IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

Studies in
Religious Symbolism

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To the memory of my father
GHÉORGHÉ ELIADE
1870–1951

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Foreword

THE REDISCOVERY OF SYMBOLISM

The surprising popularity of psychoanalysis has made the fortunes of certain key-words: image, symbol and symbolism have now become current coin. At the same time, systematic research devoted to the mechanisms of "primitive mentality" has revealed the importance of symbolism in archaic thinking and also the fundamental part it plays in the life of any and every primitive society. The obsolescence of "scientism" in philosophy, the revival of interest in religion since the first world war, many poetic developments and, above all, the researches of surrealism (with the rediscovery of occultism, of the "black" literature, of "the absurd", etc.) have, on various levels and with unequal effects, drawn the attention of the public in general to the symbol, regarded as an autonomous mode of cognition. The development in question is a part of the reaction against the nineteenth century's rationalism, positivism and scientism which became such a marked characteristic of the second quarter of the twentieth. But this conversion to the various symbolisms is not really a "discovery" to be credited to the modern world: in restoring the symbol to its status as an instrument of knowledge, our world is only returning to a point of view that was general in Europe until the eighteenth century and is, moreover, connatural to the other, non-European cultures, whether "historic" (like those of Asia or Central America for instance) or archaic and "primitive".

It is noteworthy that the invasion of Western Europe by symbolism coincides with the arrival of Asia on the horizon of history; an advent which, initiated by the revolution of Sun Yat Sen, has been unmistakably affirmed during the last few years.

I

Symbolism of the "Centre"

THE PSYCHOLOGY AND HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

Many laymen envy the vocation of the historian of religions. What nobler or more rewarding occupation could there be than to frequent the great mystics of all the religions, to live among symbols and mysteries, to read and understand the myths of all the nations? The layman imagines that a historian of religions must be equally at home with the Greek or the Egyptian mythology, with the authentic teaching of the Buddha, the Taoist mysteries or the secret rites of initiation in archaic societies. Perhaps laymen are not altogether wrong in thinking that the historian of religions is immersed in vast and genuine problems, engaged in the decipherment of the most impressive symbols and the most complex and lofty myths from the immense mass of material that offers itself to him. Yet in fact the situation is quite different. A good many historians of religions are so absorbed in their special studies that they know little more about the Greek or Egyptian mythologies, or the Buddha's teaching, or the Taoist or shamanic techniques, than any amateur who has known how to direct his reading. Most of them are really familiar with only one poor little sector of the immense domain of religious history. And, unhappily, even this modest sector is, more often than not, but superficially exploited by the decipherment, editing and translation of texts, historical monographs or the cataloguing of monuments, etc. Confined to an inevitably limited subject, the historian of religions often has a feeling that he has sacrificed the

fine spiritual career of his youthful dreams to the dull duty of scientific probity.

But the excessive scientific probity of his output has ended by alienating him from the cultured public. Except for quite rare exceptions, the historians of religions are not read outside the restricted circles of their colleagues and disciples. The public no longer reads their books, either because they are too technical or too dull; in short because they awaken no spiritual interest. By force of hearing it repeated—as it was, for instance, by Sir James Frazer throughout some twenty thousand pages—that everything thought, imagined or desired by man in archaic societies, all his myths and rites, all his gods and religious experiences, are nothing but a monstrous accumulation of madnesses, cruelties and superstitions now happily abolished by the progress of mankind—by dint of listening almost always to the same thing, the public has at last let itself be convinced, and has ceased to take any interest in the objective study of religions. A portion, at least, of this public tries to satisfy its legitimate curiosity by reading very bad books—on the mysteries of the Pyramids, the miracles of Yoga, on the "primordial revelations", or Atlantis—in short, interests itself in the frightful literature of the dilettanti, the neo-spiritualists or pseudo-occultists.

To some degree, it is we, the historians of religions, who are responsible for this. We wanted at all costs to present an *objective* history of religions, but we failed to bear in mind that what we were christening *objectivity* followed the fashion of thinking in our times. For nearly a century we have been striving to set up the history of religions as an autonomous discipline, without success: the history of religions is still, as we all know, confused with anthropology, ethnology, sociology, religious psychology and even with orientalism. Desirous to achieve by all means the prestige of a "science", the history of religions has passed through all the crises of the modern scientific mind, one after another. Historians of religions have been successively—and some of them have not ceased to be—positivists, empiricists, rationalists or

historicists. And what is more, none of the fashions which in succession have dominated this study of ours, not one of the global systems put forward in explanation of the religious phenomenon, has been the work of a historian of religions; they have all derived from hypotheses advanced by eminent linguists, anthropologists, sociologists or ethnologists, and have been accepted in their turn by everyone, including the historians of religions!

The situation that one finds today is as follows: a considerable improvement in information, paid for by excessive specialisation and even by sacrificing our own vocation (for the majority of historians of religions have become orientalists, classicists, ethnologists, etc.), and a dependence upon the methods elaborated by modern historiography or sociology (as though the historical study of a ritual or a myth were exactly the same thing as that of a country or of some primitive people). In short, we have neglected this essential fact: that in the title of the "history of religions" the accent ought not to be upon the word *history*, but upon the word *religions*. For although there are numerous ways of practising *history*—from the history of technics to that of human thought—there is only one way of approaching *religion*—namely, to deal with the religious facts. Before making the *history* of anything, one must have a proper understanding of what it *is*, in and for itself. In that connection, I would draw attention to the work of Professor Van der Leeuw, who has done so much for the phenomenology of religion, and whose many and brilliant publications have aroused the educated public to a renewal of interest in the history of religions in general.

In an indirect way, the same interest has been awakened by the discoveries of psychoanalysis and depth-psychology, in the first place by the work of Professor Jung. Indeed, it was soon recognised that the enormous domain of the history of religions provided an inexhaustible supply of terms of comparison with the behaviour of the individual or the collective psyche, as this was studied by psychologists or analysts. As we all know, the use that

psychologists have made of such socio-religious documentation has not always obtained the approval of historians of religions. We shall be examining, in a moment, the objections raised against such comparisons, and indeed they have often been too daring. But it may be said at once that if the historians of religions had only approached the objects of their study from a more spiritual standpoint, if they had tried to gain a deeper insight into archaic religious symbolisms, many psychological or psychoanalytic interpretations, which look all too flimsy to a specialist's eye, would never have been suggested. The psychologists have found excellent materials in our books, but very few explanations of any depth—and they have been tempted to fill up these lacunae by taking over the work of the historians of religions by putting forward general—and too often rash—hypotheses.

