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FROM WORD TO IMAGE: THEOLOGY OF SEEING

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to show that “seeing” is a consummate theological experience and “images” are valid theological works. Images are generated in the matrix of worship (*bhakti*), which is essentially a creative experience, since it integrates knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*karma*), mind and body, conception and perception. In Christian faith tradition, the Cross as the Tree of Life embodies and expresses the message of salvation in the most effective and exhaustive manner. “Seeing” the Cross as the Tree of Life can be an experience of theological “exclamation,” a wordless exultation.

Keywords: Art as a Theological Language, Cross as the Tree of Life, Theological Exclamation, Theology of “Seeing,” Worship and Creativity

Introduction: Various Approaches in Theological Search

A religion is lived and realized in many realms.¹ All these different realms are, however, interrelated and mutually complementing. It is similar to the different activities of a human person as thinker, doer and maker,² which are related to each other in the awareness of the

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¹Ninian Smart recognizes six dimensions, which constitute a religion. They are: the Ritual Dimension, the Mythical Dimension, the Doctrinal Dimension, the Ethical Dimension, the Social Dimension, the Experiential Dimension. See Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996, 3-8

²See for the Aristotelian view of “man’s three dimensions,” Mortimer J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody*, New York: Touchstone, 1977, 17.

person. Considering in a broad manner, theological approaches may vary as “reflective,” “active” or “creative” according to the different dimensions of religion that engage the theologian.

The scriptural and doctrinal aspects of religion would demand a “cognitive-reflective” pursuit of *jñāna*, in order to explain and clarify its revelation-faith content. The classical definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding”³ may be perhaps applied to this theological approach. It is the movement of faith in quest of enlightenment and clarity by the intellect.

The moral and social dimensions of religion may evoke a theology of “volitional-active” nature, promoting involvement (*karma*) and transformation of social conditions. Theology as “critical reflection on Christian praxis”⁴ may possibly fit in here. It is a method of “doing” theology, in which action precedes reflection and reflection leads to further action.

The ritual and experiential dimensions of religion, when considered as two mutually complementing dimensions, give rise to an “emotional-creative” kind of theology. The connection between worship (*bhakti*) and theology is expressed in the patristic axiom “*Lex orandi, Lex credendi.*”⁵

The Validity of Creative Expressions of Faith

Faith experience goes hand in hand with faith expressions; both are mutually dependant. The earliest theological articulations of faith has been in the form of prayer and worship, until theology became apologetic und argumentative. Worship is the language of the heart, which expresses not merely an abstract conceptual understanding of the divine, but a vision of concrete perceptual forms and actions. It establishes an emotional and creative relationship to God, rendering faith experiential to body and mind. Faith is grasped and expressed

³Anselm of Canterbury, “Fides quaerens intellectum” in *Proslogion (Discourse on the Existence of God)*, written in 1077–1078; See “Proslogion,” in Sidney N. Deane, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. by Sidney D. Deane, Chicago: Open Court, 1962.

⁴Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988(1st ed.), Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973.

⁵It is the adaptation of the words of the Church Father Prosper Aquitaine, a fifth century Christian writer. Literally it means, “The law of praying is the law of believing.” The original version of the phrase, *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (“that the law of praying establishes the law of believing”), highlights the understanding that the Church’s faith (*lex credendi*) finds expression in the celebration of the liturgy and prayer (*lex orandi*). Cf. Prosper of Aquitaine, *De vocatione omnium gentium*, 1, 12: PL 51, 664C. For a study of Prosper of Aquitaine’s text, see Kevin Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology*, Colledgeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994.

not only by the mind, the seat of ideas, but also by the heart, the seat of emotions.⁶

Ritual worship becomes in this context a consummate religious act, in which a person's inner experience finds expressions in symbolic gestures and objects. Both physical and spiritual aspects of human awareness are harmonized in worship, making it an integrated act of body and mind. However, without the inner experience, rituals are meaningless and without rituals, the inner experience is unexpressed and unrealized. When theology becomes worship and celebration, it becomes a community experience, which witnesses faith in concrete forms of creative expressions.

