard’s Bookshelf, 1982, p.219.

⁸³ As Clayton Bowen (‘Was John the Baptist the Sign of Jonah?’, *The American Journal of Theology* 20.3, 1961, pp.414-421) observes, Wilhelm Brandt suggested this identification in his *Die Evengelistische Geschichte* (1893, p.459, n.2); Brandt was followed in this by Canon Cheyne (‘John the Baptist’, *Encyclopedia Biblica* II, col.2502) and Alban Blakiston (*John the Baptist and His Relation to Jesus*, 1912, pp.220 f., n.54); independently and on different lines the same identification was argued for by Prof. B. W. Bacon (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 1902, p.232; *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate*, 1910, p.350; *Christianity Old and New*, 1914, p.160). Bowen rejects the philological arguments but recognises the attention this idea warrants based upon Jesus’ allusion to “the sign of Jonah” (Matt.12:39, Lk.11:30). Bowen eventually rejects this identification.

⁸⁴ J. C. J. Metford ed., *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1983, p.145.

period of 72 hours. This type of literalism entirely misses the point of the rich symbolism of the number 72 and is far from the mindset of the people for whom this tradition was first recorded. In fact the symbolic period of 72 hours is again found in the mummification process of the Egyptians and in the Biblical mourning period (Gen.50:3).⁸⁵

The Hebrew word “dove,” *yōwnāh* (יונה), offers us a further development of the symbolism of 72 that links the Christian Word (*Logos*), the Judaic Name (*Shēm*) and the symbolism of the 72 sects in Islam, which, in turn, implicitly return us to the biblical story of Babel and the division of humankind in to “72” groups. Thus, according to Strong *yōwnāh* is most likely derived from the unused root *yayin* (יין), which means “to effervesce,” hence “wine” and by implication “inebriation.” According to *gematria* the value of יין (wine) is 70. The connection to wine immediately suggests the Eucharistic mystery, which is perfectly in accord with the principal symbolism under consideration, for wine is to bread as ontological Essence is to ontological Substance. Moreover, the Hebrew word for “mystery” (*sōd*, סוד) has the value 70. Thus we may see the descent of the dove (71) as analogous, *mutatis mutandis*, to the operation of the wine (70); both of these then express the mystery (70) of creation.

Wine, in turn, returns us to Melchizedek who not only offered Abraham the mystery of initiation, which is to say, new birth and hence creation, but “also”—for these are homologous—offered bread and wine (Gen.14:18).⁸⁶ Melchizedek is identified with both Shem (Shem-Melchizedek), who is the Name of God, and Metatron, whose “name”—the 72 names of Metatron—is the same as his Master. Christ, who is ‘of the order of Melchizedek’ (Heb.5:6, from Ps.110:4), and

⁸⁵ The symbolic division of 72 into three “days” or distinct units brings to mind the following obscure account from the *Babylonian Talmud*: ‘Rabbi Jonathan said: “A third of the tower was burnt, a third sunk, and a third is still standing”’ (*Sanhedrin Folio* 109a, ed. Rabbi I. Epstein, London: Soncino Press, 1935-1948).

⁸⁶ According to St. Cyprian of Carthage: ‘in the priest Melchisedech we see the sacrament of the sacrifice of the Lord prefigured...The order certainly is that which comes from his [Melchizedek’s] sacrifice and which comes down from it: because Melchisedech was a priest of the Most High God; because he offered bread; and because he blessed Abraham. And who is more a priest of the Most High God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who, when he offered sacrifice to God the father, offered the very same which Melchisedech had offered, namely bread and wine, which is in fact His body and his blood! (*Letters* 63:4).

whose flesh and blood is the Bread and Wine, is also the Word, 'through whom all things came into being and without which not one thing came into being,' which is identical with the divine Name. The divine Mystery (70) is the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Name, which is the Word. Thus Origen says:

That bread which God the Word confesses to be His own body is the Word that nourishes souls, the Word proceeding from God the Word... and that drink which God the Word confesses to be His blood is the Word that gives drink and excellent gladness to the hearts of those who drink... For not that visible bread which He held in His hands did God the Word call His body, but the Word in the mystery of which that bread was to be broken. Nor did He call that visible drink His blood, but the Word in the mystery of which that drink was to be poured out. For what else can the body of God the Word, or His blood, be but the Word which nourishes and the Word which gladdens the heart?⁸⁷

Wine is the blood or essence of the grape; by extension to the cosmological plane, wine is a symbol of ontological Essence; from another perspective wine is *gnosis*. One might say that these two readings are identical for, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr remarks, 'The essence of things is God's knowledge of them'.⁸⁸ The state of inebriation, viewed positively and from a principally symbolic position, is a state of indistinction, a return to the primordial unity. St. Cyprian of Carthage says,

the chalice of the Lord inebriates us as Noah drinking wine in *Genesis* was also inebriated ... the inebriation of the chalice ... is not such as the inebriation coming from worldly wine ... actually, the chalice of the Lord so inebriates that it actually makes sober,

⁸⁷ Origen, *In Matt Comm Ser.* 85. Elsewhere he says, 'Now we are said to drink the blood of Christ not only in the way of Sacraments, but also when we receive His words, in which life consists as also He Himself said, "The words which I have spoken unto you are spirit and life." Therefore He Himself was wounded, whose blood we drink, that is, receive the words of His teaching' (*In Num Hom* 16:9).

⁸⁸ S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p.21, n.61.

that it raises minds to spiritual wisdom, that from this taste of the world each one comes to the knowledge of God.⁸⁹

Again, St. Augustine: ‘The light of truth passes not by, but remaining fixed, inebriates the hearts of the beholders.’⁹⁰ In Sufism, particularly the Sufic poetry of Persia, wine is a common symbol for divine *gnosis*, the “drinking” of which brings unity with the divine Mystery. In fact Hafiz draws many of these ideas together when he declares that he could not care less about the strife of the 72 sects as long as he has his glass of wine!⁹¹ In this poetic flourish Hafiz recognises the relationship between the spatio-temporal realm of cosmological existence (the 72 sects) and its divine Principle (wine, 70, the divine Mystery). Moreover, wine is not something to “know” discursively but only through the experience of Unity.

Jesus is himself the Wine and the Word. Jesus then, as we are told, appointed 72 (var.70) to go out before him (Lk.10:1)—these are sent out “in pairs,” i.e. 36 pairs, reminding us of the wings of Metatron. Jesus then declares that ‘their names are written in heaven’ (Lk.10:20) from which we might draw the obvious parallel of the 72 names of God and the 72 angels/shepherds in heaven. As noted above, a scriptural connection between these 72 and the 72 languages of Babel is suggested through *Isaiah* 14. In our current context the symbolism of the 72 languages is that of the manifestation of the creative Principle, the primordial and metaphysical Language-Word. In Christianity this is Christ, the Logos. The 72 disciples in *Luke* are thus the transmission of the metaphysical Word. Let us also note that the symbolism of the “word” transmitted by “72” is also found in Josephus, who ascribes to Aristaes a letter written to Philocrates, describing the Septuagint

⁸⁹ St. Cyprian from Hamman ed., *The Mass: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, 1967, cited in Urban, ‘*Oblatio Rationabilis*: Sacrifice in East and West’, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 8.1, 2002, p.183.

