

REDISCOVERING SYMBOLISM IN CHRISTIAN AND ASIAN CULTURES

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Introduction

Underneath the joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties of human beings, lies a common desire, which is the human desire to always go beyond. We want to go beyond our sufferings, beyond our fears, which mainly come from the finiteness that we keep on encountering in this world. We also want to go beyond our temporary joys, seeking joys that do not end, not limited or threatened by finiteness. Here lies the main source of our anxieties, the main challenge in our human condition.

In its different sections, *Gaudium et Spes* tried to address different aspects of this human fear, tackling different manifestations of joys and anxieties, whether on the economic, political, social or cultural levels. The followers of Christ cannot be “in this world” without sharing the challenges of this world. It is only through their understanding of the world that they can act as “the salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13), making it a place where the Kingdom would come, and the divine will (of getting humans beyond their human condition towards the divine) be done.¹

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¹“To believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, this human activity accords with God’s will. For man, created to God’s image, received a mandate to

This is why the Second Vatican Council addresses itself to the whole of humanity. For the council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today.²

But the Church is not just like any institution that addresses social and economic problems. Since its main goal is to follow the footsteps of the Master, it cannot but hear His voice telling us to “throw the net in the deep.” Actually not throwing the net in the *deep* could be an answer to the saying of every person of good will, after Peter, that “we have laboured all night, and we have not caught anything” (Lk 5:5). The net has to be thrown in the deep to get enough fish to feed the world, to feed the humans who hunger for the Truth, with or without knowing it, people who are seeking a mode of “being more”, to borrow a term from Fernando Rielo.³ But what is this “deep”? Where does it lie, and how can we find it?

The deep, where the net should be thrown in order to catch fish, is the essential human nature, which lies underneath the surface of changing phenomena throughout human history. The pastoral constitution thus starts by addressing the cross-cultural and cross-generational element of human dignity. Though unchangeable in value, this dignity is being perceived in a different way due to the problems of our modern age, where a new culture is being promoted, with its downsides and upsides. This is the reason why *Gaudium et Spes*, always in a tentative to understand our human condition and find solutions for its challenges, moves to the subject of culture.

Culture, as defined in *Gaudium et Spes*, “indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control.”⁴ This general definition of culture

subject to himself the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness: a mandate to relate himself and the totality of things to Him Who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to man, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth.” *Gaudium et Spes*, 34.

²*Gaudium et Spes*, 2, Preface.

³Rielo used this term, “*Being-more*,” to note that the Absolute, the God that we are seeking, is more than the metaphysical concept of Being. See *Fernando Rielo: Dialogue in Three Voices*, trans. by David G. Murray, Madrid: F.F.R., 2000, pp. 127-128. This relational dimension between *being* and *more* is reflected in our human aspirations.

⁴*Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

finds different expressions throughout different civilizations, where each community has its own patrimony. But the goal of all civilizations remains the same: controlling the world, by knowledge, labour and spirituality, which is a work of seeking the meaning of the world, and using it as a bridge to go beyond the world, towards the source of all graces, all joys and all perfection. Here is the hidden goal that lies behind all human hopes and desires.

For this reason, and always in the field of culture, I decided to address symbolism, for symbols are elements of every culture, even of the new “digital” culture, where humans seem to be more in touch with machines than nature, and although well connected (digitally), they seem to be less and less connected to one another. A rediscovery of symbols, in different cultures, will serve the objective of the Second Vatican Council, of addressing the real hopes of humans, their real joys and their emerging anxieties.

What Symbols Are

Etymologically, the word symbol comes from Greek, *Sum ballein*, meaning to throw together. A symbol was a piece of clay cut into two parts, each kept by one of two related people or families living in different areas. The part of the piece, the symbol, would then be showed by a family member in order to be recognized by the other family, which has the other part. This way, a “*symbolon*” used to be transmitted across generations as a sign of union between two persons or communities which were situated in different areas, with no possibility to recognize each other. Symbols were used to help people recognize their belonging to a common group, common belief or way of life. In this context, the Nicene Creed, which expresses the profession of Christian faith, was named *symbolum nicaenum*, meant to unite Christians under the same beliefs.

