

Some Aspects of The Symbolism of The Fish¹

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THE symbolism of the fish, which is to be found in numerous traditional forms, including Christianity, is extremely complex and has many aspects which need to be clearly distinguished one from another. As regards the origins of this symbol, it seems to have come from the North, and may even be Hyperborean²; attention has been drawn to its presence in North Germany and in Scandinavia³, and it is probably nearer in these regions to its starting point than in Central Asia, where it was no doubt carried by the great stream which, flowing from the Primordial Tradition itself, was later to give birth to the doctrines of India and Persia. It is moreover, generally speaking, in the symbolism of the peoples of the North above all that certain aquatic animals are to be found, as for example the octopus, which is particularly wide-spread among the Scandinavians and the Celts, and is also to be found in early Greece as one of the chief *motifs* of Mycenaean ornamentation⁴.

Another fact which bears out these considerations is that in India the manifestation in the form of the fish (*Matsya-avatara*) is considered as the first of all the manifestations⁵ of Vishnu, the one which marks the very beginning of the present cycle, and that it is thus directly related to the starting point of the Primordial Tradition. It must not be forgotten, in this connection, that Vishnu represents the Divine Principle especially in its world-preserving aspect; this function comes very close to that of "Saviour" which is, more precisely, a particular instance of the wider function of Preserver; and it is truly as "Saviour" that Vishnu appears in some of his manifestations which correspond to moments of crisis in the history of the world⁶. Now the idea of the "Saviour" is also explicitly attached to the Christian symbolism of the fish, since when the fish stands for Christ, its Greek name *Ichthus* is considered as being made up of the initial letters of the words *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Sôter* (Jesus Christ God's Son Saviour). Nor can we take this last word simply as a matter of course because of its context in connection with Christ, for he has other emblems which allude more directly to other attributes of his and which do not formally express the function of "Saviour".

In the form of the fish, at the end of the previous Maha-Yuga, Vishnu appears to Satyavrata⁷, who is to become, under the name of *Vaivaswata*⁸, the *Manu* or Legislator of the present cycle. He tells him that the world is going to be destroyed by the waters, and he orders him to build the ark which is to contain the seeds of the future world; then, always in the same form, he himself guides the ark over the waters during the cataclysm; and this representation of the ark piloted by the divine fish is all the more remarkable for having its equivalent in Christian symbolism also. There is a "pontifical vestment brocaded with figures in which the remains of a Lombard bishop of the VIIIth or IXth

century were enshrouded, and on which is to be seen a boat carried by a fish, image of Christ sustaining the Church⁹". Now the Ark, as well as the boat¹⁰, has often been considered as a figure of the Church; the idea that we find expressed both in Hindu and Christian symbolism is thus one and the same.

There is yet another aspect of the *Matsya-avattzra* which is particularly worthy of note: after the cataclysm, that is, at the very outset of the present *Maha-Yuga*, he brings to mankind the *Veda*, that is, according to the etymological meaning of this word which is derived from *vid* (knowing), Sacred Knowledge in its integrality; we have here an unmistakable allusion to the Primordial Revelation, or to the "non-human" origin of Tradition. It is said that the *Veda* subsists perpetually, being in itself prior to all the worlds; but it remains as it were hidden or enveloped in itself during the cosmic cataclysms which separate the different cycles, and it then has to be remanifested. The affirmation of the perpetuity of the *Véda* is moreover directly connected with the cosmological theory of the primordially of sound among the sensible qualities, sound being the quality which belongs to ether, &*kasha*, which is itself the first of the elements¹¹; and this theory is ultimately the same as what other traditions express when they speak of creation by the Word: the primordial sound is the Divine Utterance through which, according to the first chapter of *Genesis*, all things were made¹². Thus it is said that the *Rishis* or the Sages of the first ages "heard" the *Véda*: Revelation, being like creation itself a work of the Word, is strictly speaking an "audition" for him who receives it; and the term that denotes it is *Shruti*, which means literally "that which is heard"¹³.

