

The Archetypes of Devotional Homage

WHAT man's human nature stands in need of above everything else is the transcendent spiritual nature which opens it to the Absolute. Failing that, inasmuch as his fallen human nature no longer has access to the Heart, the gateway of the Spirit, what he most needs is faith, and all that faith implies in the way of religion with its doctrine and practice. But if in addition, on the basis of this foremost requirement, we were to assess the priorities of his other earthly needs, that of a consort would no doubt rank among the first. It is not for nothing that the Prophet of Islam said: 'Marriage is half the religion'. Filial and parental relationships, also psychologically needed, are subordinate to the central conjugal relationship, but like it they are projections or manifestations of Divinity, inasmuch as parent and offspring have their supra-celestial archetypes in the Creator and the Divine Word respectively. As to the fraternal relationship, together with friendship which may be considered as its prolongation, these likewise spring from an Uncreated Source, as we shall see. The perfect fulfilment of all the reciprocal possibilities so far mentioned is promised for Paradise, whereas in this life that perfection may or may not be distinctly foreshadowed. There is another relationship

which, like these, can only be consummated in the Hereafter, but which, for its earthly foretaste, is less subject to the hazards of destiny, thanks to religion. The need it meets is the thirst, universal to man, for contact on the earthly plane with an outstanding representative of perfection, that is, with the personification of an ideal. But before enlarging on this, let us consider more fully the nature of man.

We can take as our starting point the Chinese character *wang* which means king, or more precisely, king-pontiff.¹ It consists of three horizontal lines one above the other, the middle line being crossed by a vertical which just touches, at its two extremities, the highest and the lowest horizontals, and which traces out man's mediation between Heaven and earth. The character's central section alone would suffice in fact to figure the meaning of *wang*—witness the Christian cross which has that significance amongst many others. Nonetheless, the additional horizontals at the head and the foot of the cross serve respectively to denote the pontiff's two natures, heavenly and earthly, and to indicate that there can be no effective mediation between two worlds if one does not truly belong to both. In Christianity the epithet 'very', that is, 'true' is doctrinally applied to each of the two natures of Christ; and the necessity of his being 'very man' is to be deduced by analogy from the Quranic answer to those who asked why God had not sent an Angel instead of Muhammad to found the religion of Islam: *If there were on earth angels walking at their ease, We had sent down upon them an angel as messenger* (xvii:95). The words *at their ease* could be somewhat freely rendered 'in their element' or 'at home'. The Angels can visit earth, but they can never belong to earth,

¹See René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, chapter 17 (Cambridge, 1990).

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whereas to be fully man presupposes two sets of preoccupations, one with the therebeyond and the other with the herebelow.

Ever since the primordial pre-religious age it is the founders and renewers of religion who have most amply fulfilled the function of king-pontiff, and it is they who have been the most outstanding objects of what is called devotional homage or hero-worship, though this does not preclude the existence of countless lesser objects of such devotion in a variety of lesser degrees. But although in the case of the Prophets and the Saints the prophethood or sanctity of the hero is an essential factor in the background of the relationship which is our theme, it is not the immediate object of attachment. The veneration in question cannot be disassociated from the earthly nature of its object. There is something in such a commitment which proceeds from soul to soul, and it is necessary that the 'worshipped' should be, or have been, at the same level of existence as the 'worshipper', faced by the same conditions and having therefore in a very general way the same basic elementary concerns to which all life on earth is subject.

It is true that such devotion does not lend itself to analysis, and it could be said that the difficulty of enclosing it within definite lines of demarcation increases in proportion to the eminence of its object, above all when the hero is also the recipient of worship in the higher and normal sense of the term, or even beyond it. The names of Jesus, the Buddha and Krishna, for example, may be invoked as names of the Absolute, while on the other hand certain aspects of their lives on earth may be taken as models for imitation; but there is likely to be, in the case of such examples as those just given, a medial region where one kind of devotion overlaps with

another; and in any case the Absolute is always ultimately the magnet of attraction, whatever the level of Its manifestation.

The extreme amplitude of the exemplars just given and of their peers is brought out with great clarity by Frithjof Schuon in his comparison of the Saint who is not a Prophet with those who have, in addition to their sanctity, the cosmic function of what Buddhists call the Bodhisattva, the Saint who is destined for Buddhahood, that is, for a function equal to that of a major Avatara of Hinduism, or a founder of religion in the domain of monotheism. As regards exaltation the fully realized Saint is not to be surpassed, since in Gnosis the Knower and the Known are One; but the 'horizontal' radiation of Sainthood in the normal sense, though necessarily great, is not to be compared with 'the unimaginable cosmic deployment of the perfection of the Bodhisattva'.¹