⁹⁰ St. Augustine, *In Ps. XCIII*, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p.638. For numerous other examples of the positive symbolism of wine and drunkenness see Perry, pp.637-640.

⁹¹ Following Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, Oxford: Oxford University press, 1993, p.266. I believe Schimmel is referring to *Divan*, 101; see C. F. Horne ed., *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East*, New York: Parke, Austin, & Lipscomb, 1917, Vol. VIII: *Medieval Persia*, pp. 331-378, although Hafiz may make this connection more explicitly elsewhere.

translation by 72 translators, who are then said to have completed their task in exactly 72 days.⁹² In this case the “word” is the Torah, which is “nothing but the one great and holy Name of God.”⁹³

Concluding remarks

For those that have “eyes to see and ears to hear” the traditions we have been considering speak for themselves. The exegete who surrenders to this symbolism is drawn outward from the isolation of their individuality and connected with the net of homologous symbols which declares the unity in multiplicity of all creation. Simultaneously they are focused ever more inward upon Unity and in turn transported in an anagogic manner, upwards rung by rung, step by step, moving through the 72 stations, which are the entirety of our created existence, to reach the Throne at the Heart of the Cloud from whence issues the Word and Name of God.

⁹² *Antiquities* 22.2 *passim*.

⁹³ These comments are not intended to suggest that Josephus was working from Luke or vice versa, questions of textual transmission, dependence, or influence being entirely secondary here. Without then denying the idea of influence it should be enough to recognise that Luke’s reference to *Isaiah* tends to suggest that he was aware of these symbolic connections, and Josephus of course presents numerous examples of his appreciation of this type of symbolism.

Creation, Originality and Innovation in Sufi Poetry

Patrick Laude

Sufism is most often introduced as being concerned with the heart. Although there may be as many definitions of Sufism as there are Sufi Masters, if not more given the variety of inspirations through which a given Master may express himself or herself, it is not rare for these definitions to refer to a purification of the heart, an appeasement of the heart, or a change of heart, or an opening of the eye of the heart, and so on. In his *Minhāj at-tasawwuf* (Epistle on Sufism) for example, the Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī emphasises the need for a pure heart when writing that ‘the heart should show no bad character, neither jealousy, nor bewilderment, nor pessimism.’¹ In parallel, *tasawwuf* has not uncommonly been designated as the “science of the heart,” or the “heart of Islam.” The term heart, of course, has become highly polysemic, and is frequently reduced to the seat of sentiments and to the physiological organ. Sufi writers understand the heart as a reality that encompasses a variety of levels, from the piece of flesh that pumps blood into the whole body up to the centre of consciousness where the Divine touches the human. In a sense all of the realities that are referred to by the term “heart” share in the same privilege of centrality, and lower manifestations of this principle of centrality are none but reflections of the higher ones; this means that the spiritual heart, which is both the goal and the principle of spiritual work, finds an analogical manifestation in the physical heart itself. This analogy is further reflected in the fact that the physical heart is the means through which blood is purified and pumped into the whole body. The symbolic analogy between the blood and the soul clearly indicates that the heart as locus of contact with the Divine is the organ of purification of the individual psychic substance that animates the whole being. A famous

¹ ‘*Wa dhahira al-qalb min al-wasfi al-madhmūm lā hasadān lā ‘ajabān lā tashā’um*’ in *Minhāj at-tasawwuf*, Beirut: Albouraq, 2006, pp.30-31.

hadīth refers to this principle: ‘Beware! verily there is a piece of flesh in the body of man, which when good, the whole body is good; and when bad, the whole body is bad, and that is the heart.’²

The Arabic term *qalb*, which is one of the most often used in Sufism, conveys etymologically a whole range of meanings that have all in common denotations of alternated motion, such as to turn, to reverse, to tip over, to upturn, to turn upside down, or inside out, and so forth. Although the heart is apprehended as central, intimate, profound and essential, it is not understood as static. The evident reason of these two seemingly contradictory aspects of the heart lies in its being the locus of encounter between the influx of the divine infiniteness and the limitations of the human individuality. The heart is a *barzakh*, an intermediary locus, at which the immensity of the ocean meets with the boundaries of the individual ego, thereby involving an ever moving measure of alternation, change and turbulence, as the waves on the shore. A Qur’ānic source par excellence for such an understanding is to be found in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, the Chapter of the Cave, when the heart of the young men of the cave is described as being both unmoving in its link to the Divine while being ever moved by the influxes of the latter:

We gave strength to their hearts: Behold, they stood up and said:
“Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and of the earth: never shall
we call upon any god other than Him.” (Qur’ān 18:14)

Thou wouldst have deemed them awake, whilst they were asleep,
and We turned them on their right and on their left sides. (Qur’ān
18:18)

In this sūrah, the two divine motions of the heart are quite suggestive, if not instructive: there is first a strengthening (i.e. *rabatna*) akin to a binding or linking, which results in a standing and outer affirmation of faith. There is, secondly, an outer sleep that is in fact a state of spiritual wakefulness, in the sense that the sleepers are completely abandoned,

² Abdullah Al-Mamun Al Suhrawardy ed., *The Sayings of Muhammad*, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004, p.53.

forgetting their own will in sleep, while being awake in the spirit, obedient to the Divine motion that turns them left and right.

This fundamental disposition of Sufism, which some contemporary masters have equated to the situation of the corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead, bears a relationship with the notion of *waqt*, or instant, and appropriateness to this moment. Qushayri in his classic *al-Risālat fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* quotes al-Makki as stating that ‘Sufism is that the servant of God’s behaviour in each moment be most appropriate for that particular moment.’³ The *waqt* expresses and manifests the will of God as it determines the *qalb* in its particular state. The discontinuity in the sequence of the *awqāt*, which is metaphysically expressed in the Akbarian doctrine of *al-khalq al-jadīd*, or renewal of creation at each instant,⁴ is in fact none other than an expression of this unending series of alternations.