The word symbol was then used to designate a link between two words, or two entities, one of which is *the signified* while the other is *the signifying* element. It is important to note that, in a symbol, the signifying part is concrete or visible, while the signified entity is usually something less concrete, and invisible. This way a lion, for example, is linked to bravery. Note that a symbol is not to be confused with a sign. While the latter is an arbitrary link between a signifying and a signified, the former is a natural link, with some occurrence of an observation, or an incident in the past, which had people establish the link between the two entities. Somewhere,

through some act, a lion must have proved to have been brave, which made humans establish a link between bravery and lions. This characteristic of symbols marks an important part of human experience, while using entities of the visible world as symbols. An equally important fact is that symbols used to be transmitted across generations, which makes them a crucial element in anthropology, where one has to understand the development of a culture and the way of life of specific groups. A symbol will thus become an opportunity to reveal the specificities of cultures and the way some civilizations perceive the world.

But a symbol does more than just revealing cultural specificities. As a matter of fact, a symbol reveals something essential about human beings. If people use symbolic images, it is because they need to express some invisible reality which they experienced, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. They had to make use of visible entities in order to express the unsayable. This faculty of linking the entities of our visible world to our invisible, or unsayable experience, is essential to language in general, and it shows mostly in the poetic reverie, to use the term of Gaston Bachelard, and in mythical and religious passages. Since it is a tool to express the invisible, a symbol becomes a metaphysical operator, in both the literal and broad sense of the word, since it links the entities of our physical, sensible world, to entities beyond our physical experience.

The Symbol as Mystical Operator

In his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein draws a difference between what can be said and what can be shown, claiming that "what can be shown cannot be said."⁵ Then he moves to affirm that "there is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical."⁶ This inexpressible is not of the order of sensible entities, otherwise we'd be able to express it in language, but it surely exists. It would be enough, to experience the inexpressible, to consider our wonder when contemplating the beauty of a tree the boughs of which break in the sky, the tenderness of a bird singing in the morning, or the mysteries of our existence in this world. And our experience of the inexpressible leaves us with a certainty that the

⁵L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.1212, SIDE-BY-SIDE-BY-SIDE EDITION, VERSION 0.21, <http://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/tlp.pdf>

⁶L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.5.22.

expressible is not enough for our souls that thirst for more. Our experience of wonder when contemplating the world, a wonder which created philosophy, according to Aristotle, can find very few answers in the expressible. We can formulate the questions, describe the processes, even take part of phenomena, but the questions on existence, its origin, its end and its value, are not expressible in a scientific logical language. Wittgenstein lucidly admits that “even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.”⁷ How can one explain the dreams experienced while sitting in front of a warm romantic fire, the joyful sentiment due to a gentle breeze, or the feeling of pleasure when admiring beauty? The inexpressible fills our lives, and Wittgenstein calls it mystical. But should one classify this mystical as purely inexpressible, being content with vagueness when it comes to the unsayable? Wittgenstein concludes his *Tractatus* with an invitation to silence: “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.”⁸

But this silence becomes, with symbolism, a new form of discourse. To the last aphorism of Wittgenstein, I can imagine Gaston Bachelard, the French epistemologist, answering that “everything speaks, nothing is silent, even silence *rustles with noise*. All is echo in the universe.”⁹ The sensible entities become an echo, images, or links with a *meta-sensible* reality, where humans meet the quested mystery, the key to understand our existence. This is where a symbol becomes a mystical operator, linking humans emotionally to the mystery of existence.

This link with the mystery of the universe is beautifully expressed in the poem of Gerald M. Hopkins:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I dó is me: for that I came...¹⁰

⁷L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.521.

⁸L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.

⁹G. Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves*, Paris: Corti, 1942, 261. All translations quoted in this article from this author are mine.

¹⁰Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Poems and Prose*, London: Penguin Classics, 1985, 51.

Each element in this world has a function to *show* the unsayable, expressing the hidden essence of existence in a beautiful way, becoming the perfect tool for an aesthetic theology, showing the Absolute through the beautiful, or even a theological aesthetics, where beauty has one purpose, which is to express the Unique Necessary, the Prime Principle of this world.

This poetic way of seeing the universe preceded the “objective” scientific way, based on a rationalistic approach of existence. The poetic reverie, which is this playful tendency to explore the world in joy, while dreaming it, always primed over the scientific approach, which is based on the exploration of the world in a detailed objective way that focuses on utility.

