

The Sense of The Sacred

One of the most immediately intelligible and convincing outward signs of Islam is the call to prayer from the top of the minarets; a call which spreads like a blanket of serenity over the souls of the believers, from dawn into the night. Here we are far from scholastic arguments, yet there is an argument nonetheless: to be precise, a “sign,” that is to say an argument appealing not to conceptual intelligence, but to aesthetic intuition and, more fundamentally, to the sense of the sacred.

As with intellectual discernment, the sense of the sacred is an adequation to the Real, with the difference however, that the knowing subject is then the entire soul and not merely the discriminative intelligence. What the intelligence perceives quasi-mathematically, the soul senses in an as it were musical manner that is both moral and aesthetic; it is immobilized and at the same time vivified by the message of blessed eternity that the sacred transmits.

The sacred is the projection of the celestial Center into the cosmic periphery, or of the “Motionless Mover” into the flux of things. To feel this concretely is to possess the sense of the sacred, and thereby the instinct of adoration, devotion and submission; the sense of the sacred is the awareness—in the world of that which may or may not be — of That which cannot not be, and whose immense remoteness and miraculous proximity we experience at one and the same time. If we are able to have this awareness, it is because necessary Being reaches us in the depth of our heart, by a mystery of immanence which makes us capable of knowing all that is knowable, and which for that very reason makes us immortal.

The sense of the sacred is also the innate consciousness of the presence of God:¹ it is to feel this presence sacramentally in symbols and ontologically in all things.² Hence the sense of the sacred implies a kind of universal respect, a kind of circumspection before the mystery of animate and inanimate creatures; and this without any favorable prejudice or weakness towards phenomena which manifest errors or vices, and which for that reason no longer present any mystery unless it be that of the absurd. Undoubtedly such phenomena are metaphysically necessary, but they signify precisely an absence of the sacred, and thus they are integrated into our respect for existence in a negative manner and by way of contrast; but apart from this, the pious and contemplative soul feels a natural respect for the things with which nature surrounds us.

There is in the sacred an aspect of rigor, invincibility and inviolability, and an aspect of gentleness, appeasement and mercy; a mode of immobilizing fascination and a mode of liberating attraction. The devotional spirit must express both characteristics; it cannot stop short at fear alone, which moreover would be incompatible with the nature of contemplation. Majesty can be the object of contemplation only by virtue of the presence within it of an element of appeasing beauty or serenity, and this emanates more particularly from the dimension of Infinity proper to the Absolute.

The sacred is the projection of the Immutable into the mutable; as a result, the sense of the sacred consists not only in perceiving this projection, but also in discovering in things the trace

¹ It is to this consciousness of the divine presence which the well-known *hadith* on *ihsân* refers: “Perfect piety (*ihsân* = “right action”) is that you adore God as if you were seeing Him, and if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you.

² One readily terms “pantheism” the reverential tendency resulting therefrom, while forgetting on the one hand that this term designates merely the reduction of the Divine to the visible world, and on the other hand that God is really immanent in the world — otherwise the world could not exist — in varying degrees and without detriment to His rigorous transcendence.

of the Immutable, to the point of not letting oneself be deceived and enslaved by the mutable. Thus, one must live the experience of beauty so as to draw from it a lasting, not ephemeral, element, hence realizing in oneself an opening towards the immutable Beauty, rather than plunging oneself into the current of things; it is a question of viewing the world, and living in it, in a manner that is sacred and not profane; or sacralizing and not profanating. This brings us back once again to the mystery of the two aspects of *Mâyâ*, the one that imprisons and the one that delivers.³

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Let us now consider our subject in its secondary and practical aspects. The sense of the sacred, by the very fact that it coincides with devotion, essentially implies dignity: firstly moral dignity, the virtues, and then dignity of bearing, of gesture; external comportment, which belongs to the moving periphery, must bear witness in this periphery to the "Motionless Center."⁴ Thus the sacred rightly or wrongly evokes the image of solemnity, of grave and slow gestures, of complicated and interminable rituals; wrongly, in that the sacred is not bound to forms, although it excludes those which are incompatible with its nature; rightly, in that the sacred in fact transposes the immutable or the eternal into movement or the temporal.