Any cursory review of Sufi poetry makes it plain that one of its main themes has to do, precisely, with this “changing heart.” As the most fundamental manifestations of this changing heart, Martin Lings comments, in his *What is Sufism?*, on the two basic spiritual expressions of proximity and distance, i.e. expansion, *bast*, and contraction, *qabd*, as being the most fundamental manifestations of this changing heart.⁵ These are analogous to the systole and diastole of the physical heart, which are themselves outer reflections of the metaphysical ambivalence of creation. This is the “magic” of the universe which is neither “pure being” nor “pure nothing.” Being is as it were on loan from the Divine, while nothingness is only a tendency that is never reached, to use Schuon’s expressions.⁶ This is another way of saying that metaphysical continuity is from God, or more precisely from the Divine Essence, or subjectively from the Heart, whereas metaphysical discontinuity

³ Al-Qushayri, *Epistle on Sufism*, tr. A. Knysh, Reading: Garnet, 2007, p.289.

⁴ In his *Lawā'ih*, Jamī speaks of the instantaneous renewal of the universe: ‘The universe consists of accidents pertaining to a single substance, which is the Reality underlying all existence. This universe is changed and renewed unceasingly and at every moment and breath’ (*Lawā'ih* 26, tr. E. H. Whinfield & M. M. Kazwini, London: Oriental Translation Fund XVI, 1906, p.42, cited in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Supplementum Vol. 8, 1947, p.99).

⁵ M. Lings, *What is Sufism?*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, p.82.

⁶ See for example F. Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2000, pp.75 & 20.

proceeds, as a mere appearance, from the point of view of separativeness, a point of view that results from an inadequate perception of reality on our part. ‘We are closer (*aqrab*) to you than your jugular vein’ states the Qur’ān 50:16, while humans are the victims of their own *ghaflah* (heedlessness or inadvertance), the Qur’ān referring frequently to those who forgets that their metaphysical origin is in God as *ghāfilūn* (“the heedless ones”; for example Qur’ān 30:7; 7:179 and 205).

Sufi poetry is an expression of, and a response to, this human sway between presence and absence. The thrust of this paper will deal with this fundamental aspect of the question, but we would like, first of all, to introduce these reflections by a consideration of the concept of poetry in Islam, a consideration that is not without relevance to the substance of our argument, as it will appear in the coming pages.

Sufism is considered by many, today in Europe and in America, as the form, or the movement which, in Islam—when it is in fact deemed to be part of Islam—is the most conducive to creativity and the most independent from the dogmatic, formal, and conventional limitations with which this religion is frequently associated. The usual pairing of mysticism and poetry highlights this sense of freedom and unshackled authenticity that has become the hallmark of Sufism, at least as understood in the West. However, our contention is that such a reputation for originality and innovation cannot be adequately buttressed without a full consideration of the profound anchoring of Sufi poetry in tradition.

The relationship of Islam with poetry is encapsulated in the following Qur’ānic passage, which allow us to understand the ambiguity of the poetic word in Islam.

And the poets—the perverse follow them; hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley and how they say that which they do not?

Save those that believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God oft, and help themselves after being wronged; and those who do wrong shall surely know by what overturning they will be overturned. (Qur’ān 26:224-227)

It must be emphasized at the outset that the main reproach directed by the Qur’ān to the poets is that they “say what they do not.” This is a

reproach that highlights the danger of words as substitutes for actions, the snares of the word as a distraction from being. The “wandering” aspect of poets is both a historical reality that pertains, in pre-Islamic society, to the somewhat unstable and socially marginal existence of poets, such as Hassan ibn Thābit, and to the symbolic straying of their aesthetic “lies.”⁷ These are the complacencies and the perils that Plato had also in mind when he proposed to banish poets from the city.⁸ Plato condemned the poets for allowing themselves to express images that are not in conformity with the Good, thereby indulging in the realm of moral weaknesses and ontological *phantasmata*, the illusory appearances that prevent us to gaze at archetypal realities. He was therefore focusing on the negative, potentially alienating aspect of poetry. In an Arab context, the perspective in which “poetic lies” are envisaged might be less metaphysical than moral and aesthetic, but it still bears witness to the reputation of poets as verbal magicians, soothsayers and experts in imaginary fallacies. Be that as it may, the Qur’ānic “exception” (*istithnā’*, “except those who believe and work righteousness”) accounts for a kind of bifurcation into two poetic paths, one highly compatible with Islam, and the other not, a bifurcation analogous to Ali Lakhani’s judicious distinction between T.S. Eliot’s “poetry of accomplishment” and a mere “poetry of surfaces.”⁹ Such distinctions lead us to conclude that there are, fundamentally, two kinds of poets whom we could call phantasmatic poets and iconic or *āyātic* (from *āyāt* or “signs”) poets. The first are “magicians” inasmuch as they transform and deform reality whereas the second are gifted with a power of perception—from

⁷ Muhammad Asad’s translation and commentary (*The Message of the Qur’an*) offers the following: ‘Art thou not aware that they roam confusedly through all the valleys [of words and thoughts], [The idiomatic phrase *hama fi wīdyān* (lit., ‘he wandered or “roamed” through valleys’) is used, as most of the commentators point out, to describe a confused or aimless—and often self-contradictory—play with words and thoughts. In this context it is meant to stress the difference between the precision of the Qur’an, which is free from all inner contradictions (cf. note on 4:82), and the vagueness often inherent in poetry.]

⁸ *Republic*, 3.9.8 A-B.

⁹ As Lakhani says, ‘... the highest order of poetry will be consciously rooted in Truth. Such poetry can be termed “the poetry of accomplishment.” Other, lesser forms of poetry may aim ... to express Truth, without authentically achieving such expression. ... Below these forms lies what conventionally passes for poetry, some of which may incidentally express Truth, without intending it. Such poetry might be termed the “poetry of surfaces”’ (*The Metaphysics of Poetic Expression*, Sacred Web Publishing, 2008, p.11).

sha'ara (“to perceive,” “to feel”)—that is normally unknown to other men.

It is in this context that the “innovative” reputation of poetry needs to be approached. Let us begin by specifying that the term “innovation” (*bid'ah*) is not, in and of itself, pejorative in Islam. In fact, much of its negative colouring results from the recent ideological influence of pro-Salafi modes of understanding Islam. Normatively, all that can be said is that there is an etymological and metaphysical connection between *bid'ah*, innovation, and the creative power. God alone is, in a sense, entitled to *bid'ah*, since he alone is *Mubdi'* as being the first Creator, Originator of all things, hence the suspicion, sometimes obsessive, concerning human innovation in religious matters in Islam.¹⁰ Actually, the root *BD'* is to be found in the Qur'ān to refer to God's ability to create, or more specifically to create for the first time, to originate: *Badī'u as-samāwāti wa'l ard'* (‘Creator of the heavens and the earth’—Qur'ān 6:101). Human “innovation”, and poetic “innovation” in particular, has been read, in that perspective, as a kind of usurpation of God's power, and a betrayal of the fresh and authentic originality of his creative Word. By contrast with the Qur'ān, any human words would seem “inauthentic.” God is the first and only Creator, which means that every other act of “creation” can only be conceived as a copy of the original, and a copy that can only be either a poor distortion or a dangerous substitute. In so far as Islam is centred on the sense of pristine origin, or *fitrah*, it manifests a particularly acute sensitivity to the alterations and deformations to which this origin may be subjected.