Plato had appealed to existing entities in the world in order to express the world of Forms. The problem, though, in Plato’s system, was to overrule the relationship between the two worlds, thus reducing symbols to allegories, where reality is simply told in a different way. However, on a closer look, one would ask why humans have this faculty of using visible things in order to express invisible things. To answer this question, Plato uses the idea of the demiurge that wants the world of matter to resemble to the world of Forms. This demiurge will try to imitate the Forms by shaping matter, as much as possible, making it similar to the Forms. This similarity, or analogy by resemblance, makes us remember the Forms that we used to contemplate in the Real world, when we see the entities in our world of shadows. The entities of this world will thus be linked, through the demiurge, to their essence in the world of Forms. Thus they have, though indirectly in the Platonic system, a symbolic function, in the sense where they would be a representation of reality, a part of it, linking us back to the world of forms that are shining in the light of the Absolute Good.

Plato will not hesitate to use a symbolic language in order to convey his ideas. Hence, the sun becomes the Good, while the cave becomes the world... It is because symbols were for him the best mean to explain a reality that is abstract, invisible, hidden to our eyes of flesh. Thus symbolism became a way of knowledge, of discovering the hidden aspect of the world.

In this same context, symbolism is the main tool in religion, where the hidden Absolute is sought through an emotional openness, one that complements the rational quest for the Truth.

This emotional openness is characteristic of the relational dimension of our humanity, where relations amongst humans, and between humans and the Absolute, are the key to understand the meaning of life. But this task would not be possible without our human capacity of using material entities in order to designate a concept, a reality, in an emotional poetic way. This is how we use images, forming metaphors that link an animal to a psychological disposition, as in the case of the lion symbolizing bravery, or the snake symbolizing wisdom.

The Crisis of Rationalism

Rationalism seems to have underestimated the value of symbolism. With the supremacy given to reason, what was once a way to reach Truth through beauty became a purely subjective, unreliable source of knowledge. *Gaudium et Spes*, praises the technological and scientific progress, considering it as a way of accomplishing the design of God, where humans “should subdue the earth, and perfect creation.”¹¹ But the pastoral constitution warns against the exclusivity of trust in science and technology. The quest for more “scientific” descriptions of life became an obsession in the western world. “Today’s progress in science and technology can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data, and an agnosticism about everything else.”¹² This is causing a sort of absolute trust in reason, where science is “wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole truth.”¹³ This is why the symbolic approach to reality, which is the poetic axis of reason, became underestimated, if not completely overruled as a way to seek the Truth.

This spirit even affected Christianity, where the protestant wave of interpreting the scriptures was hostile to symbolism. Luther did not hesitate to call allegories as “the scum of holy scripture.”¹⁴ This attitude became somehow the hidden side of western modern culture in the last three hundred years, which had, and is still having, dangerous implications on the way we are in touch with our humanity itself.

¹¹*Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

¹²*Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

¹³*Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

¹⁴WA 42.173.31, as translated in McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994, 93.

In his book *The Master and His Emissary*,¹⁵ Iain McGilchrist studies the division of our brain into a left and a right hemisphere, where the first is oriented to deal with details in a more rational, objective and scientific way, while the latter deals with reality in a global way, more emotional and metaphoric.¹⁶ McGilchrist then argues that the Right hemisphere of the brain is the master, because it sees the *relational* aspect of things, and deals with things poetically, where they are naturally linked one to the other.

Before exploring the consequences of this fact, it is important to recall what Aristotle explains in his *Metaphysics* on the beginning of philosophy. The latter, Aristotle explains, started with wonder.¹⁷ Humans were always seeking a meaning for existence. We want things to “make sense,” where the word sense designates a meaning, a value, and a destination. Our human history shows that we were always trying hard to find answers, whether through philosophy, religion or science. This desire to know things is innate in humans. It is found in a child’s endless questioning, and is described by Aristotle as wonder.