In few words, the difficulties that have to be overcome today are these: (a) on the one hand, having decided to compete for the prestige of an objective "scientific" historiography, the history of religions is obliged to face the objections that can be raised against historicism as such; and (b) on the other hand, it is also obliged to take up the challenge lately presented to it by psychology in general—and particularly by depth-psychology, which, now that it is beginning to work directly upon the historico-religious data, is putting forward working hypotheses more promising, more productive, or at any rate more sensational, than those that are current among historians of religion.

To understand these difficulties better, let us come now to the subject of the present study: the symbolism of the "Centre". A historian of religions has the right to ask us: What do you mean by these terms? What symbols are in question? Among which peoples and in what cultures? And he might add: You are not unaware that the epoch of Tylor, of Mannhardt and Frazer is over and done with; it is no longer allowable today to speak of myths and rites "in general", or of a uniformity in primitive man's reactions to Nature. Those generalisations are abstractions, like those of "primitive man" in general. What is concrete is the

religious phenomenon manifested in history and through history. And, from the simple fact that it is manifested in history, it is limited, it is conditioned by history. What meaning, then, for the history of religions could there be in such a formula as, for instance, the ritual approach to immortality? We must first specify what kind of immortality is in question; for we cannot be sure, *a priori*, that humanity as a whole has had, spontaneously, the intuition of immortality or even the desire for it. You speak of the "symbolism of the Centre"—what right have you, as a historian of religions, to do so? Can one so lightly generalise? One ought rather to begin by asking oneself: in which culture, and following upon what historical events, did the religious notion of the "Centre", or that of immortality become crystallised? How are these notions integrated and justified, in the organic system of such and such a culture? How are they distributed, and among which peoples? Only after having answered all these preliminary questions will one have the right to generalise and systematise, to speak in general about the rites of immortality or symbols of the "Centre". If not, one may be contributing to psychology or philosophy, or even theology, but not to the history of religions.

I think all these objections are justified and, inasmuch as I am a historian of religions, I intend to take them into account. But I do not regard them as insurmountable. I know well enough that we are dealing here with religious phenomena and that, by the very fact that they *are* phenomena—that is, manifested or revealed to us—each one is struck, like a medal, by the historical moment in which it was born. There is no "purely" religious fact, outside history and outside time. The noblest religious message, the most universal of mystical experiences, the most universally human behaviour—such, for instance, as religious fear, or ritual, or prayer—is singularised and delimited as soon as it manifests itself. When the Son of God incarnated and became the Christ, he had to speak Aramaic; he could only conduct himself as a Hebrew of his times—and not as a yogi, a Taoist or a shaman. His religious message, however universal it might be, was con-

ditioned by the past and present history of the Hebrew people. If the Son of God had been born in India, his spoken message would have had to conform itself to the structure of the Indian languages, and to the historic and prehistoric tradition of that mixture of peoples.

In the taking up of this position one can clearly recognise the speculative progress that has been made, from Kant—who may be regarded as a precursor of historicism—down to the latest historicist or existentialist philosophers. In so far as man is a historic, concrete, authentic being, he is "in situation". His authentic existence is realising itself in history, in time, in *his* time —which is not that of his father. Neither is it the time of his contemporaries in another continent, or even in another country. That being so, what business have we to be talking about the behaviour of man in general? This man in general is no more than an abstraction: he exists only on the strength of a misunderstanding due to the imperfection of language.

This is not the place to attempt a philosophical critique of historicism and historicist existentialism. That critique has been made, and by more competent authors. Let us remark, for the present, that the view of human spiritual life as historically conditioned resumes, upon another plane and using other dialectical methods, the now somewhat outmoded theories of environmental determinism, geographical, economic, social and even physiological. Everyone agrees that a spiritual fact, being a *human* fact, is necessarily conditioned by everything that works together to make a man, from his anatomy and physiology to language itself. In other words, a spiritual fact presupposes the whole human being —that is, the social man, the economic man, and so forth. But all these conditioning factors together do not, of themselves, add up to the life of the spirit.

What distinguishes the historian of religions from the historian *as such* is that he is dealing with facts which, although historical, reveal a behaviour that goes far beyond the historical involvements of the human being. Although it is true that man is always

found "in situation", his situation is not, for all that, always a historical one in the sense of being conditioned solely by the contemporaneous historical moment. The man in his totality is aware of other situations over and above his historical condition; for example, he knows the state of dreaming, or of the waking dream, or of melancholy, or of detachment, or of æsthetic bliss, or of escape, etc.—and none of these states is historical, although they are as authentic and as important for human existence as man's historical existence is. Man is also aware of several temporal rhythms, and not only of historical time—his own time, his historical contemporaneity. He has only to listen to good music, to fall in love, or to pray, and he is out of the historical present, he re-enters the eternal present of love and of religion. Even to open a novel, or attend a dramatic performance, may be enough to transport a man into another rhythm of time—what one might call "condensed time"—which is anyhow not historical time. It has been too lightly assumed that the authenticity of an existence depends solely upon the consciousness of its own historicity. Such historic awareness plays a relatively minor part in human consciousness, to say nothing of the zones of the unconscious which also belong to the make-up of the whole human being. The more a consciousness is awakened, the more it transcends its own historicity: we have only to remind ourselves of the mystics and sages of all times, and primarily those of the Orient.

HISTORY AND ARCHETYPES

But let us leave aside the objections that can be raised against historicism and existentialism, and come back to our problem—that is, to the dilemmas that confront the historian of religions. As we were saying, he too often forgets that he is concerned with archaic and integral human behaviour, and that his business ought not therefore to be reduced to *recording the historical manifestations of that behaviour*; he ought also to be trying to gain deeper insight into its *meanings* and its articulation. To take one example: it is

now known that certain myths and symbols have circulated throughout the world, spread by certain types of culture: this means that those myths and symbols are not, as such, spontaneous discoveries of archaic man, but creations of a well defined cultural complex, elaborated and carried on in certain human societies: such creations have been diffused very far from their original home and have been assimilated by peoples who would not otherwise have known them.

I believe that, after studying as rigorously as possible the relations between certain religious complexes and certain forms of culture, and after verifying the stages of diffusion of these complexes, the *ethnologist* has a right to declare himself satisfied with the results of his researches. But this is not at all the case with the *historian of religions*; for when once the findings of ethnology have been accepted and integrated, the latter has still further problems to raise: for instance, why was it possible for such a myth or such a symbol to become diffused? What did it reveal? Why are certain details—often very important ones—lost during diffusion, whilst others always survive? To sum it up—*what is it that these myths and symbols answer to, that they should have had such a wide diffusion?* These questions cannot be passed over to the psychologists, the sociologists or the philosophers, for none of these are better prepared to resolve them than is the historian of religions.

