

# Remarks on the Cosmological Symbolism of the Eucharist

By Timothy Scott

The Lord Jesus took some bread and after he had given thanks, he broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' And in the same way, with the cup after supper, saying 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.'<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

**T**he Eucharist is the central rite of orthodox Christianity.<sup>2</sup> It is the Christian soteriological method *par excellence*.<sup>3</sup> In the act of communion the entelechy of creation, and thus what it means to be human, is realised: 'God became man so that man might become God.' Thus participation in the soteriological Eucharist is simultaneously a microcosmic cosmogony and eschatology. The communicant maintains the perpetual act of creation while concurrently returning to the Source, transmuting the illusion of relativity and bringing about "the end of the world."

<sup>1</sup> Mt.26:26-28, Mk.14:22-24, Lk.22:19-20, Cor.11:23-25.

<sup>2</sup> It not my intention to examine the theological doctrines of the Eucharist, nor to engage in the various debates about the veracity of different rites and beliefs. However, in the context of this essay it is worth remarking on the two rites of the Eucharist. Rite I is the liturgy as it was celebrated in the Western Church in the Middle Ages. Dramatically it represents the people of God 'leaving this world and entering Christ's presence in the heavenly throne room'; it is "vertical" expressing Christ's transcendence. Rite II is the liturgy as it was celebrated in the Early Christian Church. Dramatically it represents the Incarnation: 'Christ coming into this world in the midst of His people' ("horizontal"; Christ's Immanence).

<sup>3</sup> The symbol *par excellence* of Christianity is the Cross; however, the rite of crucifixion as such was not bestowed on humanity by Christ, who instead accepted this on their behalf. Some Christian communities do practice a rite of crucifixion, but here it is the case that the act is a symbolic exemplar rather than the popular norm.

To participate in the Eucharist is to participate in the cosmogony. Not simply to re-enact the cosmological drama but to enter into the eternal Now, *in illo tempore*, where creation is once and for all time made “new”: ‘Look, I am making the whole of creation new’ (Rev.21:5).<sup>4</sup> It is in this way that the Eucharist has the virtue of rendering the communicant “free from sin”—in the sense that liturgical absolution is integral to the Eucharistic rite—for the Now is precisely the “time before the Fall.” Here the word “time” alludes to the principle of Time unaffected itself by the temporal condition; the word “before” is thus intended in the sense of a logical rather than a temporal priority. To talk of “the Fall” is effectively to recognise a movement—symbolically “downward”—from potentiality to actuality, a qualification intended to guard against purely moralistic readings of the Fall, without denying this as an element of this symbolism. Inasmuch as the rite of communion is a “re-enactment” it is a participation in the “Eternal Return,” a return to the Centre from which one has never left. In reality the distinction between the Centre and the spatio-temporal flux of the circumference is only legitimate from the perspective of the circumference and then only as the “illusion” engendered by the “distinction” prefigured *in divinitis* by the differentiation between the Absolute as such and the Absolute relativised in view of a dimension of its Infinity.<sup>5</sup>



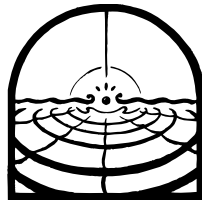
Generally speaking there is a cosmogonic symbolism in which “water” expresses the passive Substance and “fire,” or “a spark,” the active Essence.<sup>6</sup> The symbolism of water suggests undifferentiation, formlessness, potentiality, and unity through non-distinction. Cosmologically speaking, the “Waters” are Substance: the primordial Chaos, the Babylonian *apsu*, Hebraic *tehom*, Hindu *ap*, etc. Substance, according to Adrian Snodgrass, is “the primordial *sub-stratum* which “stands below” (Lat. *sub-stare*) and supports all existences, primordial Nature, the plastic, wholly passive and

<sup>4</sup> This is the “standing Now” (*nunc stans*) which makes Eternity, rather than the “passing Now” (*nunc fluens*), which makes time (Boethius, *De Consol.* 5.6). As Meister Eckhart says, “The *now* wherein God mad the first man, and the *now* wherein the last man disappears and the *now* I speak in, all are the same in God where time is but the *now*...” (l.37, 41-42).

<sup>5</sup> See F. Schuon, *In The Face of the Absolute*, 1989, p.73.

<sup>6</sup> The terms Essence and Substance correspond respectively and *mutatis mundis* to the “heaven” and “earth” of *Genesis* 1:1; again, *Purusha* and *Prakrti* of Hindu tradition, *T’ien* and *Ti* (Heaven and Earth) of Taoist tradition, etc.

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



# SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

[www.sacredweb.com](http://www.sacredweb.com)