

# Symbolism as marriage and the symbolism of marriage

Tom Bree

## When Face Looks Upon Face

The process of “development” might be described as a movement from Essence towards Substance—from that which is qualitative towards that which is quantitative. Humanity’s knowledge of its origin and destiny has thus “developed” so that it might be said that it has become more outwardly orientated as time goes on. This seems particularly so within the sciences. In past times science looked inwards, viewing the universe in terms of Divine causes and numinous Mystery; modern science turns its gaze outwards seeking empirical data.

The science of symbolism relies upon a balance of quality and quantity—of inwardness and outwardness; more to the point, it relies upon a recognition of their interdependence. The word “symbol” literally means “to throw together”; the opposite of “symbolic” is “diabolic,” which means “to throw apart.” The recognition of a symbol relies upon our capacity to *marry* together, and thus unify, an inner essential Idea with its outward, substantial and manifested counterpart.

Modern man appears almost ignorant of the traditional language of symbolism. Certain symbols, such as the cross in Christianity for example, are said to have become “exhausted.” There is talk of the need to replace traditional symbols with new symbols. Though it may be true to say that the language of symbolism is in urgent need of resuscitation, it misses the point to suggest that particular symbols should be discarded due to having become “exhausted.” It is not symbols that have become exhausted, rather our capacity to perceive and “know” their numinous quality. A true symbol participates in the Eternal and is thus eternal. It is the “lunacy”<sup>1</sup> of the human condition, a condition that is subject to a perpetual waxing and waning in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> This word was coined as it was felt that the word “lunacy” has too many associations with mental ill health.

our capacity to know the Real, which leads to our exhaustion. Thus, while one era of humanity will see the Divine Image in everything, another will embrace the purely outward forms of Idolatry.

Humanity's "solar" potential, on the other hand, illuminates the whole world around us, revealing everything that is hidden. Face forever looks upon face because the sun always sees a full moon. The sun sees everything in full illumination because it is the "Illuminator" and whosoever the sun may behold with its auroral gaze, its light will be returned back, with love, from a fully illuminated face. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Icon painting tradition, the faces of Biblical heroes are depicted front on where both eyes can be seen by "us" the viewer; in contrast Christ's enemies are depicted in profile, in which only one of their eyes is visible. When we see the full face (or the fully illuminated moon) we are in the "solar" line of view whereas when we see a profile view of the face (a waxing or waning half moon) we have left that solar line of view and have entered into the vicissitudes of lunality. That which was unchanging and "whole" has fallen into the perpetually changing world of highs and lows, ups and downs and stops and starts. The perfect unity of the circular full moon has been ruptured and thus that which was symbolic has become diabolic.



In the current era of humanity, characterised by an excessive emphasis upon materiality, there is blindness to the profound language of symbolism. The phenomena of the world have become for us, as it were, "opaque Idols" rather than "transparent Icons."<sup>2</sup> We see veiled mirrors that condemn us to a blindness that means that face is utterly unable to look upon the face that "Is" before it. It seems tragically inevitable that the overly exoteric world-view associated with Islamic Wahabism seems to show itself all too clearly in the excessive degree of face covering worn by the women who follow this ultra-modern form of Islam.

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of "opaque idols and transparent icons" is written about by Henri Corbin; see 'Theophanies and Mirrors: Idols or Icons?', tr. Pratt & Donohue, *Spring Journal*, Spring 1983, pp.1-22 (*La philosophie Iranienne Islamique aux XVIIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, p.364).



'Deposition of Christ' (The *Kwer ata re'esu*), 17<sup>th</sup> century.  
Full moon flanked by waxing and waning half moons?

In contrast, the mystical traditions of Middle Eastern monotheism often use the face as a symbol of the Divine. In Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi's book about Kabbalah he writes,

The oral tradition of Kabbalah states that the reason for existence is that "God wished to behold God" thus there was a previous non-existence in which, as the written tradition says, "Face did not gaze upon Face."<sup>3</sup>

The Sufis of Islam use the Arabic word for "face" (*Wajh*) as a name for the Divine Essence—which is feminine—and, as Frithjof Schuon points out in his essay 'The Mystery Of The Veil,' this use of the word *Wajh* for the Divine Essence, '... at first sight seems paradoxical but becomes comprehensible through the symbol of veiling'.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity, perhaps inevitably, puts the greatest emphasis upon the "Face of the Divine" due to it being a religion of Incarnation. The Icon painting tradition and, more generally, the emphasis upon figurative art brings to the fore the Christian belief in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the Divine Word and Christians are encouraged to recognise the face of Christ within their fellow human being. In Matthew's Gospel there is the essential saying attributed to Christ, 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren you do it unto me' (25:40).