However, poetry is, by definition, a kind of “creation” and “innovation,”¹¹ and this is in fact the essence of poetic perception. According to the eleventh century rhetorician 'Alī Ibn Rashīq, ‘if the poet did not conceive a concept or invent one, or embellish an expression,¹² or give it an original twist, or expand the concepts others

¹⁰ The semantic field of *BD'* includes newness, originality, wonder, magnificence, and uniqueness. The science of metaphor is *'ilm al-badī'*, a rhetorical term that refers to an idea of embellishment, adornment.

¹¹ This aspect of “production” is far more evident in Greek than in Arabic. Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes that ‘the Arabic word for poetry (*al-shi'r*) is related to the root meaning consciousness and knowledge rather than making as is the case with *poiesis*’ (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, SUNY Press, 1989, p.12).

¹² This “embellishment” seems indissociable from Arabic poetry. According to 'Abd al-Qahir the science of figures, ‘descriptive of the means by which verbal structure should be

treated wrongly, or shorten the expressions others made excessively long, or use a concept in a different way than it had been used before, then the name of poet would be given to him in a figurative sense and not in a real one.’¹³ Even though the innovative character of poetry is primarily envisaged by poetics on a formal or verbal level, or to the domain of intuitive perception, the two being in fact subtly related, it must be acknowledged that a concern for “originality” is part and parcel of the practice of poetry. Notwithstanding such an acknowledgment, it must be granted that originality may be given quite distinct meanings. As Martin Lings observes, ‘the word “original” has become encrusted with meanings which do not touch the essence of originality but which are limited to one of its consequences, namely difference, the quality of being unusual or extraordinary’; in contrast as Lings notes, ‘The original is that which springs directly from the origin or source’.¹⁴

In point of fact, mystical poetry is particularly intent on reaching this origin that is the inimitable seal of true originality.¹⁵ To the extent that it is profound, poetry is *dhikr*, a remembrance of the Origin. This remembrance being understood not only nor primarily in a temporal sense, but in a metaphysical, therefore ever concrete and immediate, sense. It bears stressing that *dhikr* is both mention and remembrance. When the Qur’ān reminds its auditors of those whom ‘neither trade nor business distract from the *dhikr* of God’ (Qur’ān 62:8-10) it must be suggested that there may be more, in this remark, than a mere reminder of the ever binding moral imperatives of the consciousness of God, or more than a reference to a purely intentional and general recognition of God: the term *dhikr* is actually more encompassing than this expedient interpretation would allow us to think, reaching to a point that conventional religion cannot envisage for lack of a sense of the self-transcendence involved in the spiritual path. The best evidence of the spiritual demands of the Qur’ān lies in the fact that *dhikr* is not only remembrance but also mention. As mention, it is presence by and

“adorned,” ... had reached an advanced stage as early as in classical poetics of the 9-11th cc.’ (V. Braginsky, *The Comparative Study of Traditional Asian Literatures: From Reflective Traditionalism to New-Traditionalism*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000, p.165).

¹³ *Kitāb al-‘Umda fī mahāsīn ash-shi’r wa ādābih*, in V. Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age*, Leiden: Brill, 1975, pp.148-9.

¹⁴ Lings, *What is Sufism?*, pp.14-15.

¹⁵ In an analogous sense, Jacques Maritain wrote that only the saint is a true “original.”

through utterance of the Name of God, as remembrance it bears witness to an absence that it fills, precisely, by remembering. *Dhikr* is both mantic and mantric: it pertains to *manteia* and to *mantra*, to prophecy and to invocation. As remembrance it is prophetic or mantic in the sense of speaking of what is absent, and for what is absent. It evokes, quasi-magically in fact, what is not available to the senses; and it does so by means of its mantric power as mention. Sufism derives, in fact, its strong faith in the “presential” (*hudūri*) function of the Names of God from the fact that these Names flow from the same source of revelation as the Qur’ān itself, being both parts of it and the main messages from it.

The dialectic, or coincidence, between presence and absence in mystical poetry is evident in its inspiration. Thus mystical poetry involves both a “manic” inspiration and the language of “logic,” what is called in Islam, *mantiq*. With respect to the first of these characteristics, let us recall that Plato describes poetry as a *mania*, or madness;¹⁶ in other words there is a divinity that moves the poet, and that we refer to as “inspiration.” It results from it that poetry is not “art,” in the sense of a technique to be acquired, but “inspiration,” in the sense of an inner state of “enthusiasm” that takes hold of the poet. In Sufism, an analogon of such a state is to be found in the *shath*, which can be defined as a kind of divine commotion and unveiling. This “manic” dimension is, as it were, the divine side of the poetical work, the grace without which the poem would be nothing more than an assemblage of words, be it relatively harmonious. Attar’s *Mantiq al-tayr* (Language of the Birds) suggests, moreover, an interesting connection between such a “poetic” state, which we today conceive as “irrational” and the domain of rationality. In fact, the *Mantiq al-tayr* refers to a “logic,” or a “conference,” or a “discourse” of birds, thereby suggesting a bridge between the world of poetics and that of logic. The term *mantiq*, in Arabic, refers both to language and to logic, which suggests a connection between the realm of intelligence and that of poetry. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes, the disconnection between the realm of poetry and that of logic, which contemporary discourses tends to highlight, is in outright opposition to the traditional doctrine ‘according to which poetry and logic refer to a single Reality that binds and yet

¹⁶ *Ion* 534 A-E.

transcends them.¹⁷ This traditional conception echoes the “language of birds,” that is an intellective intimation of the divine, cosmic “numbers” of things which is a prerogative of the traditional poet. The fundamental bond between the two domains is moreover reflected in the fact that traditional poetry includes a logical dimension, while doctrinal expressions of a logical nature often incorporate a poetical aspect. Among Sufi texts of a purely doctrinal nature, the greatest, such as the *Gulshan-i rāz* of Shabistari, are also poetical masterpieces.

What is the relevance of this two-fold understanding of poetry as manic and *mantiq* to the question of presence and absence? Poetic *mania* refers to a human absence in the context of divine presence, in the sense that it presupposes a suspension of ordinary consciousness, which is superseded by divine inspiration, or by a divine mode of consciousness. This is illustrated by a number of poetic utterances which, in the context of Sufism, imply a kind of substitution of identity. The poetry of Hallāj is particularly characteristic of this kind of “theopathic” utterance: ‘*Anā man ahwā wa man ahwā anā...*’ (‘He am I whom I love, He whom I love is I...’).¹⁸ By contrast, poetry as *mantiq* or logic points to a human presence that is as if delegated by the divine Absent. Poetic logic is like a gift, or a legacy from God to man, so that man may recover something of the Divine Presence in the Divine Absence. This is, as it were, the human side of the poetic equation, the human reflection of the Divine Intellect.

