

## *What is Symbolism?*

*The seven Heavens and the earth and all that is therein glorify Him, nor is there anything but glorifieth Him with praise; yet ye understand not their glorification. (Qur'ān: xvii, 44).*

THE above verse is an answer to the question asked by our chapter-heading; it also justifies to a certain extent, in its last sentence, the writing of the chapter, for a thing's glorification of God—which *ye understand not*—is precisely its symbolism. This may be deduced from the Islamic 'holy utterance', so called because in it the Divinity speaks on the tongue of the Prophet: *I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, and so I created the world.*<sup>1</sup> 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.

The doctrine of symbolism may also be concluded from other verses in which the Qur'ān affirms that every single thing on earth has been sent down in finite measure from the Stores or Treasuries of the Infinite, sent down as a loan rather than a gift, for nothing herebelow can last, and everything

<sup>1</sup>Italics are used throughout for all quotations from Scripture and by extension for such utterances as this.

must in the end revert to its Supreme Source. In other words, the Archetype is always the Heir who inherits back the symbol in which It manifested Itself: *Nor is there anything but with Us are the Treasuries thereof, and We send it not down save in known measure . . . and verily it is We who give life and make to die, and We are the Inheritor* (xv:21,23). We may likewise quote the following Quranic definition of the Divinity: *He is the First and the Last and the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden* (LVII:3). The first, second and fourth of these Names are related to the Hidden Treasure. As to *the Outwardly Manifest*, the mystery of the Divine Presence in the world of symbols is partly explained in the words *God created not the heavens and the earth and what lieth between them save from Truth and an appointed term* (xxx:8). It can thus be said that the whole fabric of the universe is woven out of Eternity and ephemerality, Infinitude and finitude, Absoluty and relativity.

Man himself as he was created — True Man as the Taoists name him — is the greatest of earthly symbols. The universal doctrine that he was made *in the image of God* (Genesis 1:27) signifies this pre-eminence: man is the symbol of the sum of all the attributes, that is, of the Divine Nature in its Totality, the Essence, whereas the animate and inanimate creatures that surround him reflect only one aspect, or certain aspects of that Nature. Taken all together these symbols constitute the great outer world, the macrocosm, of which man, God's representative on earth, is the centre; and that centre is itself a little world, a microcosm, analogous in every respect to the macrocosm which is, like it, a total image of the Archetype.

It is through its centre that a world lies open to all that transcends it. For the macrocosm man is that opening; as to the microcosm, its centre is man's Heart — not the bodily

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organ of that name but his soul's central faculty' which, in virtue of its centrality, must be considered as being above and beyond the psychic domain. The openness of the Eye of the Heart, or the wake of the Heart as many traditions term it, is what distinguishes primordial man—and by extension the Saint—from fallen man. The significance of this inward opening may be understood from the relationship between the sun and the moon which symbolize respectively the Spirit and the Heart: just as the moon looks towards the sun and transmits something of its reflected radiance to the darkness of the night, so the Heart transmits the light of the Spirit to the night of the soul. The Spirit itself lies open to the Supreme Source of all light, thus making, for one whose Heart is awake, a continuity between the Divine Qualities and the soul, a ray which is passed from Them by the Spirit to the Heart, from which it is diffused in a multiple refraction throughout the various channels of the psychic substance. The virtues which are thereby imprinted on the soul are thus nothing other than projections of the Qualities, and inversely each of these projected images is blessed with intuition of its Divine Archetype. As to the mind, with its reason, imagination and memory, a measure of the 'moonlight' which it receives from the Heart is passed on to the senses and through them as far as the outward objects which they see and hear and feel; and at this furthest contact the ray is reversed, for the things of the macrocosm are recognised as symbols, that is, as kindred manifestations of the Hidden Treasure, each of which has its counterpart in the micro-

'The capital letter is used to denote the distinction. Moreover since this centre reflects a whole hierarchy of centres which transcend it, the term Heart is also sometimes used of the Spirit, and ultimately of the Supreme Centre, the Divine Self.

cosm. Otherwise expressed, for primordial man everything, inward or outward, was transparent: in experiencing a symbol he experienced its Archetype. He was thus able to rejoice in being outwardly surrounded and inwardly adorned by Divine Presences.

The eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree was the attachment to a symbol for its own sake apart from its higher meaning. That violation of the norm barred man's access to his inward centre, and the consequent blurring of his vision made him no longer able to fulfil adequately his original function as mediator between Heaven and earth. But at the fall of the microcosm, the macrocosm remained unfallen; and though its symbols had become less transparent to man's perceiving, they retained in themselves their original perfection. Only primordial man does justice to that perfection; but at the same time he is independent of it, in virtue of being himself a symbol of the Divine Essence which is absolutely Independent of the Divine Qualities. Fallen man on the other hand has a lesson to learn from the great outer world which surrounds him, for its symbols offer him an enlightenment which will be of guidance to him on his path of return to what he has lost, inasmuch as their perfection can further the perfecting of their counterparts within him which have suffered from the Fall. The clouds of the macrocosm are never permanent; they come only to go, the luminaries still shine, and the directions of space have lost nothing of their measurelessness. But in fallen man the soul is no longer the vast image of the Infinite that it was created to be, and the inward firmament is veiled. That veiling is the decisive result of the Fall, which did not sever the connection between soul and Spirit, between human perception and the Archetypes, but placed there a barrier that is more or less opaque—

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increasingly opaque as far as the majority is concerned, this increase being the gradual degeneration which inevitably takes place throughout each cycle of time. But in the context of our theme the barrier can and must be described as more or less transparent, since it would be pointless to speak of symbolism where there cannot be at least some intuition, however faint, of the Archetypes. Moreover the science of symbols is inextricably linked with the path of return which, being against the cyclic current, makes for an increase of transparency.

If the symbols of the macrocosm, taken collectively or separately, are reminders for the spiritual traveller of man's lost perfection, it might none the less be said that the most direct reminders will be microcosmic, that is, True Man himself, personified by the Prophets, the Saints and, more immediately, by the living Spiritual Master. But although there is no doubt a wealth of truth in this, it would be a simplification to reduce macrocosmic symbols to a second place in any absolute sense as regards their spiritual significance for man, since much will depend on the individual and on circumstances. Moreover otherness, as well as sameness, has its own special impact. The Qur'ān affirms the efficacy of both; *We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves* (XLI:53).

Let us consider, to take a particular example, the virtue of dignity which might be described as majesty in repose, and which man, if he would be true to his nature, must seek to perfect in himself side by side with the other virtues which reflect the other Divine Qualities. The swan incarnates just a particular aspect of dignity, but it does so to perfection, and by isolating that perfection, it makes for man a powerfully clear-cut impression that is all the more irresistible for being

presented in a non-human mode, that is, in a mode which is beyond our reach. That very beyondness can lend it wings, in the eye of the observer, for return to its Archetype. The same may be said of all the other great earthly symbols that are not human, such as sky, plain, ocean, desert, mountain, forest, river and what they encompass, each an eloquent 'word' in this language that the members of the white, yellow and black races share in common.

Since nothing can exist except in virtue of its Divine root, does that mean that everything is a symbol? The answer is yes and no—yes for the reason just given, and no because 'symbol' means 'sign' or 'token', which implies an operative power to call something to mind, namely its Archetype. In the light of the initially quoted verse *Nor is there anything but glorifieth Him with praise*, we could say that whether this or that can rightly be called symbolic depends on whether its 'praise' is powerful or faint. The word symbol is normally reserved for that which is particularly impressive in its 'glorification'.

The distinction we have just made can be more clearly understood with reference to the spider's web as an image of the created universe,<sup>1</sup> an image that is all the more apt inasmuch as the web is woven out of the substance of its 'creator'. The concentric circles represent the hierarchy of the different worlds, that is, the different planes of existence; the more outward the circle, the lower its hierarchic degree, each circumference being in itself a disconnected outward (therefore 'downward') projection of the centre. The radii of the web on the other hand are images of the radiance of the

<sup>1</sup>This symbolism of the web has been admirably expounded by Frithjof Schuon, *In The Tracks of Buddhism*, (London, 1989) pp. 26–7. See also his *Atmā – Māyā*<sup>2</sup> in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1973.