Theological search is to a great extent today limited to conceptual categories, ignoring the potential of the perceptual, the aesthetic and the visual aspects of experience and communication. There is the need of a change in the methodology of theological search, taking into account the very challenge raised by the mystery of Incarnation. Christology cannot be exhausted by words spoken and heard; it needs images depicted and seen, leading to the evocation of emotional tastes.

The Word of God is Heard, Seen and Proclaimed

The Word of God touches and activates the senses, while it inspires the mind. It is in this sense that we understand the revelation of the Word of God in history. The most basic Christological statement in the Bible is: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14; Cf. 1 Jn 1:1; Lk 10:23-24; Col 1:15). The physical closeness and the vision of the glory of the Father's only Son who is filled with grace and truth is the characteristic trait of theological experience. The fullness of grace and truth, goodness and wisdom in the Son is effectively proclaimed and manifested by the brightness and beauty of his glorious vision.⁷

⁶Phil 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord ..."; Mt 27:46 and Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" See also Matthew R. Schlimm, "Emotions and Faith: The Perplexing Relationship between What We Feel and What We Believe," *Theological Investigations on Faith and Culture*, 6, 1 (Spring 2011), at <http://www.atthispoint.net/articles/emotions-and-faith-the-perplexing-relationship-between-what-we-feel-and-what-we-believe/217/> accessed on 15-11-2017

⁷Beauty can "speak directly to the heart, turning astonishment to marvel, admiration to gratitude, happiness to contemplation. It is unlikely to result in indifference; it provokes emotions, it puts in movement a dynamism of deep interior transformation." See Pontifical Council for Culture, Concluding Document of the Plenary Assembly 2006, "*Via Pulchritudinis, Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and*

Light and vision play an important role in theological experience. The visibility of the Son in his glory is the knowledge of God as light.⁸ It is the most unambiguous manifestation of God. Seeing the Son is equal to seeing the Father. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9; Cf. Jn 1:18). The enlightenment of the believer happens in the heart at the vision of the face of Christ. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). The compelling power and the attraction of the "vision" of the Son is his "beauty," which is revealed in the heart of the believer. It is the vision of the "beauteous face" of the Lord that generates apostolic enthusiasm and enkindles missionary fervour among the believers. The wisdom of his words and the goodness of his actions become *kerygma*, proclamation, when the light of his glory transforms them.⁹

Remembrance and Proclamation in Worship

As we see in the tradition of the Early Church, worship is the *locus* of manifestation and enlightenment. The "breaking of the bread" unravels the memories of salvation in which the believers recognize the "face" of Christ shining with the glory of God. The experience of the Emmaus disciples is a typical instance of such an enlightenment. "When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Lk 24:30-31). Christian worship is a *kerygmatic* experience; it consists in witnessing and proclaiming the message of salvation fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is evident in the words of St Paul: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).¹⁰ It means that

Dialogue" at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20060327_plenary-assembly_final-document_en.html, accessed on 15-11-2017

⁸Jn 8:12; Cf. 1 Jn 1:5: "God is light and in him is no darkness." Cf. Mt 17:1-8: Jesus "was transfigured before them; his face shining as the sun, and his garments became white as the light."

⁹See John Paul II, "Letter to Artists," # 3, Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999, at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html, accessed on 10-11-2017. "In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty."

¹⁰The origin of some texts of both the Old and New Testaments can be traced to the context of worship. The accounts of the first Passover in the book of Exodus were originally handed down in oral tradition in the ritual celebration of Passover. In the New Testament, in the letters of St Paul there are elements taken from the contexts of worship. For example, the account of the Eucharist in the first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26), and the Christological hymn in the letter to the Philippians (2:6-11).

faith is experienced, confessed and realized in worship. It is the celebration of a witnessing community. What sustains the community is the bond of the meal, shared in the memory of the Lord's Supper. St Paul would remind the believers in Corinth, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Cor 10:16-17).

