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# THE SACRED AND THE BASIS OF CREATION BY MYTH AND SYMBOL

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(Received 26 May 2010, revised 15 September 2010)

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the present article is to point out the main characteristics of the relationship established at the level of conceptualization of the terms *sacred*, *creation*, *myth* and *symbol* that have, in time, set the bases of an extraordinary creative collaboration. The field of fine arts, inspired by the mythical-symbolic and religious context of biblical presentations, has proved great progress, dealing with religious themes and subjects with different manners of representation. In this context, the present study intends to offer significant guide marks, of this religious, mythical, symbolic and artistic symbiosis.

*Keywords:* sacred, creation, myth, symbol, religious art

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## **1. Introduction**

One of the challenges of any researcher interested in the problems of universal existence consists in discovering the secrets and the phenomena that stay at the base of using the myths and the symbols, to which, the universal culture has so often referred to in time, analyzing the role of each of them in the relations that man has with both the sacred and the profane.

The sacred, the creation, the myth and the symbol, as spiritual and cultural categories in themselves, identify a common set of relations and connections that are examined by the interested researcher with his own means. Among them there is one that overlays upon an old subject of human culture and civilization, closely related to each of them, that is art. The field of arts, including also visual arts and music, theatre and other adjacent forms of expression, has always found the most appropriate methods of communication with the other cultural fields, resulting successful creative systems. As far as the visual expression and the representation of the sacred in fine arts is concerned, this phenomenon has proved, in time, to be a real mean of knowledge and a way of getting closer to divinity that must not be seen as an act of human strength but as one of necessity

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of rediscovering the divine and the ideal shapes that are kept alive in the human conscience by the 'nostalgia of paradise' [1].

## **2. The sacred**

Defining the concept of the sacred as the primordial element of the existence that spiritually and practically guides humankind and relates it to the entire creation is as easy as complex and difficult. Presenting itself in extremely different shapes, the sacred refers to something adjacent to the notions of infinite, intangible and transcendental, each culture pretending to possess the true definition, presenting its point of view in relation to the concept and sometimes accepting in a tolerant and diplomatic manner the points of view of others, while on other occasions acts exactly the opposite.

In the specialized literature, the interest in the sacred, in defining and studying it as a separate category of the universal culture is quite recent. Among the authors interested in the conceptualization of the sacred we mention Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, Laura Levi Makarius, Julien Ries, Roger Caillois, René Girard, William James and others.

Within the history of religions, the importance of the sacred is underlined by more than a century ago, the research activity in this field becoming more intense in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the discovery of what is unjustly called 'the primitive people', with the discovery of the tribal culture, of the oceanic art, the taboos and ancient customs originally from areas yet unknown to the civilized world. One of the most fascinating definitions of the sacred belongs to Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) who states that the sacred represents *mysterium tremendum* which is a terrifying secret that causes both fascination and fear in the believer's soul [2]. Continuing the analysis of these ideas, the sacred can be seen as a force transcending the human, that is beyond the physical world, beyond the profane, a complex notion related to the religious, the holy and that inspires uplifting and pure feelings worthy of absolute adoration.

As well as the concepts of good, moral or beautiful, the concept of the sacred stands for a set of spiritual values so that each religious system that relies on it has its personal interpretation of its identity, appearance, manifestation and phenomenology. Most of the times, as a common feature of the different points of view related to this theme, each of the religious systems mentioned, had the tendency to consider itself superior to the others, fact that, on one side makes obvious the importance of the notion of the sacred and on the other side, due to the multitude of forms and areas of expression and revelation of the sacred, strengthens the belief that there are spiritual entities superior to man, no matter the name they are carrying; divinity, gods, idols or God.

Making itself present, the sacred always generates an answer, creates an impulse that logically gives birth to a new event subordinated to the previous one. In this vision, the sacred creates new energies that transform themselves in the end into an act of creation.

### **3. The creation**

By including art into the wider space of creation we identify a relation of dependence between the sacred and the act of creation, the principles of the communion between the two representing a favourite subject, religion and art interfering more than once during history [3].

As far as the creation is concerned, the creator's presence is obvious when discussing about artistic and scientific works. In order to complete this meaning we add the theological explanation according to which the Creation represents *the totality of beings created by God*, the term mentioned having a more special meaning, with favorite references and connotations to both the Creation – as a result of the act of creating the world, and the Creator that is clearly presented as God. Conceptually and philosophically, the term *being* could also be seen not only as living entity but also as the entire Creation that lives, generically speaking, the world. Other definitions of creation refer to the act of producing artistic and scientific works or at creating an extraordinary piece to which a new feature is added, that of created work.