It is a fact that ceremonialism, like ritualism, is linked to the sense of the sacred, either directly and legitimately, or indirectly and by caricature. It is possible to speak of the ritualism of a religion as such, for ceremonies come from men, by right or abusively: by right, for the ceremonies surrounding a prince derive from the sacred character of his person, since he is a prince "by the grace of God," and this is proved by his anointment; abusively, for republican ceremonies, for example, are nothing but counterfeits without authority or reality.⁵

Legitimate ceremonies derive most often from historical incidents which create "precedents"; they are bound up with an inspiration which we could qualify as "ethnic," given that the racial or cultural soul has a right, not to the creation of rites of course, but to the manifestation of its sacral sensibility in the form of ceremonies and other elements of the kind. This right extends even into the religious domain in the sense that ceremonies often form the framework of rites: even within the religious domain, the collective soul preserves its rights, on the plane which corresponds to them and not beyond. This is quite apparent in Hinduism, where it is sometimes difficult to sift out the ceremonial from the ritual; and even in Christianity, which is however less luxuriant, the two elements at times appear to be mingled in the liturgy; assuredly, there is no confusion, but the rite seems to require imperiously, and as a *conditio sine qua non*, some ceremonial complement.

The efficacy of rites is objective; that of ceremonies is subjective; rites communicate graces which pre-exist outside of us, whereas ceremonies contribute towards actualizing our receptivity, either simply by stimulating the pious imagination, or, more profoundly, by calling forth "Platonic recollection." When Saint Basil declares, in mysteries greater power," he can have in view the human receptivity only, not the divine efficaciousness, hence the subjective import of

³ The first being at the same time the one that disperses, and the second, the one that unifies.

⁴ According to a *hadith*, "Slowness comes from God and haste comes from the devil." Now the first relates to the sense of the sacred, and the second to the profane spirit, *grosso modo* and without excluding inverse modes; since there are cases wherein the Holy Spirit inspires to swiftness and the devil incites to slowness.

⁵ The unavowed intention in cases of this kind is to attribute a sacred character to profane things, which is all the more abusive in that the promoters of the profane deny the sacred as such.

the ceremonial element, not the objective import of the rite.⁶

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It is evident that the secondary sources of the sacral mentality differ from one religion to another. In Christianity the sacred emanates from the sacrament, which confers upon the collective sense of the sacred its characteristic quality, notably the taste for solemnity, without forgetting the splendor of the liturgical art, such as the iconostases, the golden retabes and the priestly vestments. In Islam, where there are no sacraments properly so called, the collective piety has a strongly obediencial quality: to be pious, is above all to obey—with bowed head and without concern for the why of things — the Koranic and Muhammadan injunctions; it is also the taste for interminable prayers and mystical litanies to the glory of the Prophet, all of which takes us back, by analogy, to the holy ponderousness of the Christian liturgy. Adapted to collectivities, the sense of the sacred gives rise to amplifications which we could designate as “indispensable abuses”: collective piety seems to require a kind of mortification by means of a solemn prolixity, as far removed as possible from the expediential trivialities of profane life, but equally removed from sapiential serenity; thus pure wisdom, which is neither groveling nor irreverent, has no easy life in such a climate, and esoteric literature feels the effects of it, in Islam perhaps more than anywhere else. But let us return to the sacred and to the sacral mentality in itself: in Hinduism, the one as well as the other is manifested most characteristically by the ritual gestures of the hands, the *mudras*, which are found in Mahayana Buddhism as well; for the Hindus, there is also an essentializing relationship between the sacred and nudity, which Buddhism did not retain except for the images of celestial beings. In Buddhism, the sensible sacred has its basis above all in the images — especially the statues — of the Buddha, and by projection, of the *Bodhisattvas*, the *Târâs* and other quasi-divine realities; this art attained summits of perfection and interiorizing expressivity with the Tibeto-Mongols on the one hand and the Japanese on the other hand. The extinction of form in the Essence requires as counterpart the manifestation of the Essence in form: whether through the image as in Buddhism, or through the theomorphic human body as in Hinduism, or again through the eucharistic liturgy — including the icon — in Christianity. Let us also mention the verbal theophany which is the psalmodized recitation of the revealed texts, calligraphy being its visual mode; or again, in Islam, the canonical prayer, the majestic movement of which expresses the sacred in a manner that from the point of view in question is not without relation to the *mûdras* of India.