But wonder is the act of acknowledging ignorance with a sort of desire to know, a passion related to link things together in order to make sense. This wonder exists in mythology, which is a symbolic interpretation of the world, explaining the origins of existence in a metaphoric way that reveals profound realities while triggering a pleasure through a joyful *reverie*. Aristotle clarifies that “the myth-lover is in a sense a philosopher, since myths are composed of wonders.”¹⁸

The wonder that composes myths is nothing but the amazement due to the intuition that the entities of this world do mean something that goes beyond their material existence. More than being related to direct utility, they are related to some pleasure, some feeling of ecstasy that results from the contemplation of beauty. Indeed, it is the beauty of this world that first attracted humans to discover it. It is

¹⁵Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, London: Yale University Press, 2009.

¹⁶We should be careful, though, not to confuse this with the functions of both hemispheres, because both deal with the environment through language, reason, poetry, etc... but the way of dealing with the environment differs between one hemisphere and the other.

¹⁷*Metaphysics*, 982b12.

¹⁸*Metaphysics*, 982b19.

true that the need to control this world in order to improve the quality of life was also a very important motive to discover the world and the laws that lie behind all physical events. However, modern discoveries tend to give the priority to the emotional ties with the world, rather than the rational ties that seek direct utility. Our “right brain,” mostly in charge of emotions and feelings, was the prime motor of our quest, discoveries and actions.

The quest for the pleasant had always primed over the quest for the useful. The elements of nature become, thus, an opportunity to *enjoy* existence, understanding it in a context where it becomes a *link* to the quested happiness. A rock, for example, stops being a solid aggregate of minerals in order to become the symbol of a solid reality, a truth that would be apt to become the stepping stone of a whole community, one that is meant to last eternally.¹⁹ All metaphors that one could use are based on analogies between a visible concrete reality and a more *meta-sensible* reality, one that is built on senses but meant to go beyond direct physical senses.

These metaphors are a very important element from a religious perspective. One of the possible etymological roots for the word religion is the Latin word “*religare*”, which means to establish a bond, linking humans to God. This link is both established through human effort and divine revelation. But the first natural place to connect to God is the world. Our contact with the world gives us an intuitive knowledge that “through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures we may, *by analogy*, contemplate their Author” (Wis 13:5). This analogy is at the basis of symbols, where humans get to know about the Author through the images of this world.

Jesus invested in this human faculty when He used parables in order to spread the good news. Today, Christianity needs to come back to this way, the approach of symbolism, in order to *re-connect* with humans. In our age, this task has two main benefits. First, it will bring back humans to their human nature, bringing healing to the mutilation of exaggerating the role of reason, in an era that gives it full supremacy; and second, it will fulfil its task of following the footsteps of the Master, bringing healing to people in an age where “Truth has been diminished, before the sons of men” (Ps 11:2).

¹⁹“The Lord is my rock,” says Ps 18:2, and “you are the rock,” said Jesus to Simon Peter (Mt 16:18).

This task requires a new inquiry into symbolism through different cultures, since all humans have this faculty of seeking the divine through the sensible entities of this world. With the project of inculturation that the Church has been encouraging since pope Pius XII, the task of studying symbolism in different cultures and religions becomes urgent for a healthy inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. *Gaudium et Spes* highlights the existence of “many ties between the message of salvation and human culture,”²⁰ where the Church used the discoveries of many cultures in order to spread the message of Christ, “examine it and more deeply understand it, that she might give it better expression in liturgical celebration and in the varied life of the community of the faithful.”²¹ In this same context, John Paul II gives special attention to “the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity.”²² Asian religions, in particular, teach that the entities of the sensible world have a symbolic meaning, thus becoming a bridge between the human and the divine. I will tend to clarify this function of the symbol through the study of the four symbolic elements, fire, water, earth and air, because these elements will become the key to understand many symbols in both Christian and other Asian cultures. Since philosophy is the quest for wisdom, and religion is the connectivity with the source of wisdom, delving into symbols will be an excellent exercise for both philosophy and religion, seeking a mystical type of wisdom, which will hopefully help them get closer to their desired aim. Since the task seeks illumination, I will start with the element that lights the way.

Fire

Fire is one of the most important symbols in humanity, and it always presented ambivalence when it comes to its symbolism. Fire could equally burn and illuminate, and burning itself could be out of love or hatred. For Bachelard, “fire is a privileged phenomenon that could explain everything.”²³ It exists everywhere, in the heart of the Earth as well as high in the sky. Some fire comes from the depth, like

²⁰*Gaudium et Spes*, 58.