It results from the preceding lines that mystical poetry is both analogous to the Qur’ān and dissimilar to it. It is akin to the Qur’ān as *dhikr*, and also in the phenomenology of inspiration as a suspension of ordinary consciousness, as *mania*. However, poetry is also “logical,” i.e. it obeys a certain human, formal logic, of which the rules of prosody are so to speak the formal reflection. The Qur’ān is freed from such human, formal constraints, and such is, in a sense, the secret of its incomparability. The Qur’ān is not only inimitable in terms of its formal, logical or conceptual content but, above all, because of that to which it leads by virtue of its belonging to a higher degree of reality. The Qur’ān testifies to its divine nature not so much in terms of what it

¹⁷ S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, New York: SUNY, 1987, p. 87.

¹⁸ M. Lings ed., *Sufi Poems: A Medieval Anthology*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2004, pp.38-39.

is itself, as a verbal system, as by what it alludes to by virtue of its divine inspiration. While poetry is like the language of *presence in absence*, springing forth, as a compensation, from a longing of the heart for the Divine Presence from within its very absence, the Qur'ān, by contrast, is akin to a pointer to God's absence, or rather transcendence, within the very texture of His Word as presence. God is present in his Book, but this book is also a recurrent reference to what lies beyond, and cannot be accessed. We could almost say, in a most paradoxical fashion, that with the Qur'ān there is a kind of mysterious *immanence of transcendence*.

With respect to poetry, it must be emphasized that it is, in large measure, a language intent on filling the void left by the divine parting from the soul. Let us quote Martin Lings on this aspect of presence in the midst of absence:

...herebelow Saints are no longer in the Paradise of Eden, and as things are and have been through historic times, the sense of separation from God and the return to the intrusive imperfections of this lower world can be overwhelming, despite the certitude of the Saint that the state of Union cannot be lost and that every apparent absence is within the framework of Presence. The soul spontaneously seeks a means of relief, and the chief means, needless to say, is prayer. Another means of relief, not altogether unconnected with prayer, is to give birth to a poem.¹⁹

Poetry, like prayer, stems from the gap that is left when the immediacy of union, or presence, has released its blissful hold on the soul. Opposing mystical experience and poetical expression—as it has sometimes been done under the pretext that the former thrives on fullness and presence while the latter flows from emptiness and absence—is therefore inaccurate. It would be more adequate to write that poetry is like the resplendent shadow, if one be allowed this oxymoron, of the pure light of presence. Martin Lings' analogy between poetry and prayer, is therefore highly suggestive of the ambivalent, half-human half-divine, status of poetry. However, his statement also implies that prayer is a more central “means of relief” than poetry, its

¹⁹ Lings, Preface, *ibid.*, p.viii.

divine focus reabsorbing, as it were, its human locus. This is particularly true of jaculatory prayer (*dhikru-Llāh*) in which, as Schuon has indicated, it is in fact God Himself who utters, in a mysterious but most real way, His Name in us.²⁰ In poetry, by contrast, the reciprocity between the Divine and the human, conveys a sense of reverse analogy in which the human absorbs the elixir of divine presence, and thereby transmutes the terrestrial language of man.

There is a sense, however, in which this contrast between poetry and the Qur'ān must be qualified, and as it were reversed. Let us note, in this respect, that the mystic generally aspires to become consumed into silence: poetry tends toward silence, which is pure presence. This cannot be better exemplified than by *Khamush*, the Silent One, which is Rumi's nickname. Fatemeh Keshavarz, commenting on Rumi, encapsulates a major dimension of Sufi poetry in general: 'One may see the *Dīvān* as an intense expression of the desire to abandon the spoken word and embrace silence.'²¹ This longing for silence, far from being akin to an annihilation, can be considered, in fact, as an ontological fullness. It is extinction, or *fanā'*, from the point of view of analytic manifestation while being permanence, *baqā'*, from the point of view of synthetic implicitness.²² The higher reality always appears as a "nothing" from the standpoint of the lower one. Schuon's definition of the poem as "form in motion toward its essence" highlights the ontological primacy of the meaningful "silence" which constitutes the archetype or the entelechy of words. In that sense the silence that inhabits and mysteriously informs mystical poetry as a longing testifies to a feeling that language is "not enough." It is the sign of language's impotence and limitations, but also, paradoxically, the index of an excess of language: the need for silence amounts to opening a space in

²⁰ 'There is an orison wherein God Himself is in a sense the Subject, and that is the pronouncing of a revealed divine name' (F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 1995, p.125).

²¹ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi*, Aiken: University of South Carolina, 1998, p.49.

²² Jurjānī identifies *fanā'* and *faqr* (poverty) to the 'unfathomable black (*sawād*) of the face in the two domains of *mulk* and *malakūt*,' i.e. the world of manifestation and that of divine Mystery. What this black is to the visual field, silence is to the auditory realm. As for *baqā'*, it is akin, for Ibn 'Arabī, to the letter *hā'* that concludes the Name Allāh and 'expresses the ultimate synthesis of the unconditioned mystery.' Cf. Al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb at-ta'rīfāt*, M. Gloton ed., Beirut: Albouraq, 2005, pp.332 & 356).

the false “plenitude” of language in order to suggest the infinitude of the beyond, which words cannot capture. Language, especially in poetry, can in fact obstruct reality by making a potential idol of its verbal arrangements.

This twofold relationship between poetry and silence results from the Word being both a reflection of God and a separation from God, from its source, a mere echo. This leads us to the recognition of two types of silence, both of which are at work in poetry. The first type of silence hints at the deepest layer of Reality as the unutterable essence of all words. This is the initial and final silence, which bears no connection to the words that follow and precede, while being the underlying substratum of all sounds, like the subjacent silence of a music. It is, as it were, an unarticulated fullness of language from which language derives and to which it returns.

The second type of silence is relational, and is therefore always relative to words. It proceeds by contrasts and alternations. This is silence as the “interstice” between the words. It can be a way to expand the effect of words, thereby suggesting both their power and their limitations. In such cases, the imperfection of language is hinted at by silence, but this same silence can also be a resounding space for the suggestive power of words. So the immanent charge of the poetic word is also informed by a call to transcendence.

