

# Celestial Apparitions: An Elementary Criteriology

by

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*Editor's note: The following is a recent translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon. The essay has also appeared in the book *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Perennial Books, 1981).*

According to a *hadith* the devil cannot assume the physical appearance of the Prophet. This is in itself entirely plausible, but one may nonetheless ask what is the usefulness of this information given the fact that, after the Companions had disappeared, there was no longer — and there is no longer — any witness to this appearance.

The practical significance of the *hadith* is as follows: if the devil were to take on the appearance of a deified man or of an angel, he would inevitably betray himself by some discordant detail. This would no doubt pass unnoticed by those whose intention lacks both disinterestedness and virtue and who, placing their desires above the truth, basically want to be deceived, but not by those whose intelligence is serene and whose intention is pure. The demon cannot assume objectively an entirely adequate likeness of an “angel of light”, but he can do so subjectively by flattering — and so corrupting — the viewer who has laid himself open to illusion. This explains why, in a climate of individualistic and emotive mysticism, all celestial apparitions are sometimes rejected; a measure of prudence which would have no point outside such a climate and which is, in itself, at the very least exaggerated and problematical.

The right attitude towards an apparition — or some other grace — which God does not impose upon us with an irresistible certitude, is one of deferential neutrality and, according to circumstances, of pious expectancy; but even when a grace is accompanied by certitude, one must not take one's stand exclusively upon it for fear of falling into the error of which many false mystics have been guilty at the beginning of their careers; for the decisive basis of the spiritual way is always an objective value, but for which there could be no question of a “way” in the proper sense of the term. This amounts to saying that in relation to graces or visions one must be neither discourteous nor credulous, and that it suffices to take one's stand upon the unshakable elements of the way, the elements of Doctrine and of Method, which are established

a *priori* on a basis of absolute certitude and which can never be contradicted by authentic manifestations of grace.<sup>1</sup>

Those who are in the grip of illusion do not know, and do not wish to know, that the devil can give them sound inspirations with the sole aim of gaining their confidence, so as to be able finally to lead them into error, and that he can tell them the truth nine times the more easily to deceive them on the tenth occasion, and that he deceives above all those who are seeking the confirmation or fulfilment of illusions to which they are attached.<sup>2</sup> This applies to visions as well as to auditions or other messages.

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One particular type of grace is ecstasy. Here too one must distinguish between the true and the false, the supernatural and the morbid — even the demonic. A very rare and, at the same time, most paradoxical exception is accidental ecstasy, something which, in this context, we cannot leave unmentioned. It may happen that someone entirely profane has a real ecstatic experience, without understanding how or why; such an experience is unforgettable and has a more or less profound effect upon the character of the person concerned. This is a matter of a cosmic accident of which the causes lie far distant in the individual's destiny, or in his *karma* — merits acquired in the past and before birth — as Hindus and Buddhists would say. But it would be a serious mistake to see in such an experience a spiritual acquisition of a conscious and active character, for such an event can only be a call to an authentic way on which one starts again from nothing: *quaerite et invenietis*.

None of this has any direct connection with celestial apparitions; but ecstasy is nonetheless a way of “seeing God”, through a veil either woven with symbols or fashioned from ineffable light. It may in any case coincide with a vision, and in that case it will be the subjective precondition of a supernaturally objective mode of perception, just as sleep may be; that is to say, it will be the meeting point — one which is already celestial — for a contact between earth and Heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> In the same order of ideas there is the problem of the question put ritually to God, the Moslem *istikharah*. For this procedure to be valid it is necessary that the intention should be a pure one and that the interpretation should be correct, and this requires a variety of conditions, subjective as well as objective. For example, one cannot ask Heaven if such and such a dogma is true or whether or not the spiritual master is right, for this would betray an attitude of unbelief or insubordination, contradicting the principle *credo ut intelligam* which, precisely, applies in such cases.