We have alluded above to what we have termed the “indispensable abuses” of sacrality in the face of collective mentalities. Before criticizing a given problematical and at first glance irrational phenomenon in a religion, one must ask the following general question: how does a religion succeed in effectively and durably imposing the sense of the sacred upon a large human collectivity? And one must take account of the fact that in order to achieve this result, it must tolerate or even favor certain excesses which, in practice, are inevitable and conform to its general style; many things which, in religions, may seem excessive to us, or even absurd,

⁶ This is true *a fortiori* when it is a question of outward signs, such as genuflections, the swinging of censers, the ringing of bells, which we cannot object to for the simple reason that these are ceremonies and not rites, strictly speaking. In many cases, the ceremony is to the rite what clothing is to the body.

fundamentally have the merit of replacing the vices of the profane mind and of contributing in their own way to the sense of the sacred; all of which is too easily lost sight of and which in any case constitutes an “attenuating circumstance,” and not one of the least.

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This is not to say that the sacred coincides in an absolute manner with the traditional in the strict sense of the word: that is “traditional” which is transmitted from a divine source; now we do not say that the latter can manifest outside of the traditional framework, but it can do so independently of inherited formulations, otherwise there would be neither inspiration nor diversity of schools. That is, in the sacred there is a vertical” and discontinuous manifestation as well as a “horizontal” and continuous manifestation; and this is all the more true when it is a question of intellectuality, hence of essentiality and universality.

Within the framework of a traditional civilization, intellectuality as well as art have the possibility and consequently the right to be original, on express condition that the originality be the fruit of an inspiration and not a desire; the prejudice in favor of “creativity” excludes *a priori* all concurrence of the Holy Spirit. Inspiration is something which by definition imposes itself without our expecting it, although our nature must be predisposed to it; David was the last to want to be king, but it is he who was chosen.

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There is nothing paradoxical in the idea that man cannot be a metaphysician in the full sense without possessing the sense of the sacred; Plotinus is certainly not the only one to have pointed this out. The reason for this is not that the intelligence cannot *a priori* perceive the true without the concurrence of moral qualities, but that by itself it is not capable of excluding all possibility of error, given that errors often have their source in the imperfection of the soul, for man is a whole; it is no less true that, beyond a certain level of perception, the intelligence has need of particular graces which largely depend upon moral qualification in the broadest sense of the term. It cannot be contested that moral and aesthetic sensibility—which is not a luxury since it forms part of the human norm— influences to one degree or another the formulation of transcendent truths, and even above all the speculative imagination and its requisite sense of proportions. In an altogether general manner, we would say that one cannot enter the sanctuary of truth except in a holy manner, and this condition includes above all beauty of character, which is inseparable from the sense of the sacred.

The two poles of the sacred are truth and holiness: truth and holiness of persons and of things. A thing is true by its symbolism and holy by the depth of its beauty; all beauty is a cosmic mode of holiness. In the spiritual order, man is in truth through his knowledge, and he is holy through his personal conformity to the truth and through the depth of this conformity.