Conversely, the transcendence highlighted by the *Qur’ān*, as exemplified by its status of *ijāz* (incomparability) and its leitmotif of *tanzīh* (abstraction) and ever furthering distance, tends to be turned inside out (*qalb*), as it were, by the Sufi unveiling of the dimension of immanence, in and by the quintessential synthesis of the Book, which many Sufis understand to be the *Shahādah* and the divine Name (*al-ism al-‘azīm*). In Sufi practice, the Divine Name becomes the epitome of Divine Presence. The *dhikr* is in fact understood, at its height, as an actualization of Divine Presence, a spiritual synthesis of the whole *Qur’ān*.

The alternation of presence and absence²³ that lies at the heart of mystical poetry is not only a subjective reality.²⁴ It finds its deepest

²³ This paradoxical status of the Sufi—between absence and presence—is expressed by al-Rudhbari: ‘Sufism is a vigil at the door of the Beloved, even when you are being chased way’ (Qushayri, *Epistle on Sufism*, p.290).

foundation in the very structure of Reality as a veil upon the Divine Face. As the heart that moves back and forth from presence to absence, and alternates days and nights, the world of manifestation is itself both a veil that hides and one that reveals. In fact, the objective and subjective aspects of this metaphysical hide-and-seek are intimately intertwined. Thus is expressed the ambiguity, or even the mobility, of creation in a famous passage by Mahmud Shabistari:

Were She to shake those fragrant tresses from her face,
Not one impious soul would be left in the world.

Were She to hold them still so as to hide her face,
Not one true believer would be left to existence.²⁵

The “fragrant tresses” are, in Shabistari, the multiplicity in which the Divine both hides itself and manifests itself. Behind this veil lies the unity of the Divine. When moving or shaking, these “hair” reveal that which they hide, when set in their place they hide the face of the Beloved. Creation is a play of hide-and-seek, as expressed by Ibn ‘Arabi: ‘The universe is neither pure being nor pure nothingness. It is entirely magic: it makes you believe that it is God and it is not God; it makes you believe it is creation and it is not creation, for it is neither this nor that in all respects.’²⁶ The ambiguous status of creation accounts, metaphysically, for the interplay of silence and words, presence and absence that is so characteristic of Sufi poetry.

‘It makes you believe that it is God’ points to the principle that the world leads us into thinking it is the real God inasmuch as it wants us to envisage it independently from God, while it is actually real only by and through God. So it can make you believe, in “its own terms,” that it is

²⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi, in his *Tarjumān*, makes the point that the outer perception of the Beloved is un-needed since His reality is to be found in the heart: ‘*Amā yakfīhi annī bi-qalbi-hī, yushāidnī fi kulli-waqt, amā, amā?*’ [‘Is it not enough for him that I am in his heart and that he beholds me at every moment? Is it not enough?’] (*Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, tr. R. A. Nicholson, London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978, p.57). This verse expresses the very mystery of presence in absence.

²⁵ Mahmud Shabistari, *Garden of Mystery, Gulshan-i rāz*, tr. R. Abdul Hayy Darr, Cambridge: Archetype, 2007, p.141.

²⁶ *Futuhāt* IV, quoted in C. Addas, *Ibn Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996, p.87.

in fact God, by making you oblivious of the fact that the unity is to be realised on the level of *wujūd* (Being) and not *mawjūd* (relative beings), on the level of Divine Substance, not accidents. Conversely, the universe of manifestation ‘makes you believe’ it is creation in so far as it is separated from God, and because it makes you envisage this separation as somehow “absolute” by virtue of it being “not nothing,” by and through God. So the separation, albeit relative, is made apparently absolute in that it is not nothing, therefore a reflection of the absoluteness of the One. The universe is therefore a kind of perpetual alternation between an Absolute that is never fully realised in relativity, and a nothingness that is never reached.

This alternation appears, in a symbolic way, in the very manner in which poetry reveals itself as a spiritual medium to Ibn ‘Arabi:

The reason which has led me to utter (*talaffuz*) poetry is that I saw in a dream an angel who was bringing me a piece of white light; as if it were a piece of the sun’s light. “What is that?” I asked. “It is *Sūrah al-shu‘arā’* (the *Sūrah* of the Poets)” was the reply. I swallowed it, and felt a hair (*sha’r*) stretching from my chest up to my throat, and then into my mouth. It was an animal with a head, a tongue, eyes, and lips. It stretched forth until its head reached the two horizons, that of the East and that of the West. After that, it shrank back and returned to my chest; at that moment I realised that my words would reach the East and the West. When I came back to myself, I uttered verses that came forth from no reflection and no intellectual process whatsoever. Since that time, this inspiration has never ceased; and it is because of this sublime contemplation that I have collected all the poetry that I can remember. But there is much more that I have forgotten! Everything that this collection contains is thus, thanks be to God, nothing other than [the fruit of] divine projection, a holy and spiritual inspiration, a splendid, celestial heritage....²⁷

There is here, besides the obvious sanction of, and justification for, spiritual poetry as a kind of prolongation of the Qur’ān itself, quite a suggestive alternation between the smallest reality, symbolized by the

²⁷ Quoted in C. Addas, ‘The Ship of Stone’, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 19, 1996 (<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/shipofstone.html>).

hair, and the widest, expressed by the expanse of the horizon. The piece of light, the very element of vision, becomes, when ingested, a hair that is imperceptible to the eye but still perceptible inwardly, in the chest, presumably as an element of discomfort or unease that can only be released through the throat and the mouth. The spiritual reality of the *sūrah* “The Poets” is interiorized by Ibn ‘Arabī, and becomes itself the principle of the production of poetry. This means that the negative assertions of the *sūrah* toward poets can only be deemed to be extrinsic, and do not touch upon the essence of spiritual poetry. The ordinary *tafsīr* (interpretation) of these verses assert that the negative reference to the poets is a way to highlight that the Prophet was not himself a poet and a soothsayer. Poets are to be condemned because they create a verbal reality that does not correspond to what is, and they do so through excessive praises, lies and soothsaying. They do so because they do not perceive reality as it is (*tawhīd*) in the first place, and they are “associationists” inasmuch as their ego is involved in this poetic construction of reality on the sands of delusory words.