It is with ideas such as these in mind that this writer takes an interest in the symbolism of the western Christian wedding and particularly of the wedding veil as well as the face which it covers.



The wedding veil has, in more recent times, come to be viewed, through sociological eyes, as an item of clothing that controls or dominates women, making them into the property of men; this has, in turn, led to the wedding veil becoming an item of apparel that many brides will wear "open" as opposed to down over their face, where this is seen as a symbolic act of liberation from male oppression.

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<sup>3</sup> Z. b. S. Halevi, *Kabbalah: Tradition of hidden knowledge*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1979, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> F. Schuon, *Esotericism as Principle and Way*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, p.47, n.35.

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Such an anti-symbolic reading of the veil is perhaps inevitable when we consider the intellectual poverty that characterises the current era. This is not to say that symbols don't become corrupted overtime within the perceptions of humanity, and that the wedding veil isn't one such example; but to only see a symbol in its corrupted form means that we are not allowing it to be reborn anew in our understanding and thus, in turn, we become partly responsible for it remaining in its corrupted state. The idea that what lies behind the veil is "property" of any sort or under the dominion of a particular section of humanity is a corruption of the highest order, but how are we to possibly relate to the inner world of "meaning" when we are constantly encouraged to deny its very being?

That which lies behind the veil is, in symbolic terms, the hidden "inner world." There is an unfortunate irony that when many brides wear an open veil it is not because the inner world has, as it were "become revealed" or, so to speak, liberated. Rather it seems more the case that the inner world has become subsumed by the outer world which, in terms of geometric symbolism, is much like saying that it is possible to have a circumference without first having a centre.

Certain forms of feminism have done a great deal of good in areas such as reminding us of the essential nature of the Divine Feminine and highlighting the brilliance of women such as Hildegard of Bingen as well as some of the social changes that they have brought infusing modern culture with a much needed breath of fresh air. But feminism, like anything else, collapses when it loses touch with its own archetype which in terms of feminism is surely 'An attempt to bring about a rebalancing of opposites so that they can then enter into harmonious union.'<sup>5</sup>

The principle of the harmony of opposites is one of the most fundamental within all spirituality. One of the many ways in which this union shows itself is within the western Christian wedding ceremony. The wedding ceremony, in one sense, marks the earthly legal union of two individuals; in a higher sense the ceremony could be looked upon as a form of sacramental mystery play in which the Divine and the human join together as one. Here we are talking about something that is not, as

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<sup>5</sup> An active encouragement towards being in a perpetual state of antagonistic opposition, power struggle and conflict is surely a classic example of "fallen" feminism.

it were, dependent upon the presence of the two particular individuals who are involved in the rite, for they are actors who are playing archetypal roles within a heavenly drama.

Similarly, when we bow at a monarch it is not specifically the individual to whom we bow. No doubt their presence before us is beneficial but ultimately we are bowing at the principle of “monarchy” and it is this monarchic principle that the individual embodies. This is an important distinction to recognise and it is the reason why when a particular monarch passes away the monarchic principle does not pass away with them, it simply passes over to the next living human who is in line to the throne. ‘The King is dead, long live the King!’

The higher meaning contained within the wedding ceremony is not dependent upon the two particular individuals who are getting married. There obviously needs to be a bride and a groom for there to be a wedding but this same “mystery play” is repeated over and over again week after week with new couples playing the appropriate roles within the ritual.

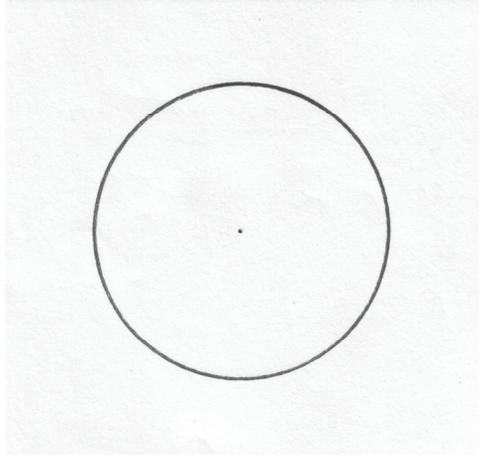
There is a Chinese saying which says, ‘The village comes and goes but the well is forever there.’ If the well, from which we draw up life giving water, is like the principle of wedded union or monarchy, in the sense of it being a thing that is drawn upon generation after generation, then the villages around the well that “come and go” are the particular human beings who play the roles of bride and groom or monarch for a certain period of time before someone else takes their place to draw up the well’s life giving water that feeds both body and soul.