From a mythological and theological perspective, for different cultures, the beginning of Creation stands for the end of the chaos, an image often presented in the theories on cosmogony of different people. The element that separates the Creation from the chaos is the energy inspired with by the Creator so to make order and to separate it from disorder. Therefore, the chaos, as a natural environment represents the defining and operational space of the created order, of the Cosmos. The ancient Greeks defined the *cosmos* in opposition to the chaos, as a harmonious manner of organization, with no spatial and temporal limits that represented the Universe [4]. Making an analogy, we can conclude that any creation, in opposition to the chaos, represents a true cosmos, a universe in itself, more precisely a complex of material, conceptual and spiritual references.

Admitting the dichotomy creation – creator, a relation of interdependence is present between the two, the creation reflecting part of the creator's features. With reference to this relation, Nicolai Berdiaev underlined the sacred character of the existence and its divine nature, asserting the existence of a causal relationship of the act of creation in the world because of the act of divine creation itself [5]. Taking this reasoning further and making use of an analogy, the supposition of the inexistence of the act of divine creation is nothing else but the lack of the general act of creation, roughly speaking.

### **4. The myth**

In the contemporary society, an entire set of specific means is used for understanding the act of creation. Their role is to offer, using their own language, a definition of the term in question. Two of the means referred to are the myth and the symbol.

Identified as an extraordinary story describing the origins of the Universe, of the world and its phenomena, capturing beliefs and fantastic characters (gods, heroes etc.), the myth is seen as a proper manner for presenting long past events, explaining the ontological structure of the world that finds powerful arguments for the existence of divinity, of cosmogony, of anthropogony, of natural shapes, of plants and animals. In a more complex definition, myths present the history of the acts of supernatural beings, giving it a higher degree of credibility. Myths also express the forms of creation, often suggesting or directly presenting the way creatures came to life, significant human actions or things standing as a paradigm of any important human manifestation. Mircea Eliade considers the myth could be seen as a precedent for any human action as well as a way of discovering the archaic society, the history of their beliefs and of their organization [6].

Victor Kernbach on the other hand, sees the myth as a complex manner of storytelling, of presenting and explaining clearly the mysterious or sacred phenomena discovered by entities superior to man, since immemorial time [7]. He classifies myths into four main categories (memorial myths, phenomenological myths, cosmographic myths and transcendental myths) pointing out the sacred that unites them. The myth is a reflection of the supernatural forces that have their essence in the transcendent and they make themselves present into the real world that opposes the transcendent. The sacred feature of the myth relies on the primordial relation between the sky and the earth and on the initial mutual communication that later transformed itself into a unidirectional one, from earth to sky.

The myth was given three major functions: the narrative function – used to describe and present; the initiatic function – for revealing and uncovering and the etiological function - meant to offer explanations [8]. So, the importance of the myth consists in a set of models, its importance for the sacred and for the religious systems being due to the capacity of transferring the religious feeling from one plane to the other. The act of mythologizing allows the recreation of the divine image within the human space. By reproducing the original model, the image relates itself to it and ends by representing it allowing the model to be identified and recognized. This way, the Byzantine icon offers for example the image of a transcendent model and of a reality superior to the earthly one. Divinity is seen as closer to man, transfigured and understood at the level of the senses, the Person of God the Father from the Christian religious system being understood easier when related to the image of an old man, with white hair, filled with holiness and kindness, and all the other divine attributes as in the famous representation of the *Creation of Adam* from the where the image of God the Father is similar to this earthly description. The scene referred to is part of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) between 1508–1512, at the request of Pope Julius II. Painting and fine arts in general have tried more than once to associate an image to this description, encouraged by dogmas, in spite of the fact that no one was ever able to see God the Father and His real appearance.

Recreating images and moments of extreme value, myths make reality more consistent and make themselves be seen, in a certain way, as a form of the concept *imitatio dei*, as an exchange of essence between divine and human acts. Reminding certain psychoanalytic explanations belonging to Freud [9] regarding the source of the religious feelings, the arguments introduce aspects and meanings of the relation father – son, that are at the base of the relation between divinity and mankind or the feeling of subordination and dependence mentioned by Rudolf Otto when he refers to Schleiermacher [10], the one who shed light on this theory.

The action of mythologizing, as a fundamental action of changing something into a myth represents a spectacular manner of valuing that particular element no matter if it is the case of a being, a thing or an event. This is valid for Science as well as for the entire system of religious beliefs.