During the cataclysm which separates this *Maha-Yuga* from the previous one, the *Véda* was concealed in a state of envelopment in the conch shell (*shankha*), which is one of the chief attributes of *Vishnu*. The conch is considered as containing the imperishable primordial sound (*akshara*) that is, the monosyllable *Om*, which is the name *par excellence* of the Word in its manifestation in the three worlds, while being, through another correspondence of its three elements or *matras*, the essence of the triple *Veda*¹⁴. Moreover these three elements when reduced to their essential geometrical forms and graphically arranged in a particular manner, form the very shape of the conch; and by a rather remarkable concordance, this is also the shape of the human ear, the organ of audition, which in order to be fitted for the perception of sound must in fact have a disposition in conformity with the nature of sound. All this is clearly connected with some of the most profound mysteries of cosmology.

Like *Vishnu* in India, and also in the form of a fish, the Chaldaean *Oannes*, whom some have expressly considered as a figure of Christ¹⁵, likewise teaches men the primordial doctrine—a striking example of the unity that exists between what are, in appearance, the most diverse of traditions, a unity which would remain inexplicable if we did not admit their attachment to a common source. The symbolism of *Oannes* or of *Dagon* seems moreover to be not only that of the fish in general but more especially that of the dolphin; among the Greeks the dolphin was connected with the cult of Apollo¹⁶ and had given its name to Delphi; and particularly significant is the fact that this cult was formally recognised as having come from the Hyperboreans. The relationship between *Oannes* and the dolphin (there is, on the contrary, no clear indication of any such relationship as regards the manifestation of *Vishnu*) is above all implicit in the close connection between the symbol of the dolphin and that of the "woman of the sea"¹⁷ (the

Aphrodite Anadyomene of the Greeks); it is she, under various names, such as *Istar*, *Atergatis* and *Derceto* who appears as the consort of *Oannes* or of his equivalents, that is, as representating a complementary aspect of the same principle—its *Shakti*, as the Hindu tradition would call her. This "Lady of the Lotus" (*Istar*, like *Esther* in Hebrew, means "lotus", and also sometimes "lily", two flowers which in symbol-ism are often interchangeable), like the Far-Eastern Kwan-yn, is also, in one of her forms, the "Goddess of the bottom of the seas".

To complete these remarks, we will also add that the figure of the Babylonian *Ea*, the "Lord of the Deep", represented as a being that is half goat and half fish¹⁸, is identical with the figure of the Sign of Capricorn in the Zodiac and may well be its prototype; now it is important to remember, in this respect, that the Sign of Capricorn corresponds to the Winter solstice. *The Makara*, which takes the place of Capricorn in the Hindu Zodiac, is not unlike the dolphin; the symbolic opposition between the dolphin and the octopus must therefore have its roots in the opposition between two solstitial signs of Capricorn and Cancer (*in India* Cancer is represented by the crab), or between the Gate of Heaven and the Gate of Hell, *Janua Coeli* and *Janua Inferni*¹⁹; and this explains also why these two same animals should be found together in certain cases, as for example beneath the tripod at Delphi, and beneath the feet of the stallions that draw the solar chariot, as marking the two extreme points reached by the sun in its yearly course. It is important not to confuse the two signs in question with another sign of the Zodiac, that of Pisces, whose symbolism is different and should be related exclusively to the symbolism of the fish in general, especially in its connection with the idea of "vital principle" and of "fertility" (above all in the spiritual sense, like "posterity" in the traditional language of the Far East); those are other aspects, which can also moreover be related to the Word, but which are none the less to be clearly distinguished from those aspects which manifest it, as we have seen, under its two attributes of "Revealer" and "Saviour".

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

If anyone has these three qualities you may know God holds him to be His friend: First, a generosity like the generosity of the river; secondly, a benevolence like the benevolence of the sun; thirdly, a hospitality like the hospitality of the earth.

Chisti Shaikh Mu'inuddin.

¹ *Symboles Fondamentaux de la Science Sacree*, ch. XXII

² See Rene Guenon, *The Wild Boar and the Bear in Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. I., No. I., pp. 36-41.

³ L. Charbonneau-Lassay, *Le Poisson in Regnabit*, December 1926.

