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The Delivered One and the Divine Image

by

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Iconoclasm is not a new phenomenon in India: from the beginning of modern times there have been Hindus—or supposed Hindus—who no longer wished to understand the true role of their sacred images; it seems that a serious consideration of this issue is often eclipsed by a concern to escape superficial and humiliating or even insulting accusations and to conform to a moralism that is all the more oppressive for being insuperably conventional. We are not thinking here of those who fully adopt a traditional perspective that excludes images in the name of a particular mental approach to the Absolute, such as the perspective of Islam; Muslim objections to images are certainly not justifiable directly or objectively—that is, from the Hindu point of view—but they are justified indirectly or subjectively insofar as they are linked to a spiritual attitude of "abstraction"; when this attitude is fully conscious, the "temple of idols"—to use the words of Ibn Arabi—may symbolize a "heart" sheltering the divine realities.[1]

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[1] The following *hadīth* furnishes the key to a universality that is limited by no question of form: "In the thought of my servant, I (*Allāh*) am what he thinks I am. Let him then meditate (on Me) according to his highest aspirations!" This *hadīth* may be compared to the following passage from the *Bhagavad-Gītā*: "Whatever [Divine] form a believer seeks to worship with faith, I [Krishna-Vishnu] make his faith unwavering. Moved by such faith, he [the believer] engages in worship of that form, and thus he attains the fruits he desires and that I have ordained for him" (7:21-22). What this means is that God renders firm a man's faith to the extent that it is sincere, which it can hardly be in just any perspective; the chances of sincerity diminish in proportion to the degree of intrinsic heresy.

Moreover, had it not been for Arabian idolatry and the memory of Mesopotamian and Mediterranean idolatry, Islam could have shown itself less exclusive in principle; what counts, however, is the intrinsic value of its attitude, which is to be found—methodically as well as incidentally—even in the heart of those civilizations most given to figurative symbolism.[2] Be that as it may, our criticism of iconoclasm is obviously not aimed at a particular traditional perspective, but at those who submit, should the occasion arise, to an influence incompatible with the tradition to which they belong—in this case the tradition of Hinduism, for it is of Brahmanical India we wish to speak; and we are thinking less of Muslim influence—since in this regard it is fairly slight outside of pure and simple conversion—than of Western influence, which alone carries with it a "civilizing" reproach and a Protestant "angelism"[3] and which alone creates a corresponding psychological complex. Whatever may have been the influence of Islam in various Hindu spheres in the past, Hindu iconoclasm of the twentieth century is indisputably the result of modern inspiration, whence precisely its half-scientific, half-puritanical flavor.

In this mental climate there is an opinion that seems to have been accepted as a sort of self-evident truth in all too many spiritual circles in India, namely, that the presence of one who is "delivered in this life" (*jīvan-mukta*)[4] in an *āshram*[5] can render superfluous or even intolerable the presence—and even more so the worship—of sacred images, even when one of those images is that of the divine Prototype to whom the "delivered one" belongs, whether by his method or even by right of "Incarnation". This attitude would be warranted if it resulted from a purely methodic exclusion motivated by an advaitic viewpoint—just as the replacement of ritual prayers by a single, quintessential orison can be justified on such a plane—but as soon as the rejection of images begins to take on the air of religious ostracism or rationalistic reflex, it is quite obviously inadmissible in a society possessing a sacred art with a figurative style.

With regard to the object, the true function of sacred images is to represent a transcendent Reality both symbolically and sacramentally, and with regard to the subject it is to promote a habitual concentration on this Reality by means of a mental fixation on the symbol, a process that can be conceived in a devotional as well as an intellectual mode or in both ways at once.[6] In

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[2] Cistercians and Zen Buddhists are examples of this in a relative sense. On a profane level, which may exist *de facto*, Islam more or less tolerates images that "do not cast a shadow"—in other words, paintings—as long as they do not portray God or the face of the Prophet.