From this point of view, myths must not be seen as much as a necessity, although certain situation also require this approach, but as a common manner of transmitting certain type of information for which a temporal guarantee and one of value is desired. This is how, for example, extraordinary, even supernatural deeds of past heroes can be understood. For the modern society, the truthfulness of certain historical facts can be questioned in the absence of a certain mythological protection. This way, even the existence of mythological characters as Achilles or Ulysses can be taken out of reality, the myth creating in time a protective aura that translates into the contemporary language of any generation the meaning and the importance of extraordinary characters or past deeds.

Being submitted to a permanent process of evolution, myths modify, enrich or even lose part of the initial information. The interesting fact is that they manage to cope with the challenges of modern societies (postmodern) from which they tend to be a part of. The myths of fantastic heroes have not disappeared; they still exist and are even encouraged by certain audio – video cultural environments as music or film that offer the possibility of bringing to the present day images that otherwise could only be found in the pages of the books of history or mythology. Having the possibility of presenting themselves in different shapes, myths tend to make use of the means of expression present in society in order to send the message across. Apart from this, we must also mention the unchangeable characteristic of the myth that cannot be influenced by the different cultural impulses, that is the *archetype*. It is transmitted from one generation to the other in its most pure shape, the primordial one. This is how it was possible the perpetuation of some mythical and legendary images up to the present day, the role of the new artistic environments being that of bringing them back into the public's memory. The image of Achilles from the Greek mythology for example, offers the proof of the temporal continuity of the myth, reminded and enriched by the film *Troy* (2004), in which Brad Pitt played the part of the famous character.

In conclusion, the myth can be seen as a manner of transferring information for the area of the sacred, being responsible for the transmission of the specific elements of the hierophany. The sacred uses the myth as well as other of its concepts and in certain cases even includes it entirely. From this point of view, we can imagine a mutual bond between the two fields, the existence of the mythical elements with sacred connotations being equally pertinent as the existence of the sacred elements with mythical connotations. According to this statement it would not be wrong to believe that, due to its ensemble of values, the myth can transmit, strengthen and use the elements of sacredness, but it cannot condition their existence, the fundamental element of the sacred, divinity, being present even without the contribution of the mythological factor.

## **5. The symbol**

As a large number of studies in this field already mention, one of the most important possibilities for the sacred to make itself present within the Creation and within art in particular, is to assert the possibility of expression and visual representation with the use of symbols. The subject becomes more meaningful and can be easier understood if we relate it to the existent connections between the sacred and mythology. As far as we are interested, both myths and symbols are used to increase the value of the sacred messages and to make them more meaningful for the people.

Referring to the symbol, its definition presents a multitude of meanings, starting with *sign, object, being, notion, idea, feature, feeling* and ending with meanings derived from technique and science. So, the definition of this term is complex enough to determine certain interpretations that are also valid when talking about spirituality, religious theories and sacredness.

We start from the premise that the subjects we are referring to, are sharing a powerful bond as both the sacred and the symbol are part of spirituality and so their analysis requires a permanent connection of their meanings. One explanation for this wide cohesion is that the symbol represents a category of sensitivity, dedicated to the intellect and to the spirit [11]. The bond to the sacred resides precisely in the symbol's multiple meanings, in its capacity to use images in order to express even what does not have an image. Even from this point of view, we can join Paul Ricoeur simple and challenging statement that "*the symbol makes one think*" [12]. This extraordinary phrase manages to surprise in only a few words the symbol's wide amount of meanings.

If, when referring to the myth, we mentioned that in its relation to the sacred, the myth presents itself as a mean of transferring the information of the sacred, then, we consider that the symbol stands for the fundamental element of the language that makes possible the relationship between the divine and the human. In the end, the language itself is a set of symbols, the two means of expression being in fact, complementary. The symbol makes use of two important abilities of the human psychic that are intuition and synthesis,

allowing endless conceptual approaches. Unlike the symbol, the language, being complementary to it, as René Guénon pointed out, requires a different level of comprehension [12, p. 17]. René Guénon offers a realistic description of the symbol's qualities, pointing out their useful character and acknowledging that they are not strictly necessary, their function being related more to the specific of the human being. Also referring to the symbol, Mircea Eliade said that religious consciousness belongs to the symbolic area, the bond of the human to the sacred being the result of the conscience. Eliade's symbol can be seen as a characteristic of the conscience and a fundamental feature of the human intelligence, one of the main traits of the sacred being that of making itself present, feature theoretically known as hierophany. From this point of view, Eliade's symbol marks a prolongation of the hierophany, respectively, an essential language of religious life.

