

The Idea of the Center in the Traditions of Antiquity

by

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We have had occasion previously to allude to the “Center of the World” and to the diverse symbols by which it is represented.¹ We must return to this idea of the Center, which is of the greatest importance in all the traditions of antiquity, and indicate some of the principal significations which are linked to it.

The Center, before all else, is the origin, the point of departure of all things; it is the principal point, without form and without dimensions, therefore indivisible, and thus the only image that can be given to the primordial Unity. From it, by its irradiation, all things are produced, just as unity produces all numbers without its essence being modified or affected in any fashion whatsoever. There is here a complete parallelism between the two modes of expression, i.e., geometric symbolism and numerical symbolism, so that one can use them quite impartially and pass from one to the other in a most natural manner.

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that in the one case or the other, it is always symbolism that is in question: arithmetical unity is not metaphysical Unity; it is only a figure of the latter, but a figure in which there is nothing arbitrary; for there exists between the one and the other a real analogical relationship. And it is this relationship which permits the transposition of the idea of Unity beyond the domain of quantity, into the transcendental order. It is the same with the idea of the Center; this latter is susceptible of a similar transposition by which it is stripped of its spatial character, which is no longer evoked except as a symbol. Symbolically, the central point is the Principle; that is to say, it is pure Being. The space which it fills by its irradiation and which itself is not other than the same irradiation (the *fiat lux* of Genesis), without which this space would be only “privation” and nothingness, this is the world in the most extended sense of the word, the totality of all the beings and all the states of existence which constitute universal manifestation.

The simplest representation of the idea which we have been formulating is the point at the center of a circle (Figure 1): the point is the emblem of the Principle while the circle is that of the

1. See *Regnabit*, March 1926 and the author's *The Symbolism of The Cross*.

world. It is quite impossible to fix any origin in time to the use of this figuration, for one frequently encounters it on prehistoric objects. No doubt one must see here one of those signs which are linked directly to the Primordial Tradition. Sometimes the point is surrounded by several concentric circles which seem to represent the different states or degrees of manifested existence, arranged hierarchically according to their greater or lesser removal from the primordial Principle. The point at the center of the circle has been taken also, and probably from a very ancient time, as a figure of the sun because this latter is truly, in the physical order, the Center or “Heart of the World”. And this figure of the encircled point has remained until our own time as the usual astrological or astronomical sign for the sun. It is perhaps for this reason that most archeologists, wherever they encounter this symbol, claim for it an exclusively solar significance, while in reality it has a sense far vaster and more profound; for they forget or ignore that the sun, from the point of view of all the traditions of antiquity, is itself only a symbol -- that of the true “Center of the World” which is the divine Principle.

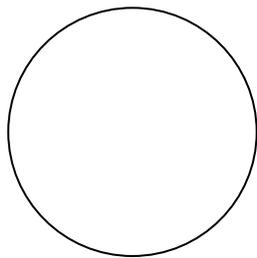


Figure 1

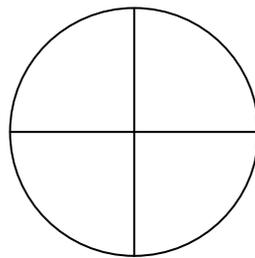


Figure 2

The relationship which exists between the center and the circumference, or between what they respectively represent, is already indicated clearly enough by the fact that the circumference cannot exist without its center, while the latter is entirely independent of the former. Perhaps this rapport can be indicated even more precisely and explicitly by the rays issuing from the center and ending at the circumference. These rays can clearly be represented in varying numbers as they really are indefinite in multitude, as are the points of the circumference which are their extremities. But, in fact, for figurations of this kind, numbers having themselves a particular symbolic value are always chosen. The simplest representation of the idea which we are here formulating is that which presents only four rays dividing the circle in equal parts, that is to say, two diameters at right angles forming a cross in the interior of the circumference (Figure 2). This new figure has the same general significance as the first, but certain secondary significations are attached which complete it: the circumference, if one represents it traced in a certain direction, is the image of a cycle of manifestation, such as the cosmic cycles of which Hindu doctrine, notably, offers an extremely developed theory. The divisions determined on the circumference by the extremities of the branches of the cross then correspond to different periods or phases into which the cycle is divided. Such a division can be envisaged, so to speak, according to so many diverse scales, whether or not it is a question of more or less extended cycles. Thus one will have, for example, and in order to restrict ourselves only to the order of terrestrial existence, the four principal movements of the day, the four phases of the moon, the four seasons of the year;

and also, following the conception that we find in the traditions of India and Central America as well as those of Greco-Latin antiquity, that of the four ages of humanity. These considerations can be indicated only summarily in order to give a general idea of that which the symbol expresses. Moreover, all this is connected more directly to that which we will have to say in the remarks that follow.

