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Religious Monograms and Mantras

It is common knowledge that Yoga centres exist in the great cities of the world like New York and London where self-styled Gurus and spiritual masters communicate in secret to their fashionable lady clients a special *mantra* for a fixed financial offering. This commercialized version of spirituality is an indication of the human need for appropriate means for concentrating attention on the ultimate meaning of existence and for giving specific expression to one's style of the transcendental search. These *mantras* or mnemonic formulae and especially the religious monograms of a tradition encapsulate centuries of a people's religious thinking preserving it and transmitting it to the future generations. The study of these monograms and *mantras* can reveal to us various theological dimensions of a people's religious experience.

YAHWEH

Perhaps the best known religious monogram is YAHWEH, the Hebrew name for God which was not vocalized and only rarely pronounced. Whenever it occurred in the Holy Bible it was pronounced as Adonai or Elohim or some other title for God. Originally the cult of Yahweh began among the Kenites, a clan of the Medianites in whose territory Sinai was located. It may have meant the "storm God" or "He who speaks." But in God's enigmatic dialogue with Moses (Ex. 3, 14) it acquired a new meaning. It was considered the most appropriate symbol of the divine Reality since it indicated the self-description of God as "I am who am" or, more literally, "I am who will be". It was declared as God's name for ever, and his title in every generation (Ex. 3, 15). When God pronounced his name Moses experienced his presence as compassionate, gracious, constant and true (Ex. 34, 5). That name was to be pronounced as a blessing

on the Israelite people (Num. 6, 24-27) and those who took that name lightly were liable to punishment (Ex. 20, 7; Deut. 5, 11).

YAHWEH represents the unique way Israel conceived and approached its God: It presented God not only as the self-subsistent Reality but also as the transcendent Person who is faithful to his promises. In their historical experience of moving up and down in the valleys of the Euphrates—Tigris and Nile rivers connected by the Palestinian coast, known as the fertile crescent, the Hebrews saw God as the author of the universe, a personal Creator who placed at the top of his creation Man, as a partner of the covenant He established with the universe. As man is a person, a free being responsible for his actions towards himself and towards others, his God also is a personal being, capable of understanding man's needs and aspirations and loving him intensely. As the beginning and end of creation, the storehouse of the mysterious plans for the well-being of the world and of all beings, the same God is designated by a monogram composed of the first and last letters of the alphabet, Alpha and Omega, Alap and Tau.

OM

In sharp contrast to the Hebrew approach to the Deity as the personal Creator of all things, the Hindus thought of divine Reality as the impersonal womb out of which all things emerged. OM is the monogram that summarizes the wealth of Hindu religious experience. As is generally recognized, the primitive man thought of the divine as power. Caught between the non-existence that threatened to swallow up the human being on the one side, and the possibility of survival in a vision of benign existence, man alternated between magic and myth. Myth spoke to him of the entry of an outside force into the universe to shape it and hold it and lead it to prosperity; magic gave him hopes of capturing and manipulating the unseen force. These two aspects of the cosmic power combined in the idea of sacrifice, which through the recitation of set formulae and offering of gifts in fire was expected to achieve beneficial results automatically. In the beginning the sacred syllable OM was a holy exclamation at the beginning and end of the Vedic *mantras*, embodying as it were their magical power. It could also mean a solemn assent or Amen, an acceptance or command or expression of auspiciousness, or warding off of evil influences, and the like. Hence it had a central role in sacrificial ritual.

In the *Upanishads*, however, OM became the symbol of the meditative approach to transcendental reality. According to Yama's instruction to Naciketas in the Kathopanishad OM stands for that one Real in search of which all ascetics perform penances, scholars undertake arduous studies, and, in fact, every one follows his or her life-pursuits. It stands for the really Real, the immutable and all-embracing. Mundakopanishad describes OM as all that has been, that which is and all that is to be: that all is OM only OM! The Mundakopanishad assumes OM to be the sum total of the Upanishadic teaching and instructs us to use it as a bow and one's own heart as an arrow to aim at the transcendental goal. OM is made up of three letters representing three states of consciousness: A, the *vaiśvānara* indicating the spirit of the waking state; U, the *taijasa*, the spirit of dreaming souls; and M, *prājna*, the spirit of dreamless sleep leading finally to *tura* the fourth state of pure consciousness.