In the Qur'ān the Prophet is told: *Verily of an immense magnitude is thy nature* (LXVIII:4). He is also told, with reference to the tremendous impact of Revelation, which only such magnitude as his would be capable of enduring: *If We had sent down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, thou wouldst have seen it lying prostrate in humility, rent asunder through fear of God* (LIX:21). Referring in more general terms to the qualification to bear such a burden, which amounts to no less than the capacity to conceive and bring forth a whole world, that is, a religion together with the theocratic civilization which necessarily evolves from it, Schuon writes: 'Far from tending exclusively towards the non-manifested, the angelic humanity of the virtual Buddha radiates on the contrary throughout the cosmos as the sun lights up the darkness of night. It is this, we repeat, which makes it capable of acting as vehicle for that

¹ *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, (London, 1989) p. 141.

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crystallisation of the Infinite which Revelation is, seed and sustenance of a universal and millennial tradition'.¹

As an equivalent to 'that crystallisation of the Infinite' he also defines Revelation as 'that Truth made flesh' to include more explicitly those cases where the Divine Message comes as a man rather than as 'the Word made book'; and he expressly mentions the Virgin Mary as exemplifying the capacity we are speaking of, an amplitude which, as he points out, is not part of the function of great Saints such as Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi who may none the less be her equals in exaltation, that is, in Gnosis. Of her radiance on the 'horizontal' plane he writes: 'This supereminent perfection was indispensable for her function as "co-redemptress", but such an endowment is a providential disposition or a cosmic prodigality which, while necessarily being accompanied from a certain moment by Knowledge, does not have to be there in order that Knowledge may be obtained. If it did, it would be useless to talk about Gnosis and to teach it to ordinary mortals.'²

The Qur'ān speaks of Jesus and his mother as *a sign for the worlds* (xxi:91); and the breadth of every such perfection is partly to be measured by the reaction produced by its presence in the cosmos. Despite the differences of religious perspectives there is a remarkable sameness of reaction the world over, the same great cause being always identifiable in its corresponding effect, in a devotion which is, of its kind, incomparable for its intensity, diffusion and endurance, and which remains undiminished even if, as is the case with regard to Muhammad and to Mary, the religion forbids it to cross the boundary line which separates devotional homage from worship in the ordinary sense.

¹*ibid.* ²*ibid.*

In view of what was initially said about the thirst for contact on the earthly plane with perfection personified, it might be argued that the preceding paragraphs about persons no longer situated in this world have taken us somewhat away from our subject. But an aspect of 'the unimaginable cosmic deployment' of all the examples given is its triumph over death and over time and space. The religions in question have continued throughout the centuries to draw vitality from the as it were still living presence of those who presided over their foundation. It is true that the immediate companions of the Prophets are always counted as having been exceptionally blessed; but another feature of the 'cosmic deployment' we are speaking of is to provide certain compensations for later generations whose lives did not coincide with that of the great central hero of their perspective. At the outset of a religion its sacred arts are still no more than seeds in the soul of its founder; their flowering plays a part in the perpetuation of the presence of that soul: to stand outside or inside a great cathedral, for example, can be to encounter mysteriously the person of Jesus.

To take another example of enduring presence, let us quote once more from Frithjof Schuon. The reference, needless to say, is to places where—over fifty years ago—the Islamic civilisation still remained intact, as yet unpenetrated by the modern world: 'On our first visits to Arab towns we were impressed by the austere and even sepulchral atmosphere: a kind of whiteness of the desert was spread like a shroud over houses and people; everywhere there was a breath of prayer and of death. In this we see beyond question a trace of the soul of the Prophet.'¹

¹ *Understanding Islam*, (London, 1963) p. 88, note 3.

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To be mediator between Heaven and earth is not the ultimate function of man; and since Paradise will have the last word, it is not illegitimate to give it, on occasion, the first word also. We can thus define the herebelow nature of man as an immortal soul made for Paradise and therefore capable of spiritualisation, but temporarily exiled to earth, and a body made for Paradise and therefore capable of resurrection and transubstantiation but also temporarily exiled to earth where, like the soul, it is allowed to anticipate remotely some of the experiences destined for it in Paradise. If man is ephemerally mediator between Heaven and earth, he is everlastingly mediator between the Absolute and the relative, or between the Absolute in Itself and the Absolute in the relative, or between a higher and a lower Paradise. Given the duality which underlies man's unity, it is in the nature of things that two Paradises should be required to satisfy his aspirations. The Qur'ān promises two for each blessed soul, and it mentions two pairs of Celestial Gardens at different levels (LV:46, 62). According to one of the most frequently quoted commentaries¹ the higher pair consists of the Paradise of the Essence and the Paradise of the Spirit. Each Garden characterised by its fruit, and of the fruits mentioned with reference to the two upper Gardens, namely the date and the pomegranate, the commentator says that the date belongs to the Spirit, 'for in its Paradise the kernel of the individuality still remaineth', whereas the pomegranate conforms to the nature of the Essence which admits of no such individual residue. Analogously, as regards the two lower Gardens, the Paradise of the Heart implies a relative extinction of the psychic individual, and its fruit is the fig, whereas the olive,

¹Published under the name of Muhyiddīn ibn al 'Arabī, but generally considered to be by 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kāshānī.

which consists mostly of kernel, is the fruit of the Paradise of the Soul.