Theological endeavour in the context of worship is a process of unravelling a treasured memory and recollecting the related instances. Jesus said, "Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25; Cf. Lk 22:20). It is basically the paschal memory that is remembered, reenacted and relived in the Eucharistic celebration. Remembrance in the biblical sense is different from a detached objective reflection or speculation. Neither is it the reminiscence of the past events in a nostalgic mood. It is *anamnesis*, that is removal of *amnesia* or forgetfulness that blocks one's deepest self-awareness. *Anamnesis* involves the person's self-revelation and self-realization, since the memory evoked is critical and challenging to a person's self-awareness. St Paul would remind the believers of Corinth about Christian dignity. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20; Cf. 1 Cor 3:16).

The Conceptual Crisis in the Narration of the Salvific Memory

The memory evoked and relived is multi-dimensional or multi-layered. It fathoms the depths of consciousness of the community as well as of each believer, enlighten its dark recesses and awaken the images of a new life. A single narrative cannot exhaust the content of a multilayered memory evoked in the cultic context. St Paul experiences the insufficiency of words and arguments to explain the mystery of salvation. He was confronted by the Jewish faith on the one hand and the Greek philosophy on the other. The content of his preaching, the message of the Cross, sounded scandalous and foolish to them. It could not be fit into their categories of belief and thought. Paul was convinced, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness stronger than human strength." The crucified Christ is "God's power and wisdom" (1 Cor 1:24-25). The message the Cross of Christ cannot be preached in the cleverness of words. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:17-18; Cf. Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:8; 1 Cor 1:23).

Evocation of the memory of salvation in the context of prayer and worship must be a concerted effort of body and mind. It takes place not only through narration, but also through action and depiction. What is remembered and celebrated is the event of salvation and the experience of the new life won by Jesus through his sacrificial death and resurrection. The narration of this story of salvation is not an impassionate objective description of facts and events, but an emotional recollection of the salvific deeds of God in the life of the community. The narration is to be complemented and its effect enhanced by appropriate gestures and objects. Thus, the moments of prayer and worship are experienced as highly inspired, creative and artistic.

Evoking the Salvific Memory in the “Creative Space” of Celebration

In cultic contexts, there is a flow of creative and transforming energy. Transformation takes place not only in the participants, but also in the entire space of worship, making it into a place of unity, fellowship, harmony, peace and love. The Holy Spirit operates as the creative energy in Christian prayer and worship, inspiring and evoking a space of communion and harmony. The Spirit lends sense to every word and action in worship. No one can say, “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Beginning with this basic confession of faith, the Spirit transforms the entire worshipping community into the one body of Christ.¹¹ As many members with different functions and capabilities are united to one body, all the believers are united to become one body – the body of Christ, who is the centre of the salvific experience, remembered and relived in worship. The Spirit unravels the memory of salvation expanding it spatially backward into the past and forward into the future.

St Paul in his first letter to Corinthians writes, handing over a tradition that he has received:

... Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures... Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.

¹¹1 Cor 12:12-13: “For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:1-26).

This passage is the verbal recollection of the memory of salvation that is preserved and handed over as a tradition in the community of the believers. It is the theology of the Cross, explained with a great visual impact. It visualizes a space-time that is stretched between Paradise and Parousia, traversing the entire gamut of experiences from the original paradisiacal harmony, through its disruption and restoration, till the final fulfilment in the kingdom of God. The Christ-event, death-burial-resurrection, is the main thread of the narration. What happened in Jesus Christ were not casual events; they were in accordance with the scriptures, the plan of God.

Unfolding Layers of Memory – The Paschal Mystery, the Cross and the Tree of Life

The narration of the salvation history is embellished and elaborated with suggestive phrases, which refer to the events in the past and in the future. They reveal to the minds of the believers images, which are deeply rooted in human psyche. The emphasis on the events of “death-burial-resurrection” evokes naturally the three “worlds” – the lower world (hell), the middle world (earth) and the upper world (heaven). After his death, Jesus descended into hell and after resurrection ascended into heaven.¹² It means that no realm of human experience remains untouched by the effects of salvation.