²¹*Gaudium et Spes*, 58. Note that liturgical celebrations are full of symbols, mysteriously linking the earth to heaven, even transforming the world into the body of Christ, through the mystery of the Eucharist.

²²John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 72.

²³Bachelard G., *La psychanalyse du feu*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949, 19.

an erupting volcano, while some fire comes from above in the shape of lightning. This fire spreads fear in the hearts of humans, while it is also the lighting sun that spreads warmth in the same hearts. In the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit went down on the apostles' heads as tongues of fire, transforming them without burning them. But hell is also referred to as the place where "fire is not quenched" (Mk 9:48).

Hindu doctrine gives a fundamental importance to fire. Agni, the "digestive fire," gives the ability to process all aspects of life, sensory impressions and memory. Indra, the twin brother of Agni, is the God of rain and thunderstorm. He holds *vajra*, a lightning thunderbolt in his hands, and this represents the intermediary fire between heaven and Earth. As for Sūrya, the Supreme Light, it is the celestial fire, the sun. In most cultures, Fire also has the function of purification. In Hinduism, *Agnihotra*, the purification by fire, is a Vedic *Yajna*, a sacrifice offered as a first step into the unitedness of the I with the Supreme Being. *Agnihotra* has an impact on the whole creation. In Taoism, Yan or Fire branch is the method of transformation, used to free oneself from conditioning. While those images help us understand fire, a deep quest in the symbolism of fire can enlighten us to understand the similarities.

Fire always fascinates its observer. A child intuitively wants to touch it, feel it and play with it. Yet this fire soon becomes a subject to parental prohibition, out of fear of burns. This is how the first thing we know about fire becomes the restriction of touching it, a restriction that becomes seducing in itself. When I was a child, my friends and I used to wait till when we were unsupervised in order to play with matches, trying to have them lit in our hands as long as possible without being burned. I also still remember the level of fascination we used to have when observing the small fires we used to make in our playground. The higher the flame used to go, the more we were happy with it. I still can recall those moments of respectful admiration, silently contemplating fire. Reading Bachelard's psychoanalysis of fire, I was glad to know that what I experienced is a natural human phenomenon.

Fire is associated with the power of the intellect. Paul Diel considers it as the "purification by understanding."²⁴ It is that our intellect wants to know, to integrate the mysteries of the world with

²⁴Diel, P., *Le Symbolisme dans la Mythologie Grecque*, Paris: Payot, 1966, 134.

this *digestive fire*. But it encounters resistance from nature which refuses to be controlled in its profoundness. However, this same nature hides a fire within it, a level of intelligibility that answers the thirst for fire. This intelligibility fulfils its potential when it meets the intellect, which is being actualized through the intellectual act. This is why the *Agnihotra* purifies the whole universe, which finds its fulfilment when it's understood by humans. While transforming matter, fire sublimates it in a movement that goes upward, trying to reach the sky. Isn't it the way intelligence apprehends the entities of this world, trying to transform it through abstraction into something more sublime, something rational? But rationality alone leaves the world dry; it burns it in a futile way, without the fire of desire, which is the motor of all human actions. With desire, fire becomes more than a desire to rationally understand the world. It becomes a desire to spiritualize it. This is the fire that comes from above, giving light to the intelligence.

One more important fact about earthly fire: it can be started through friction. Influenced by psychoanalysis, some anthropologists suggest that the sexual experience of friction, which brings warmth to the body, suggested seeking fire through the friction of wood or stone.²⁵ This leads us to get the origins of fire in love. Don't we compare love to a fire burning inside? Love is this interaction between two lovers, fighting against their differences, trying to be more perfectly united, while the fire of love consumes them and joins them. But what is love, if not this feeling of non-satisfaction without the other, the humble feeling that the self is nothing if not in a relational movement, horizontally with other humans, and vertically with God. This is the internal fire of sacrifice, the true *Agnihotra* that lies within, which we encounter in the *Samyutta Nikaya* (1, 169): "Pile no wood for fires on altars; I kindle a flame within me: My heart the hearth, the flame the dointped self."