Among the figures which admit of a greater number of rays, we must mention especially the wheels or “rounds” which most commonly have six or eight diameters (Figures 3 and 4). The Celtic “round” which was preserved throughout most of the Middle Ages, is found under both

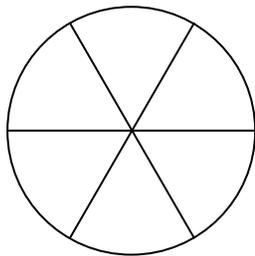


Figure 1

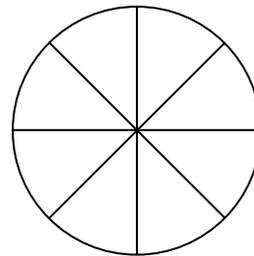


Figure 2

these forms; these same figures, and especially the second, are encountered very often in oriental lands, notably in Chaldea and in Assyria, in India (where the wheel is called *chakra*) and in Tibet. On the other hand, there is a close relationship between the wheel and the *chrismon*² which, in short, differs only in that the circumference which marks the extremities of the rays is not normally drawn. Now the wheel, instead of being simply a “solar” sign as is commonly thought in our time, is before all else a symbol of the world, which one can understand without difficulty. In the symbolic language of India, one speaks constantly of the “wheel of things” or of the “wheel of life”, which corresponds precisely to this signification. There is also the question of the “wheel of the Law”, an expression which Buddhism has borrowed, among many others, from anterior doctrines and which, originally at least, refers especially to cyclic theories. It must be added that the Zodiac is also represented in the form of a wheel, naturally of twelve rays, and that the name given it in Sanskrit signifies literally “wheel of signs”, according to the primary sense of the word *rashi* which serves the signs of the Zodiac.³

Further, there is a certain connection between the wheel and diverse floral symbols; one could even speak of a veritable equivalence.⁴ If one considers a symbolic flower such as the

2. The *chi-rho* monogram of Jesus Christ.—Translator’s note.

3. We note, likewise, that the “wheel of fortune”, in the symbolism of western antiquity, has very close rapports with the “wheel of the Law”; and also, though it may not be very clear at first glance, with the Zodiacal wheel.

4. Among the indications of this equivalence, as regards the Middle Ages, we have seen the wheel of eight spokes and a flower of eight petals represented on two sides of the same carved stone embedded in the façade of the church of St. Maxime at Chinon, which very probably dates from Carolingian times.

lotus, the lily or the rose,⁵ their blossoming represents, among other things (for these symbols have multiple significations) and by a quite understandable similitude, the development of manifestation. This blossoming, moreover, is a radiation round about the Center, for here also it is a question of “centered” figures, and it is this which justifies their assimilation to the wheel.⁶ In the Hindu tradition, the world is sometimes represented in the form of a lotus, in the center of which rises *Meru*, the sacred Mountain which symbolizes the Pole.

But let us return to the meanings of the Center, for, until now, we have expounded only the first of all, that which makes of it an image of the Principle. We find another significance in the fact that the Center is properly “middlemost”, the point equidistant from all points on the circumference (which latter has no reality apart from the radiation of the former) and which divides each diameter into two equal parts. In the preceding remarks, the Center was considered as if prior to the circumference, which has no reality apart from the former’s radiation; now we consider it in relation to the realized circumference. What is in question is the action of the Principle in the bosom of creation. The point midmost between the extremes, represented by opposite points on the circumference, is the place where contrary tendencies, ending at these extremes, are neutralized, so to speak, and are in perfect equilibrium. Certain schools of Muslim esoterism, which attribute to the cross a symbolic value of the highest importance, refer to the center as the place where all contraries are unified and all oppositions resolved. The idea which is given particular expression here is that of equilibrium, and this is one with the idea of harmony. These are not two different ideas, but aspects of the same idea. There is yet a third aspect to this symbolism, linked especially to the moral point of view (though admitting of other significations), and this is the idea of justice. One can relate this to what we have said of the Platonic conception, according to which virtue consists in the just middle ground between two extremes. From a more universal point of view, the Far Eastern traditions speak unceasingly of the “Invariable Middle” which is the point where the “Activity of Heaven” is manifested. And according to Hindu doctrine, at the center of every being, as of every state of existence, there resides a reflection of the supreme Principle.