### **The Geometry of Marriage**

A veil is something that demarcates two areas, one “behind” the veil and thus hidden, the other before it, making it visible and within “this world.” On the one hand we have a sense of “two-ness” by virtue of the two areas; on the other hand we have a “three-ness” because the veil is, as it were, the mediating relationship between the two areas. It is the form that gives identity to these two areas through defining their limits and by obscuring one area and not the other.

A similar principle can be seen within geometric symbolism. The first principle of geometry is the hidden “point” of unity. If we think of this point as expanding outwards in all directions (on a two dimensional plane) we then obtain a circumference which, if taken in its entirety,

can be viewed as a visible outward reflection of the unity of the original point. Through this we have a polarised two-ness in terms of there being a hidden centre and a manifest circumference but in reality we are, again, looking at three-ness because the moment that we have a circumference we have a radius or radial measurement, the distance (or relationship) between the centre and the circumference.

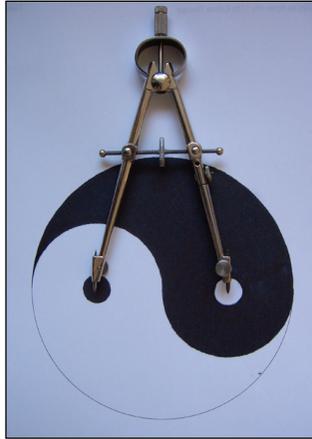


Prior to the emergence of the veil or radius, there was unity—then when the veil/radius came into being it brought about a two-ness due to it causing the division of the original Unity into “hidden being” and “revealed form”; along with this two-ness we see the third aspect in the veil/radius itself which brought the two-ness into being but which is also their unifying principle. In the words of Hildegard of Bingen, ‘The Holy Spirit produces Eternity and Identity, and then joins them so that they are one’<sup>6</sup>

A similar principle can be seen within the *taijitu* of Toaist tradition, the well known image of yin and yang, united in the circle that results from their togetherness. Also of interest here is the fact that the distance between the eyes of yin and yang is the same length measurement as the radial measurement of the circle that embodies their union so again here we see the radial measurement as embodying the relationship between the two polar opposites.

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<sup>6</sup> Hildegard, Letter to Eberhard II, Bishop of Bamberg 1163-64.



A kindred geometric form that shares some of the characteristics of the *taijitu* is the hexagram. In the monotheistic tradition it is most commonly known as the Star of David or the Seal of Solomon, in the Hindu tradition, the Satkona Yantra or *satkoan*. It consists of two overlaid and opposed equilateral triangles—one pointing upwards and the other downwards.



The geometric form of the Star of David, Seal of Solomon, Satkona Yantra, *satkoan*.