This aspect is also obvious when referring to the numerous Christian concepts symbolically present in religious art. From this perspective, Christian art, overlaid most of its existence to the Byzantine influence, can be considered a symbolic art in which every constituent element carries its own meaning – in theory being present the discussion about the symbolism of religious texts, the themes represented artistically, the chromatic, the objects and other characteristic motifs. In order to support with images the symbolic value of Christian art we mention the way the four evangelists are represented: the (*winged*) *man* symbolizes St. Matthew the Evangelist as the beginning of its Gospel he describes the embodiment of Christ, the *lion* symbolizes St. Mark the Evangelist, reminding of the “*voice of he who cries in the wilderness*” (Matthew 3.3) that marks the beginning of his Gospel, the *bull* as a symbol of the sacrifice presented in St. Luke's Gospel and the *eagle*, symbol of the spiritual ascension preached in St. John's Gospel [13].

The Middle Age civilization and culture were rich in symbolic meanings, the world and the surrounding universe being the mark of a much deeper reality; the ability of interpreting them being directly dependent to the erudite class of society. This is obvious for example in the case of symbolic objects and images as the mitre and the Episcopal crosier from the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting *The Ecstasy of Saint Andrew Cosrini* of the Italian artist Guido Reni (1575-1642). (In paleochristian art certain themes and motifs were often used to present symbols of the primary Church, their meaning being identified with the idea of Christianity. Frederick Tristan in *The First Christian images* [14], mentions some of these symbols: the anchor, the lighthouse, the ship, the palm tree branch, the wreath, the dove, the lamb, the fish and others.) The society's relations to this kind of objects was definitely seen from different perspectives, creating a hierarchical structure filled with symbols between the bishop – as owner of these symbols and distinctions of the ecclesiastical power and the simple believer of the Church – as follower. The enigmatic character of the symbols as well as their meaning were often meant to prevent the proper understanding of certain aspects of reality, acting as a metaphoric shield that hid the true mysteries. Not far from them is the symbolic meaning of the tongues of

fire that are present in the icon, *The Descent of the Holy Spirit* that, for the one unfamiliar with the religious symbols, may seem a simple representation of an element in the religious painting. But the Bible does offer the necessary explanation for their presence: “*And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” (The Acts of the Apostles 2.3, 4)

In a similar manner, the existence of a sufficiently suggestive title as the case of the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting *Agnus Dei* of the Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664) prevents the painting from losing its true meaning, a meaning filled with symbolic and sacred echoes. The painting has in the foreground a lamb with its paws crossed and tide symbolizing the Eucharistic sacrifice. Also symbolically, the sight is drawn by the stretched head of the lamb that strengthens the idea of abandon and loneliness. Without the symbolic elements, the image could be seen as a simple painting, characteristic to the period in which the painter lived.

## **6. The basis of artistic creation by divine inspiration**

The base of the artistic creation generally defines a particular phenomenon of the human intellect, a complex process of creating and materializing a new form of existence that we will call artwork. The complexity of this process lies in the multitude of means that the creator has at his disposal to fulfil his goal and to convey the meanings he’s interested in. In order to reach this goal, certain stages, compulsory for the future artwork, must be fulfilled. Nichifor Crainic reveals two of these stages [1]; their meaning surpassing the borders of the physic and reaching those of the transcendent. The first stage refers to the inner vision of the artistic object, while the second refers to the way the vision is transposed externally by using the proper artistic means. In the same way, the vision and the expression represent the manifestation of the creator’s deepest thoughts, the act of completion functioning as a complex of subjective and objective conditions through which the work of art is drawn from inside the artist out of him and given back to the world [1, p. 140].

The visual representation of the sacred stands for the man’s attempt to imagine the spiritual, transcendental world placed above the real world. The appearance and the recreation of the sacred through art are due to the individual’s aspiration to return to the primordial shape of the spiritual world, trying to underline those aspects superior to human reasoning and norms. In other words, the sacred, as it is seen in different cultures stands for the different manners of divine revelation, creating in an imaginary and abstract manner the image of a world and of beings superior to the human one.

Transferring these ideas to the act of creation we assert the existence of an equivalence between the structure of the artistic space, it being represented by both the physical and the metaphysical space where the artist creates, and the structure of the sacred space that was previously described as a place of

hierophany. Between the human space of artistic creation and that of divine creation we consider there is that channel of communication that mystically connects the Creator and the creator, allowing the eternal repetition of the act of primordial Creation at human dimensions [15].