One has only to take the trouble to study the problem, to find out that, whether obtained by diffusion or spontaneously discovered, myths and rites always disclose a *boundary situation* of man—not only a historical situation. A boundary situation is one which man discovers in becoming conscious of his place in the universe. It is primarily by throwing light upon these boundary situations that the historian of religions fulfils his task and assists in the researches of depth-psychology and even philosophy. This study is possible; moreover, it has already begun. By directing attention to the survival of symbols and mythical themes in the psyche of modern man, by showing that the spontaneous re-

discovery of the archetypes of archaic symbolism is a common occurrence in all human beings, irrespective of race and historical surroundings, depth-psychology has freed the historian of religions from his last hesitations. We will give a few examples, in a moment, of this spontaneous rediscovery of archaic symbolism, and we shall see what these can teach a historian of religions.

But already one can guess what perspectives would open up before the history of religions if only it knew how to profit by all its discoveries together with those of ethnology, sociology and depth-psychology. By envisaging the study of man not only inasmuch as he is a historic being, but also as a living symbol, the history of religions could become (if we may be pardoned the word) a *metapsychoanalysis*. For this would lead to an awakening, and a renewal of consciousness, of the archaic symbols and archetypes, whether still living or now fossilised in the religious traditions of all mankind. We have dared to use the term metapsychoanalysis because what is in question here is a more spiritual technique, applicable mainly to elucidating the theoretical content of the symbols and archetypes, giving transparency and coherence to what is allusive, cryptic or fragmentary. One could equally well call this a new *maieutics*. Just as Socrates, according to the *Theaetetus* (149 a, 161 e), acted on the mind obstetrically, bringing to birth thoughts it did not know it contained, so the history of religions could bring forth a new man, more authentic and more complete: for, through the study of the religious traditions, modern man would not only rediscover a kind of archaic behaviour, he would also become conscious of the spiritual riches implied in such behaviour.

This maieutics effected with the aid of religious symbolism would also help to rescue modern man from his cultural provincialism and, above all, from his historical and existentialist relativism. For, as we shall see, man is opposing himself to history even when he sets out to make history, and even when he pretends to be nothing but "history". And in so far as man surpasses his historic moment and gives free course to his desire to relive

the archetypes, he realises himself as a whole and universal being. In so far as he opposes himself to history, modern man rediscovers the archetypal positions. Even his sleep, even his orgiastic tendencies are charged with spiritual significance. By the simple fact that, at the heart of his being, he rediscovers the cosmic rhythms —the alternations of day and night, for instance, or of winter and summer—he comes to a more complete knowledge of his own destiny and significance.

Still with the aid of the history of religions, man might recover the symbolism of his body, which is an anthropocosmos. What the various techniques of the imagination, and especially the poetic techniques, have realised in this direction is almost nothing beside what the history of religions might promise. All these things still exist even in modern man; it is only necessary to reactivate them and bring them to the level of consciousness. By regaining awareness of his own anthropocosmic symbolism—which is only one variety of the archaic symbolism—modern man will obtain a new existential dimension, totally unknown to present-day existentialism and historicism: this is an authentic and major mode of being, which defends man from nihilism and historical relativism without thereby taking him out of history. For history itself will one day be able to find its true meaning: that of the epiphany of a glorious and absolute human condition. We have only to recall the value attached to historical existence by Judæo-Christianity, to realise how, and in what sense, history might become "glorious" and even "absolute".

Obviously, one could never pretend that rational study of the history of religions should, or could, be substituted for religious experience itself, still less for the experience of faith. But even for the Christian consciousness, a maieutics effected by means of the archaic symbolism will bear its fruit. Christianity is the inheritor of a very ancient and very complex religious tradition whose structures have survived in the midst of the Church, even though the spiritual values and theological orientation have changed. And in any case, nothing whatever, throughout the Cosmos, that

is a manifestation of glory—to speak in Christian terms—can be a matter of indifference to a believer.

Finally, the study of religions will shed light upon one fact that until now has been insufficiently noted, namely, that there is a logic of the symbol. Certain groups of symbols, at least, prove to be coherent, logically connected with one another;[1] in a word, they can be systematically formulated, translated into rational terms. This internal logic of symbols raises a problem with far-reaching consequences: are certain zones of the individual or collective consciousness dominated by the *logos*, or are we concerned here with manifestations of a "transconscious"? That problem cannot be resolved by depth-psychology alone, for the symbolisms which decipher the latter are for the most part made up of scattered fragments and of the manifestations of a psyche in crisis, if not in a state of pathological regression. To grasp the authentic structures and functions of symbols, one must turn to the inexhaustible indices of the history of religions; and yet even here, one must know how to choose; for our documents are in many cases decadent in form, aberrant, or frankly second-rate. If we want to arrive at an adequate understanding of archaic religious symbolism we are obliged to make a selection, just as, in order to gain some idea of a foreign literature, we must not take at hazard the first ten or the first hundred books to be found in the nearest public library. It is to be hoped that one day the historians of religion will make a hierarchic assessment of their documents according to the value and the condition of each, as do their colleagues, the historians of literature. But here again, we are only at the beginning of things.

THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD

In archaic and traditional societies, the surrounding world is conceived as a microcosm. At the limits of this closed world begins the domain of the unknown, of the formless. On this side

[1] See below, in Chapter III, *the "god who binds", and the symbolism of knots.*

there is ordered—because inhabited and organised—space; on the other, outside this familiar space, there is the unknown and dangerous region of the demons, the ghosts, the dead and of foreigners—in a word, chaos or death or night. This image of an inhabited microcosm, surrounded by desert regions regarded as a chaos or a kingdom of the dead, has survived even in highly evolved civilisations such as those of China, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Indeed, a good many texts liken the enemies who are attacking national territory to ghosts, demons or the powers of chaos. Thus the adversaries of the Pharaoh were looked upon as "sons of ruin, wolves, dogs", etc. The Pharaoh was likened to the God Rē, victor over the dragon Apophis, whilst his enemies were identified with that same mythical dragon. Because they attack, and endanger the equilibrium and the very life of the city (or of any other inhabited and organised territory), enemies are assimilated to demonic powers, trying to reincorporate the microcosm into the state of chaos; that is, to suppress it. The destruction of an established order, the abolition of an archetypal image, was equivalent to a regression into chaos, into the pre-formal, undifferentiated state that preceded the cosmogony. Let us note that the same images are still invoked in our own days when people want to formulate the dangers that menace a certain type of civilisation: there is much talk of "chaos", of "disorder", of the "dark ages" into which "our world" is subsiding. All these expressions, it is felt, signify the abolition of an order, of a Cosmos, of a structure, and the re-immersion in a state that is fluid, amorphous, in the end chaotic.