Equilibrium itself, moreover, is only the reflection in the manifested order of the absolute immutability of the Principle. In order to view things from this new angle, one must regard the circumference as being in motion around its center which alone does not participate in this movement. The very name of the wheel (*rota*) immediately evokes the idea of rotation; and this rotation is the figure of the continual change to which all manifested things are submitted. In this

5. The lily has six petals; the lotus, in the most common representations, has eight. The two forms correspond, therefore, to the wheels of six and eight spokes. As for the rose, it is represented with a variable number of petals which may modify the signification, or at least give it diverse nuances.

6. In the representation of the chrismon in the manner of a rose, from the Carolingian epoch, which was reproduced by M. Charbonneau-Lassy (*Regnabit*, March 1926), the central rose has six petals which are orientated as are the branches of the chrismon; further, it is enclosed in a circle, which makes its identity with the six-spoked wheel appear as clearly as possible.

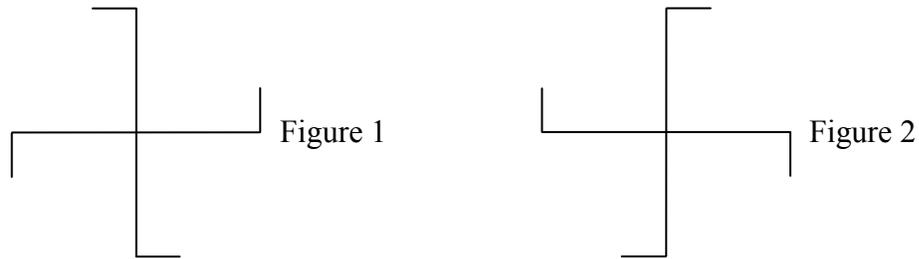
movement there is a unique point which alone remains fixed and immutable, and this point is the Center. This brings us back to the cyclical conceptions of which we spoke earlier: the course of any cycle, or the rotation of the circumference, is succession, whether in temporal or in some other mode. The fixity of the Center is the image of eternity, where all things are present in perfect simultaneity. The circumference can only turn around a fixed center; similarly, change, which does not suffice unto itself, necessarily supposes a principle which is outside change. This is the “unmoved mover” of Aristotle which is also represented by the Center. Just as all that exists and all that changes or is moved has no reality but the immutable Principle and depends totally on it, so it is this same Principle which gives movement its initial impetus and which subsequently governs and directs it and which gives movement its law—the conservation of the order of the World being as it were only a prolongation of the creative act. The Principle is, according to a Hindu expression, the “Inward Director” *antaryāmi*, for he directs all things from the interior, himself residing at the most interior point of all, which is the Center.

Instead of the rotation of a circumference around its center, one can also envisage that of a sphere around a fixed axis. The symbolic significance is exactly the same. This is why representations of the “World Axis” are so numerous and so important in all the ancient traditions. The general sense of this symbol is fundamentally the same as that of the figures of the “Center of the World”, except perhaps that the former evokes more directly the role of the immutable Principle in regard to universal manifestation than do the other rapports under which the Center may be considered. When the sphere, terrestrial or celestial, accomplishes its revolution around its axis, there are in such a sphere two points which remain fixed; these are the poles, which are the extremities of the axis or its points of contact with the surface of the sphere. And this is why the idea of the Pole is yet another equivalent of the idea of the Center. The symbolism of the Pole, which sometimes may take very complex forms, is also found in all traditions and it even had a considerable place in them.