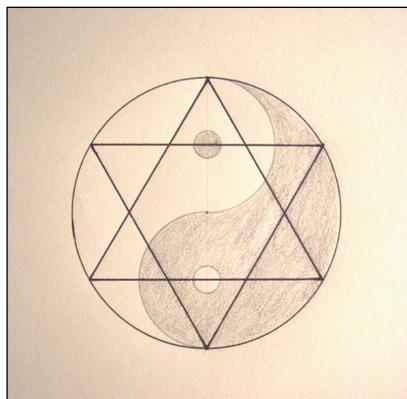
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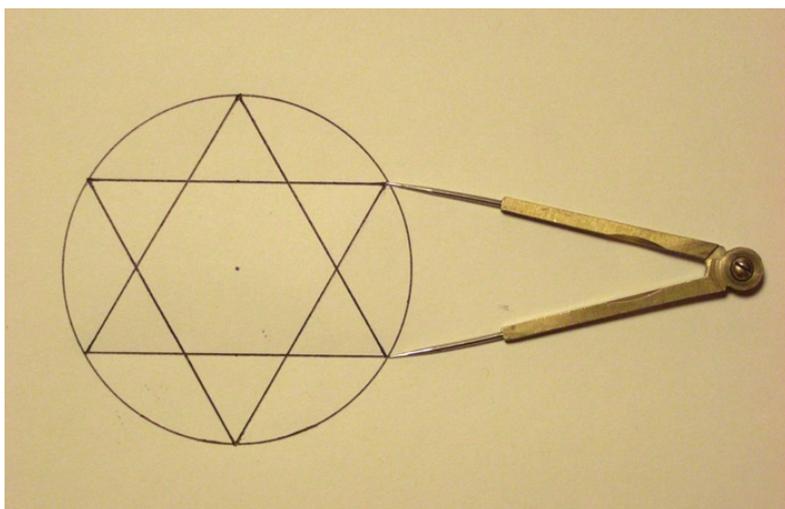
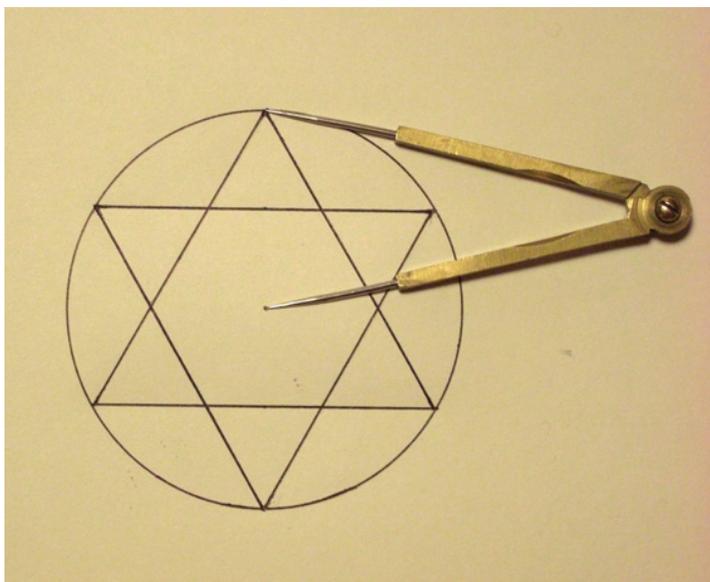
Like the *taijitu* the hexagram consists of the same shape repeated twice but with one of them rotationally inverted in relation to the other. The product of the triangle's union (i.e. their area of overlap) is the hexagon which is, in a certain sense, the “rectilinear representative” of the circle by virtue of the fact that its edge length is exactly the same as the radial measurement of the circle that contains it and in this way it is the first polygon to come forth from the circle.

Again the radial measurement of the circle that contains the hexagram can be seen within the relationship between these two opposed triangles. The inversion of one triangle in relation to the other requires a rotation of sixty degrees which is the equivalent of one radius in rectilinear terms.

Though if the symbolism of polar opposition is to be applied rigorously—in the sense of us looking at the two triangles as being diametrically opposed in their orientation—we would then say that the rotation in question is actually one hundred and eighty degrees which is the equivalent of three radii.

If the *taijitu* is drawn within the same circle as the hexagram, an interesting relationship becomes apparent via the hexagon that is at the centre of the hexagram. The halfway points along the top and bottom edges of this hexagon (effectively the hexagon's head and feet) coincide with the position of the yin/yang eyes and thus the distance between the hexagon's “head” and “feet” also measures one radius. It is also clear to see that the central point of the circle is the pivot around which the rotational inversion occurs between both yin and yang as well as the two triangles.



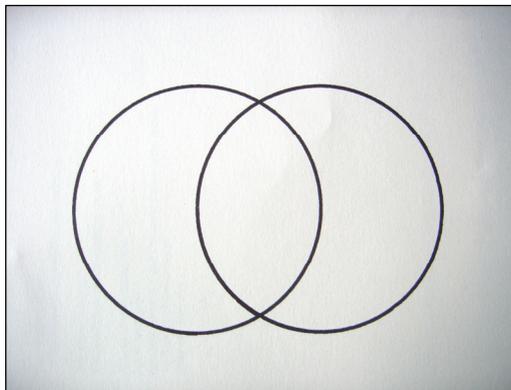


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The two triangles of the hexagram express polarity through their opposing orientations. Within sacred art this polarity may also be shown through the colour or shading, of the triangles, as it is shown in the yin and yang. In the example (below)—a stained glass window from Wells Cathedral—the light triangle ascends, while the dark triangle descends.



Yet another geometric form of significance here is the one that is known as the *Vesica Pisces* or the Mandorla, as well as a whole host of other names. It is a particularly important form within Christian geometry and can be seen regularly within Christian art forms, particularly ones that date back to medieval European Christendom. The form in question consists of two overlaid circles that are the same size and whose centres both coincide with a particular point on each others circumference.



This form is a quintessential geometric expression of two-ness plus its unifying relationship as seen in terms of the two circles plus their area of overlap. This overlap creates an almond shape, hence the name mandorla, which is the Italian word for “almond.” The two circles symbolically represent polar opposites such as the “inner” and the “outer,” God and Man, Heaven and Earth or the sun and the moon (in the sense of “illuminator” and “illuminated,” or the Eternal and the changeable). The area of overlap is the relationship between these two opposites and thus is, again, a third aspect which unifies them as well as acting as a doorway between them. In medieval Christian architecture this form is often seen above a doorway or even as a doorway (whereby the doorway’s arch is derived from the top half of a *vesica*).