In sharp contrast with this illusory, phantasmatic reputation of poetry, it follows from the symbol of the hair, the smallest atom of visibility or perceptibility, that the production of poetry originates both from an assimilation of the Qur’ān and from an inner, quasi-irresistible, urge, since a hair cannot remain in the throat without producing a discomfort that needs to be resolved in and by outer production. Moreover, commenting upon this passage in her biography of Ibn ‘Arabī, Claude Addas has mentioned that the imaginal transformation of the hair into an animal spreading over the horizon alludes to the universality of the message of Islam and Sufism, particularly as expressed in Ibn ‘Arabī’s works.²⁸ Inwardness and universality are the two poles of the Muhammadan inspiration, as stemming from this passage. This two-fold aspect is expressed by the alternation between the inner locus of perception, the chest, and the outer horizon, the two

²⁸ ‘Furthermore, the animal’s expansion presages, according to Ibn ‘Arabī’s own remarks, the future of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s teachings. This vision that announces the diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work from all appearances falls within the scope of the strictly universal dimension of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ministry, that is, of the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood. In the eyes of Muslims, and especially in Ibn ‘Arabī’s eyes, this characteristic of universality is a privilege (scripturally based on Qur’ān 34:28) of the *risāla muhammadiyahya*, of the mission of the Prophet’ (Addas, ‘The Ship of Stone’).

intermediary elements, or steps, being the mouth and the animal. The most imperceptible, the hair, comes to the mouth, where it becomes word, and then “animal” in the sense of a universal message perceptible by the senses, reaching finally the whole horizon. The near imperceptibility and subtlety of the hair, which is explicitly connected by Ibn ‘Arabī to the Muhammadan Seal, may also be read as an allusion to the principle that the junction between the Divine and the human is of such a subtle nature as to be almost imperceptible outwardly until it manifests itself in and through outer creation, word or poetry. Poetry proceeds from an imperceptible reality that outpours into creation, with a final view to bring us back to the “original” heart.

As production, or creation, poetry connects the innermost and the outermost, it attempts at expressing the imperceptible in the language of the perceptible. The imperceptible is intuitive insight, mystical union, and the perceptible is couched in a language that speaks to the senses and sentiments. Hence, the alternation of poetry between presence and absence, success and failure, fulfillment and lack. These alternations are thus expressed by Rumi:

To capture love whatever words I say
Makes me a shame when love arrives my way,
While explanation sometimes makes things clear
True love through silence only one can hear:
The pen would smoothly writes the things it knew
But when it came to love it split in two (...) ²⁹

In the language of Rumi, love is presence, and intellect absence, while poetry is as if oscillating between the two. If love is experience of spiritual fruition by presence, and intellect discursive distance, therefore exteriority vis-à-vis the mystical source, poetry cannot but be situated on the ambiguous and unstable locus of a kind of “necessary impossibility.” It aims at distilling presence, but cannot do so without a measure of absence. This imbalance accounts for the fact that mystical poetry shifts back and forth between “theopathic utterance” and “theoretical explanation.” This is a paradoxical position, since both ends take us away from poetry as such, the first end verging upon unitive

²⁹ Jawid Mojaddedi tr., *The Masnavi: Book One*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.11.

experience, and therefore immediacy and silence, the second end leading into verbal insubstantiality, and even artifice.

What precedes leads us to conclude that the practice of spiritual poetry could be schematized in the form of a triangular structure, namely an inverted triangle the summit of which is the heart as seat of the divine presence. The upper, horizontal line of the triangle ranges from the mind as organ of mental crystallization and metaphorical representation of presence, to the poem itself as linguistic production. The upper left angle, where the mind is situated, is in fact the very locus of ambivalence since it can either faithfully transmit, or appropriate and betray, the immediacy of the heart's intuition springing forth from the inverted summit, hence the ambiguity of poetry that the Qur'ān suggests: 'They say what they do not.' In that sense, the pretension and hypocrisy of poetry is akin to a more general flaw, which is referred to in Islam as *ri'ā'*. Jurjānī defines *ri'ā'* as a "renunciation to *ikhhlās* (sincerity, rectitude of intention) by paying attention to other than God in the accomplishment of outer or inner acts."³⁰ The term is akin to the root of *ra'ā*, to perceive, to see, to notice, and also *rā'ā*, to dissimulate. So *ri'ā'* is not only a dissimulation, but an excessive concern for self-perception and even ostentation, i.e. "aesthetic ornamentation."

The closeness and association of the two roots to see (*ra'ā*) and to dissimulate or to feign (*rā'ā*) suggest that seeing is a form of dissimulation of the true Seer: a self-consciousness that obliterates the true *Shāhid*, the Divine Witness who alone can say: '*Lā ilāha illā Anā* (I am God)' (Qur'ān 20:14). It amounts to an inner *shirk*, a veiling or a covering (*kufīr*) of the eye of God, as it were. If poetry is a compensation for the "flowing back" of divine presence, or a nostalgic remnant of that presence, it also runs the risk of substituting itself to that "absence" which it sings, thereby closing the door to the grace of true inspiration. It is at this point that we reach the ultimate paradox of poetry as a genre. Poetry is a *shirk* to the extent that it favours, and savours, self-reflection over pure seeing. The poetic creation is indeed an inner perception that has been verbally crystallized, while being the object of an outer perception as product (poems, images, ideas, etc.). It may become complacency, self-reflection in the first sense, i.e. the hypocrisy

³⁰ *Définitions*, p.231.

and insubstantiality of the *Sūrah*'s poets, and outer *shirk* in the second, like Plato's poetic lies. Poetry can reveal, transmit, translate, but it can also cover, hide, and obstruct.³¹ This has to do, undoubtedly, with the very modalities of poetic language, which is suggestive and allusive, connotative and imaginal, and therefore little adapted to the didactic and legal needs of the outer religious community. But there is another sense in which the allusiveness and subtlety of poetic language may be envisaged as ambiguous, and perhaps even perilous in the absence of a proper spiritual context and an adequate inner intention. In this sense, mystical poetry is perilous because it lies close to the source, and may very well spoil its purity. There is, in poetry, the seed of an inconspicuous *shirk* that some Muslim traditions symbolize in the form of the track of an ant over a black stone on a dark night.

Because of the subtlety and profundity of its means and goals, it is not surprising that poetry occupies a paradoxical and highly ambivalent situation in the way to the Divine. Louis Massignon used to refer to this ambivalence by contrasting the naked witnessing of the *shath* (divinely inspired utterance) resulting from a mystical unveiling, *kashf*, such as he would see flow from the works of Hallāj and Shushtari, with what he conceived of as the aesthetic and philosophical constructions and complacencies of Ibn 'Arabī and 'Umar Ibn al-Farid.³² The latter's "preciosity" was, in his mind, the symptom of a self-reflexive inflation. By contrast, Massignon perceived the seal of authenticity of mystical poetry in a certain elemental disorder, or even formal awkwardness, bearing witness to the absence of any formal *ri'ā'*. One certainly does not need to agree with Massignon's particular indiosyncratic preferences and arguable biases³³ to acknowledge that spiritual poetry is genuine to

³¹ As Claude Addas has demonstrated, the association of poetry with the Muhammadan Seal and esoteric knowledge in Ibn 'Arabī, refers to the subtlety of the latter (cf. *supra* n.28).