In principle, truth and holiness cannot contradict each other; nonetheless, in the domain of traditional orthodoxy, conflicts between the sense of the sacred and the critical sense, or between piety and intelligence, are always possible, because either of the two elements can be manifested in intellectually inferior modalities; sentimentalism is not mystical love, any more than intellectualism is intellectuality. One could debate the question of intelligence all day long, at least so long as one does not see clearly that intelligence is defined essentially by its capacity to grasp the object, and only secondarily by its subjective qualities, those of expression, logic, the

combination of ideas and so on; this should go without saying. If we have in view subjectivity according to its positive reality, we can say that subjective intelligence accentuates the modes of assimilation of the object, whereas objective intelligence focuses upon the object as such; there is also an intelligence that is concrete and another that is abstract, and other complementarities such as activity and passivity, discernment and contemplation; but it is always adequation, hence truth, which takes precedence over the secondary modes.

It is all too evident that fundamental intelligence is manifested, not necessarily in the fact of accepting lofty ideas, but by the capacity to really understand them, even if they be rejected accidentally either through lack of information or because the medium of information *de facto* lacks intelligibility. There are people, whether intelligent or not, who adopt transcendent ideas out of ambition; however it is a fact that people of modest intelligence often accept such ideas more readily than others of brilliant intelligence, or are more supple in accepting them, whether this be thanks to a contemplative instinct or simply thanks to the absence of intellectual scruples, or for both reasons at once. But whatever might be the degree of intelligence, incomprehension does not necessarily stem from a fundamental limitation of the mind; its cause may also be a moral tendency of the soul; it remains to be seen to what degree this tendency is personal or is on the contrary imposed by the surroundings. If we compare a religious believer who closes himself to a given esoteric idea because of his faith, with another man who, without being more intelligent than the former—he may even be much less so—adopts the same idea through mere vanity, the question which then arises is that of knowing whether holding a sublime idea for insincere motives is really equivalent to a knowledge. No doubt there is a shadow of mental knowledge, but it is condemned in advance to sterility, precisely because it has no connection with the sense of the sacred; the sacred, which requires fear as well as love. For extremes meet, and the circle which opens in truth closes in beauty.

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In this general context it is perhaps worth speaking of miracles, which are essentially a manifestation, and a proof, if one will, of the sacred, whence the catalyzing power they have upon souls. As in the case of the sacred in general, the chief argument here is founded upon the reality of the supernatural and, by way of consequence, upon the necessity for the irruption of the supernatural into the natural order. It is necessary first of all to be clear as to the meaning of the word “supernatural”: the supernatural can be what is contrary to the laws of nature, but it cannot be what is contrary to the very principles of the Universe; if we term “natural” that which simply obeys the logic of things, with no other restriction, the supernatural is also natural, but it is so on a scale far vaster than that of physical causality, that of this lower world. The supernatural is the “divinely natural” which, irrupting into an eminently contingent and limited plane of the natural, contradicts the laws of this plane, not by virtue of the causality proper to the latter, of course, but by virtue of a far less contingent and limited causality. If “God exists”—really and fully, and not as some unconscious and passive “power” as the naturalists and deists would have it—then miracles cannot not be; transcendence as well as immanence require that this mode of theophany have its place in the economy of the possible.

The problem of miracles is essentially linked to the doctrine of possibility; depending upon whether a man is ignorant or informed, opaque or intuitive, he will wonder whether miracles are possible or what is the explanation of their possibility; the metaphysician in any case cannot ignore that universal Possibility implies and requires the apparent paradox of the miraculous

intervention. A miracle is like the sunrise: it pre-exists in the divine order and it manifests only in function of a human opening; thus the sun rises because the earth turns towards it, whereas in reality the sun is fixed in relation to the earth. Nature is like a moving veil before an immutable supernature.