The conception of the enemy as a demonic being, a veritable incarnation of the powers of evil, has also survived until our days. The psychoanalysis of these mythic images that still animate the modern world will perhaps show us the extent to which we project our own destructive desires upon the "enemy". But that is a problem beyond our competence. What we wish to bring to

See our book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York-London, 1954, pp. 37 ff.

light is that, for the archaic world in general, the enemies threatening the microcosm were dangerous, not in their capacity as human beings but because they were incarnating the hostile and destructive powers. It is very probable that the defences of inhabited areas and cities began by being magical defences; for these defences—ditches, labyrinths, ramparts, etc.—were set up to prevent the incursions of evil spirits rather than attacks from human beings. Even fairly late in history, in the Middle Ages for instance, the walls of cities were ritually consecrated as a defence against the Devil, sickness and death. Moreover, the archaic symbolism finds no difficulty in assimilating the human enemy to the Devil or to Death. After all, the result of their attacks, whether demonic or military, is always the same: ruin, disintegration and death.

Every microcosm, every inhabited region, has what may be called a "Centre"; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all. It is there, in that Centre, that the sacred manifests itself in its totality, either in the form of elementary hierophanies—as it does among the "primitives" (in the totemic centres, for example, the caves where the *tchuringas* are buried, etc.)—or else in the more evolved form of the direct epiphanies of the gods, as in the traditional civilisations. But we must not envisage this symbolism of the Centre with the geometrical implications that it has to a Western scientific mind. For each one of these microcosms there may be several "centres". As we shall see before long, all the Oriental civilisations—Mesopotamia, India, China, etc.—recognised an unlimited number of "Centres". Moreover, each one of these "Centres" was considered and even literally called the "Centre of the World". The place in question being a "sacred space", consecrated by a hierophany, or ritually constructed, and not a profane, homogeneous, geometrical space, the plurality of "Centres of the Earth" within a single inhabited region presented no difficulty.[3] What we have here is a sacred, mythic geography, the only kind effectually *real*, as opposed to profane geography,

[3] See our *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, London, 1958, pp. 367 ff.

the latter being "objective" and, as it were, abstract and non-essential—the theoretical construction of a space and a world that we do not live in, and therefore do not *know*.

In mythical geography, sacred space is the essentially *real space*, for, as it has lately been shown, in the archaic world the myth alone is real. It tells of manifestations of the only indubitable reality—the *sacred*. It is in such space that one has direct contact with the sacred—whether this be materialised in certain objects (*tchuringas*, representations of the divinity, etc.) or manifested in the hiero-cosmic symbols (the Pillar of the World, the Cosmic Tree, etc.). In cultures that have the conception of three cosmic regions—those of Heaven, Earth and Hell—the "centre" constitutes the point of intersection of those regions. It is here that the break-through on to another plane is possible and, at the same time, communication between the three regions. We have reason to believe that this image of three cosmic levels is quite archaic; we meet with it, for instance, among the Semang pygmies of the Malay peninsula: at the centre of their world there stands an enormous rock, Batu-Ribn, and beneath it is Hell. From the Batu-Ribn a tree-trunk formerly reached up towards the sky.[4] Hell, the centre of the earth and the "door" of heaven are all to be found, then, upon the same axis, and it is along this axis that the passage from one cosmic region to another is effected. We might hesitate to believe in the authenticity of this cosmological theory among the Semang pygmies, were we not bound to admit that the same theory already existed in outline in prehistoric times.[5] The Semang say that the trunk of a tree *formerly* connected the summit of the Cosmic Mountain, the Centre of the World, with Heaven. This is an allusion to a mythic theme of extremely wide diffusion: formerly, communication with Heaven and relations with the divinity were easy and "natural"; until, in consequence of a ritual fault, these communications were broken off, and the gods withdrew to still higher heavens. Only medicine-men, shamans, priests, and heroes, or the sovereign rulers were now able to re-establish communication with Heaven, and that only in a temporary way and for their own use.[6] The myth of a primordial paradise, lost on account of some fault or other, is of extreme importance—but although in some ways it touches upon our subject, we cannot discuss it now.

[4] P. Schebesta, *Les Pygmées* (French translation), Paris, 1940, pp. 156 ff.

[5] Cf., for example, W. Gaerte, "Kosmische Vorstellungen im Bilde prähistorischer Zeit: Erdberg, Himmelsberg, Erdnabel und Weltenströme" in *Anthropos* IX, 1914, pp. 956–979.

SYMBOLISM OF THE "CENTRE"

Let us now return to the image of the three cosmic regions connected in a "Centre" along one axis. It is chiefly in the early Oriental civilisations that we meet with this archetypal image. The name of the sanctuaries of Nippur, Larsa and Sippara was *Dur-an-ki*, "link between Heaven and Earth". Babylon had a whole list of names, among others "House of the basis of Heaven and Earth" and "Link between Heaven and Earth". But there was also in Babylon the link between the Earth and the lower regions, for the town had been built upon *bāb-apsū*, the "Gate of *apsū*"; *apsū* meaning the waters of Chaos before the Creation. We find the same tradition among the Hebrews. The Rock of Jerusalem went deep down into the subterranean waters (*tehōm*). It is said in the Mishna that the Temple stood just over the *tehōm* (the Hebrew equivalent for *apsū*). And just as, in Babylon, they had "the Gate of *apsū*", so in Jerusalem the Rock of the Temple covered the "mouth of the *tehōm*". We encounter similar traditions in the Indo-European world. Among the Romans, for example, the *mundus* constitutes the meeting-point between the lower regions and the terrestrial world. The Italic temple was the zone of intersection between the higher (divine) world, the terrestrial world and the subterranean (infernal) world.[7]

Every Oriental city was standing, in effect, at the centre of the

[6] Cf. our *Le Chamanisme et les techniques de l'extase*, Payot, 1951.

[7] Cf. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 13 ff.

world. Babylon was *Bāb-ilāni*, a "gate of the Gods", for it was there that the gods came down to earth. The capital of the ideal Chinese sovereign was situated near to the miraculous Tree "shaped Wood" (*Kien-mou*) at the intersection of the three cosmic zones, Heaven, Earth and Hell. Examples could be multiplied without end. These cities, temples or palaces, regarded as Centres of the World are all only replicas, repeating *ad libitum* the same archaic image—the Cosmic Mountain, the World Tree or the central Pillar which sustains the planes of the Cosmos.