<sup>2</sup> The satanic origin of a message is immaterial when it is beneficent, but the devil will give such a message only to those whom he expects to deceive thereafter, but for which — to say the least — he would have no interest in doing so. In this general context let us also recall the fact that according to certain ancient maxims which are well known, “heresy resides in the will and not in the intelligence”, and that “to err is human but to persevere in error is diabolical”.

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Among real or apparent graces there are also “powers” such as those of healing, prevision, suggestion, telepathy, divination and the performance of minor miracles. These powers may indeed be direct gifts from Heaven, but in this case they are related to some degree of sanctity; otherwise they are only natural, though rare and out of the ordinary. Now in the opinion of the most diverse spiritual authorities one should treat them with great caution, paying no attention to them, particularly because the devil may be involved in this and has an interest in so involving himself. Gratuitous powers may, *a priori*, indicate election on the part of Heaven, but they can also cause the downfall of those who become attached to them to the detriment of the purgative asceticism which all spirituality demands. Many heretics and false spiritual masters have started by becoming the dupes of some power with which nature had endowed them.

For the truly spiritual man powers such as these are seen primarily as a temptation rather than as a favour. He will not stop there, if only for the simple reason that no saint will take his own sanctity as axiomatic. Man does not have the standards which are God’s, except in abstract terms or through a particular grace which derives from a dignity already by nature prophetic; for no man can be both judge and party in his own cause.

It therefore goes without saying that powers may be just as hazardous as visions or they may be equally authentic according to human predisposition and according to the will of God. The criterion of a supernatural power resides in the character of the man concerned, and nobility of character is also, and in essence, one of the criteria of sanctity; which is tantamount to saying that powers cannot on their own be proofs of spiritual election.<sup>3</sup>

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According to a well-known principle, angels always speak in the doctrinal or mythological language of those whom they are addressing, provided this language is intrinsically orthodox. There are here two elements of possible contradiction: differences of religion and differences of level. It follows that a celestial being may manifest himself not only in terms of a particular religion or of a particular confession, but also in terms of a given degree of universality; and just as esoterism on the one hand extends and on the other contradicts exoterism — the former attitude referring to the truth which saves and the latter to the formalism which limits — so celestial manifestations may in principle contradict each other within the framework of one and the same religion, according to whether they take account of this particular cosmos or, on the contrary, express the single and universal Truth.

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<sup>3</sup> The twin pillars of the virtuous character are humility and charity; one could also say, patience and generosity, or piety and goodness. According to a saint, the devil has said that he can do everything — except humble himself. The underlying meaning: everything that is outward, for what is inward is precisely humility and sincerity.

Having said this, one must be aware that the spokesmen of Heaven never give lessons in “universalist erudition”: they do not speak of *Vedanta* or of Zen in a Semitic climate, any more than they speak of Spanish mysticism or of Hesychasm in a Hindu or Buddhist climate. Let us repeat, however, that there is nothing abnormal in Heaven favouring by supernatural signs such and such a spiritual perspective, while favouring in the same manner another which surpasses it, provided both perspectives are in themselves legitimate and even though they coexist in the same religious cosmos.

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The question of the apparition of a deified man — of an *Avatara*, if you will — raises another problem, that of the distinction between a visionary dream and an ordinary dream. Celestial beings appear only in visionary dreams, not in ordinary ones, but this does not mean that all celestial manifestations in the context of the latter are diabolical, for they may be merely natural. Just as we can dream of something with which we are preoccupied, so we can dream innocently of a saint, without the absence of any spiritual cause implying the presence of a malefic one. The situation is quite different when the apparition is self-contradictory or when the context is discordant, for then a satanic element has mingled with the purely natural cause, unless the former is, properly speaking, the real cause of the mirage; if this is so the dream may even be taken for a visionary one, but it is precisely its content which betrays its origin.