One of the most striking figures in which are resumed the ideas which we have been expounding is that of the *swastika* (figures 5 and 6), which is essentially the sign of the Pole. We believe, moreover, that in modern Europe no one has until now⁷ made known its true significance. It has been vainly sought to explain this symbol by the most whimsical theories. Some have gone so far as to see in the *swastika* a primitive instrument for making fire. In truth, if there sometimes actually is a certain relationship with fire, it is for quite different reasons. Most often one makes of it a “solar” sign, which it has become only accidentally and in rather indirect manner. We may repeat here what we said above apropos the wheel and the point at the center of the circle. Those who have been closest to the truth are they who have regarded the *swastika* as a symbol of movement, but this interpretation is still insufficient, for it is not a question of just any movement, but of a rotation around a center or an immutable axis. And it is the fixed point which is the essential element to which the symbol in question is directly related. The other

7. This study by Guénon was first published in *Regnabit*, May 1926. —Translator.

significations which this same figure admits are all derived from this one. The Center imparts movement to all things; and as movement represents life, the *swastika* becomes thereby a symbol of life or, more precisely, the vivifying role of the Principle in relation to the cosmic order.



If we compare the *swastika* to the figure of the cross inscribed in the circumference (figure 2), we can readily understand that fundamentally these are two equivalent symbols, But the rotation, instead of being represented by the tracing of the circumference, is indicated in the *swastika* only by the lines added to the extremities of the branches of the cross and which form right angles along with the latter. These lines are tangents to the circumference, and they mark the directions of movement from the corresponding points. As the circumference represents the World, the fact that the former is understood so to speak, indicates quite clearly that the *swastika* is not a figure of the World, but rather the action of the Principle in regard to the World.⁸

If one relates the *swastika* to the rotation of a sphere such as the celestial sphere around its axis, one must consider the *swastika* as traced in the equatorial plane, and then the center point will be the projection of the axis on the plane which is perpendicular to it. As for the direction of the rotation indicated by the figure, the importance is only secondary. In fact one finds both the one and the other of the two forms which we have reproduced above,⁹ and this without one being obliged always to see the least kind of opposition¹⁰ between them. We are well aware that in

8. The same remark holds for the chrismon as compared to the wheel.

9. The word *swastika* is, in Sanskrit, the only one which serves in every instance to designate the symbol. The term *sauwastika*, which some have applied to one of the two forms to distinguish it from the other (which alone would then be the true *swastika*), is in reality only an adjective derived from *swastika*, indicating that which is related to this symbol or to its significations.

10. The same remark can be made of other symbols and notably of the Constantinian chrismon, in which the P is sometimes inverted. It has been thought that in such cases it must be considered as a sign of the Antichrist; in fact, this intention may have existed in certain cases, but there are other instances in which it is manifestly impossible to admit this (in the catacombs, for example). Similarly, the corporative “*quatre de chiffre*” (an idiomatic expression which designates a symbolic design based on the figure 4. —Translator) which is only a modification of the same P of the chrismon and is turned indifferently in the one or the other direction without one being able to attribute this fact to a rivalry between diverse guilds or to their desire to distinguish themselves, for one finds the two marks appertaining to the same corporation.

certain countries and at certain times, there may have come about certain schisms, the partisans of which have willfully given to this figure an orientation contrary to that prevailing in the circles from which they themselves separated, in order to affirm their antagonism by an exterior manifestation; but that in no way touches the essential significance of the symbol, which remains the same in every case.

The *swastika* is far from being an exclusively oriental symbol, as is sometimes believed. In reality it is one of those which are among the most wide-spread; and one encounters it nearly everywhere from the Far East to the Far West, for it exists even among certain indigenous peoples of North America. At the present time, it is preserved especially in India and in Central and East Asia, and it is probably only in those regions that its real significance is still known.¹¹ Nevertheless, even in Europe, in Lithuania and Courland, peasants still trace out the design on their houses, doubtless without any longer knowing the significance, and seeing in it only a protective talisman. But perhaps the most curious thing is that they give it the Sanskrit name of *swastika*.¹² In antiquity, we find this sign particularly with the Celts and in pre-Hellenic Greece;¹³ and still in the West, as M. Charbonneau-Lassy has remarked,¹⁴ it was formerly one of the emblems of Christ and it remained in use as such until the end of the Middle Ages. Like the point at the center of the circle and like the wheel, this sign incontestably goes back to prehistoric times. Furthermore, and without the least hesitation, we see in it one of the vestiges of the Primordial Tradition.