This symbol of a Mountain, a Tree or a Column situated at the Centre of the World is extremely widely distributed. We may recall the Mount Meru of Indian tradition, Haraberezaiti of the Iranians, the Norse Himingbjör, the "Mount of the Lands" in the Mesopotamian tradition, Mount Tabor in Palestine (which may signify *tabbur*—that is, "navel" or *omphalos*), Mount Gerizim, again in Palestine, which is expressly named the "navel of the earth", and Golgotha which, for Christians, represented the centre of the world, etc.[8] Because the territory, the city, the temple or the royal palace thus stood at the "Centre of the World"—that is, on the summit of the Cosmic Mountain—each was regarded as the highest place in the world, the only one which had not been submerged at the Deluge. "The land of Israel was not submerged by the Deluge," says a rabbinical text. And, according to Islamic tradition, the highest elevated place on earth is the Kā'aba, because "the Pole Star proves that . . . it lies over against the centre of Heaven"[9] The names of sacred Babylonian towers and temples show that they were assimilated to the Cosmic Mountain; that is, to the Centre of the World—"Mount of the House", "House of the Mountain of all the lands", "Mount of Storms", "Bond between Heaven and Earth", etc. The *ziqqurat* was, properly speaking, a cosmic mountain—that is, a symbolic image of the Cosmos; its seven stages represented the seven planetary spheres; by ascending them, the priest attained to the

[8] Cf. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 374 ff.

[9] For the texts, see our *Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 13 ff.

summit of the Universe. This same symbolism informs the colossal construction of the temple of Barabudur, which is shaped like an artificial mountain. To ascend it is equivalent to an ecstatic journey to the Centre of the World; upon reaching the highest terrace, the pilgrim experiences the break-through into another state; he transcends profane space and enters into a "pure region". Here we are in the presence of a "rite of the centre."[10]

The summit of the Cosmic Mountain is not only the highest point on the Earth, it is the navel of the Earth, the point at which creation began. "The Holy One created the world like an embryo," affirms a rabbinical text. "As an embryo proceeds from the navel onward, so God began the creation of the world from its navel onward, and from thence it spread in different directions." "The world was created, beginning at Sion," says another text. The same symbolism occurs in Ancient India, in the *Rig Veda*; where the Universe is conceived as expanding outward from a central point.[11]

The creation of man, a replica of the cosmogony, took place similarly from a central point, in the Centre of the World. According to the Mesopotamian tradition, man was fashioned at the "navel of the earth", where there is also *Dur-an-ki*, the "link between Heaven and Earth". Ohrmazd created the primordial man Gajomard, at the centre of the world. The Paradise in which Adam was created out of clay is, of course, situated at the Centre of the Cosmos. Paradise was the "navel of the Earth" and, according to a Syrian tradition, was established "upon a mountain higher than all the others". According to the Syrian book *The Cavern of Treasures*, Adam was created at the centre of the earth, on the very same spot where, later on, the Cross of Jesus was to be erected. The same traditions have been preserved by Judaism. The Judaic apocalypse and the *Midrash* specify that Adam was fashioned in Jerusalem. And Adam, having been buried at the

[10] For the texts, see our *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 376 ff.

[11] *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 377; *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 16.

same spot where he was created—that is, at the centre of the world, upon Golgotha—the blood of the Lord will redeem him also.[12]

The most widely distributed variant of the symbolism of the Centre is the Cosmic Tree, situated in the middle of the Universe, and upholding the three worlds as upon one axis. Vedic India, ancient China and the Germanic mythology, as well as the "primitive" religions, all held different versions of this Cosmic Tree, whose roots plunged down into Hell, and whose branches reached to Heaven. In the Central and North Asiatic mythologies its seven or nine branches symbolise the seven or nine celestial planes—that is, the seven planetary heavens. We have not room here to enlarge upon the complex symbolism of this Tree of the World;[13] what concerns us now is the part it plays in the "rites of the centre". It may be said, in general, that the majority of the sacred and ritual trees that we meet with in the history of religions are only replicas, imperfect copies of this exemplary archetype, the Cosmic Tree. Thus, all these sacred trees are thought of as situated in the Centre of the World, and all the ritual trees or posts which are consecrated before or during any religious ceremony are, as it were, magically projected into the Centre of the World. Let us content ourselves with a few examples

In Vedic India, the sacrificial stake (*yūpa*) is made of a tree which is similar to the Universal Tree. While it is being felled, the priest of the sacrifice addresses these words to it: "With thy summit, do not rend the Heavens; with thy trunk, wound not the atmosphere . . ." It is easy to see that what we have here is the Cosmic Tree itself. From the wood of this tree the sacrificial stake is fashioned, and this becomes a sort of cosmic pillar: "Lift thyself up, O Lord of the forest, unto the summit of the earth!" is the invocation of the *Rig Veda* (III, 8, 3). "With thy summit

[12] *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 378.

[13] Cf. our *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 269 ff.; *Le Chamanisme . . .*, pp. 244 ff.; and, upon the Christian symbolism of the Cross as the Cosmic Tree, see H. de Lubac, *Aspects du Bouddhisme*, Paris 1951, pp. 61 ff.

thou dost hold up the Heavens, with thy branches thou fillest the air, with thy foot thou steadiest the earth," proclaims the *Satapatha Brāhmana* (III, 7, 1, 4).

The installation and consecration of the sacrificial stake constitute a rite of the Centre. Assimilated to the Cosmic Tree, the stake becomes in its turn the axis connecting the three cosmic regions. Communication between Heaven and Earth becomes possible by means of this pillar. He who makes the sacrifice does, indeed, go up to heaven, alone or with his wife, upon this post now ritually transformed into the World-Axis itself. While setting up the ladder, he says to his wife: "Come, let us go up to Heaven!" She answers: "Let us go up!" (*Sat. Br.* V, 2, 1, 9), and they begin to mount the ladder. At the top, while touching the head of the post, the sacrificer cries out: "We have reached Heaven!" (*Taittirīya Samhitā*, *Sat. Br.*, etc.) Or, while climbing up the steps of the stake, he stretches out his arms (as a bird spreads its wings!) and on reaching the top cries out: "I have attained to heaven, to the gods: I have become immortal!" (*Taittirīya Samhitā*, 1, 7, 9.) "In truth," continues the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (VI, 6, 4, 2), "the sacrificer makes himself a ladder and a bridge to reach the celestial world."

The bridge or ladder between Heaven and Earth were possible because they were set up in a Centre of the World—like the ladder seen in a dream by Jacob, which reached from earth to the heavens. "And behold! the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (*Genesis* XXVIII, 11-12). The Indian rite also alludes to the immortality that is attained in consequence of the ascent into Heaven. As we shall see presently, a number of other ritual approaches to a Centre are equivalent to a conquest of immortality.