As we walk through this doorway we move from the mundane outer world through to the inner world of prayer. In Christian iconography Christ will often be depicted within the *vesica* form; thus in St John’s Gospel Jesus says, ‘I am the door: by me if any man enter in he shall be saved’ (10:9).

The “inner” and the “outer” can also be seen in terms of an actual almond itself which consists of a hard outer shell as well as a soft, hidden inner kernel and so it incorporates the two polar opposites within itself by embodying their relationship.<sup>7</sup> Yet again the radial measurement of the circles that are involved here is particularly apparent within this “relational” third aspect that is the *vesica*.

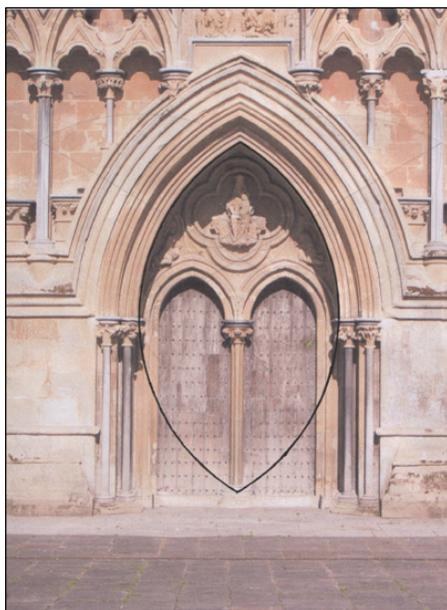
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<sup>7</sup> The veil and the radius also “embody” this dual unity. A veil has two faces, one that can be seen and one on the other side of it that is hidden from the “outward” eye. The radius presents us with an intriguing dual union in the sense of it being both manifest and unmanifest at the same time thus expressing the “hidden-ness” of the centre as well as the “embodied” nature of the circumference (the two of which it runs between and thus unites). The radius is dyadic in the sense of it being a one dimensional line that runs between two points. A dyad will sometimes be described as “the flowing of the point.” If the monad is an unmanifest point then the first dimension, in terms of space, sees the flowing of this point in one direction which creates a line though it is a line that could be described as being indefinitely thin because, being one dimensional, it has no breadth or depth. So it is effectively an invisible line though the fact that the point has moved into the first dimension means that it has become manifest. In this way it is both hidden and revealed at the same time. In Proclus’ commentary on Euclid’s Elements it states, ‘He taught us what the point is through negations only, since it is the principle of all magnitudes; but the line he explains partly by affirmation and partly by negation. The line is length, and in this respect it goes beyond the undividedness of the point; yet it is without breadth, since it is devoid of the other dimensions’ (*Proclus: A Commentary on the first book of Euclid’s Elements*, tr. G. Morrow, New Jersey: Princeton, 1992, p.79).

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The central bay of the Royal Portal of Chartres Cathedral in France



The Vesica drawn onto a photo of the west door of Wells Cathedral

The two overlaid circles provide us with four focal points, firstly the two centres of the two circles (which in the most direct sense are the two opposite poles) and secondarily the two intersections of their two circumferences and these four points could be looked upon as the four extremities of the *vesica*. If we first look at the relationship between the two centres of the circles we see straight away that their proximity is equal to the radial measurement of either circle. If we now consider all four focal points and use them to draw a rhombic (diamond shaped) polygon within the *vesica* we find that all four edges of this polygon are equal in length to the radial measurement of either circle. It is only when we look at the distance between the two intersections that we find something new—a square root of three measurement in relation to the radius—and this is the first dyadic proportional relationship within Euclidian geometry. Despite this departure from the radial measurement, the fact that it is a “proportional relationship” means that the very being of this root three measurement depends upon the existence of the radial measurement, which it is a root three “in relation to” so even here the radial measurement is key.

If the two circles that form the *vesica* are arranged so that one is above and the other one below, the *vesica* then takes on the resemblance of an eye which brings to mind the words of Meister Eckhart, ‘The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which God sees me.’ Eyes, like windows, are doorways through which we can see from the inside to the outside or vice versa. As well as looking outwards toward the outer world, the eyes—which are known as the windows to the soul—are the organs through which we look “inwards.” Though having said this, the one part of ourselves that we definitely cannot see is our own eyes unless we look in a mirror and then we can behold them. Thus it is the case that we need outward forms through which it becomes possible for us to look inwards. We will return to the mirror later on.