The salvific action in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ attains a cosmic significance, since its effects renew the entire space-time and creation, restoring it to its pristine glory. Jesus Christ reconciles to himself all things “by the blood of his cross” and has become Lord over all creation.¹³ The cosmic image of Christ looms large and vivid in the horizon, as the future fulfilment of salvation. The worshipping community recognizes its destiny in the participation of glory with the resurrected Lord in his kingdom (Eph 1:17-23). Thus, the temporal dimensions of past, present and future and spatial dimensions of the three worlds are actualized in worship.

The resurrected Jesus is alluded to be the Tree of Life, bearing the first fruits of salvation, the first signs of the new life. Here, a vivid memory of the Tree of Life planted by God in the middle of Paradise

¹²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 5, Nos. 631-637, See http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p122a5p1.htm, accessed on 9-11-2017, Cf. Acts 2:31-32; 1 Pet 3:18-20.

¹³Col 1:16-20: “In him all things were created in heaven and on earth ... all things were created through him and for him... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

is evoked (Gen 2:9). Jesus Christ who produces the fruits of life is contrasted with Adam who ate from the forbidden tree and caused death to the whole humanity through disobedience. The sin of Adam deprived humanity of the fruits of the tree of life. But Jesus opened the closed gates of Paradise. He is now planted as the new Tree of Life in the middle of the Garden. All those who eat of this tree will have eternal life. By being attached to the Tree of Life like branches, they themselves will become fruit-bearing. The fruit-bearing vital relationship with the resurrected Lord and thus the life-sharing communion among the believers can be aptly recaptured in the image of the vine-stock and the branches (Cf. Jn 15:5).

The Cross as the Tree of Life in Christian Iconography



Representation of the Cross on the Sarcophagus of Archbishop Theodore in the Basilica of St. Apollinaris in Classe, Ravenna, Italy (7th century) – lid and the chest of the sarcophagus

Evidently, the salvation and the fullness of life attained in Jesus Christ derive great visual effect in the image of the fruit-bearing tree in the middle of the restored Garden of Eden. He will bear fruit till the end of the world, giving everlasting life to all who eat of it.¹⁴ In the context of Christian worship, it is the Eucharist that is identified with the life-giving fruit.¹⁵ Naturally, the image of the Tree of Life, drawn from the scriptures as well as from the human psyche embedded in ancient cultures, awakened in the early Christian community the memory of the Cross, the sign of salvation. The creative minds of the worshippers readily recognized the cosmic significance of the Cross as the sign of salvation and visualized it in the context of worship as the fruit-bearing Tree of Life. While the fruit of a tree in the Garden of Eden was the cause of sin in the world, the fruit of the Tree of Life in the form of the Cross, brings salvation to the world.

In Christian iconography, the tree symbolism has a long tradition. In the fifth and sixth centuries the "Tree of Life" motif was increasingly in use in association with the Cross.¹⁶ The Cross was often represented as a sign of victory, flanked by heraldic animals or birds. For example, the sarcophagus of Archbishop Theodore in the Basilica of St Apollinaris in Ravenna, Italy, is decorated with the Tree of Life motif. On the lid of the sarcophagus, the Cross is mounted on the head of a lion, evidently to denote the victory over death and passage into immortality.¹⁷ From the bottom of the cross on both sides sprout branches with leaves. On the branches perch two doves facing the cross as heraldic signs.

¹⁴Rev 2:7: "To him who conquers I will grant to eat the tree of life which is in the paradise of God." Cf. Rev 22:2-3.