Quite contrary to what occurs in ordinary dreams, visionary dreams are absolutely homogeneous and of a crystalline precision. They leave behind them, when one awakens, an impression of freshness, of luminosity and of happiness, unless their content is a threat from Heaven and not — as is more often the case — a consolation or an encouragement. In conformity with their supernatural character, visionary dreams are more or less rare, for Heaven is not prolix and there is no reason why man should receive frequent celestial messages.<sup>4</sup>

Certain considerations regarding the relation between the dreaming and the waking states are in place at this point, for there are those who maintain that the dream-experience does not affect the waking ego. Some modern Vedantists indeed claim that the two states in question are quite unrelated, that the dreaming ego is not in any way the same as the waking one, that the two states are closed systems and that it is incorrect to take the waking ego as the point of reference

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<sup>4</sup> An exception must be made of those messages which flow continuously, taking the form of a habitual dialogue between the celestial personality and the privileged soul, as was the case with Sister Consolata; but there is then only an interior dialogue, without any visual manifestations.

for the dreaming consciousness;<sup>5</sup> and that consequently the latter is in no way inferior to the former nor less real.<sup>6</sup>

This extravagant and pseudo-metaphysical opinion is contradicted, in the first place, by the fact that, on awakening, we remember our own dream and not someone else's; secondly, by the fact that the inconsistent and fluid character of dreams, on the one hand, and, on the other, their reference to our objective experiences, prove their subjectivity, their passivity and their contingency; and, thirdly, by the fact that, while dreaming, we can perfectly well be aware that we are dreaming and that it is we — and not someone else — who are dreaming. The proof of this is that it may happen that we awaken of our own free will when the development of the dream takes a disturbing turn. On the other hand, no one would think of making an effort to emerge from the waking state — however disagreeable the situation — in the hope of awakening into some paradisaal state with the conviction that one had emerged from an accident of one's own imagination, whereas in reality the terrestrial world would remain what it is. Certainly the universe is, in a sense, an illusion in relation to the Principle, but the objective world is not an illusion in relation to a particular subjectivity on the plane of relativity.<sup>7</sup>

“And behold the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife ... Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him.” And again: “Behold the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt ... When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt”. These passages from the Gospel show as clearly as one could wish the continuity — evident in itself — between the dreaming and the waking states or between the ego of the sleeper and that of the awakened man. The fact that it is here a question of a visionary dream — therefore of an

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<sup>5</sup> Like Kant, Siddheswarananda, for instance, seems to think that his own experiences limit those of others.

<sup>6</sup> Some have even gone so far as to claim that dreaming is superior to the waking state since it comprises possibilities which are excluded by the physical world, as though these possibilities were anything but purely passive and as though the objective and determinant reality of the waking state did not compensate infinitely for the dream possibility of rising into the air; or again, as if one could not just as well dream of being deprived of motion.

<sup>7</sup> Shankaracharya, so misunderstood by some of his interpreters, is of the same opinion when he specifies, in his commentaries on the Vedanta-Sutras, that “the world of the intermediate state (the dream) is not real in the same way that the world woven of ether and of the other elements is real”. He says also that “the visions of a dream are acts of memory, whereas the visions of the waking state are acts of immediate consciousness (acts of perception); and the distinction between memory and immediate consciousness is recognized by everyone as being determined by the absence or presence of the object”. And finally: “This wandering (in dreams), derived only from mental impressions (*vasana*) is not real.” All this, obviously, concerns ordinary dreams, not visionary ones, the objective reality of which is evident, given their supernatural cause.

intrinsically objective phenomenon — rather than of an ordinary one in no way detracts from the force of the argument, given that the framework of the phenomenon is the dreaming consciousness, not the waking one. The angel, instead of making himself physically visible, has so to speak mirrored himself in the psychic substance of the dreamer; it is precisely this which characterizes visionary dreams, for in this way they combine an objective phenomenon with an eminently subjective state of consciousness, that is to say one which is withdrawn from the external world.<sup>8</sup> Here objective reality enters the dream-world, either unveiled or clothed in symbolism