This same passage of the Qur'ān has also been commented by Frithjof Schuon.¹ In particular he brings out the analogy between the higher and the lower pairs by making a distinction in each pair between a 'horizontal' Garden and a 'vertical' Garden, which accords perfectly with Kāshāni's commentary. The Paradise of the Spirit is the abode of the differentiated persons of those who have attained to Union, and although it ranks as the summit of all created splendour, it is none the less 'horizontal' in relation to Union Itself which is the Paradise of the Essence. 'As for the two lower Gardens, the higher of the two will not be a Paradise of Union but of beatific vision, this vision being, like Union, "vertical" in relation to a "horizontal" and therefore phenomenal and specifically human beatitude.'² This lowest of the Gardens, the Paradise of the Soul, is the one which most immediately concerns our theme, and then, in ascending order, the other 'horizontal' Gardens³ which lie above it. If the supreme spiritual lights must be said to have their fullest manifestation in the Paradise of the Spirit, that does not preclude their appearance at every level in the whole hierarchy of celestial abodes. Religions are unanimous that one of the beatitudes of Paradise, regardless of its degree, is the presence at its centre of one or more of those who have been, for its inmates, the objects of their greatest veneration. Nor would it be with-

¹ *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, (London, 1976) chapter 12, 'The Two Paradises'.

² *ibid.*, p. 208.

³ The number four for the Paradises must not be taken in a limitative sense but simply as indicating certain main divisions in the hierarchy. The same may be said analogously, but from a somewhat different angle, of the number seven for the Heavens.

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out significance to add that souls agree about this, for the longing in question is deeply ingrained in human nature, and that is a criterion, a guarantee that it corresponds to a reality.

To grasp the symbolism of the reciprocity we are considering, it is essential to understand that all devotional homage, all hero-worship worthy of the name, proceeds subjectively from the perfection which exists in every soul, even though, in the majority, it has been buried under the rubble of a fallen second nature. If the burial is too deep, the sense of values can be irremediably vitiated; but even a remote consciousness of the latent perfection is enough to serve as a basis for having ideals and to arouse in souls, at contact with actual perfection, the nostalgic recognition of a fulfilment which for themselves also is a possibility and a goal to be reached. Herebelow the relationship in question is thus virtually between a lesser and a greater perfection.

Salvation is a guarantee of virtual perfection that is capable of being actualised; but nothing less than actual perfection can enter Paradise. It could not be otherwise, ¹ inasmuch as all those who pass through the gates of Heaven incur thereby a tremendous responsibility: it is henceforth the function of each to be, himself or herself, an integral feature of the celestial Garden, a source of felicity for all the other inmates, a vehicle of the Divine Presence. In the heavenly archetype of devotional homage the lesser perfection is thus an actualised perfection and not merely a virtuality as in its earthly symbol. Otherwise expressed, in the archetypal domain not only the hero but also the hero-worshipper has something of inestimable value to offer, the more so in that every perfection, lesser

¹St Irenaeus, later followed by the whole Western church until the Reformation, condemned as heretical the notion that all saved souls will go directly to Paradise at death.

or greater, is unique. This must not, however, be taken in any egalitarian sense that might suggest a reduction of the intensity of the worship, for subjectively the actualisation that has taken place includes the perfecting of discernment and the sense of proportions and, objectively speaking, the higher the plane the greater the disparities. *Behold how We have favoured some of them above others; and verily the hereafter is greater in degrees and greater in precedences of favouring* (Qur'ān xvii: 21). None the less it must be remembered that since the formal barriers of the herebelow have been transcended, the lesser may have an intimacy with the greater such as immeasurably surpasses all terrestrial privileges.¹

Not without bearing on our context are the last words which the Prophet of Islam was heard to utter,² 'with the supreme communion', words which are to be understood in the light of a passage from the Qur'ān which he had just quoted, *with those upon whom God hath showered His favour, the prophets and the sages³ and the martyrs and the righteous, most excellent for communion are they* (iv:69). This utterance, made at the summit of the hierarchy by one of the greatest objects of devotional homage, is particularly relevant here in that it expresses his joyous presentiment of the company, in Paradise, not only of his peers but also of the lesser perfections, the least of which are those who are termed *the righteous*. The celestial archetype of hero-worship could thus be defined as a

¹The immense privileges resulting from such intimacy are one of the themes of *Pearl*, which is among the most remarkable of mediaeval English poems.

