

OBSERVATIONS ON RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

by
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The task of the historian of religions remains incomplete if he fails to discover the function of symbolism in general. We know what the theologian, the philosopher and the psychologist have to say about this problem.* Let us now examine the conclusions which the historian of religions reaches when he reflects on his own documents.

The first observation that he is forced to make is that the World "speaks" in symbols, "reveals" itself through them. It is not a question of a utilitarian and objective language. A symbol is not a replica of objective reality. It *reveals* something deeper and more fundamental. Let us try to elucidate the different aspects, the different depths of this revelation.

(1) Symbols are capable of revealing a *modality of the real or a condition of the World which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience*. To illustrate the sense in which the symbol expresses a modality of the real inaccessible to human experience, let us take an example: the symbolism of the Waters, which is capable of revealing the pre-formal, the potential, the chaotic. This is not, of course, a matter of rational cognition, but of apprehension by the active consciousness prior to reflection. It is of such apprehensions that the World is made. Later, by elaborating the significances thus understood, the first reflections on the creation of the World will be set in motion; this is the point of departure of all the cosmologies and ontologies from the Vedas to the Pre-Socratics.

As for the capacity of symbols to reveal an inner pattern of the World, we will refer to what we said earlier about the principal significances of the Cosmic Tree. The Tree reveals the World as a living totality, periodically regenerating itself and, thanks to this regeneration, continually fertile, rich and inexhaustible. Here, too, it is not a question of considered knowledge, but of an immediate comprehension of the "cipher" of the World. The World "speaks" through the medium of the Cosmic Tree, and its "word" is directly understood. The World is apprehended as Life and, for primitive thought, Life is a disguise worn by Being.

A corollary of the preceding observations: religious symbols which touch on the patterns of life reveal a deeper Life, more mysterious than that grasped by everyday experience. They reveal the miraculous, inexplicable side of Life, and at the same time the sacramental dimension of human existence "Deciphered" in the light of religious symbols, human life itself reveals a hidden side: it comes from "elsewhere", from very far away; it is "divine" in the sense that it is the work of Gods or supernatural Beings.

(2) This brings us to a second general observation: for primitives, *symbols are always religious*, since they point either to something *real* or to a *World-pattern*. Now, at the archaic levels of culture,

*We would recall Paul Tillich's statement: "This is the great function of symbols: to point beyond themselves, in the power of that to which they point, to open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed, and to open up levels of the human mind of which we otherwise are not aware."
(Religious Symbolism)

the *real*—that is to say the powerful, the significant, the living—is equivalent to the *sacred*. Moreover, the World is a creation of the Gods or of supernatural Beings: to discover a World pattern amounts to a revealing a secret or a “ciphered” meaning of the divine work. It is for this reason that archaic religious symbols imply an ontology; a pre-systematic ontology, of course, the expression of a judgment both of the World and of human existence: judgment which is not formulated in concepts and which cannot always be translated into concepts.

(3) An essential characteristic of religious symbolism is its *multivalence*, its capacity to *express simultaneously several meanings the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience*. The symbolism of the Moon, for example, reveals a connatural unity between the lunar rhythms, temporal becoming, the Waters, the growth of plants, women, death and resurrection, the human destiny, the weaver’s craft, etc. In the final analysis, the symbolism of the Moon reveals a correspondence of a “mystical” order between the various levels of cosmic reality and certain modalities of human existence. Let us observe that this correspondence is not indicated by immediate and spontaneous experience, nor by critical reflection. It is the result of a certain mode of “viewing” the World.

Even if we admit that certain of the Moon’s functions have been discovered by careful observation of the lunar phases (their relation with rainfall, for instance, and menstruation), it is difficult to imagine that the symbolism could have been built up in its entirety by an act of reason. It requires quite another order of cognition to reveal, for example, the “lunar destiny” of human existence, the fact that man is “measured” by temporal rhythms which are one with the phases of the Moon, that he is consigned to death but that, like the Moon which reappears in the sky after three days of darkness, he also can begin his existence again, and that, in any case, he nourishes the hope of a life beyond the tomb, more certain or better as a consequence of initiation.

(4) This capacity of religious symbolism to reveal a multitude of structurally united meanings has an important consequence: the symbol is capable of *revealing a perspective in which diverse realities can be fitted together or even integrated into a “system”*. In other words, a religious symbol allows man to discover a certain unity of the World and at the same time to become more aware of his own destiny as an integral part of the World. In the case of lunar symbolism, it is clear in what sense the different meanings of the symbols form a “system”. On different registers (cosmological, anthropological, and “spiritual”) the lunar rhythm reveals homologous patterns: always it is a matter of modalities of existence subject to the law of Time and cyclic becoming, that is to say of existences destined for a “Life” which carries, in its very structure, death and rebirth. Thanks to the Moon symbolism, the World no longer appears an arbitrary assembly of heterogeneous and divergent realities. The various cosmic levels are mutually related, they are, in a sense, “bound together” by the same lunar rhythm, just as human life is “woven” by the Moon and predestined by the Spinning Goddesses.