OM is also the creative symbol: According to Atharvaveda the neuter Brahman, the ultimate magical power creates the anthropomorphic masculine personal Brahma on a lotus leaf and he in turn through penance perceives OM the syllable composed of two letters. With the vowel O he creates the waters and with the consonant M he forms light and the luminaries, sun, moon and stars. By triplicating the vowel of OM he produces the triad of earth (*bhu*) atmosphere (*bhuvah*) and heaven (*svah*) including also fire and wind, and triplicating the consonant he completes the creation bringing forth even the ritual for the Brahman priest.¹ The lotus symbolism brings the creation by OM into harmony with the idea of creation as a biological procreative act, since lotus denotes the union of *Prakṛti* with *Purusha*; already for Satapatha Brahmana the lotus leaf symbolized the womb.²

As Yahweh stood for the Hebrew style of looking at the divinity OM symbolizes and summarizes the Hindu style of theologizing. The divine reality is not an entity outside of and additional to the phenomenal world. Such an outside entity could not be infinite and could not be God, nor be creator in any real sense. Hence the transcendent reality has to be at the same time also immanent, more intimate to beings than their own interior. The emergence of beings from the divine creative principle should be conceived more like the expression

1. See Bloomfield. *The Atharvaveda*, (Strassburg: 1899) p. 108f.

2. *Satapatha Brahm.* VI, iv, 1,7 SBE XLI p. 215.

of the spoken word composed of vowels and consonants, manifesting the immanent mental word. In this perspective the entire human phenomenal existence has meaning and value only in being a true expression of the underlying divine Word.

OM Manipatme Hum

Buddhism took over and elaborated the Hindu monogram OM, but in a way to bring out clearly its own particular style of theologizing. It is stated in the formula "Om Manipatme Hum". OM and HUM are exclamatory expressions, pure sound symbols that have meaning only in certain contexts. So in Buddhism the emphasis shifted from the OM to the "Mani" or Jewel, since Buddhism summarized its religious outlook in the three jewels, Buddha, Dharma and Samgha. These three jewels were conceived in the style of the *saptaratna* or seven jewels or treasures desired by the Vedic royalty. According to Brhad Devata these treasures were the wheel, the car, jewels, wife, territory, horse and elephant. In the Pali Canon they are enumerated as wheel, elephant, horse, jewel, woman, house and the military commander.³ Ultimately they refer to the seven treasures that emerged from the churning of the Sea of Milk by the *devas* and *asuras*.⁴ Buddhism substituted these material jewels with its own spiritual treasures. Religion was for Siddhartha Gautama Buddha not the elaboration of an ontology of God. Metaphysical questions like the existence and nature of God and the immortality of the soul cannot get any definite and unanimous answer, and can, therefore, only distract from the main religious search which is to gain liberation from the present state of suffering, caused by ignorance, motivation, sense experience, desire and their concomitant phenomenal factors. This has to be achieved through individual enlightenment. Buddha who attained such enlightenment and liberation is the first jewel since he is the model for everyone, and everyone is called to be a Buddha. Dharma is Buddha's teaching of *pratityasamutpāda*—that the factors of our experience have reality only in their interdependence in origination. Samgha is the community of the followers of Buddha with the various grades and stages that exist in the advance towards liberation. This basic "mani" symbolism expressed also the Buddhist

3. *Digh Nik.* XV, *Mahapadhana Sutta* XVII, 31.

4. *Mahabh.* I, 18.

idea of *sraddha* or faith which is like a wishing gem, a magical amulet which by its touch makes the muddy waters of life crystal clear.

To this jewel symbol, originally borrowed from the Brahmanical tradition, was added the "padma" or lotus symbolism to accommodate the later creationistic ideas of Mahayana Buddhism. In the light of the Karmasamsara doctrine it was clear that it could not be the first time that Buddha appeared in the world when he was born as Siddhartha Gautama. He must have been preceded by a great many other Buddha figures. So besides his individual body as Gautama, Buddha has an unchanging form or reality called Dharmakaya, and another enjoyment body known as Sambhogakaya revealed only to the Bodhisattvas. The vision of the Buddhbody by a Bodhisattva produced a creator figure analogous to the Hindu Brahma, and he was known as Amitabha Buddha, the *nirmana kaya* or the creative Buddha. But this creative principle Amitabha produced an active proximate creator designated as Avalokitesvara, seated as a hermaprodite upon the fertile lotus of his father.