As well as being an item of clothing worn by humans, various other versions of the veil can also be seen in religious sanctuaries in the form of something that covers a sacred object or sacred space. In Orthodox Christian churches there is the Iconostasis, the Icon covered screen that

stands between the Nave and the Sanctuary. Older European churches have a similar, though usually more transparent, screen called a Rood Screen.

The “stasis” of Iconostasis means “a standing still,” which perfectly describes the appearance of the object in question but this stationary verticality also speaks of the vertical nature of the relationship that there is between the two areas—one before the screen (the Nave) and one behind it (the Sanctuary). These two areas have a horizontal relationship within three dimensional space; however, in terms of what they represent there is a strict vertical hierarchy in which what is beyond the screen is higher than that which is before it. A movement from the Nave to the Sanctuary is, in symbolic terms, one of ascension even if the actual physical movement in question is a horizontal one.

The word “rood” derives from the old English word “rod” which means “pole.” Rood also means “cross” and the Rood screen is always adorned with a crucifix, hence the reason for it being called a Rood Screen. With the cross we again have here an image of vertical ascension—from the grave of Adam at Golgotha rising to Christ enthroned in Heaven.

In the Gospel of Matthew the vertical “way of the Cross” is inversely answered by the rending of the veil of the Temple. This “revelation from above” reveals the Holy of Holies which, in turn, reveals to the Centurion the true nature of Christ’s identity.

The word “reveal” is most appropriate for what is being talked about here due to its etymology connecting it with the word “veil.” The “re” of reveal means “opposite of” and then “veal” is derived from the word *velare*, meaning “to cover or veil,” which in turn comes from *velum* meaning, “sail.” So to reveal is effectively to “unveil.”

### **The Mystical Marriage at the End of Time**

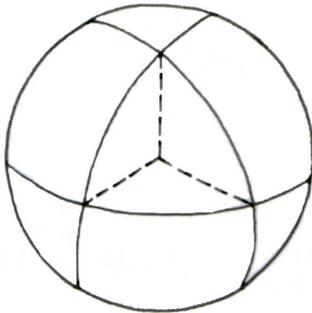
The joining together of the Bride and the Groom in the marriage ceremony can be looked upon as a “Mystical Marriage” in which humanity joins together with the Divine. In the Jewish tradition, Israel is described as being the Bride of God. This follows through into Christianity where the Church is described as the Bride of Christ. The Church is betrothed to Christ and the final union will take place at the end of time. In the meantime the Church aspires to “be true” to Christ, which is what the word “betroth” means. In the Book of Revelation the

Heavenly Jerusalem is described as being dressed ‘as a bride adorned for her husband’ (21:2). It is also described as being cubic (21:16), which, within geometric symbolism, relates to the end of a cycle that started with the sphere. According to René Guénon,

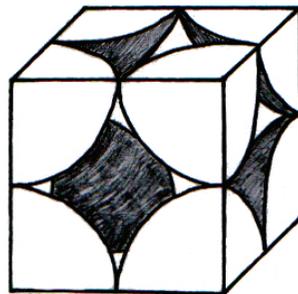
...the cube is opposed to the sphere as being the most ‘arrested’ form of all, if it can be so expressed; this means that it corresponds to a maximum of ‘specification’. The cube is also the form that is related to the earth as one of the elements, inasmuch as the earth is the ‘terminating and final element’ of manifestation in the corporeal state; and consequently it corresponds also to the end of a cycle of manifestation, or to what has been called the ‘stopping point’ of the cyclical movement.<sup>8</sup>

The sphere and the cube can also be looked upon as opposites via their inverse relationship whereby they are the two opposing poles of three dimensionality itself.

If a sphere is cut along three of its circular planes or more specifically the three circular planes whose intersections mark the axial coordinates of three dimensional space (length, breadth and depth), we end up with eight identical sections of sphere. If each of these sections is then inverted, effectively turning the sphere inside out, we end up with a cube.



Sphere divided into  
8 equal sections.



The 8 sections turned inside out  
to form a cube.

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<sup>8</sup> R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, tr. Lord Northbourne, Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001, p.138; see ch.20: ‘From Sphere to Cube.’