Another example will illustrate even better this capacity of symbols to open up a perspective in which things can be understood as united in a system. The symbolism of Night and Darkness—which can be discerned in cosmogonic myths, in initiatory rites, in iconographies featuring nocturnal or underground creatures—reveals the structural unity between the pre-cosmogonic and pre-natal Darkness, on the one hand, and death, rebirth and initiation on the other. This renders possible not only the intuition of a certain mode of being, but also the comprehension of the “place” of that mode in the constitution of the World and the human condition. The symbolism of cosmic Night enables man to see what existed before him and before the World, to understand how

things came into existence, and where things "were" before they were there, before him. Once again, this is no speculation but a direct understanding of the mystery that things had a beginning, and that everything which precedes and concerns this beginning has a supreme value for human existence. Consider the great importance of initiatory rites involving a *regressus ad uterum*, as a result of which man believes himself able to start a new existence. Remember also the innumerable ceremonies intended periodically to restore the primordial "Chaos" in order to regenerate the World and human society.

(5) Perhaps the most important function of religious symbolism—especially important because of the role it will play in later philosophical speculations—is its *capacity for expressing paradoxical situations or certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way*. One example will suffice: the symbolism of the Symplegades as it can be deciphered in numerous myths, legends and images presenting the paradox of a passage from one mode of existence to another—transfer from this world to another, from Earth to Heaven or Hell, or passage from a profane, purely carnal existence to a spiritual existence, etc. The following are the most frequent images: to pass between two clashing rocks or icebergs, or between two mountains in perpetual movement, or between two jaws, or to penetrate the *vagina detata* and come out unharmed, or enter a mountain that reveals no opening, etc. One understands the significance of all these images: if the possibility of a "passage" exists, it can only be effectuated "in the spirit"—giving the word all the meanings that it is capable of carrying in archaic societies: a discarnate being, the imaginary world and the world of ideas. One can pass through a Symplegades in so far as one behaves "as a spirit", that is to say shows imagination and intelligence and so proves oneself capable of detaching oneself from immediate reality. No other symbol of the "difficult passage"—not even the celebrated motif of the bridge filed to the sharpness of a sword-edge, or the razor mentioned in the *Katha Upanishad* (III,14)—reveals more clearly than the Symplegades that this way of being can only be attained by renouncing a crude belief in the impregnability of matter.

One could make similar observations concerning the capacity of symbols to express the contradictory aspects of ultimate reality. Nicolas Cusanus considered the *coincidentia oppositorum* as the most suitable definition of God's nature. Now, this symbol had long ago been used to signify not only what we call the "totality" or the "absolute" but paradoxical coexistence in the divinity of the opposite and antagonistic principles. The conjunction of the Serpent (or another symbol of the chthonic and unmanifested darkness) and the Eagle (symbol of the solar and unmanifested light) expresses, in iconography or in myth, the mystery of the totality and the cosmic unity. To repeat, although the concepts of polarity and the *coincidentia oppositorum* have been used systematically since the beginnings of philosophical speculation, the symbols which have obscurely revealed them have not been the product of critical reflection but the result of an existential tension. Assuming its presence in the World, man found himself facing the "cipher" or "word" of the World and this led him to confront the mystery of the contradictory aspects of a reality or sacrality which he was tempted to consider as single and homogeneous. One of the greatest discoveries of the human spirit was naively anticipated on the day when, by certain religious symbols, man guessed that oppositions and antagonisms can be fitted and integrated into a unity. From then onwards the negative and sinister aspects of the Cosmos and the Gods not only found a justification but revealed themselves as an integral part of all reality or sacrality.

(6) Finally, we must stress the *existential value of religious symbolism*, that is to say the fact that a symbol *always points to a reality or a situation concerning human existence*. It is above all this existential dimension that distinguishes and divides symbols from concepts. Symbols preserve

contact with the deep sources of life; they express, one might say, "the spiritual as life experience". This is why symbols have a kind of "numinous" aura: they reveal that the *modalities of the spirit are at the same time manifestations of Life*, and that consequently, they *directly concern human existence*. A religious symbol not only reveals a pattern of reality or a dimension of existence, it brings at the same time *a meaning to human existence*. This is why even symbols concerning ultimate reality also afford existential revelations to the man who deciphers their message.

A religious symbol translates a human situation into cosmological terms, and vice versa; to be more precise, it reveals the unity between human existence and the structures of the Cosmos. Man does not feel himself "isolated" in the Cosmos, he is open to a World which, thanks to the symbol, becomes "familiar". On the other hand the cosmological significances of a symbolism allow him to escape from a subjective situation and recognize the objectivity of his personal experiences.

It follows that the *man who understands a symbol not only "opens himself" to the objective world, but at the same time succeeds in emerging from his personal situation and reaching a comprehension of the universal*. This is to be explained by the fact that symbols "explode" immediate reality as well as particular situations. When some tree or other incarnates the World Tree, or when the spade is assimilated to the phallus and agricultural labour to the act of generation, etc., one may say that the immediate reality of these objects or activities "explodes" beneath the irruptive force of a deeper reality. The same thing takes place in an individual situation, for example that of the neophyte shut in the initiatory hut: the symbolism "explodes" this particular situation by revealing it as exemplary, that is to say endlessly repeatable in many different contexts (for the initiatory hut is approximated to the mother's womb, and also to the belly of a Monster and to Hell, and the darkness symbolizes, as we have seen, cosmic Night, the pre-formal, the foetal state of the World, etc.) *Thanks to the symbol, the individual experience is "awoken" and transmuted into a spiritual act*. To "live" a symbol and correctly decipher its message implies an opening towards the Spirit and finally access to the universal.

from *MEPHISTOPHELES AND THE ANDROGYNE: Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol*,
Sheed & Ward, 1965.