[3] Catholics and Orthodox Christians, though they are not opposed to the veneration of images, naturally reject the form it takes in Hinduism; here it is a question not of principle but of content.

[4] Really or supposedly, but this is not the question here.

[5] A sort of hermitage, where a guru lives and where disciples and pilgrims gather.

[6] "Although Vishnu is the inner soul of all that exists, he nonetheless humbles himself to enter into a ritual image (*archā*). Just as burning fire penetrates all things, though its power to burn is not perceptible and becomes plainly visible only when it is produced by the rubbing together of two sticks, even so Vishnu, who penetrates all, is not perceptible to the ordinary man but becomes visible in the symbol through the

connection with the question of one "delivered in this life", we would add the following: in reality and by its own nature, a divine image is the complement of a holy man, and it is related in one way or another to the divine Prototype it materializes or sensorializes: if the saint "is Rama" in accordance with the pole of *Ātmā* corresponding to "Consciousness" (*Chit*)—that is, in accordance with the "inward" or subjective reality—the corresponding sacred image will be identified with Rama in accordance with the pole "Being" (*Sat*), or in accordance with the objective aspect of reality, since the two manifestations, both the inward and the outward, coincide in "Beatitude" (*Ānanda*), which is the third element of *Ātmā*; for both the saint and the divine image manifest Rama, hence Divinity. The element "Beatitude" is what directly produces the spiritual manifestation, for "Beatitude" transposes the Divine into the phenomenal world, and by means of what one might call its dynamic character it sets "in motion"[7]—or causes to "shine"—the static poles of the Self, which are "Being" and "Consciousness".[8]

Some may object that the body of the one "delivered in this life" manifests the "divine form" or the aspect "Being" and that this corresponds to the "Consciousness" realized by the sage, but it must be replied that the sacred image is much more truly the body of this "Consciousness" than the human body that incarnates it, or that is thought to incarnate it; only in the case of the great *Avatāra*s themselves, such as Rama, Krishna, or the Buddha, does the body manifest *Sat* as directly as it does *Chit,* whence their superhuman beauty, charged with the supernatural, to which traditional accounts bear witness. If a holy man or woman happens to possess physical beauty, this appearance is nonetheless of an entirely different order—if not in all, then at least in most cases—and within the framework here considered it in no way renders the devotional worship and contemplative use of the sacred image superfluous; features that are a necessary aspect of the *Avatāra* may be merely a contingent aspect of the spiritually realized man.

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But in order for the image to truly serve as the body of the "delivered one"—in order for it to be *Ātmā* as he is or, more precisely, for it to be *Sat*, "Being", even as he is *Chit*, "Consciousness"—it must conform to what may be called the cosmic laws of divine representation.

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effect of the *mantra.* It is for this reason that one must adore Vishnu with all one's heart by means of images made by human hands and in conformity with the prescriptions of the Sacred Books" (*Padma-Tantra*, 3:26, 2-7). According to the Eastern Church, an icon is not properly speaking a human work but rather a manifestation of the heavenly Model itself. The icon has been compared to a window from earth to Heaven and from Heaven to earth; the gold background of the paintings reflects the celestial aura, the luminous substance enveloping deified beings and thus recalling in certain respects the symbolism of the "light of Tabor".

[7] For this is *l'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle*, as Dante said.

[8] One can see the similarity between this doctrine and Trinitarian theology.

It is important to understand above all that the purpose of art is not *a priori* to provoke aesthetic emotions but to transmit, together with these emotions, a more or less direct spiritual message,[9] hence influences emanating from—and leading to—liberating truth. Certainly art belongs by its very definition to the formal order, and perfection of form means beauty; to claim that art has nothing to do with beauty on the pretext that its immediate aim is spiritual is as false as the contrary, namely, that beauty is the exclusive aim of a work of art. Beauty essentially includes both a container and a content: the container is conformity to the laws of harmony or regularity of structure whereas the content is a manifestation of "Being" or "Knowledge", or again of "Beatitude"—which brings us back to the ternary of *Ātmâ*—or more precisely an unequal combination of these three elements; moreover these contents are what determine the container *a priori*. To speak of beauty "pure and simple" with a pejorative connotation is a contradiction in terms since it is impossible for beauty not to manifest truth or an aspect or mode of it; if sensory harmony "delivers" after its own manner and in certain conditions, it is because it is truth.