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The question of knowing which detail it is that would be inconsistent with the authenticity of a celestial apparition depends either on the nature of things or else on a particular religious perspective or a particular level of this perspective. That is to say there are elements which in themselves, and from every religious or spiritual point of view, are incompatible with celestial apparitions, whereas there are others which are so only in the framework of a given perspective or a given spiritual viewpoint; for example, according to the Catholic criteriology, total nudity is excluded so far as the messengers of Heaven are concerned,<sup>9</sup> whereas in Hinduism it has either a neutral or a positive character. The reason for the Catholic attitude is that Heaven can neither wish to excite concupiscence nor to offend against modesty; but even in the climate of Christianity there exists here a certain margin. The explanation of the Hindu attitude, on the other hand, lies in the sacred character of nudity, which is founded upon the body's theomorphism and thus, in a sense upon its "humanized divinity". In this case metaphysical transparency compensates for the ambiguity of the flesh, which, in any case, both Hindus and Moslems regard as something natural and not sinful.<sup>10</sup>

As for discordant elements which are intrinsically incompatible with a celestial manifestation, there are first of all — and quite obviously — elements of ugliness or grotesque features, not only in the actual form of the apparition but also in its movements or even simply in the surroundings of the vision; then there is the question of speech, both from the point of view

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<sup>8</sup> It is true that all knowledge, consciousness or perception, is subjective by definition but what counts is the direct objective cause rather than the subjective phenomenon as such when it is a matter of distinguishing a real experience from an imaginary one.

<sup>9</sup> Even partial nudity, probably, so far as women are concerned, except in the case of *lactatio*, as indicated by St Bernard's vision and also by certain icons.

<sup>10</sup> It will no doubt be objected that the same is true for Christians; but while this is so in theory it is not so in practice, collective sentiments not always being at the level of theological niceties. The opinion of modernists has nothing to do with authentic Christian sensibility.

of content and of style, for Heaven neither deceives nor engages in idle talk.<sup>11</sup> “God is beautiful and He loves beauty”, the Prophet said. Loving beauty, He also loves dignity, He who combines beauty (*Jamal*) with majesty (*Jalal*). “God is love”, and love, if it does not exclude holy wrath, assuredly excludes ugliness and pettiness.

A decisive criterion of authenticity, on the basis of necessary extrinsic criteria, is the spiritual or miraculous efficacy of the apparition. If nothing that is spiritually positive results from the vision, it is of doubtful validity in proportion to the imperfection of the visionary, without necessarily being false even in such a case as this, for the motives of Heaven may escape men; if, on the contrary, the visionary draws a permanent grace from the vision so that he becomes a better man,<sup>12</sup> or if the vision is the source of miracles without being accompanied by any discordant elements, there can be no doubt that this is a case of a true celestial apparition.

*A fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos.*

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Our attitude regarding celestial manifestations depends in short on our understanding of the relationship between transcendence and immanence, and also between necessity and contingency, which brings us back to the mystery of the Veil. On the one hand, when we perceive a celestial sign, we must not overlook that it is a veil, albeit luminous; on the other hand, knowing that it is a veil, we must not forget, *a fortiori*, that its *raison d'être* is the transmission of truth and presence and that in this respect the sign is as if transubstantiated, and that it is therefore itself truth and presence. On the one hand, the Virgin personifies and manifests the Mercy of God; on the other, the Divine Mercy is personified in the Virgin and is manifested by her; not in the sense that every positive phenomenon necessarily manifests God because in reality there is nothing but He, but in the sense that God makes Himself manifest in an eminently direct way in the midst of His ordinary and indirect manifestations, which pertain to the natural, not the supernatural, realm.

When perceiving the symbol or the support, one can see God either after or before the form: after, because the form evokes God; before, because God has made Himself form. The mystery of the Veil contains the whole mystery of hypostasis, and so that of theophany.

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<sup>11</sup> Which cuts short a whole series of apparitions or “messages” of which one hears talk in the second half of the 20th century.

<sup>12</sup> Which either modifies his habitual behaviour or leads to a change in his character, the former being an extrinsic result, the latter an intrinsic one; in any case the one is not entirely independent of the other.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*Those who obtain ultimate happiness from the divine vision never fall away from it. Because whatever at one time is, and at another time is not, is measured by time.... Now the vision in question...is not in time but in eternity. Therefore no one, having once become partaker thereof, can lose it.*

*St. Thomas Aquinas.*