¹⁵See Berthold Furtmeyr "Tree of death and life" in Salzburger Missale (1481), in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich. The miniature painting of Furtmeyr appears in the Missal, preceding the liturgy for the feast of Corpus Christi. The tree is flanked by Eve and Mary, representing the Church. It bears both fruits and sacramental hosts. It is a combined representation of the paradisiacal Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Eve gives the forbidden fruit to the people on her side. On the side of Mary, the tree shows a crucifix and she administers the Eucharistic bread of life to the faithful. Cf. Jn 6:35.

¹⁶Orazio Marucchi, "Archæology of the Cross and Crucifix," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. See at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04517a.htm> - accessed on 8th Nov.2017

¹⁷Daniel's escape from the lion's den shows that God saves the innocent by shutting the lions' mouths. See Dan 6:22. In ancient cultures, the lion is associated with the sun. Ananda Coomaraswamy identifies the lion's mouth symbolically with the "Sun-Door" the passage to heaven. See Coomaraswamy, "*Svayamātrnnā: Janua Coeli*" in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed., R. Lipsey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 490 n.

Similar representation of the cross is visible also on the chest of the sarcophagus, but with some differences. The cross seems to rise out of a vessel and the tip of the cross is kissed by a descending dove. This representation maintains the tree of life meaning with special reference to baptism and new life. The vessel stands for the baptismal water and the dove for the Holy Spirit. The descending of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is associated with the baptism of Jesus Christ (Mt 3:13-17). The meaning of the vessel containing water is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is the matrix of rebirth and regeneration and on the other, it is the abyss of death and annihilation.¹⁸ It suggests the meaning of baptism as dying with Christ and being raised with him. It is the basic pattern of Christian life – dying in order to sprout and grow and to bear fruit. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12: 24). Fruitfulness of life presupposes a death-resurrection process.

The Tree of Life Motif in the Persian or St Thomas Crosses in India



Persian Cross (7th c.) with Pahlavi inscription on St Thomas Mount, Mylapur, India



Persian Cross in Knanaya Valiya Pally, Kottayam, India

¹⁸J. E. Cirlot, s.v. “Water,” *A Dictionary of Symbols*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971. Water signifies symbolically both tomb and womb. See F.W. Dillistone, *Christianity and Symbolism*, London: SCM Press, 1955, 186.

Crosses with similar symbolic representations of the Tree of Life are seen in India. They are known as Persian Crosses because of the Pahlavi inscriptions on them. They are also known as St Thomas Crosses, since they belong to the faith tradition of the St Thomas Christians of India.¹⁹ The symbolism of the Tree of Life is evident in all these crosses. The four tips of the Cross are suggestive of sprouting life with foliage and fruits. Below the Cross, as in the Ravenna crosses, growing vegetation is depicted in the traditional decorative style of India. The descending of the Holy Spirit is shown in the form of a dove.

One of the conspicuous features of the St Thomas Crosses is the enthronement of the Cross on a pedestal of three steps. It can signify the downward and upward movements of “descending” or “ascending.” The one who has descended in order to ascend is Jesus Christ. “No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (Jn 3: 13). These words occur in St John’s Gospel with reference of the lifting up of Jesus on the cross, like the “serpent in the wilderness” by Moses.²⁰ Those who see him and believe in him will have eternal life.

The Cross in these representations recalls the memory of the resurrected Lord. Jesus is raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.²¹ He is “designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). In one of the crosses of this ancient Christian tradition, in Kottayam *Valia Palli*, there is an additional elevated level where the Cross is enthroned with the heraldic signs of two peacocks on both sides. In most of the Persian Crosses the heraldic signs are incorporated to the pillars on both sides of the Cross, supporting a decorated arch over it, denoting the heavenly realm.

Theological Import of the Symbolism of the Tree of Life

The symbolic representation of the Cross as the Tree of Life brings out most effectively the different layers of meaning which the

¹⁹The Crosses of this tradition are found besides Mylapur (Tamilnadu), in Kottayam, Muttuchira, Kothanallur, Alengadu and Kadamattam in Kerala. See for a detailed study of the tradition of St Thomas Cross, Dr M. Thomas Antony, “Saint Thomas Cross: A Religio-Cultural Symbol of Saint Thomas Christians,” *Dukhrana*, (December 17, 2013), at <http://dukhrana.in/saint-thomas-cross-a-religio-cultural-symbol-of-saint-thomas-chrsitans>, accessed on 15-11-2017.