One of the most suggestive representations of this type of communion between the divine and the human is present in iconography. By definition, an art of divine inspiration, the art of icons, presents, using the means of the material world, the sacred shapes of the immaterial world, transferring the information of divine inspiration into the sacred space of the creator. The icon depicting *Saint John the Evangelist along with his apprentice Prohor*, dictating him the Gospel holds the visual code of the communion. In the iconographic representation of this scene, in the upper part of the composition, the background is interrupted by a series of sections of coloured circles in shades of violet-grey and a beam is heading towards the Evangelist's forehead. This symbolizes the transmission and the receiving of the divine revelation. In a worldly manner of visual representation the beam is meant to suggest, in a simpler way, the measure of human understanding, the 'way' of creative inspiration. As far as symbolism is concerned, the circles suggest the presence of God while the beam stands for the inspiration or, better yet, the revelation of the work, in this case, the Gospel.

On the opposite side of the Evangelist it is his apprentice Prohor, the one writing what God dictates to Saint John the Theologian. The parallelism between the divine and the human creation resides in the icon from placing at approximately the same level the blessing hand of the Evangelist who, symbolically, also has the role of transmitting the revelation further, and respectively, the apprentice's head bent attentively over the text of the Gospel.

In the end, this symbolic circuit of creation finds its end within the pages of the book the apprentice writes. The compositional stages of the icon can be followed as described so far, using a series of intermediary elements but also directly, by visualizing it from the initial point of interpreting the icon up to the final one. Otherwise, numerous iconographic representations of the theme strengthen this idea by placing the circles suggesting God's presence and the book, as a symbol of the creative labour of the human on the same diagonal with the lighted beam of hierophany and the creative and divine revelation. In this context, the beam identifies itself with the existent communicational channel between the two creators: the divine and the human.

The same way of pursuing a hierophanic route is present in the icon *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin Mary* as well as in the religious painting *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew the Evangelist* created by Caravaggio (1571–1610) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In both paintings, the inspiration is symbolized by the presence of an angel that seems to establish the way the painting should be created. A lot clearer than in the case of the symbolism of the beams of light or of the tongues of fire, due to the angels as spiritual and divine creature belonging to the sacred, the idea of divine inspiration is transmitted to both the creator of the painting and to the one who sees the final product.

We should also mention here the revealing role of certain images over the creator, images that tradition considers not having been made by human hand. Among them there are the portraits of Jesus Christ, known as celestial archetype, marvellously sent, according to an ancient legend to Abgar, king of Edessea, the portrait printed on Saint Veronica's head kerchief - representations well known in today's iconography as *mandilion*, as well as the image from the *Shroud of Turin*. Its origin even today raises numerous controversies to which mythical and symbolic elements are added. The role of these images proved to be important sources of inspiration, along with the traditions regarding the way of presenting the sacred images representing Jesus Christ.

Considering their existence real, we notice both the indirect manner of inspiring with divine inspiration, artistically presented as messengers, angels or beams of light, as well as the direct manner in which certain appearances are presented, as the case of the ones mentioned above. It is obvious that a discussion on this theme can be meaningful only as long as these spiritual beliefs are taken into consideration; without them the entire process seems illusory, the subject itself being equally relevant as the entire discussion of the existence and the manifestation of the sacred.

## **7. Conclusions**

In this brief presentation of myths and symbols we meant to point out the complex function of these elements of language in the creative process of religious and sacred works. Mediating the relation sacred – profane, the myth and the symbol represent the essential instruments that men uses in his attempt of transcending. Placed at an equal distance from the sacred and the profane, drawn by the temptation of both, the human needs these means in order to transcend. The worldly existence of the human identifies a complex circuit in which the passage from the profane to the sacred is possible starting from the myth and the symbol and reaching the sacred reality that stands for both primordial goal and purpose.

An interesting contemporary challenge consists in identifying the place of the artist in the circuit of creation. This challenge gives birth to new perspectives and even to a rhetoric on the status of the artist: is the artist the main creator of his work, the intermediary endowed with the ability to convey an idea or a work that is, at its turn, inspired, or is he a simple person in charge with writing upon dictation? The answer to these questions definitely becomes more and more difficult to get when important artists as Michelangelo, claim that the sculpture already exists in the block of marble that is to be carved and the artist does nothing but to reveal it. One thing is certain: no matter the place of the artist, the human creation has its origins in the divine creation which they copy and with which resembles, but which it cannot overtake because humans are not given this possibility, no matter how much they insist. The unsuccessful biblical experience of humanity of building the legendary Tower of Babel that was meant to be so great, having its peak reaching the sky, without being dedicated

to God, represents at least one reason for reanalyzing the origin and the finality of the human creative act and certifies the idea of divine and human collaboration in the act of creation.

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