²*Mubammad: his life based on the earliest sources*, (London, 1983) p. 341.

³This word, *siddiqin*, is usually translated 'saints' which, if used here, might wrongly suggest that 'the righteous' are not saints. The word 'sage' serves to do some justice to the ideas of wisdom and of truth that are implicit in *siddiq* which denotes a saint of the highest rank.

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blissfully harmonious interrelation between greater and lesser perfections, each of which has something to give and something to receive. The celestial archetype of fraternity and friendship is, on the other hand, the communion of equals or near equals, between prophet and prophet, sage and sage, and between peers within other constellations of Spirits who are drawn together by their parity.

Once more with reference to the two Paradises promised to every blessed soul, it will be clear from what has already been said that the 'vertical' Garden is always the domain of worship in its highest sense, whereas it is in the 'horizontal' Garden that the different manifested perfections are interrelated. The immediate archetypes of earthly hero-worship are thus to be found in the Paradise of the Soul. But these archetypes are themselves symbols of the analogous relationships which vastly transcend them in the higher 'horizontal' Gardens, of which the highest is that of the Spirit. It is to this Paradise that the above quoted last utterance of the Prophet of Islam must be held to refer in particular, though it can also apply to Paradise as a whole in view of the constant appearances, at every level of the celestial hierarchy, of those who personify supreme holiness.

It may now be asked what the Paradise of the Spirit symbolizes in its turn, for it is not possible that this multiple beatitude should spring into existence without the warrant, above it, of a purely Divine Archetype. In his chapter on 'The Two Paradises',¹ Frithjof Schuon mentions, as parallel to the Islamic symbolism of the two Gardens, a Christian tradition according to which the elect, that is, the dwellers in the Paradise of the Spirit, will wear 'Crowns of Uncreated Light'. These Divine Crowns may be said to stand for the

¹See above, p. 52.

Supreme Garden, that of Union, and they can be identified with what Muhyiddin ibn al-ʿArabi terms 'the Immutable Entities' (al-a ʿyān ath-thābitah) which are the Divine Archetypes of created beings. We have here the highest aspect of the symbolism of stars. Although day and night draw their existence from the Absolute and the Infinite respectively, day has, in its aspect of proceeding from night, a secondary meaning of manifestation,¹ and it is from this point of view that the Stellar Archetypes are to be intuited: hidden in the day of illusion, they come into their own in the Night of Reality. Thus, as we have already seen,² the Divine Essence, in its aspect of Infinitude, is addressed as Night, in Arabic Layla, the name of a woman and in particular of the most famous heroine of romance in the tradition of the Arabs. Qays, her lover, is better known as Majnūn (madman) because of the intensity of his love for Layla, and Islamic mysticism has as it were annexed this couple to represent allegorically the love of the Sufi for the Divinity. During the last thousand years love poems have been regularly addressed to the Divine Essence under the name of Layla, and in one such poem of this century the Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī affirms his own spiritual realization in the line: 'My star resplendeth in her firmament.'³ This Star, which is his 'Crown of Uncreated Light', is his presence in the Paradise of Union ('her firmament'). As such, it is the Immutable Entity from which he draws his existence.

If the celestial archetype of devotional homage be defined as the communion of lesser and greater perfections, then its

¹Night in its turn has a secondary meaning of ignorance which veils the Divine Truth.

²See p. 40.

³*A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, (London, 1971) p. 225.

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Divine Archetype may be said to lie in the Communion of the Stars on the face of the Night of the Infinitude. If on the other hand devotional homage be simply defined as marvelling at perfection, then it may be said to originate, like the third personal pronoun, in the Absolute-Infinite's Consciousness of Its own Perfection. The equivalence of these two Archetypes is revealed in Ibn al 'Arabī's brief poem on the Immutable Entities as our Origin and our End:

We were letters, exalted, not yet uttered,
Held aloft in the keep of the Highest of Summits.
I therein am Thou, and we are Thou,
And Thou art He, and all is in He is He –
Ask of any that so far hath reached.¹

Referring back to the promised paradisaical intimacy between devotees and the objects of their devotion, it may be deduced from the above lines that those intimacies are necessary as a bridge, a prefiguration of union. Reality is One, and worship is a dualism which has to be transcended. In other words, every utterance of devotion is rooted in a hidden consciousness of identity. All worship, at whatever degree, must be ultimately absorbed into the Absolute, that is, into God's affirmation of Himself, *there is no god but He* and *there is no god but I*.

¹*Islamic Spirituality, Foundations*, (London, 1987), *World Spirituality*, vol. 19 p. 238, note 15.