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Divine Mercy, and they portray the relationship of connection between the centre and all that exists. But it is significant that even if, on the basis of the web, a symbolic figure be drawn with the number of radii increased to the limit of what it is possible to set down on paper, there will still be, between the radii, gaps which increase in due proportion to the remoteness of the world in question from the 'Hidden Treasure' which it was created to reveal. In the world of matter, which marks the lowest limit of the downward and outward radiation of the Divine Principle, there will therefore be wider 'gaps' than anywhere else. Needless to say, there are in fact no voids, so that to justify our image it must be added that each radius has its own aura and that the intervening space between two radii is thus filled by the two presences in question. But not to be situated on the radius itself means necessarily not to be an outstandingly direct reflection of the transcendent Archetype; and the qualitative disparities between the various things of this world can be partly explained in the light of this image.

Since we are concerned with what is symbolic and what is not, it should be understood that we are not considering here disparities such as those between the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms or between different sections of the same kingdom—mammals, birds and insects, for example. The lion, the eagle and the bee are all true symbols, each being a summit in its own domain which means, in the language of our figure<sup>1</sup>, that it lies on one of the radii, whence its power to

<sup>1</sup>No single symbol can possibly reflect all the aspects of its Archetype. While it figures the outward impetus set in motion by the creative act, the web has no downward dimension. In this respect it needs to be completed by the Biblical symbol of Jacob's ladder, or by the Sufi symbol of the Tree of the Universe which represents the different hierarchic levels by cedar-like layers of branches, one layer above the other.

place us on that same ray of the creative Spirit so that our aspirations may thereby ascend inversely back to the source. But not everything is capable of offering us this possibility; and the disparities we have been speaking of lie between true symbols and kindred beings which are considerably less well favoured.<sup>1</sup> It is in the nature of things that some of the contents of the world that is furthest from the Principle should bear signs of that remoteness.

By way of summing up, still with reference to the concentric circles and the radii of the web, it could be said that all created things are both disconnected projections of their creative Principle while being at the same time Its connected radiations. On this basis the symbol could be defined as that in which the relationship of connection predominates over that of disconnection, whereas the predominance of disconnectedness precludes, as it were by definition, any outstanding power to connect us with the Archetype, and it is that power which may be said to confer, on its possessor, the status of symbol.

To see that symbolism is inseparable from religion we have only to remember that the word religion indicates the *re*-establishment of a ligament with the Supreme Archetype, and one has to resort to a symbol for that purpose. Primordial man, in virtue of being directly aware of his own connect-

<sup>1</sup>To take examples from the world of mammals in addition to the lion, with whom other members of the cat family are to be included, we may mention, as being truly symbolic in their different ways, the elephant, the camel, the horse and the wolf. On the other hand, in contrast with these sacred animals, the hippopotamus, the giraffe and the hyena are uninspiring, by which we mean, to revert to our liminal quotation, that their 'praise' is too 'faint' to earn for them, as such, the title of symbol in the higher and more exclusive sense of the word, though as animals, that is, in their life and consciousness, they are symbolic, as also in their very existence.



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edness, was the personification of the link which religion aims at restoring, whence his capacity to act as mediator between the Divinity and Its microcosmic and macrocosmic reflections which are, respectively, man (or the soul) and the earthly state in its entirety including its human centre.

If religion means spirituality, then primordial man was the embodiment of religion. But if this word be understood strictly in its etymological sense he cannot be said to have had any religion, for there is clearly no need to re-establish a connection which has never been impaired. Nor did he need, in any negative sense of that word, a science of symbols; but in virtue of his being a total image of the Divine, he could not fail to reflect the Hidden Treasure's joy—*I loved to be known*—at perceiving Itself mirrored in created things. Otherwise expressed, beneath the Supreme Beatitude of Gnosis, that is, the consciousness of identity with the Absolute Infinite One, his happiness as a soul in bliss coincided with symbolism, that of Paradise itself and of all that it contained including himself and other holy microcosms.

