

Opera Omnia

Volume IX Mystery and Hermeneutics

Part One

Myth, Symbol, and Ritual

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INTRODUCTION

In a world in which works written very recently are already considered obsolete, an author has to have a good measure of innocent daring—and his or her publisher be gifted with uncommon wisdom—to produce a book like this. This work is the fruit of long years of reflection on issues that challenge the *myth* of progress and begin to emerge when Man stops to think and realizes how his very thought rests on a faith that is not subject to his reason and can only be accepted within a hermeneutics of Man's place in reality.

Put in plainer language, here is the threefold issue I take up in this book. Human life lies open to our consciousness, and this in turn is founded on myth, which leads us to believe that it is our consciousness that shows reality to us. We have *faith* in it—in reality itself, or in our consciousness of reality. Hence the need to resort to *hermeneutics*, or to an interpretation of this life of ours.

In other words, under the influence of Eastern spiritualities, the English term *realization* has come to be synonymous with *salvation* or *liberation*. One attains fullness (heaven, God, the ultimate goal of humankind, happiness, and so on.) inasmuch as one *realizes* oneself, that is, becomes real, attains reality. The ultimate goal of Man, then, is to be realized, to become fully real, to become what he *is*—even when this reality is seen as Void or Nothingness.

The path toward this realization is faith or, more precisely, the act of faith: the accomplishing of whatever Man *believes* to be his goal. In one way or another, this appears to be a universal conviction of humankind, regardless of the various interpretations of faith or its means of expression that have evolved in different cultural contexts.

So-called modernity, which now influences almost all the world's cultures, has plunged Man into crisis by proclaiming, with plausible “proof,” that faith is a myth that ought to be supplanted by reason. Enlightenment philosophy, and the spirit of rationalism that it brings, must light up the darkness of mankind's so-called religious period. Yet Man again finds himself in crisis when he discovers that “reason” is itself a myth resulting from the faith that professed to be redemptive.

What is it that opens us up to reality? What is “this” reality? Is it also a myth? How must we *interpret* this faith, or this myth?

Guided by the inspiration of a mystical genius, who was in turn inspired by St. Thomas Aquinas, I will explain how reality itself is a myth that is shrouded in veils, and that true revelation does not consist in lifting these veils but in recognizing them for what they are. According to Meister Eckhart, there are three veils: the veil of *goodness*, the veil of *truth*, and the veil of *being*. This threefold veil of reality is the hidden theme of this work, and in tackling it I have used some examples from the past that are still equally valid today. These veils are not simply an impediment—without them we would be blinded; indeed, it is only by recognizing their presence that we can actually see.

In all walks of life, and not only in a scientific context, one often hears statements like, “Science today has demonstrated . . .,” or “We now know that. . ..” Consequently, this tends to lead us to adopt the attitude of “So let's wait for tomorrow,” thus endlessly projecting us forward toward the day after tomorrow.

It is a fact that there is no eternal “now”—time stops for no one—but it is equally true that “today” is only what is *present* (for whom?). Here, too, there is a middle way with regard to both the form and the context of ideas.

Rereading this text, I came to realize that in places it is too dense and I have not always developed fully the ideas set down. This is because over the years some of my ideas have gained simplicity, while others now seem less important, and some that perhaps once were considered too bold, today, at the turn of this millennium, appear much less unlikely. Nevertheless, I believe the book is still valid.

It is not that I wish to uphold a static *philosophia perennis*; on the contrary, I view the perennial in philosophy as an aspiration to an ever new and ever ancient wisdom.

I refer to this somewhat artificial millennial landmark (“millennial” for whom?) not for the sake of paying tribute to fashion or contributing to a monocultural mentality, but for a deeper reason. In fact, the popularity of the “new millennium” is not the mere product of propagandist manipulation. It corresponds to an archetype of human wisdom: Man refuses to become a puppet in the hands of any Market, be it of the Gods, of Men, or even worse, of Things.

For many centuries, a large part of mankind saw itself as victim of a Destiny over which Man had no control. For even longer it was believed that this Destiny was open to the influence of prayer (on the part of the “spiritual” people of religions), but after every sort of bitter experience mankind awoke from this “dogmatic dream,” and began instead to dream of reaching an “age of enlightenment” that would bring freedom. Today these illusions are beginning to crumble, as this single example from economics shows clearly: in 1960 the ratio between the wealthiest 20 percent of the world’s population and the poorest 20 percent was 30:1. In 1999 it had reached 82:1, and today’s gap would be even wider. Will the so-called market monotheism become the new idol?

In short, one part of mankind feels, often unconsciously, that what is at stake in today’s world is something more essential than a change of apparel or upgrade of computer bytes—that we need something more radical than a shift from right to left, or than a truer form of democracy, or a more equal distribution of the “riches” or “resources” of the Earth. From peasants to intellectuals, from those who call themselves believers to those who call themselves unbelievers because they do not share the beliefs of the so-called believers, all are aware that no single reform of the present dominant system is sufficient, and that the *transformation* that is called for clearly does not accept, but rather rejects, any paradigm.

We tend, understandably, to feel a certain suspicion toward any paradigm (because it seems to rob us of our freedom) and apprehension in the face of any sort of messianism. The historical experience of mankind has been such that we no longer find it possible to uphold the idea that we will be better people than our forefathers.

Almost simultaneously, Aristotle, Buddha, Zarathustra (probably), and Laozi all preached a middle way between heteronomy as dependence on the Gods and the autonomy of Man. Man, however, seems to have failed to find the right balance. Some of the prophets of Israel, and Jesus himself, as well as many sages, saints, and religious founders ever since, have proclaimed the path of Love, though apparently without much success. Other religions have refined and adapted the message of ancient traditions but the only outcome has been to create new divisions. Even science and modernity have believed in peace, the “global village,” the “happy New World,” and progress, but again, with little success. Discussions on the “new millennium” are symptomatic of this crisis.