Intelligence is the fruit of an intentional desire, which goes out to reach the other with humility. If this desire deviates from its goal in order to seek the ego, it becomes a destructive fire, a fire that gives a black flame and thus does not enlighten. The intellect that is fooled to think itself the Master of creation, rather than its receiver, will become a ruining fire that burns without end. In order for fire not to burn without hope, it needs a little bit of water.

²⁵See Bachelard G., *La Psychanalyse du Feu*, 47.

Water

Water is associated with fertility in almost all cultures. It is the *materia prima*, the place where all was formed. We find this passage in the *Vishna Purana*:

“The waters are called *Nárá*, because they were the offspring of Nara (the supreme spirit); and as in them his first (*Ayana*) progress (in the character of Brahmá) took place, he is thence named *Náráyaña* (he whose place of moving—or sleeping—was the waters).”²⁶

We also see that the mundane egg was at the surface of water. In Genesis, the Spirit of the Lord was hovering over the water (Gen 1:1).

However, water is also the place where all disintegrates. This is how it becomes a cleansing element, delivering people from all that defiles them. For Hindus, water is a purifier, life giver and destroyer of evil. Water resembles material imagination: it penetrates the depth of matter, deforming images in order to create new ones that we “substantially and intimately dream of.”²⁷ For Mircea Eliade, “the waters symbolize the universal matrix of virtualities; they are *fons et origo*, ‘spring and origin,’ the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and support every creation.”²⁸ Using a Jungian terminology, water would be the anima, while fire is the animus. The anima is the feminine human soul, which receives the sensible world without being satisfied by it. The anima searches for the meaning lying underneath the water, the *immanent divinity*. It is not a coincidence that most of Christ’s disciples were fishermen, seeking the meaning of life in the depth of the sensible world. To catch fish, one needs to hold light, since fishing takes place mostly at night, when nature is asleep. Fishing also requires a good and clean net, which is “put in the deep water” (Lk 5:4), and thrown “on the right side of the boat” (Jn 21:6).

While fire is linked to the intellect, water is linked to emotions, which is equally necessary for life, for cleansing, refreshing and vivifying. This is where water is *Sattva*, purity and knowledge of all sensible reality. This knowledge is best caught fresh in the water, just like a fish. If we want to understand the meaning of symbols, we

²⁶*The Vishnu Purana* IV:2, translated by Horace Hayman Wilson, [1840], at sacred-texts.com

²⁷Bachelard G., *L’Eau et les Rêves*, 8.

²⁸Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*, Tr. Willard Trask, New York: Harcourt, 1963, 130.

need to go into direct contact with nature. Only there reality will reveal itself, only then we will recall the state of Saint Francis of Assisi, the one who was so in touch with nature, understanding the language of birds, and using this understanding to praise the creator. And since knowledge of the world and of the creator goes hand in hand with the knowledge of oneself, water becomes a mirror.

This image of water as a mirror shows in the myth of Narciss. But contrary to the lesson usually drawn by the myth, Narciss does not reveal a blind egoistic love of oneself. It rather reveals the act of falling in love with an ideal image, because one's reflection in water is different from the reflection in the mirror, where the former has some vagueness that gives it a dynamic aspect. The human image, in the water, becomes an act of hope, a dream of idealization in a beauty that cannot flourish without water. This is how water becomes an invitation to admire beauty in a peaceful way. Maybe because people feel re-connected to the maternal womb when affronted with water. When my newborn twins used to cry, I used to play for them the sound of water. I cannot forget the serenity on their faces when they heard the sound. Maybe water gives peace to humans, which is why it washes the sins away, inviting us to discover the real meaning that lies beneath. This meaning, symbolized by the fish, is mounted by Varuna in Vedic religion. The fish is also *Matsya*, the first avatar of Vishnu, the Hindu god which revealed to Manu the coming of an all-destructive deluge. Only the meaning that lies in the depth of the waters can save humans from drowning in the illusory satisfaction of the sensible world.

In Buddhism, the fish makes an appearance as one of the eight sacred symbols of the Buddha, and it symbolizes happiness and freedom. The fish in China also symbolizes unity and fidelity as it is noted that fish (particularly koi) often swim together in pairs. It is that freedom, happiness, and fertility, is only attained when we understand the meaning of our existence, and this meaning is only attained in a relational setting, where humans see themselves one through the other, loving each other, and thus being able to see the world in wider scope, and thus seeing the Unique Essential, the God who is Love.

