

The Pierced Heart of the Virgin

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Originally published as *The Pierced Heart of the Virgin* (*Sophia* 8.1, 2002)

This paper was inspired by a painting of the *Mater Dolorosa* in the side chapel of Aachen Cathedral, also called Charlemagne's Cathedral. Photo by kind permission of Peter Nikolsky (<http://www.nikolsky.name/index.html>) - © Peter Nikolsky, 2007.



‘Yea, A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also’
(*The Prophecy of Simeon – Luke 2:35*)

The iconographical vocabulary of the Catholic tradition includes the image of the Sacred Heart of the Virgin pierced by either a single sword or, in some cases, seven swords (the *Mater Dolorosa*, “Mother of Sorrows”). For many Christians it is easier to empathize with the suffering of Mary than with the almost incomprehensible suffering of the man, Jesus, who took upon himself the sins of the world. The suffering of Mary is the suffering of a mother who must watch helplessly the unfolding Passion of her beloved son. This is the deep human meaning of this startling image. Little more need be said to explain this, for any person of sensitivity must feel at least this much. Still, the symbolism of this image is rich and, in its depths, embraces the meaning of existence. In it we find concurrently cosmological

knowledge and a spiritual teaching. Yet running like a constant vein through all levels—be they metaphysical, cosmological or spiritual—remains the essential truth of the suffering heart of the Mother who must submit her child to the Passion.

The Biblical precedent of this image derives from the words of the Jewish Priest, Simeon, who prophesized at the circumcision of Jesus that the holy Child was destined for ‘the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed’. He continued, saying to Mary, ‘and a sword will pierce your soul too’. (Lk.2:34, 35) This is commonly taken as indicating the “Sorrow of St. Mary” and, in the case of the seven swords, the “Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary”. The sorrows of Mary are: the prophecy of Simeon; the flight into Egypt; losing the Holy Child at Jerusalem; meeting Jesus on his way to Calvary; standing at the foot of the Cross; Jesus being taken from the Cross; and the burial of Christ. These are compensated by the “Seven Joys of St. Mary the Virgin”: the Annunciation; the Visitation; Nativity; Adoration of the Magi; finding of the Holy Child in the Temple; the Resurrection; and the Assumption.

Symbolically the heart expresses the notion of the “centre”. This is true in all traditional doctrines, both of the East and the West. The image of the seven swords in the heart of St. Mary is not the only association of this mystical number with the symbol of the heart. In the Islamic tradition, ‘Ala al Dawlah remarks that the heart consists of seven “layers” or levels.¹ This reminds one of the seven layers of Dante’s Purgatory, which is topographically the centre or heart of his cosmology. According to St. Clement of Alexandria, God, who is the heart of the world, manifests in the six principal directions of space. Here the initial point of emanation, the centre, is simultaneously the principle of space—without itself being of space—and the “seventh” direction, or the direction of “return”. This informs the symbolism of the six days of creation in the Book of Genesis, with the seventh day being the centre, the still point or “day of rest”. Thus the number seven is associated with the idea of the completion of a cycle, of a return to the Source. Seven is the number of the centre, the principal point that contains all space, just as the cosmos is contained in the heart. In the words

¹ Cited in Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Middlesex, 1996, p.481.

of Sri Ramana Maharshi: ‘The entire Universe is condensed in the body, and the entire body in the Heart. Thus the heart is the nucleus of the whole Universe.’² Seven is both the “first and the last”, the Alpha and the Omega, and thus Jacob Boehme remarks that: ‘The seventh day (of creation) is the origin and the beginning of the first.’³

Seven, being the number of the centre, is also the number of the sphere, which is simply a prolongation of the centre. In the oft quoted words of Hermes Trismegistus: ‘God is an intelligible sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.’ Again, St. Bonaventura: ‘God’s centre is everywhere, His circumference nowhere.’⁴ From a more cosmological perspective it can be remarked that the centre, which is the principle of the Cosmos, while itself remaining unaffected by cosmic condition, is strictly no “where”, and that from this point of view it is the circumference that is “every where” and the unmanifested centre, “no where”. In this sense the Sufi poet, Shabistari, remarks: ‘Man’s heart is the central point, and heaven the circumference.’⁵

In referring, as we have, to the number seven as “mystical” we intend that this term be understood according to its root meaning of “silence”, for the centre is precisely beyond rational language by virtue of participating with the supra-rational Beyond. In this participation the heart is the mediator between the immanent and the transcendent. This, in the language of Sufism, is the station of the *barzakh*, the isthmus between the two “seas” of the Koran, the Upper and Lower Waters of Kabbalah. The Shaikh Si Mohammad Tadili says: ‘All the *barazikh* (plural of *barzakh*) of man depend on his central *barzakh*, which is the heart (*qalb*), mediator between the domain of the Spirit (*Ruh*) and that of the individual soul (*nafs*).’⁶

² Maharshi, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* 3vols. ed. Venkataraman, 1955, p.601, cit. Perry, A *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville, 2000, p.826.