The assimilation of the ritual tree to the Cosmic Tree is still more apparent in Central and North Asiatic shamanism. The climbing of such a tree by the Tatar shaman symbolises his ascension to heaven. In fact, seven or nine notches are cut in the tree and the shaman, while he is climbing up them, makes the

pertinent declaration that he is going up to heaven: he describes to the onlookers all that he sees at each of the celestial levels which he passes through. At the sixth heaven he worships the moon, at the seventh, the sun. Finally, at the ninth, he prostrates himself before Bai Ulgân, the Supreme Being, and offers him the soul of the horse that has been sacrificed.[14]

The shamanic tree is only a replica of the Tree of the World, which rises in the middle of the Universe and at whose summit is the supreme God, or the solarised god. The seven or nine notches on the shamanic tree symbolise the seven or nine branches of the Cosmic Tree—that is, the seven or nine heavens. The shaman feels, moreover, that he is united with this Tree of the World through other mystical relationships. In his initiatory dreams, the future shaman is believed to approach the Cosmic Tree and to receive, from the hand of God himself, three branches of it, which are to serve as frames for his drums.[15] We know the indispensable part that is played by the drum during the shamanic ceremonies; it is above all by the aid of their drums that shamans attain to the ecstatic state. And, when we think that *the drum is made of the very wood of the World Tree*, we can understand the symbolism and the religious value of the sounds of the shamanic drum—and why, when he beats it, the shaman feels himself transported in ecstasy near to the Tree of the World.[16] Here we have a mystical journey to the "Centre", and thence into the highest heaven. Thus, either by climbing up the seven or nine notches of the ceremonial birch-tree, or simply drumming, the shaman sets out on his journey to heaven, but he can only obtain that rupture of the cosmic planes which makes his ascension possible or enables him to fly ecstatically through the heavens, because he is thought to be already at

[14] Cf. the material and the bibliography in our book *Le Chamanisme*, pp. 171 ff.

[15] A. A. Popov, *Tavgijcy. Materialy po etnografii avamskich i vedeevskich tavgicev* (Moscow-Leningrad 1936), pp. 84 ff. See also *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, pp. 160 ff.

[16] Cf. E. Emsheimer, "Schamanentrommel und Trommelbaum" in *Ethnos*, Vol. IV, 1946, pp. 166–181.

the very Centre of the world; for, as we have seen, it is only in such a Centre that communication between Earth, Heaven and Hell is possible.[17]

SYMBOLISM OF ASCENSION

It is highly probable, at least in the case of the Central Asiatic and Siberian religions, that this symbolism of the Centre was influenced by some Indo-Iranian and, in the last analysis, Mesopotamian cosmological systems. The importance of the number seven seems, among other things, to prove this. But it is important to distinguish between the borrowing of a cosmological theory elaborated *around* the symbolism of the Centre—such as, for example, the conception of the seven celestial spheres—and the symbolism of the Centre *in itself*. We have already seen that this symbolism is extremely archaic, that it is known to the pygmies of the Malay Peninsula. And even if we might suspect a remote Indian influence among these Semang pygmies, we should still have to explain the symbolism of the Centre that is found upon the prehistoric monuments (cosmic mountains, the four rivers, the Tree, the spiral, etc.). Furthermore, it has been possible to show that the symbolism of a cosmic axis was already known in the archaic cultures (the *Urkulturen* of the Graebner-Schmidt school) especially among the Arctic and North American populations; the centre-post of the cabin they live in is assimilated to the Cosmic Axis. And it is at the foot of this post that one deposits the offerings intended for the heavenly divinities, for it is only along this axis that offerings can mount up into heaven.[18] When the form of the dwelling is changed and the hut is replaced by the yourt (as, for example, among the nomadic stock-breeders of central Asia), the mythico-ritual function of the central pillar is

[17] The initiatory ascent of a ceremonial tree is also met with in Indonesian, South American (Araucan) and North American (Pomo) shamanism. Cf. *Le Chamanisme* . . ., pp. 122 ff., 125 ff.

[18] See *Le Chamanisme* . . ., pp. 235 ff.

performed through the opening left in the roof to let out the smoke. On sacrificial occasions, they bring a tree into the yourt, so that the top of it projects through this opening. This sacrificial tree with its seven branches symbolises the seven celestial spheres. Thus, on the one hand, *the house is made to symbolise the universe* and, on the other, *is supposed to be situated in the Centre of the World*, the smoke-hole opening upwards towards the Pole Star.

We shall return presently to this symbolic assimilation of the dwelling-place to the "Centre of the World", for it expresses one of the most instructive customs of archaic religious man. For the moment, let us look at the ritual of ascension that takes place in a "centre". We saw that the Tatar or Siberian shaman climbs a tree, and that the Vedic sacrificer mounts a ladder: the two rites are directed to the same end, the ascension into Heaven. A good many of the myths speak of a tree, of a creeper, a cord, or a thread of spider-web or a ladder which connects Earth with Heaven, and by means of which certain privileged beings do, in effect, mount up to heaven. These myths have, of course, their ritual correlatives—as, for instance, the shamanic tree or the post in the Vedic sacrifice. The ceremonial staircase plays an equally important part, of which we will now give a few examples:

Polyaenus (*Stratagematon*, VII, 22) tells us of Kosingas, the priest-king of certain peoples of Thrace, who threatened to desert his subjects by going up a wooden ladder to the goddess Hera; which proves that such a ritual ladder existed and was believed to be a means whereby the priest-king could ascend to Heaven. The ascension to Heaven by ritually climbing up a ladder was probably part of an Orphic initiation; in any case, we find it again in the Mithraic initiation. In the mysteries of Mithra the ceremonial ladder (*climax*) had seven rungs, each being made of a different metal. According to Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 22), the first rung was made of lead, corresponding to the "heaven" of the planet Saturn; the second of tin (Venus); the third of bronze (Jupiter); the fourth of iron (Mercury); the fifth of "monetary alloy" (Mars); the sixth of silver (the Moon) and the seventh of

gold (the Sun). The eighth rung, Celsus tells us, represented the sphere of the fixed stars.[19] By going up this ceremonial ladder, the initiate was supposed to pass through the seven heavens, thus uplifting himself even to the Empyrean—just as one attained to the ultimate heaven by ascending the seven stages of the Babylonian *ziqqurat*, or as one travelled through the different cosmic regions by scaling the terraces of the Temple of Barabudur, which in itself, as we saw, constituted a Cosmic Mountain and an *imago mundi*.