An essential aspect of every religion is the performance of rites. But if it be said that primordial man had no need of rites, it must be added that for him every act was potentially a rite in virtue of his awareness of its symbolic significance. The possession of a spiritual nature above his human nature enabled his consciousness to transcend the earthly state and with it the temporal condition. The domain of the Spirit encompasses the whole of time and is therefore as it were simultaneously 'before' the creation of man and 'after' his resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Seen from that angle, symbols have 'already'

<sup>1</sup>It is thus an error to suppose that blessed souls have to wait in Paradise for their bodies to join them after the resurrection, since if a soul has accumulated in life enough celestial gravity for it to be drawn towards Paradise as

been reabsorbed into their spiritual archetypes; but such a standpoint is beyond the reach of fallen man, except in theory, since he no longer has access to the Heart which is the gateway to the Spirit. In other words, the Saint is able to lend his wings to a symbol, and those wings, with which the primordial soul was naturally fledged, were lost at the Fall.

If the Saint does not, strictly speaking, need the prescribed rites of a religion, he can none the less rejoice in them, and he is their exemplary performer. But as to fallen man, inasmuch as they are Heaven's answer to his wingless predicament, he needs them imperatively above all things else. They could be defined as symbolic acts or enacted symbols, providentially endowed with wings for return to their Source, wings which the performer of the rite acquires by identifying himself with the act in question. Otherwise expressed, a rite is as a life-line thrown down from Heaven: it is for the worshipper to cling to the life-line; the rest is in the hands of the Thrower. Since a rite is always performed with a view to God, it amounts to a re-enactment of the connection between the symbol (in this case man) and the Supreme Archetype, a vibrating of that unsevered but dormant link, which needs the constant repetition of these vibrant acts to rouse it, once and for all, from sleep to wake.

In considering the relationship between rites and the categories of symbols already mentioned, it must be remembered that the Hidden Treasure may always radiate anew certain aspects of Itself in whatever degree of intensity is needed to overwhelm human limitations, and in whatever

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soon as it is liberated from its body at death, it will be reunited, once it has risen beyond the domain of time, with its 'already' resurrected and transfigured body.

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mode is best adapted to the particular receptivity of a given time and place. Such are the Divine interventions which establish the religions on earth, and without which no religion could take root. The altogether exceptional power with which Providence intervenes at these cyclic moments necessarily brings into being symbols for which the definitions already given will not suffice. It is true that every symbol has, as we have seen, a mysterious identity with its Archetype. But of symbols in general it can and must be said that they are merely symbols and not the Archetype. Being 'of this world' they are subject to all its conditions and limitations. A Revelation also—together with the sacramental symbols with which it operates—being in this world, though not 'of it', is bound to take on a finite form. It is none the less a 'stranger' herebelow, for the whole point of its earthly existence is that it should amount to an other-worldly intrusion, that it should be a real presence of the Infinite in the finite, of the Transformal in the formal. Moreover what is true of Revelation, such as the Vedas, the Pentateuch and the Psalms, the Tao-Te-King, the Qur'ān, is likewise true of the descents of the Divine Word in human form such as the Hindu Avatars, including the Buddha, and by extension Jesus. Considering the part they are called upon to play in their various religions, it would indeed be pointless to say of any of these, within the context of the perspective in question, that they are 'merely symbols'. 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. To express this distinction the words 'begotten not made' can be transposed from the Christian creed and

applied universally, for such symbols may well be said to be 'of one substance' with the Archetype.

With regard to the Eucharist as an example of a sacramental symbol, it is worthy of note that the otherworldliness of its bread and wine is affirmed not only in Christianity but also, and even more absolutely, by the Islamic Revelation, which mentions the Last Supper—in a chapter that is named after it, 'The Banquet'—as the immediate result of the following prayer of Jesus at the request of his disciples: *O God, our Lord, send down to us a banquet from Heaven which will be a feast for the first of us and the last of us,*<sup>1</sup> *and a sign from Thee* (v: 114). Also highly significant, as regards Revelation in general, is the Islamic dogma that the Qur'ān is 'not created'. The same identity of the sacramental symbol with its Archetype constitutes the basis of the universal esoteric rite of invoking the Divine Name. Hindu *japa-yoga* (union by invocation) and its equivalents in all other esoterisms have, as their guarantee of efficacy, the truth which Sufism expresses with the words 'the Name is the Named'.

<sup>1</sup>That is, for the first and last generations of Christians.