The meaning lies underneath the water, but it requires a human effort to be caught. This effort resembles to the cultivation of a seed, which requires a combination of water and fire. Too much water,

without sun, makes a seed rotten, while too much fire burns the seed and kills it. Together, water and fire help the seed grow, so that it bares thirty-fold, and sixty and hundred. To be accomplished, this project needs earth and air.

Air

Though water is used as a sign of re-generation, it could also cause death. Submerged with water, one could suffocate and die. It is only in a relationship with air that water could generate a new birth. The air is almost universally a symbol of the spirit. In Hebrew, the word used for spirit (*ruah*) is the same used for wind. The Spirit of God is thus symbolized by the wind, which is the air in motion, dynamic, relational, hovering over the surface of the water, and creating Heaven and Earth.

In Hinduism, *Vayu* is the vital breath, the deity of life, sometimes referred to as *Mukhya Vayu*. The soul, in Hebrew, has also the word for breath, *nephesh*. So the air is the principle of life, in humans and in the universe. In this element, priority is given to movement. Air is always active, resembling the Pure Act. The air in the universe takes a vertical movement, meaning that the destiny of soul is the divine. With air, mobility becomes the primary character of the image. It represents an active openness to the divine, an openness without which everything dies. The totality of being can only reveal itself in an ascending movement towards perfection, a spiritual attitude that liberates us from the limits of the sensible world, inviting us to seek transcendence.

In the image of air, flourished the human dreams to fly, to see the world from above, to reach a higher state of being. The people of Babylon controlled all elements. They knew how to get Earth and mix it with water, making clay, and passing it to fire in order to make themselves houses. However, they realized that their industrial city still needed air, so they wanted to go vertically: "Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:4). The people of Babylon knew that without a vertical dimension, a tower that stands high in the air, they would scatter all over the face of the earth. If the air does not bring us upward, it scatters us in futile movements, with the illusion of development rendering us less humans and more like machines. Flying in the air is only possible when the tower we want to build has a

purpose, and this purpose is a personal God, a Being that reveals Himself to us. “The blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:2). This wind is meant to fill our houses, our living space, in order to lift us towards the light and prepare us to become a new creature.

As opposed to the feminine symbol of Earth, Air is a masculine symbol that suggests receptivity from our part, a receptivity that is often expressed in dreams. Thus, Jacob dreams of the ladder dressed in the air, set up on earth with the top reaching heaven, and where the angels, those “made as winds” (Ps 104:4), were ascending and descending on it (Gen 28:12). The wind is the human movement towards heaven and the heavenly movement towards Earth. But the heavenly wind has to be humbly received, in a mystical state of ecstasy, similar to the deep sleep of Adam when Eve was created.²⁹ It is only then, after this state of receptivity, that Adam recognized himself through his love for the woman; he had then to learn a new receptivity, one that would be open to other humans in a horizontal movement where the wind blows and brings both humans vertically, against the law of gravity, towards God. However, and again, if this movement remains on the horizontal level, it will be doomed to fall. Our reference vanishes if we keep it on the horizontal level; it has to find its goal in the vertical, in the quested transcendence. Seeking this transcendence, humans start their journey with their feet standing steady on a solid ground, on Earth.

Earth

Earth is the place where all elements meet, which makes it the place where a set of images interact, enriching our knowledge of symbolic imagination of matter. It is associated to the *yin*, passive principle opposed and complementary to the *yan*. It is also the image of profoundness, where hide all minerals, conditions of life; it is the inner nature that was hidden within water.

Earth is also the surface where a human being stands, head towards the sky. It is the altar of all purifying sacrifice. Earth offers us stable images, which are resisting to change, while it could be mixed with water to become a flexible clay, accepting many forms.

²⁹And YHWH Elohim caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept [...] And YHWH Elohim built the rib that he had taken from Man into a woman; and brought her to Man” (Gen 2:21-22).