We can easily understand that the stairway in the Mithraic initiation was an Axis of the World and was situated at the Centre of the Universe: otherwise the rupture of the planes would not have been possible. "Initiation" means, as we know, the symbolic death and resurrection of the neophyte or, in other contexts, the descent into Hell followed by ascension into Heaven. Death—whether initiatory or not—is the supreme case of a rupture of the planes. That is why it is symbolised by a climbing of steps, and why funerary rites often make use of ladders or stairways. The soul of the deceased ascends the pathways up a mountain, or climbs a tree or a creeper, right up into the heavens. We meet with something of this conception all over the world, from ancient Egypt to Australia. In Assyrian, the common expression for the verb "to die" is "to clutch the mountain". Similarly in Egyptian, *mnnγ*, "to clutch" is a euphemism for "to die". In the Indian mythological tradition, Yama, the first man to die, climbed up the mountain and over "the high passes" in order to show "the path to many" as it is said in the *Rig Veda* (X, 14, 1). The road of the dead, in popular Ural-Altaic beliefs, leads up the mountains: Bolot, the Kara-Kirghiz hero and also Kesar, legendary king of the Mongols, enter into the world of the beyond by way of an initiatory ordeal, through a cave at the summit of the mountains: the descent of the

[19] Cf. the materials brought together in our *Le Chamanisme*, pp. 248 ff. For the Christian symbolism of ascension, see Louis Beirnaert, "Le Symbolisme ascensionnel dans la liturgie et la mystique chrétiennes" in the *Eranos Jahrbuch*, XIX, Zürich, 1951, pp. 41-63.

shaman into Hell is also effected by way of a cavern. The Egyptians have preserved, in their funerary texts, the expression *asket pet* (*asket* means "a step") to indicate that the ladder at the disposal of Rē is a real ladder, linking Earth to Heaven. "The ladder is set up that I may see the gods," says the *Book of the Dead*, and again, "the gods make him a ladder, so that, by making use of it, he may go up to Heaven." In many tombs of the periods of the archaic and the middle dynasties, amulets have been found engraved with a ladder (*maqet*) or a staircase. The custom of the funerary ladder has, moreover, survived until our days: several primitive Asian peoples—as, for instance, the Lolos, the Karens and others—set up ritual ladders upon tombs, to enable the deceased to ascend to heaven.[20]

As we have just seen, the ladder can carry an extremely rich symbolism without ceasing to be perfectly coherent. *It gives plastic expression to the break through the planes necessitated by the passage from one mode of being to another*, by placing us at the cosmological point *where communication between Heaven, Earth and Hell becomes possible*. That is why the stairway and the ladder play so considerable a part in the rites and the myths of initiation, as well as in funerary rituals, not to mention the rites of royal or sacerdotal enthronement or those of marriage. But we also know that the symbolism of climbing-up and of stairs recurs often enough in psychoanalytic literature, an indication that it belongs to the archaic content of the human psyche and is not a "historical" creation, not an innovation dating from a certain historical moment (say, from ancient Egypt or Vedic India, etc.). I will content myself with a single example of a spontaneous rediscovery of this primordial symbolism.[21]

Julien Green notes, in his Journal for the 4th of April, 1933, that "In all my books, the idea of fear or of any other fairly strong emotion seems linked in some inexplicable manner to a staircase.

[20] See *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 102 ff. and *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, pp. 420 ff.

[21] See our *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, London, 1960, pp. 15 ff.

I realised this yesterday, whilst I was passing in review all the novels that I have written . . . (here follow the references). I wonder how I can have so often repeated this effect without noticing it. As a child, I used to dream I was being chased on a staircase. My mother had the same fears in her young days; perhaps something of them has remained with me. . . ."

We now know why the idea of fear, for Julien Green, was associated with the image of a staircase, and why all the dramatic events he described in his works—love, death, or crime—happened upon a staircase. The act of climbing or ascending symbolises *the way towards the absolute reality*; and to the profane consciousness, the approach towards that reality arouses an ambivalent feeling, of fear and of joy, of attraction and repulsion, etc. The ideas of sanctification, of death, love and deliverance are all involved in the symbolism of stairs. Indeed, each of these modes of being represents a cessation of the profane human condition; that is, a breaking of the ontological plane. Through love and death, sanctity and metaphysical knowledge, man passes—as it is said in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, from the "unreal to the reality".

But it must not be forgotten that the staircase symbolises these things because it is thought to be set up in a "centre", because it makes communication possible between the different levels of being, and, finally, because it is a concrete formula for the mythical ladder, for the creeper or the spider-web, the Cosmic Tree or the Pillar of the Universe, that connects the three cosmic zones.

CONSTRUCTION OF A "CENTRE"

We have seen that it was not only temples that were thought to be situated at the "Centre of the World", but that every holy place, every place that bore witness to an incursion of the sacred into profane space, was also regarded as a "centre". These sacred spaces could also be constructed; but their construction was, in its

way, a cosmogony—a creation of the world—which is only natural since, as we have seen, the world was created in the beginning from an embryo, from a "centre". Thus, for instance, the construction of the Vedic fire altar reproduced the creation of the world, and the altar itself was a microcosm, an *imago mundi*. The water in which one mixes the clay is, as the *Satapatha Brāhmana* tells us (I, 9, 2, 29; VI, 5, 1, etc.), the primordial Water; the clay that serves as a base for the altar is the Earth; its lateral walls represent the atmosphere, etc. (Perhaps it should be added that this construction also implies a construction of cosmic Time, but we have not room to go into that problem here.)[22]

It is unnecessary, then, to insist that the history of religions records a considerable number of ritual constructions of a "Centre". Let us, however, note one thing which is of importance in our view: to the degree that the ancient holy places, temples or altars, lose their religious efficacy, people discover and apply other geomantic, architectural or iconographic formulas which, in the end, sometimes astonishingly enough, represent the same symbolism of the "Centre". To give a single example: the construction of a *mandala*.[23] The term itself means "a circle"; the translations from the Tibetan sometimes render it by "centre" and sometimes by "that which surrounds". In fact a *mandala* represents a whole series of circles, concentric or otherwise, inscribed within a square; and in this diagram, drawn on the ground by means of coloured threads or coloured rice powder, the various divinities of the Tantric pantheon are arranged in order. The *mandala* thus represents an *imago mundi* and at the same time a symbolic pantheon. The initiation of the neophyte consists, among other things, in his entering into the different zones and gaining access to the different levels of the *mandala*. This rite of penetration may be

[22] See *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 79 ff.

[23] Cf. our *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, New York-London, 1958, pp. 219 ff.; Giuseppe Tucci, *Teoria e pratica del mandala*, Rome, 1949; on the symbolism of the *mandala*, see C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, London, 1953, pp. 91 ff.; and the same author's *Gestaltungen des Unbewussten*, Zürich, 1950, pp. 187 ff.

regarded as equivalent to the well-known rite of walking round a temple (*pradakshina*), or to the progressive elevation, terrace by terrace, up to the "pure lands" at the highest levels of the temple. On the other hand, the placing of the neophyte in a *mandala* may be likened to the initiation by entry into a labyrinth: certain *mandalas* have, moreover, a clearly labyrinthine character. The function of the *mandala* may be considered at least twofold, as is that of the labyrinth. On the one hand, penetration into a *mandala* drawn on the ground is equivalent to an initiation ritual; and, on the other hand, the *mandala* "protects" the neophyte against every harmful force from without, and at the same time helps him to concentrate, to find his own "centre".