In the cosmogonic order, the miracle is prefigured by the irruption of life into matter, and all the more so by the irruption of intelligence both into matter and into life; the human species would be the quintessential miracle if the notion of the miraculous could be applied in such a case. On this plane of the “human miracle,” the irruption of Revelation constitutes yet another miracle; and the same is true for Intellection and for all other incidental interventions of the Holy Spirit. For what is true for the macrocosm is equally true for the microcosm: if the miraculous exists outwardly, then it also exists inwardly. The microcosmic or inward miracle is that which manifests the Divine Presence in the soul: gnosis, ecstasy, the sacrament, sanctity, all of which furnish so many proofs of the possibility, as well as of the necessity, of an unimaginable irruption of the divine element; and what is possible within ourselves is possible around us.

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When speaking of miracles in themselves, one must also take account, if not of all their modes and of all their forms, which is scarcely possible, but of the causes of their frequency or, on the contrary, of their rarity; for not every miracle is possible in every epoch or in every situation. It is in the nature of things that the unfolding of a religion be accompanied by a gushing forth of prodigies that lasts for a millennium or so, only to dry up more and more until its near extinction towards the end of the religious cycle, and without it being possible to draw lines of demarcation within this process. And miracles become more and more rare not only by virtue of the progressive hardening of the psychic and physical substance of the world, but also by virtue of the hardening of hearts, both causes going hand in hand and determining one another mutually and by alternations. Between matter and the animic element a “layer of ice” forms, which isolates matter more and more by cutting it off from the subtle world that surrounds and penetrates it; skepticism provokes the silence of Heaven, and this silence favors skepticism. And at the very interior of the human microcosm, the soul becomes separated from the spirit and the spirit closes itself to the soul.

It is by innumerable experiences of miraculous occurrences over many thousands of years — but which become more and more precarious — that one can explain that trait of character termed “credulity” or the “thirst for the marvelous”; by the force of circumstances, these experiences have left in the collective soul the nostalgia for a paradise which is slipping away but of which one does not wish to acknowledge the loss, all the more so in that, precisely, it is not wholly lost, and that it reappears from time to time when least expected. Parallel to the effusion of miraculous incidents — the style of which varies moreover from one religion to another — one notes, especially when reading the Oriental hagiographers, a collective sensibility unknown in our times and hard to imagine;⁷ certainly, there is also the creative imagination of legends, but this phenomenon cannot invalidate what we have just said for the simple reason that if many accounts cannot be taken literally, there are many others which incontestably can and which precede and determine the legends, beginning with historical texts such as the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. And this is independent of the fact that, in the sacred Scriptures, certain

⁷ Men cry out, faint, fall into ecstasy, sometimes die, under the effect of a given manifestation of *barakah*, sometimes even following a particularly illuminating or striking saying.

prodigies have a symbolic character only, at least when what is in question are more or less “prehistoric” events, the symbolical character of which is moreover easily recognizable.⁸

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The difference between a sermon about God and a miracle that manifests Him, is in short that between the word and the thing, or between abstract doctrine and its concrete content: by the miracle, God says “I am here,” whereas the sermon is limited to affirming that God is. It is in fact impossible that a God who on the one hand is absent and who on the other hand wills to be known and must be known, never make Himself present, at least in a way that His nature permits and that the world can bear and similarly in the soul: it is impossible that a reality perceived indirectly by thought, and which however imposes itself on the mind in the manner of a “categorical imperative,” never be perceived directly by the heart, thus proving as it were its truth by its presence and by its existence, hence by experience.

This perception by the heart is realized not only by gnosis, which is unitive by definition, but also by faith, which *a priori* remains separate from its object; the mystery of faith is in fact the possibility of an anticipatory perception in the absence of its content; that is, faith makes present its content by accepting it already, before the perception properly so-called. And if faith is a mystery, it is because its nature is inexpressible to the degree that it is profound, for it is not possible to convey fully by words this vision that is still blind and this blindness that already sees.

⁸ Such is notably the case of Biblical stories up to and including that of the Tower of Babel, stories which can be termed myths without the least pejorative intention. What is particular to the myth is that on the one hand its meaning takes precedence over the facts, and that on the other hand it also applies to the life of the soul, at the initiatic level as well as the simply moral level.