⁴ The arms of the octopus are generally straight in Scandinavian figurations whereas they are coiled in spirals in Mycenaean ornaments. Here the *swastika*, or figures clearly derived from it, is also very often to be found. As a symbol, the octopus is related to the zodiacal sign of Cancer which corresponds to the summer solstice and to the "bottom of the waters"; hence the "malefic sense" which it can some-times have, the summer solstice being the Gate of Hell, *Janua Inferni*.

⁵ The habitual Western term "incarnations" is not used here because the word is altogether inexact; the term *avateira* means the "descent" of the Divine Principle into the manifested world.

⁶ It should be mentioned also, in this respect, that the last manifestations, the Kalki- *avatdra*, "He who is mounted on the white horse" and who is to come at the end of this cycle, is described in the *Puranas* in terms identical with those of the references, in the *Apocalypse*, to the second coming of Christ.

⁷ The name means literally "dedicated to the Truth"; the element "Truth" is also to be found in the name of *Satya-Yuga* which denotes the first of the four ages or yugas of the *Maha-Yuga*. Noticeable also is the similarity between the word *Satya* and the name of *Saturn* who, precisely, was considered in Western Antiquity as the regent of the Golden Age ; and in the Hindu tradition, the sphere of Saturn is called *Satya-Loka*.

⁸ Proceeding from *Vivaswat*, one of the twelve *Adityas* who are considered as so many forms of the Sun, in correspondence with the twelve signs of the Zodiac, and who, it is said, will appear simultaneously at the end of the cycle (cf. *Le Roi du Monde*, ch. IV and IX).

⁹ Charbonneau-Lassay, *ibid*.

¹⁰ In Ancient Rome the boat was one of the emblems of Janus, as were also the two keys, and both boat and keys have remained, together with the title *Pontifex Maximus*, among the chief emblems of the Papacy.

¹¹ Inversely, when a man is dying, the first of the senses to be "lost" or reabsorbed is normally the sense of smell corresponding to the element earth , then taste corresponding to water, then sight corresponding to fire, then touch corresponding to air, and finally hearing which corresponds, as we have seen, to ether. See the author's *La théorie hindoue des cinq éléments* in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, 1935.

¹² Compare also the beginning of the Gospel of St. John.

¹³ For the distinction between *Shruti* and *Smriti* and the relationship between the two, see *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*, ch.1.

¹⁴ On the presence of the same ideogram A U M in early Christian symbolism, see *Le Roi du Monde*, eh. iv.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note in this connection that the fish head, which formed the head-dress of the priests of Oannes, is also the mitre of Christian bishops.

¹⁶ This explains why the symbol of the dolphin is linked with the idea of light (See L. Charbonneau-Lassay, *Le Dauphin et le crustacé*, in *Regnabit*, January 1927, and *Le Bestiaire du Christ*, ch. xcvi, v.). Also worth mentioning in this connection is the function of saviour of the ship-wrecked which was attributed to the dolphin by the ancients. The legend of Arion provides one of the best known examples of this.

¹⁷ This "woman of the sea" is not to be confused with the mermaid, although she is sometimes represented as having a similar appearance.

¹⁸ Moreover, *Ea*, like the Egyptian scarab, holds in front of him a ball which represents the "Egg of the World". This "Egg" (*Brahmanda*), which contains the seeds of the world that is to be manifested, corresponds, as does also the conch shell, to the Sign of Cancer which is not only the opposite of the Sign of Capricorn, but also its complement. The positive aspects of Cancer have been treated at some length by the author in his article *L'Hiéroglyphe du Cancer (Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée, ch. XIX)* and elsewhere; and since in the present article the references have been mainly to its malefic aspect, it should perhaps be mentioned here also that it is only malefic as a gate of exit. But Cancer is necessarily the gate of entry into the individual human state for all except the *Avatara* who alone can enter through the Gate of Capricorn. Connected with this "initiatory" aspect of Cancer is its correspondence to the Feast of St. John the Baptist, to the silver key of the two keys of St. Peter, and to the Lesser Mysteries. (Translator's note).

¹⁹ The function of the dolphin as guide of blissful souls towards the "Islands of the Blessed" is also evidently related to the *Janua Coeli*.