We have not yet finished indicating all the significances of the Center. If it is first of all a point of departure, it is also a terminal point. Everything comes from the Center and must finally return to it. As all things exist only by the Principle and cannot subsist apart from it, there must be between them and it a permanent bond, represented by rays joining to the center all the points on the circumference. But these rays can be traversed in both directions; first from the Center to the circumference, and then returning from the circumference to the Center. There are as it were two complementary phases, the first represented by a centrifugal and the second by a centripetal movement. These two phases can be compared to those of respiration according to a symbolism to which the Hindu doctrines often refer. On the other hand, one finds a no less remarkable analogy with the physiological function of the heart. In fact, the blood leaves the heart, is

11. No illusion is intended to the quite artificial usages of the *swastika*, notable by certain German political groups who quite arbitrarily have made of it a sign of anti-semitism under the pretext that this emblem was peculiar to the so-called "Aryan race". All this is pure fantasy.

12. Lithuanian is, moreover, of all the languages of Europe, that which most resembles Sanskrit.

13. Diverse variants of the *swastika* exist; for example, a form with curved branches (having the appearance of two crossed S's) which we have seen on a Gallic coin. On the other hand, certain figures which have kept only a purely decorative character, such as those to which one gives the name "Greek key" motif, derive from the *swastika*.

14. In *Regnabit*, March 1926.

dispersed throughout the organism which it vivifies, then returns to the heart. The role of the latter as organic center is therefore truly complete, and corresponds entirely to the idea that we must, in a general way, form of the Center in its full signification.

All beings, dependent on the Principle in all that they are, must consciously or unconsciously aspire to return to it. This tendency to return towards the Center also has, in all traditions, its symbolic representation. We refer to ritual orientation, which is properly the direction towards a spiritual center, a terrestrial and perceptible image of the veritable “Center of the World”. The orientation of Christian churches is at bottom only a particular case of this and is essentially related to the same idea which is common to all religions. In Islam, this orientation (*qiblah*) is the materialization, if one may speak thus, of the intention (*niyyah*) by which all the powers of the being must be directed towards the Divine Principle,¹⁵ and one can easily find many other examples. Much more might be said on this question, and doubtless we will have occasions to return to it in the continuation of this series; for this reason, we must be content for the present only to indicate this last aspect of the symbolism of the Center.

To sum up, the Center is at once the principle and the end of all things; it is, according to the well known symbolism, the *alpha* and the *omega*. Still more, it is the principle, the middle, and the end; and these three aspects are represented by the monosyllable *Aum*, to which Charbonneau-Lassy alluded as emblem of Christ and of which the association with the *swastika*, among the signs of the monastery of the Carmelites of Loudun, seems to us particularly significant. In fact, this symbol, much more complete than the *alpha* and the *omega*, admits of meanings which can issue into almost infinite developments. And it is, by one of the most astonishing concordances that one could encounter, common to the ancient Hindu tradition and to Christian esoterism of the Middle Ages. In both cases, it is equally and *par excellence*, a symbol of the Word, which in reality is the true “Center of the World”.¹⁶

15. The word “intention” must be taken here in its strictly etymological sense (from *in-tendere*, tend towards).

16. Whatever the role of the monosyllable *Aum* in Christian esoterism of the Middle Ages, the best authorities are agreed that it has no present ritual validity in a Christian context. —Translator.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

We do not look for gulfs when we compare religions, rather we try to find similarities and unity. This is the essential difference between the Chinese and Western view points. We firmly believe in the truism that all faiths are the paths leading towards the Ultimate Reality, just as the spokes of the wheel converge to its axis. When the people are too immersed in the dogmas and rituals of their chosen religion, it appears to them to be the only one worth following and they defend their own particular faith. However, when they have acquired enough wisdom, charity and discernment, they too are bound to perceive that the road to Heaven is nobody's monopoly and that the divine laws apply equally to all. It is the dogmas, ritual and the mode of worship that divide the faiths and not the basic essence of their beliefs.

But I am not in favor of conversion from one faith to another, neither do I believe in the fusion of all religions into one. The Ultimate Truth is one, but it has an infinite number of aspects and what is more beautiful than that each faith should reflect only one facet of the Divine, all of them together creating a shining gem of beauty. Would the world be more beautiful if all the flowers on earth had been blended into one uniform color or all mountains razed to make the globe monotonously flat? Each religion offers something glorious, peculiarly its own, to point out the road to the Ultimate Reality. What man or group of men would be able to prescribe a single form of religion that would satisfy all and everybody? That would be an attempt to give a finite concept of the Infinite and, of course, it would fail.

Abbot Mingzing.