The eight corners or extremities of the cube were all united and hidden in the central point of the sphere at the beginning of the process; they become the points that are most far removed from the centre when they inverted to create the cube. This inverse relationship has, as its intermediary, the very coordinates of three dimensional space itself, which is sometimes referred to as the “six armed three dimensional cross.” So the process begins with that which is most internalised and then moves into, and through, this manifested world of three dimensionality until it terminates in the form of a cube, which embodies that which is most externalised—the New Jerusalem dressed “as a Bride adorned for her husband.”<sup>9</sup>

This union at the end of time brings to mind the “Wedding Night” (*Sheb-i Arus*) of the great Muslim mystic Rumi, who often spoke of God as his Lover. Rumi’s “wedding night” is the night on which he passed on from this world; thus as the sun sets in the West and becomes reunited with its own principle in the hidden world beyond the horizon, so the great mystic finally became fully united with his Love at the end of his time in this world. The image of a couple walking into the sunset is surely an expression of this reunion on the western horizon even though it is generally only viewed in a rather sentimental way in the current era.

The sun rising in the West, on the other hand, is an idea that is found within Islam as well as in Plato’s writings,<sup>10</sup> and is also associated with “end times.” At the end of the cycle everything becomes inverted, much like the inversion of sphere into cube, and one expression of this inversion is the sun rising in the west rather than in the east.

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<sup>9</sup> Another “veiled bride” that is associated with the cube can be found within the Jewish tradition. The Shekhinah is the Divine presence that dwells within the cubic Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon and is known as the “Bride of the Sabbath”: ‘I can descend and restrict My Shekhinah within a square cubit’ (*Exodus Rabba* 34.1). The Sabbath, as the seventh day, is also associated with the centre of the “six armed three dimensional cross” as the seventh “direction” from which the six arms (or directions) emanate. This Holy Palace, as it is known, is the dwelling place of the Shekhinah and is the centre or interior of the cubic form whose six faces are orientated towards the six directions of three dimensional space—forwards and backwards—(length), left and right—(breadth) and up and down—(depth): ‘The house ascends and takes up its position, and joins itself to both realms ... and the house shines with six lights that cast radiance on every side’ (*Zohar* I, 172a-172b).

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Politicus* (Statesman), 269A.

It is here, with the sun's appearance in the West, that we begin with the Christian wedding ceremony and the appearance of the bride at the west door of the church—thinly veiled light that she is. She moves eastwards through the church, slowly moving towards the groom who, unlike her, is standing still at the altar.

One of the most popular Bible readings within the modern western Christian wedding is chapter 13 of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. It speaks in beautiful terms of the significance and importance of "Love" over all else. Towards the end of the chapter St Paul speaks of a future time of perfection, which we have a sense of now but have not yet fully realised: 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully even as I am known'. This image of a partially obscured mirror that will one day become clear so that face can look upon face is also described in Sufi ideas. In her book about Sufism, Laleh Bakhtiar speaks of the unpolished mirror,

Before the creation of human beings, the universe had been brought into being but it was unpolished, unreflective and unconscious of the Divine presence...the mystic aspires to become this reflective mirror...the Sufi thus becomes the instrument by which the Divine can have vision of self in another form. The mystic, empty of self, then has the capacity to reflect the Divine to the Divine. The mystic has been unveiled so that light comes to reflect light...<sup>11</sup>

This mirror is none other than the moon which receives and returns the light of the sun and this brings us back to where we started with the "lunacy" of the human condition. The unpolished or veiled mirror is the partially illuminated, waxing or waning moon or St Paul's description of "knowing in part" or "seeing a poor reflection" whereas the polished mirror is where we "see face to face" for the mirror's veil has been removed. It is where we "know as we are known" for it is where we view the moon from the position of the sun and thus see a fully illuminated circular form of light that returns our loving gaze.

In Rumi's epic poem *Masnavi*, there are the following few lines that speak of the glories of this world. It finishes with something that sounds

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<sup>11</sup> L. Bakhtiar, *Sufi Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, p.15.

remarkably similar to the end of chapter 13 of St Paul's Letter to the Corinthians.

I am ever in concord with this father of ours,  
And Earth ever appears to me as a paradise.  
Each moment a flesh form, a new beauty,  
So that weariness vanishes at these ever fresh sights.  
I see the world filled with blessings,  
Fresh waters ever welling up from new fountains.  
The sound of those waters reaches my ears,  
My brain and senses are intoxicated therewith.  
Branches of trees dancing like fair damsels,  
Leaves clapping hands like singers.  
These glories are a mirror shining through a veil;  
If the mirror were unveiled, how would it be?<sup>12</sup>

A mirror shows an inverted image of that which is before it and thus if the bride is a 'mirror that is shining through a veil', this light that we see before us—this light that is the sun rising in the West at the end of time—is nothing but a reflection of the sun rising in the East at the dawn of time. When the bride enters the church from the West, Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, simultaneously enters the church from the East with a procession of divine light that would surely blind all of those present were they not looking westwards towards Her veiled reflection. These equinoctial twins of East and West—they who are the duality of the Tree of Knowledge—slowly move closer to the stationary solstitial groom—the Tree of Life in whose unity they will join together as one at the midpoint of the day; Aurora, the one who will "crown" him and the bride, the one who will enthrone him. The beginning looks to the end, the end back to the beginning. The groom awaits their arrival as they slowly move closer towards him. Finally the bride and the groom are standing side by side and the ceremony is ready to begin.