²⁰Num 21:8-9: “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.”

²¹Rom 8:11 “... he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit who dwells in you.”

mystery of salvation entails. A prosaic narration of the salvation history would fall short of the depth and beauty of the mystery, which requires a space-time that surpasses our practical and logical mentality.

The salvation event is enacted in the person of Jesus as a meal and a sacrifice, which is the Eucharist. It is an act of reconciliation, which reunited humanity with God and humans among themselves, as the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Cross indicate. Moreover, salvation has a cosmic significance, since it is the restoration of the entire creation in the hands of the Creator. Jesus Christ is mediator and reconciler, whose salvific act of sacrifice is recollected by the believers in the memory of the Cross event – death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Cross with its salvific meaning is seen not as a dead piece of wood, but as a dynamic memory, a burning awareness, which is continually renewed and relived in history till the day of the final glory, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.²² Constant growth and transformation through all seasons of life make it a sign of hopeful endurance and survival. It has a deep and a profound past, which goes back to the origins of history. It has a living and flourishing present, constantly challenged by the elemental world. Moreover, it has a bright and promising future of fruition and glory. The space-time created by the Cross is to be experienced at the “Centre,” not in the periphery, because it is an ever-expanding reality “grounded in love,” filling the entire universe in “breadth, length, height and depth.”²³

In association with the image of a tree, the Cross embodies and expresses in it all the latent meanings it has attained as an instrument of salvation, as the sign of death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁴ Almost in all ancient cultures of the world, the tree symbolism is employed to explain reality and its mysteries in concrete, tangible terms. “In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes the life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life,

²² Cor 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

²³Eph 3:17-19: “Christ may dwell in your hearts ..., as you are being rooted and grounded in love... you may have the power to comprehend,... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...”

²⁴In some places in the Bible it said that Jesus was hanged on a tree (wood). See Acts 5:30; Acts 13:29; 1 Pet 2:24.

and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality.”²⁵ The tree attains cosmic proportions when it is identified with the “world axis” supporting the universe. It stands for the spatial and temporal centre of the universe, spreading out in all directions, growing deep into the earth and high into the sky. It extends itself by its downward growth to the hidden layers of the underworld and to the dusky memories of the past. It struggles and stays firmly on earth, withstanding the assaults of the elemental powers and registering times and seasons in its growth rings. Its upward growth to the sky with extended branches is the sign of a promising future of fruition and fulfilment. The flourishing tree conserves life on earth. It is the abode of all living beings on earth and in the sky, providing food and shelter to all creatures.

The great visionary saint of the Middle Ages St Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) has seen in one of her visions the centrality of the Tree and its role in sustaining the universe. She writes about “*Viriditas*”²⁶ the “green-power” of life, which is effected by the harmony of body and soul. The Tree of Life embodies the “greening” power of life. St Hildegard recognizes in it the power of the Holy Spirit who makes the entire universe “green.”²⁷ The greening power of the Holy Spirit is visible on the Tree-Cross as foliage and fruits. The power of the Spirit runs through the branches and keeps it united with the trunk. The words of Jesus about his life-giving unity with the believers may be remembered here. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:5-11). The vision of the Church as “one body and many members” (See 1 Cor 12:12-27) is made perceptible in the iconography of the Cross as the Tree of Life.

²⁵J.E. Cirlot, s.v. “Tree,” *A Dictionary of Symbols*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971. In the Mesoamerican Mayan culture, the tree of life is Yaxche. It is the *axis mundi* and represents the three dimensions of cosmos – the underworld, earth and heavens. See Tom Christensen, “Yaxache – The Maya Tree of Life,” at <http://www.buriedmirror.com/yaxche.htm>, accessed on 16-11-2017; See also Wikipedia, “Mesoamerican world tree” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican_world_tree, accessed on 15-11-2017.