Let it be it said in passing that certain theorists of art have arrived at the conclusion—worthy of Zeno of Elea—that the beauty of a beetle is not inferior to that of a man nor the beauty of a shed to that of a cathedral, and this is proclaimed on the pretext that everything perfect in itself and on its own level, or every work "well made", possesses all the beauty of which it is capable; in short it is assumed that beauty permits degrees only within the same order and not by virtue of the nobility or baseness of the order in which it manifests itself—a necessary manifestation in fact since beauty appears wherever there is the fulfillment of a possibility, regardless of how inferior it may be. This is to forget—from an excess of zeal, no doubt—the nature or indeed the very notion of beauty: as we have already said, beauty is not only a matter of formal rectitude but also of content, and the content of beauty is its wealth of possibilities and its cosmic generosity, which means that there is a beauty that possesses or envelops and a beauty that bestows or overflows. Harmony of form is not merely the trueness of a square or triangle, as certain simplistic and frigid theories would have it; insofar as a form is all that it is capable of being, it is also—and essentially—the manifestation of an internal infinitude.

The first aim of sacred art is didactic, whether it is a pictorial catechism for use by the unlettered or a metaphysical or mystical doctrine suggested by symbols, and the two are by no means incompatible; sacerdotal art seeks to express a symbolism that is either simple or com-

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[9] Although profane art is not sacred art, it should nonetheless not be identified with anti-traditional art; it may fully respect at least the negative rules of universal art, and it may assume a function similar to sacerdotal art even while being much less central; there are in any case intermediate modes between sacerdotal and profane art. Let us add that an artist's initially subjective preoccupation with a particular aesthetic value—if he has one—is in no way opposed to the profound function of art nor therefore to the spiritual perfection of the work; since all things are interrelated it goes without saying that aesthetic emotion may convey a spiritual intuition—as in the case of Ramakrishna—or even a truth the artist may not necessarily be conscious of but that is transmitted nonetheless.

plex,[10] and in doing so it transmits at the same time an influence of beauty, hence a "flowering"—inevitably so since its language is one of form; if it tried to seek visible harmony for its own sake, it would fall into arbitrariness and the individualistic and sterile impasse that constitutes naturalism. The error of naturalism is certainly not that it is blind to aesthetic qualities; the problem is that naturalism lacks a sufficient reason insofar as it takes itself for an end in itself—that is, insofar as it attributes glory to the artist or the sensory model alone—and it violates the rules resulting from tradition and from the nature of things.

Naturalism in art violates tradition because it is unaware that style is a providential discipline proceeding from a genius that is at once spiritual and ethnic and developing according to the laws of organic growth and in an atmosphere of contemplative piety, which is not in the least individualistic or Promethean; and it violates the nature of things in painting because it treats the plane surface as if it were a three-dimensional space and the immobility of the surface as if it could contain movement; and it does the same in sculpture because it treats inert matter as if it were living flesh and as if it were in motion, and it sometimes treats one material as if it were another without regard for the soul of each substance.[11] To paint is to recreate a vision by adapting it to a plane surface, any movement being reduced to its essential type, and to sculpt is to recreate a vision by adapting it to inanimate matter or a particular kind of matter, any movement being reduced to a particular phase that is as if static; at the same time it is to recreate the object rather than copying it or to copy it while recreating it according to an inner vision that is at once traditional and personal, or according to the life we project into it by virtue of our knowledge, or again according to the life it projects into us by virtue of its ontological and divine content.