The “new millennium” is presented as a slogan that breaks all these molds of moral reformation, metaphysical exhortation, or scientific optimism. One can see how the new winners

of history, weary from these experiences, have now gone back to proclaiming the (same) law of the jungle under the flag of free trade and believe that the “market” will regulate itself without the intervention of human beings, who will become its victims.

In this book we shall not be dealing directly with such issues, but neither shall we ignore them. In fact, the current state of mankind as a concrete manifestation of the human condition is the backdrop for this study. Serenity and detachment do not mean indifference or insensitivity.

The following pages have taken decades to mature, and are therefore free of the tyranny of the linear and uniform passage of time that characterizes the modern-day society of Western origin. They are themselves the result of a long history and many “reincarnations.”

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The first part of Volume IX is composed of three sections, which deal with myth, symbol, and cult (the second part will be dedicated to faith and its interpretation through words). In modern-day language, myth means anything unreal or simply a legend with a degree of fantasy. When I use the term *mythos*, however, I refer to its traditional (if not always clear) meaning, that is, a different way of expressing a conviction, or rather a truth that is not necessarily clearly and distinctly understood by reason but is, nonetheless, accepted as obvious and therefore does not need to be proven.

This first part begins with a description of the relationship between *mythos* and tolerance (section I, part 1, chapter 1), which seems to be a question that is still vital today; all too often, in fact, tolerance is associated with weakness or resignation.

This is followed by another reflection on the relationship between myth and the problem of morality (chapter 2). If we believe that morality is a myth, we run the risk of not taking it seriously and consequently falling into anarchy; if we interpret it literally, on the other hand, we risk falling into fanaticism. This is a vital question.

Three general studies follow on the meaning of *mythos* and its relationship with language and therefore also with theology (chapters 3 to 5). This is illustrated by four *mythoi* from India that, though not as well-known as their Greek counterparts in the West, have served as touchstones in Indic culture. Interculturality is a human imperative for our time. It is a way of overcoming cultural provincialism without becoming imprisoned in separate compartments.

I then go on to describe the four *mythoi*. The first *mythos* (section I, part 2, chapter 6) is the homeomorphic equivalent of the creation myth, which combines into one the Middle Eastern *mythoi* on guilt and redemption. The second (chapter 7), the *mythos* of the human condition, presents an original vision of what Man is. The length of this text is an indication of its importance; it implies, in fact, a whole anthropology. The third myth (chapter 8) gives us another example of the universality of human consciousness. Man sees himself as both righteous and a sinner—“*simul justus et peccator*,” as Martin Luther would say. This ambivalence is part of human nature. Man cannot resist temptation, but his downfall proves in the end to be of higher value. “*O felix culpa*,” Catholic liturgy boldly sings.

The fourth *mythos* (chapter 9) deals with a similar concern. The rejection of incest has become so deep-rooted in the human mind that it appears to be at the very least unnatural, and in order to discover its profound meaning we have to recover our innocence. Sexuality is a human invariant that in many cultures assumes the status of an almost universal reference point.

As already mentioned, the message of these *mythoi* cannot be conveyed through an exclusively rational process of reflection. The *mythos* is essential to us. We have also seen that *mythoi* depend on metaphors and symbols, using the spoken word as a vehicle for the *logos*.

Far too often, concepts are considered the best instruments of language because they tend to have the univocal meaning that is needed for intelligibility (conceptual, obviously). Reducing the *logos* to a concept causes it to become drastically impoverished, with serious repercussions on human life itself. In actual fact, the most common use of the word is the symbol, which is not only polyvalent but also saves us from the great danger of objectivism, which can easily lead to fanaticism. The Egyptian *mythos* (as retold by Plato), which views the invention of writing as the beginning of a degeneration of culture, is not without an element of truth. A purely objective thought process does not allow alternative interpretations. A univocal, logical deduction allows no deviation from the equation $2 + 2 = 4$ and only 4. Symbols, on the other hand, enable us to go beyond objectivism without falling into subjectivism. Symbols are neither objective nor subjective; they belong to relationships, and thus dialogue is indispensable for good thinking—and also for good living.

Human nature is not individualistic. Man cannot be reduced to the individual, or to a mere concept. And this brings us to Man's most powerful means for approaching reality and his fellow humans—the symbol. Following some general reflections on what a symbol is (section II, chapters 10 and 11), we discuss the example of a word that is fundamentally important in the East but very often misunderstood: *karman* (chapter 12), which, reduced to a mere concept, is very vulnerable to reason. And if the symbol of *karman* is prevalent in half the world's cultures, the metaphor of the drop of water (chapter 13) as a symbol of the condition of every existence, including human, is virtually universal.

The conclusion of this part (section III) discusses a book that was written in 1973 on a topic which was at the time very current, and today, so many years later, is still just as interesting. The only obvious change concerns the title, which, in 1969, the World Council of Churches gave to a consultation that originally inspired the book. The title "Secularization" has been changed here to "Secularity," which is the term I used in later works.

The theme of this book is centered around the concept of the rite, not as ceremony but as the expression of *homo religiosus*; not as a "function" but as the activity that Man performs in communion with the cosmos for the welfare of the universe—*lokasamgraha*, as it is known in Hindū wisdom. Secularity, that is, interest in the secular, has all too often been considered in many traditions as an impediment to spiritual life. The profane (*pro*, before or outside of the *fanum*, temple or sacred place consecrated to the Gods) is in contrast to the sacred, but not to the secular, which can be experienced in all its sacrality.

I have added this study to part I because I believe the theme is still of great importance today. Over the years, the language has gradually changed, but the book may still be of value.