²⁶Hanna Strack, “VIRIDITAS bei Hildegard von Bingen und ihre Bedeutung für eine Theologie des Blühens,” <http://www.hanna-strack.de/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/VIRIDITASAufsatz2.pdf>, accessed on 15-11-2017

²⁷Hildegard von Bingen, “Welt und Mensch,” Das Buch “*De operatione Dei*,” aus dem Genter Kodex, translated and interpreted by Heinrich Schipperges, Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1965, 237.

It depicts unity as participation in the life of Christ, going down and rising up with him, in the process of attaining “the stature of his fullness,” staying firm in him, without being “tossed to and fro and carried away by every wind” (See Eph 4:4-15).

In the Byzantine art, the Tree of Life motif has been extensively used to illustrate the theological meanings of the Cross as the symbol of the life-sharing communion between Christ and the believers. The representations of the Cross appear both in sculpture and mosaic.



In Rome in the ancient church San Clemente there is a highly sublime presentation of the Cross which illustrates the blessings of salvation in a very evocative manner.²⁸ The crucifixion scene is transformed into a vision of Paradise, which merges with the Church in the form of a vine. An inscription reads: “We have likened the Church of Christ to this vine: the Law made it wither but the Cross made it bloom.” At the base of the Cross is the representation of the Tree of Life (in the form of an acanthus plant with tendrils) out of which the Cross emerges, to be identified with the Tree itself. It is a vivid illustration of the Tree of Life in the Book

²⁸The church of San Clemente is the reconstruction of an Early Christian basilica from the 4th century. The structure was completed and consecrated around 1118-19. The mosaic decoration of the apse is dated to be of 1130s. See also Jocelyn Monette, “The Apse Mosaic at San Clemente, Rome,” at http://catholicbiblical.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/B2-The-Apse-Mosaic-at-San-Clemente_web-13-Apr-03.pdf, accessed on 15-11-2017

of Revelation.²⁹ Emerging from the bottom of the Tree are the four rivers of Eden. The tree branches out in all directions as swirling vines and extends itself in the entire space. A closer look shows detailed depictions of different life situations, persons, animals and birds, which have to do with the salvation history and the mystery of the Cross.

Conclusion: Image as a “Theological Exclamation”

The “artistic” approach to theology presupposes a worshipful attitude (*bhakti*) which is a happy blending of knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*karma*). It is an attitude, which is inspired by the Spirit who motivates and enables the devotees to see and visualize their spiritual experience and represent it in colours, forms and images. Artistic representations can possess a dynamic power to witness and proclaim the experience in convincing terms, while impassionate factual narrations are insufficient to communicate the emotional content of an experience. The “imaginal” expression of a religious experience makes “theological exclamations” instead of theological statements. For example, the cosmic significance of the Cross in salvation is well “depicted” by the fourth century writer Pseudo-Hippolytus in his Easter Sermon.³⁰

This tree of heavenly proportions rises up from the earth to heaven. It is fixed, as an eternal growth, at the midpoint of heaven and earth. It sustains all things as the support of the universe, the base of the whole inhabited world, and the axis of the earth. Established by the invisible pegs of the Spirit, it holds together the various aspects of human nature in such a way that, divinely guided, its nature may never again become separated from God. By its peak which touches the height of the heavens, by its base which supports the earth, and by its immense arms subduing the many spirits of the air on every side, it exists in its totality in everything and in every place.

The message of the Cross is at once “divine wisdom” and “human foolishness.” It surpasses our “conceptual” understanding, but we can “taste” it “perceptually” through images. It justifies images as a valid and sufficient means of theological communication and “seeing” (*darśan*) as a consummate theological experience.

²⁹Rev 22:2: “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

³⁰*De Pascha Homilia* 6, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 59 (Chrysostom, Spuria) 743f; English translation: Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 291.