³ Boehme, *Masterium Magnum* XVI.16, cit. in Perry, A *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.839.

⁴ St. Bonaventura, *Itin. Metis*, 5, cit. Perry, A *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.814.

⁵ Shabistari, *The Secret Rose Garden of Sa’d Ud Din Mahmud Shabistari* tr. Lederer, Lahore, p.81, cit. Perry, A *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.825.

⁶ Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, Cambridge, 1987, p.194.

We might also note that the silence of the centre accords with its state of serenity; for the centre is at perfect rest, just as the seventh day. It is the place of Aristotle's "unmoved mover". Again it is the abode of the non-manifest Principle, the *Atma*, or Supreme Self, of the Hindu tradition. This "abode" is the *Brahma-pura*, analogous with the Heavenly Jerusalem, or again, the Holy of Holies in Kabbalah. The Holy of Holies is the sanctuary of the *Sheckhinah*, the Divine Immanence, which René Guénon, observes as being identical to the *Pax Profunda* of the Rosicrucian tradition. He again notes this as the same as the *Es-Sakinah* or "Great Peace" of Moslem esotericism.⁷ This sense of tranquility is well represented in the gracefulness, poise and quiet beauty of the Blessed Virgin.

According to the meeting of Christian and Kabbalistic symbolism, the Garden of Eden is analogous to the Holy Virgin. Now, Judaic tradition speaks of the angel Jophiel who guards the gate of Eden with a flaming sword (see Gen.3:24). This is another way of saying that from Eden, which is the centre and garden of peace, flows Creation like the emanating and all reaching flames of this "sword of the spirit". This symbolism is directly comparable with the symbolism of the "radiating heart" and the "flaming heart", which Guénon has discussed in some detail.⁸ "Flame", or fire in general, concerns the dual symbolism of light and heat. Light is represented by radiation and expresses luminosity in the sense of illumination. Thus the heart was considered as the seat of the Intellect and the abode of the intellectual faculty. The symbolism of heat is that of the "quickenning heat", life itself, and in this sense the heart is the "vital centre". Thus the flaming sword of Jophiel is, in its radiation, luminosity and vivacity, none other than the Divine Ray, the *Fiat Lux* of Genesis.

The *Fiat Lux* is analogous to the creative Word, by the manner in which sound and light are one: 'The Word was the real light', says St. John. Again, the Persian mystic poet, Rumi, writes: 'But when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.'⁹ This

⁷ See Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London, 1975, p.36.

⁸ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge, 1995, Ch.71.

⁹ Rumi, *Maulana Rum's Masnawi*, tr. Gupta, Agra, 1995, I, 835.

connection between light and word returns us to the sword, for, according to St. Paul, ‘the sword of the spirit...is the word of God’ (Ep.6:17).

The image of the sword that pierces the heart of St. Mary represents Creation itself, in both its passive or potential state of “rest” (Mary), and in its active and “fiery” extension (the sword or Christ). To talk of Mary as Creation is then to talk of Mother Nature. Here we recognise the feminine and *shaktic* pole of creation, to use the Hindu terminology. In this connection we find the etymological correlation of Maya-Devi (mother of Sakyamuni Buddha), Maia (mother of Hermes) and Maria (mother of Jesus). Again we should recall that Moses’ *shakti* is his sister, Miriam, which name is the root for the name Mary.

The sword in St. Mary’s heart constitutes the “sorrow” of Mary. This implies the negative sense of creation, a notion that is strongly evident in the Hindu term, *Maya*, which evokes the notion of illusion or unreality. Quite literally this word refers to “that which” (*ya*) “is not” (*ma*). The name “Mary” derives from the Hebrew primitive root, *maw-raw*, which connotes “bitterness”. It might also be noted that this is the root of the word, “myrrh”, which ointment was given to the baby Jesus by the Magi (Mt.2:12). For the Church Fathers the gift of myrrh to the baby Jesus was symbolically interpreted as prefiguring the Passion. In this heart of bitterness the Passion of Christ and the sorrow of Mary meet.