The short formula "Om manipadme hum" is a summary statement of the entire Buddhist doctrine including its threefold refuge in the jewels of *Buddha, dharma and sangha*, as well as its later elaboration of the *pratityasamutpada* (dependent origination) doctrine as the threefold body of Buddha. The Buddhist theology does not elaborate the nature of the divine reality, but only the momentary and interdependent character of the phenomenal world. The world itself is a sort of jigsaw puzzle which one has to resolve dispassionately. Man himself is a stream of consciousness which has to be disentangled and liberated from the puzzle he encounters. Any attempt to define the really real in terms of the phenomenal world would be a futile and self-contradictory attempt.

Christian Monograms and Ideograms

In the early centuries of Christianity, when it was often subjected to systematic public persecution, people tried to express their faith in cryptic symbols which bring out the specific emphasis of Christian faith.

ICXC NIKA: One of the short forms found on Christian monuments, especially of the Byzantine period, is a combination of Greek letters: Iota (I), Sigma (C), Chi (X) and Sigma (C), indicating

I (esou)s X (risto)s : Jesus Christ. To this was added the word NIKA, a survival of the pagan invocation to the Goddess of Victory, later used as an encouragement to the contestants in the Greek and Roman race tracks. Properly spelled as NIKAI or NIKAIS it could mean "he conquers" or "you conquer."

IHS is a similar monogram for Jesus taking the first three letters of his name in Greek, often found in liturgical art and adopted by the Jesuits as their emblem.

CHRIMSON was another Greek monogram or symbol for the name of Christ often found in the catacombs and other places. The earliest ones are said to date from 269 and have many forms (i.e. Chi and iota), (Chi and Rho) and (Tau surmounted by Rho). The first form was used by Constantine I as a symbol on his flag at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 and subsequently on his coins.

Christianity shifted the religious emphasis from the name and nature of God to the personality of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became the Saviour of humanity. As it was for Buddhism, for Christianity too religion was a search for the liberation of man. Hence, instead of concentrating attention on the nature of God it tried to emphasize what God did for humanity in Jesus Christ, the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross and his victory over sin and death in his glorious resurrection.

MARANATHA is another Christian short form which is the transcription into Greek of an Aramaic expression meaning "Our Lord, come," or "Our Lord has come."⁵ In the imperative form, it is an urgent request for the second coming of Christ.⁶ Taken in another sense, it may be seen as a warning or a solemn declaration as in Didache 10, 6 that the Lord is about to come to judge the living and the dead.

Theological Meaning of Monograms and Mantras

The monograms and mnemonic forms we have examined, though limited in number, are sufficient to draw a few general conclusions regarding the function and meaning of such expressions so frequent in

5. *I Cor.* 16.,.22.

6. *See Rev.* 22.20

religious traditions. First of all they represent an easy way for removing certain expressions from common use and reserving them for the sacred. Thus Israel taking the Kenite name for the storm god removed it from ordinary use completely in order to show the transcendent character of its God above all other gods. Then it filled the same word with meaning indicating Israel's special approach to the personal God. The sacred is not a world completely removed from the world of ordinary experience but is only its inner and truer dimension that can be grasped only from a perspective of faith.

Another dimension of faith emphasized by the monograms and *mantras* is the mysterious character of the object of faith. This was particularly stressed by the Japanese and Chinese Koans, short statements the meaning of which it was almost impossible to decipher for the religiously unenlightened. That is the very idea of Buddhist Nirvana: the transcendent meaning of reality can in no way be imagined or understood in terms of the phenomenal. The parables of the Kingdom in the New Testament to a great extent perform the same function: The publican who is an impossible sinner is said to be justified more than the Pharisee who did nothing wrong. The man forced into the wedding feast is thrown out mercilessly because he has no proper wedding clothes. The prodigal who returns from his evil ways is embraced with open arms while the faithful elder son is virtually ignored. They all show that the Kingdom of God does not follow the neat rules of man's reason.

A third function of such pithy expressions and symbols is the ongoing education of the common people. Words like OM and Maranatha are compendiums of religious instruction which can be expanded and explained at great length. Such symbols continue to gather new meanings as they are handed down from generation to generation. The Christian expression IXTUS is a typical example in this respect. IXTUS in Greek means fish. It is also a short form of the sentence: "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour". Christ is the real fish coming to us through the waters of Baptism, and Christians are said to be little fishes. It also came to signify the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, since according to St. Augustine Christ is the fish roasted for us.

Finally, these *mantras* and monograms are a strong affirmation of what religion stands for, a summing up of all things coming from

the hands of the Creator back into his eternal bosom. Every religious symbol tries to gather up what was dissipated and spread around in our world of experience. For one who constantly meditates on the OM nothing more may be needed for experiencing God.