But every Indian temple, seen from above, is a *mandala*. Any Indian temple is, like a *mandala*, a microcosm and at the same time a pantheon. Why, then, need one construct a *mandala*—why did they want a new "Centre of the World"? Simply because, for certain devotees, who felt in need of a more authentic and a deeper religious experience, the traditional ritual had become fossilised: the construction of a fire altar or the ascent of the terraces of a temple no longer enabled them to rediscover their "centre". Unlike archaic man or the man of Vedic times, the Tantric devotee had need of a *personal experience* to reactivate certain primordial symbols in his consciousness. That is why, moreover, some Tantric schools rejected the external *mandala*, and had recourse to interiorised *mandalas*. These could be of two kinds: first, a purely mental construction, which acted as a "support" for meditation, or, alternatively, an identification of the *mandala* in his own body. In the former case the yogi places himself mentally within the *mandala*, and thereby performs an act of concentration and, at the same time, of "defence" against distraction and temptation. The *mandala* "concentrates"; it preserves one from dispersion, from distraction. The discovery of the *mandala* in his own body indicates a desire to identify his "mystical body" with a microcosm. A more detailed analysis of this penetration by means of yoga techniques, into what might be called the "mystical

body", would take us too far. Suffice it to say that the reactivation of the *chakras*—those "wheels" (or circles) which are regarded as so many points of intersection of the cosmic life and the mental life—is homologous with the initiatory penetration into a *mandala*. The awakening of the Kundalini is equivalent to the breaking of the ontological plane; that is, to the plenary realisation of the symbolism of the "Centre".

As we have seen, the *mandala* can be used in support, either at the same time or successively, of a concrete ritual or an act of spiritual concentration or, again, of a technique of mystical physiology. This multivalency, this applicability to multiple although closely comparable planes, is a characteristic of the symbolism of the Centre in general. This is easily understandable, since every human being tends, even unconsciously, towards the Centre, and towards his own centre, where he can find integral reality—sacredness. This desire, so deeply rooted in man, to find himself at the very heart of the real—at the Centre of the World, the place of communication with Heaven—explains the ubiquitous use of "Centres of the World". We have seen above how the habitation of man was assimilated to the Universe, the hearth or the smoke-hole being homologised with the Centre of the World; so that all houses—like all temples, palaces and cities—are situated at one and the same point, the Centre of the Universe.

But is there not a certain contradiction here? A whole array of myths, symbols and rituals emphasises with one accord *the difficulty of obtaining entry into a centre*; while on the other hand another series of myths and rites lays it down that *this centre is accessible*. For example, pilgrimage to the Holy Places is difficult; but any visit whatever to a church is a pilgrimage. The Cosmic Tree is, on the one hand, inaccessible; but on the other, it may be found in any yourt. The way which leads to the "Centre" is sown with obstacles, and yet every city, every temple, every dwelling-place *is already* at the Centre of the Universe. The sufferings and the "trials" undergone by Ulysses are fabulous; nevertheless any

return to hearth and home whatever is equivalent to Ulysses' return to Ithaca.

All this seems to show that man *can live only in a sacred space*, in the "Centre". We observe that one group of traditions attests the desire of man to find himself at the Centre *without any effort*, whilst another group insists upon the *difficulty*, and consequently upon the *merit*, of being able to enter into it. We are not here concerned to trace the history of either of these traditions. The fact that the first-mentioned—the "easy" way which allows of the construction of a Centre even in a man's own house—is found nearly everywhere, invites us to regard it as the more significant. It calls attention to something in the human condition that we may call the *nostalgia for Paradise*. By this we mean the desire to *find oneself always and without effort* in the Centre of the World, at the heart of reality; and by a short cut and in a natural manner to transcend the human condition, and to recover the divine condition—as a Christian would say, the condition before the Fall.[24]

We should not like to terminate this study without having recalled one European myth which, though only indirectly concerned with the symbolism and rites of the Centre, combines and integrates them in a still vaster symbolism. We refer to an episode in the legend of Parsifal and the Fisher King,[25] concerning the mysterious malady that paralysed the old King who held the secret of the Graal. It was not he alone who suffered; everything around him was falling into ruins, crumbling away—the palace, the towers and the gardens. Animals no longer bred, trees bore no more fruit, the springs were drying up. Many doctors had tried to cure the Fisher King, all without the least success. The knights were arriving there day and night, each of them asking first of all for news of the King's health. But one knight—poor, unknown

[24] Cf. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 380 ff., and *Le Chamanisme*, pp. 417, 428 ff.

[25] *Perceval*, Hucher edition, p. 466; Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, Cambridge, 1920, pp. 12 ff. The same mythic motif occurs in the cycle of Sir Gawain (Weston, *ibid.*).

and even slightly ridiculous—took the liberty of disregarding ceremony and politeness: his name was Parsifal. Paying no attention to courtly custom, he made straight for the King and, addressing him without any preamble, asked: "Where is the Graal?" In that very instant, everything is transformed: the King rises from his bed of suffering, the rivers and fountains flow once more, vegetation grows again, and the castle is miraculously restored. Those few words of Parsifal had been enough to regenerate the whole of Nature. But those few words propound the central question, the one question that can arouse not only the Fisher King but the whole Cosmos: Where is the supreme reality, the sacred, the Centre of Life and the source of immortality, where is the Holy Graal? No one had thought, until then, of asking that central question—and the world was perishing because of that metaphysical and religious indifference, because of lack of imagination and absence of desire for reality.

That brief episode of a great European myth reveals to us at least one neglected aspect of the symbolism of the Centre: that there is not only an intimate interconnection between the universal life and the salvation of man; but that *it is enough only to raise the question of salvation*, to pose the central problem; that is, *the* problem—for the life of the cosmos to be for ever renewed. For—as this mythological fragment seems to show—death is often only the result of our indifference to immortality.

II

Indian Symbolisms of Time and Eternity

THE FUNCTION OF THE MYTHS

Indian myths are "myths" before they are "Indian"; that is to say, they form part of a particular category of archaic man's spiritual creations and may, therefore, be compared with any other group of traditional myths. So, before dealing with the Indian mythology of Time, it is advisable briefly to recall the intimate connections between the Myth as such, as an original form of culture, and Time. For besides the specific functions that it fulfils in archaic societies, which we need not dwell upon here, the myth is also important in what it reveals to us about the structure of Time. As is generally admitted today, a myth is an account of events which took place *in principio*, that is, "in the beginning", in a primordial and non-temporal instant, a moment of *sacred time*. This mythic or sacred time is qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of our everyday, de-sacralised existence. In narrating a myth, one re-actualises, in some sort, the sacred time in which the events narrated took place. (This, moreover, is why the myths, in traditional societies, are not to be narrated however or whenever one likes; they can be recited only during the sacred seasons, in the bush and at night, or around the fire after or before the rituals, etc.) In a word, the myth is supposed to happen—if one may say so—in a non-temporal time, in an instant without duration, as certain mystics and philosophers conceived of eternity.

This observation is important, for it follows that the narration