All these considerations serve to underline the fact that in acting as a complement to one "delivered in this life" an image can be "divine" only if it is sacred in form and by virtue of its genesis; and this means that one must be mindful of the spiritual and technical rules that tradition alone can guarantee.

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[10] An image is simple to the extent that it represents a specific heavenly reality and complex to the extent that it includes—as may be the case—an entire constellation of symbols, which refer for example to various attributes or functions.

[11] In a stylized painting such as an icon or Vishnuite miniature, the absence of three-dimensional vision and movement does not trouble us, for the painting presents itself as a painting precisely and not as a substitute for the objective world; it is not merely this or that but above all a work of art. In naturalistic art, by contrast, the objective accuracy of the drawing and subtlety of the shading intensify the absence of space and movement: the figures seem to be transfixed in a void without atmosphere. In statuary, where inert matter and immobility create a similar impression, the contrast between model and copy becomes intolerable and confers something spectral upon the work. Naturalism partakes of the nature of deception and magic, but the reaction against it, since it comes from below, leads to much worse aberrations that are truly perverted—with the exception of a few works, or categories of work, which nonetheless do not form a school.

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Sometimes this concept of "image" can be understood in a larger sense, beyond the question of works of art: in the case of Sri Ramana Maharshi, for example, one could say that the sacred mountain of Shiva, Arunchala, served as a permanent symbol of the Principle, which was simultaneously "incarnated" in the sage and was thus his true body; on the other hand one could also say that the body of the Maharshi was a manifestation in human mode of Arunachala, the earthly *lingam* of Paramashiva. In much the same way it was possible for the disciples of Ma Ananda Moyi to consider her a human manifestation of the Ganges in its aspect of "Mother", which means that the atmosphere of devotion that grew up around this saint could coincide—in the absence of other supports—with the traditional worship of Mother Ganga. As for Ramakrishna, no doubt the image that represents him most suitably and is the most adequate for purposes of worship is the image of *Shakti*, not so much in her terrible aspect as in her aspect of beauty and maternal love, precisely as she appeared to the saint.[12]

It will perhaps not be out of place to mention an abuse that often accompanies iconoclasm: the disparagement of *Avatāra*s in the interest of exalting living sages, even false ones. Wishing to highlight the worth or merits of a particular contemporary master, the disciple finds no better way of doing so than to affirm that the personage in question is superior to Shankara and even to Krishna or Vyasa, whose supposed limitations and whose no less imaginary demerits are then enumerated with an astounding lack of spiritual instinct, traditional knowledge, and sense of proportion; in prefaces or other texts devoted to *guru*s we have too often witnessed this sort of ignorance and presumptuousness in relation to spiritual ancestors who are infinitely, and as it were ontologically, superior to all that our own age can produce or offer and who cannot be equaled because of their very degree of cosmic manifestation. It must be said that this kind of abuse is especially typical of our century, where a belittling and degrading psychology is mingled with an incessant concern for demagoguery; notable in this connection is the singular incapacity of our contemporaries to imagine the Apostles, whose "simplicity" is confused with the kind one knows from ordinary experience and which is merely a type of vulgarity. People in India readily compare someone like Gandhi—who was not himself responsible for this—to the Lord Buddha, whereas in fact there is no comparison between them, to say the least.

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[12] "Kali is verily *Brahman,* and *Brahman* is verily Kali. It is one and the same Reality. . . . When it engages in these activities [of creation, preservation, and destruction], then we call it Kali or *Shakti.* . . . When there was neither creation nor the sun, moon, planets, and earth, and when darkness was enveloped in darkness, then the Mother, the Non-Formal One, *Mahā*-Kali, the Great Power, was one with *Mahā-Kāla,* the Absolute. . . . *Shyāmā*-Kali has a somewhat tender aspect. . . . She is the Dispenser of boons and the Dispeller of fear" (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* New York, 1942). "As the Mother, She [Kali] is no longer grim and fearful as in Her dance of death but appears to Her devotees in a majestic, gracious form full of sweetness and love, showering benediction upon all and opening up their understanding" (*Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, Calcutta, 1936).