³² Massignon contrasts Shushtari and Hallāj who 'would like to shout, as it is, the all so simple coming of the divine touch that has substantially wounded them' with Ibn al-Fārid and Ibn 'Arabī for whom 'the aesthetic concern corrodes the very structure of symbols, to the point of loosening their properly mystical dynamic tension' ('L'expérience mystique et les modes de stylisation littéraire' (1927) in *Opera Minora II*, Paris: PUF, 1969, pp. 374-5).

³³ 'By God, I feel so much love that it seems as though the skies would be rent asunder, the stars fall and the mountains move away if I burdened them with it: such is my experience of love.' If I attributed this quotation to Rūmī or to Ruzbehān Baqlī, no one would be surprised: they are both unanimously acknowledged to be among the most

the extent that it conveys a fresh sense of contact with reality, an immediacy that bears witness to its origin. Sufi poetry eschews *shirk* and *ri'ā'* to the extent that it flows from the heart's intuition and abandonment with the selfless spontaneity of a sign of God, of a sign from God: a traditional innovation in metaphysical originality.³⁴ Sufi poetry is innovative by espousing and suggesting the renewed creation of the instant, finding therein, without seeking it, the pristine originality of the Real.

illustrious representatives of the “way of love” which is at the heart of the mystical tradition of Islam. But it is from the *Futūhāt*, the work whose “impassive and icy tone” Massignon denounced, that this cry from an inflamed heart issues. Massignon had read all of it; no doubt he knew this passage, but even if his sight rested on it for a few moments, he probably saw nothing more than a literary device. For him, Ibn Arabī was only a dry, haughty dialectician and nothing ever succeeded in persuading him to re-examine this opinion which he had held since his youth (C. Addas, ‘The Experience and Doctrine of Love in Ibn ‘Arabī’ tr. C. Twinch on behalf of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society for the Symposium at Worcester College, Oxford, May 4-6th 2002).

³⁴ We would like to suggest that this might also be a lesson for “innovation” in Islam at large. Beyond rationalistic, historical and ideological recipes for adaptation to circumstantial norms, innovation must be “original” in the sense of being concretely grounded on a consciousness of, and concern with, *tawhīd*. As such, the meaning of “innovation” is traditional in the deepest sense. “Innovation” disconnected from metaphysical and spiritual “originality” may confine to ideological patchwork or trendy bricolage. By contrast, tradition remains an inexhaustible source of “innovation.” As Corbin put it, ‘a tradition transmits itself as something alive, because it is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinion’ (*En islam iranien I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p.33).

Contributors

Fr Michael Casey OCSO

Fr. Michael Casey is a Cistercian monk and prior of Tarrawarra Abbey (Australia). He is the author of many books including *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer* and *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*. He acts as a retreat master and is a much sort after speaker around the world.

Klaus Klostermaier

Klaus Klostermaier is an internationally renowned scholar of Hinduism and Indian history and culture. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and was Head of the Department of Religion at the University of Manitoba (Canada) from 1986 to 1997, and Director of Academic Affairs at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies from 1997-1998. He is the author of numerous publications on Hinduism.

Patrick Laude

Patrick Laude is a professor at Georgetown University, currently at their School of Foreign Service in Qatar. He is the author of *Singing the Way*. He has also edited *Pray without Ceasing: An Anthology of the Way of Invocation in World Religions* and *Music of the Sky: An Anthology of Spiritual Poetry*. His writings have been published in the US and Europe in numerous journals.

Frithjof Schuon

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) is best known as the foremost spokesman of the “Traditionalist” or “Perennialist” school and as a philosopher in the metaphysical current of Shankara and Plato. He wrote more than two dozen books on metaphysical, spiritual, artistic, and ethnic themes and was a regular contributor to journals on comparative religion in both Europe and America.

Timothy Scott

Timothy Scott is the editor *Eye of the Heart*. He tutors in the Philosophy and Religious Studies Program at La Trobe University, Bendigo (Australia). His doctoral thesis, *Symbolism of the Ark*, is to be published by Fons Vitae. He lived and taught Religious Studies in Düsseldorf and Oxford. He is a regular contributor to the journals *Sacred Web* (Vancouver) and *Sophia* (Washington DC).

Adrian Snodgrass

Adrian Snodgrass is Adjunct Professor with the Centre for Cultural Research (Australia). He is an internationally renowned authority in Buddhist studies and Buddhist art. He also researches in the area of hermeneutical philosophy and its application to knowledge production and cross-cultural understanding. He is editor of *The Architectural Theory Review* and *Architectural Theory* and the author of *The Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas in Shingon Buddhism*, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings 2Vols*, and *The Symbolism of the Stupa*.

Algis Uždavinys

Algis Uždavinys is a Research Associate at La Trobe University, Bendigo (Australia). Prior to taking up this position he was a Research Fellow at the Institute of Culture, Philosophy, and Arts (Lithuania) and also a Lecturer at the Academy of Arts (Lithuania). He is a member of The International Society for Neoplatonic Studies and The Lithuanian Artists' Association. He has published extensively in English, French, and Lithuanian, and also translated the works of Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Plotinus into Russian and Lithuanian. He is a regular contributor to journals such as *Sacred Web* (Vancouver) and *Sophia* (Washington DC). Algis is the editor of *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy*.

Philosophy and Religious Studies at La Trobe University, Bendigo

Philosophy and Religious Studies (PRS) at La Trobe University, Bendigo offers the student the opportunity to study the great philosophical ideas, debates and schools of thought all the way from Homer and Plato down to the present. Its wide range of units include the academic and comparative study of the religious traditions of both East and West and study of such diverse phenomena as myths, rituals, cosmological systems, sacred texts, traditional iconographies and social institutions, as well as the inter-relationships of philosophy and theology.

The Philosophy and Religious Studies program offers Undergraduate, Honours and Postgraduate degrees. Students who have completed Honours degrees elsewhere are welcome to apply for entry to either the Masters or the Doctoral program.

For more information see: www.latrobe.edu.au/prs

Enquiries should be directed to:

Dr Harry Oldmeadow, Ph. +61 3 5444 7592; h.oldmeadow@latrobe.edu.au

Eye of the Heart - Issue 3

Eye of the Heart is seeking original scholarly articles. We welcome articles from scholars, academics, post-graduates and students. Areas of interest include:

Metaphysics, Theology, Philosophy, Cosmology, Mythology, Symbolism,
Sacred art, Religious forms, the Spiritual Life, and the Sophia Perennis.

For more information visit: www.latrobe.edu.au/eyeoftheheart

Issue 3 will be available in May, 2009. Featured articles will draw from:

- ◆ Spiritual symbolism in the Grimm's tales.
- ◆ Classical astrophysiology
- ◆ Essence and Power in Clement of Alexandria's negative theology
- ◆ Re-membering the sacrificed God: Symbolism of the Eucharist
- ◆ Remarks on Taoist aesthetics

We welcome further submissions for Issue 3 and beyond.