Although Earth appears as hard and unchangeable, all depends on its dynamic change in order to come to life. This characteristic had earth earn the quality of *materia prima*, saved from water by *Varaha*, the avatar of *Vishnu* in the form of a boar. The boar symbolizes the spiritual authority, associated to bravery in Japan. Note that a boar is often confused with a pig, symbol of blind passions and ignorance. It is that a boar is the wild natural image of the spiritual dimension, with its invading power, while a pig is the symbol of a tentative to domesticate the spirit, to master it from humans. But the spirit is a movement, a relationship with the divine, which is not to be controlled by humans. It rather takes control and saves humans from their complete fall into materialism. The spirit is the movement of the human soul, its direction towards God. One doesn't control this movement, but is rather taken by it in a dynamic relation that leads to fulfilment.

Some icons also show *Varaha* saving Earth from the water, holding it passionately in his arms, while Earth is personified as the goddess *Bhudevi*. Only the innocent, wild, natural and powerful spirit, could save mother Earth and make it give birth to the archetypes that hide within it. A therapy that does not take into account the original spirituality of humans will never be able to attain healing. On the contrary, it will remain in the phase of illusive cure through administered drugs that rarely end up improving the situation of the patient.

Earth is the place where all archetypes hide, which makes it a revealer of our humanity. This is why the serpent is characterized by wisdom in the ancient cultures.³⁰ It is because it sticks to the Earth and slips into the hidden places, under the sand and between the rocks. This wisdom was "punished" in Genesis by YHWH to crawl on its belly and eat dust for the rest its life (Gen 3:14). But the penalty of the creator is always a restorative one. This means that wisdom became closer to the archetypes, in order to get in touch with the profound human nature, which is what makes intelligence humble, and thus more open to salvation received from above. In Hebrew, the snake is called *Seraph*, *the burning one*, a word also used to designate the angels who hold the arch of God.³¹ In Numbers, burning serpents

³⁰Even Christ teaches us to be "wise as serpents" (Mt 10:16).

³¹I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they

were sent to bite the Jews who spoke against God, and a bronze burning (or fiery) serpent, set by Moses in the air on a pole, following God's command, was used to heal whoever looks at it.³² Both snakes had a restorative role, wisdom of the Earth has to receive, through an openness, the Wisdom of Heaven, and when too much water seems to flood us, some fire will always do good.

Water softens the Earth, making it flexible, and fire hardens it again, after it is moulded into a new shape. Every human desire, in order to be able to stand, once put into the air, has to go through the fire. Every mystical relationship with the universe needs to be examined by the intellect. But this intellect is not an act of rationalization; it is a sensibilization and a creation, which is only accomplished by spiritualization. This is how the combination of the four elements becomes a guide to healthy life. This is the symbolic teaching that lies in our archetypal identity, as humans, in the image and resemblance of God. Just like an equilibrium of elements makes it possible for Earth to give birth to trees, and equilibrium of our human faculties makes it possible for us to be sane, and our sanity will be known by the fruits that we bear. Isn't it the reason why the trees became the symbol of humans?

Conclusion

"Happy is the man that findeth Wisdom" (Prov 3:13), but where does this wisdom lie? Is it in more knowledge, more power or more possessions? The reality is that wisdom lies in none, but can be an excellent attitude to have all, once we realize that wisdom is not a product of our reason. Wisdom is rather a state of being to be discovered by reason as well as emotions, it has to be lived and experienced in a somehow mystical way. But this mystical path to Wisdom cannot be said, it can only be *shown*, in an invitation to a relationship with a wisdom that becomes concrete, through nature, but mostly through humans who transcend nature. This is where symbols become a way to reach wisdom, a way to see the Truth. Here

covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:1-3).

³²"And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live" (Num 21:8-9).

lies the reason why we should be open to symbolism, which leads to enjoy glimpses of the beauty of wisdom, finding equilibrium between our different human dimensions, symbolized by the four elements.

Symbols show us the real source of our joys and hopes, and they instruct us in a way that speaks to our whole humanity. Studying the four elements is just an invitation to a more thorough study, where going deeper into the cultures of the world helps us find the light of Christ, shining through the different sides of the diamond, which is our humanity. The image of God will end up glowing clearer, and the light of Christ can thus shine in all the world, so that all “may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Studying symbols is one way to reach this goal, and thus to accomplish the goal of *Gaudium et Spes*, fulfilling the joys and hopes of humanity!