But let us return to the question of images: on the plane of spiritual values no two things are more divergent than wisdom, which is inward, and art, which is outward; all the distance separating essence from form is between them. Nonetheless "extremes meet", and nothing is closer to wisdom and sanctity than sacred art or liturgy, in the widest sense of these terms, and this explains the value, which is in no way disproportionate, that traditional civilizations attach to these disciplines. The image of the Divine—and we are thinking here of sacred calligraphy as well as anthropomorphic representations[13]—is like the visible face of the Truth: in a language at once direct and multileveled, it renders transparent what spirituality hides in the depths of hearts.

The greatest of all miracles is theophany; in other words there is in reality only one miracle, from which all others are derived, and this is contact between the finite and the Infinite or the unfolding of the Infinite in the bosom of the finite. The divine image is a sacramental crystallization of this miraculous meeting, whence its lightning-like self-evidence, resembling that of the inward miracle.

Explanatory Notes by Editor James S. Cutsinger

From Page 1 above:

• Muhyi al-Din *Ibn Arabi* (1165-1240), the author of numerous works including the *Futūhāt al-Makkīyah*, or "Meccan Revelations", and the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, or "Bezels of Wisdom", was a prolific and profoundly influential Sufi mystic, known in tradition as the *Shaykh al-Akbar*, the great master.

From Page 3 above:

• *Rama* and *Krishna* are the two most important *Avatāra*s of the Hindu God Vishnu.

• Note 6: The "*light of Tabor*" is the uncreated light in which Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were enveloped during Christ's Transfiguration on the Holy Mountain of Tabor and in which, according to the Eastern Church, the deified saints also come to participate: "And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples

[13] Recalling also such categories of art as the Buddhist *mandala*, where geometry combines with calligraphy and in some cases with human figures.

heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9; cf. Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36).

• Note 7: *Dante* Alighieri (1265-1321) was the author of the *Divine Comedy*, one of the summits of world literature, which concludes with a celebration of *l'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle*, "the Love that moves the sun and other stars" (*Paradise*, Canto 33:145).

From Page 4 above:

• Note 9: *Ramakrishna* (1834-86), a *bhakta* of the Hindu Goddess Kali, was one of the greatest Hindu saints of modern times.

• *Zeno of Elea* (c. 490-c. 430 B.C.), one of the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece, is best known for his paradoxes, which were designed to show that multiplicity and change are illusory.

From Page 6 above:

• *Ramana Maharshi* (1879-1950), widely regarded as the greatest Hindu sage of the twentieth century, experienced the identity of *Ātmā* and *Brahma* while still a young man, and the fruit of this experience remained with him as a permanent spiritual station throughout his life.

• *Shiva* or *Paramashiva* ("supreme Shiva") is the third god of the Hindu trinity—Brahma being the first and Vishnu the second—and is associated with the powers of generation and destruction.

• *Ma Ananda Moyi* (1896-1982)—or Anandamayi Ma, meaning "bliss-filled Mother"—was known for her intense and long-lasting states of *samādhi* and is venerated by many Hindus as an incarnation of the Goddess Kali.

• *Shankara* (788-820), the pre-eminent exponent of *Advaita Vedānta*, was regarded by the author as the greatest of all Hindu metaphysicians.

• *Vyasa*, traditionally regarded as the compiler of the *Veda*s, is regarded by many Hindus as an incarnation of Vishnu.

• Note 12: *Kali*, worshipped by Ramakrishna (see above) as the supreme deity, is the destructive and transformative manifestation of the Hindu Goddess Parvati, consort of Shiva; *Mahā*-Kali is "great Kali", and *Shyāmā*-Kali is "black Kali".

• Mohandas K. *Gandhi* (1869-1948) is a well-known Indian spiritual and political leader.