The seven swords symbolize the realisation of a complete cycle of creation. This is to say, that the seven swords symbolize cosmic existence in its entirety, from its principial or cosmogonic point, to its cosmological projection, to its cosmolytic return. The cycle of the Seven Sorrows is both a cycle of creation and the work of salvation. The seventh sorrow is Christ’s burial. This is compensated for by the seventh joy, the Assumption, the return proper. We should keep in mind here that the tomb of Christ is a cave. The “cave of the heart”, observes Guénon, is a well-known traditional expression. As he remarks, ‘the Sanskrit word *guha* generally designates a cave, but it is also used of the internal cavity of the heart, and consequently the heart itself. ... This is the equivalent of the Greek *kruptos* that gives the word “crypt”,

which is synonymous with cave. These ideas are related to the centre insofar as it is considered as the most inward and consequently the most hidden point.’¹⁰ It is through entering his tomb or heart that Christ is able to return to the Divine Source. Thus the Assumption is not only a compensation for the Burial but, in a strict sense, a complement of it.

Here we recognise an important symbolism of the heart: that of the systole and diastole. These complementary phases reflect the complementary actions or phases of the cosmic force: expansion and concentration or centrifugal and centripetal movement. This symbolism of complementarity is also found with the expiration and inspiration (or exhalation and inhalation) of the Divine Breath. In this connection we can again note the relationship of the heart with the Word, formed from and analogous as it is with the Breath.

This notion of complementarity is again realised in the full understanding of the Hindu *Maya*. This is not only the source of universal illusion but is also, and simultaneously, the “productive power” and, to use Judeo-Christian terminology, the “Glory of God” or *Shekhinah*. As Frithjof Schuon, remarks, *Maya* ‘is also “divine play”. She is the great theophany, the “unveiling” of God “in Himself and by Himself” as the Sufis would say. *Maya* may be likened to a magic fabric woven from a warp that veils and a weft that unveils; she is a quasi-incomprehensible intermediary between the finite and the Infinite’¹¹. This last point recalls the heart as it is the *barzakh*.

It is no coincidence that Schuon speaks of *Maya* as a “magic fabric”, for *Maya* is referred to as the “cosmic veil”. In Kabbalah this is the *pargod*, the veil of manifest light with which the *Shekhinah* shrouds Herself. This is again the veil or curtain of the Temple that is rent with Christ’s death. Here we are presented with a return to the heart through the “piercing” of the veil of existence. These points inform the iconography of Mary, who is commonly pictured draped in her marine blue cloak.

¹⁰ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.145.

¹¹ Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London, 1965, p.89.

Hidden beneath this cloak, and innermost to her being, is Mary's red inner garment: red the colour of blood and the heart, and the symbolic colour of Christ's Passion.

Simeon the Priest foretold that Mary's soul should be pierced through. In the Greek the words "pierce" and "pierced" present two illuminating root connections. The word *dia* (dia), which is the primitive root of *dierchomai* (dierxomai), "pierce through" (Lk.2:35), implies the "channel" of the act, which is to say, the "way" (cf. Jn.14:6). The word *ek* (ek), which is the primitive root of *ekkenteo* (ekkentew), "look on him whom they *pierced*" (Jn.19:37), indicates the origin or "place from where action proceeds". This is the centre, the seventh point, the garden of Eden, the Holy of Holies, and the heart of Mary. This piercing is the return to the origin, the Divine Source. This return is to be understood in an eschatological sense just as, in the Scroll of Zechariah, the death of the Pierced One brings the opening of the fountain that washes away sin and impurity, and the raising of the siege of Jerusalem. It is written: 'They will mourn for the one whom they have pierced as though for an only child, and weep for him as people weep for a first-born child.' (Zc.12:10). For St. John this passage prefigured Jesus' Passion (Jn.19:37).

Jesus is the "only child", the "first-born child". When we think in human terms, his piercing and death on the Cross must have been as a bitter sword driven into the heart of his loving mother. At the same time, the piercing of Christ is the return to the Source, where Father, Mother and Son are as One. The complementary piercing of the heart of the Virgin is the emanation of the flaming sword of the spirit from the heart of Creation. While the sword returns into the heart of Christ, it might be said that the flaming sword pierces the heart of Mary from within, bursting forth to light the world. With the seven swords it is implicit that this flaming sword is to light the world before returning to its Origin. This cycle is contained in the one, just as the centre contains the circumference. The Seven Sorrows are here one with the Seven Joys. This Origin is the centre, the seventh point, the first and the last, the Heart of Hearts. In this the heart of Christ and the heart of Mary are but the one Divine Heart.