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<sup>12</sup> Meulana Jalalu-'d-din Muhammad Rumi, *Masnavi I Ma'navi*, tr. E H Whinfield, 1898, Book 4, Story 8.

When the sun is in the East or the West it casts shadows but when the East and the West meet at midday—the point of the day at which the sun is at the zenith of Heaven directly overhead—there are no shadows, just pure light.

The Kaaba (or “cube”) in Mecca becomes shadowless at the mid-point of the day just before and after the northern hemisphere summer solstice. Mecca is just a couple of degrees south of the tropic of Cancer—the part of planet earth that is closest to the sun on the northern hemisphere summer solstice. Depending upon which part of the tropics one is in, and on which particular day of the year that one views it, it is possible to see the sun rising perpendicular in relation to the horizon and then rising upwards to the very centre of the sky directly overhead for pure local midday. It is the sun reaching its peak in the sky that actually defines this mid-point of the day when for a fleeting moment the sun leaves the eastern side of the sky but has not yet entered into the western side of the sky and at this moment of “coronation” all the shadows disappear. The eastern sun—the one that casts shadows westwards—becomes wedded to the western sun—the one that casts shadows eastwards—and together in union their conjoined light shines vertically downwards from Heaven to earth. This can be seen if one is standing on the tropic of Cancer on the summer solstice and thus at Mecca just before and after the solstice. The Kaaba, which is a pre-Islamic building, also has one of its faces orientated towards the summer solstice sunrise.

The word “solstice” literally means “The sun standing still.” This image of the sun standing still directly overhead speaks again of a “stationary verticality,” which in this case is between the sun shining and crowning us from above, and the earth below our feet that receives the sun’s ontological path of light—a shadowless light whose omniscience shows itself in the fact that there is nothing that is hidden from it. Shadows are areas that are hidden (or veiled) from a light source but this moment of no shadows is one of complete revelation where the heavenly face gazes downwards at a fully illuminated and unveiled earthly face “and it is light upon light.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, midday on the

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<sup>13</sup> See H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, tr. N. Pearson, New York: Omega Publications, 1994, pp.68-73; see ch. 4: *Visio Smaragdina*, sect. 4: ‘Like with Like’.

summer solstice is a moment of blissful matrimony when the two join together as one.



The bride and the groom are now standing together in front of the religious minister, officiator of the ceremony. This religious figure is the third aspect or unifying principle within the wedding ceremony. The minister embodies the oneness that brings the bride and groom together into their unified oneness.

It is traditional for the father of the bride to bring her to the altar and to then “give her away.” When this happens the bride is not given straight to the groom, she is given to the minister who then, as it were, passes her on to the groom so again we see the religious minister as the intermediary between the two opposite halves of this union.

The point at which the bride’s veil is raised differs from one rite to another. Sometimes it will be raised once the bride has reached the altar—the holy inner abode where nothing remains hidden. It may be raised immediately before the vows so that the vows can be spoken face to face without there being any barrier between them. It may also be raised after the vows so as to actualise the union that has now taken place by removing the barrier which had been obscuring the face.

The vows are spoken by both the bride and the groom but it is the groom who speaks his vows first followed then by the bride. In this way the sun shines its light outwards and the moon then returns it. But having said this, when the groom speaks first he speaks on behalf of the whole of humanity and requests entry to the inner sanctum—that which lies beyond the veil—and to knock on the door is essential if one wants the door to be opened. By reciprocating the spoken vows the bride opens the door and effectively gives permission to the groom for union to take place. In this way we see an inversion of hierarchy whereby, on the one hand, the groom, as the sun, is primary whereas the bride, as the moon, is secondary, but on the other hand the bride is the hidden inner world behind the veil—that with whom humanity longs to become reunited and there is no question that the Divine Essence is greater than man. So within this “reunion,” both the bride and the groom embody the Divine and the human at the same time in relation to each other.

At this point there is the exchanging of wedding rings. A temporal symbolism that is associated with the wedding ring is the eternity of a never ending circle, in the sense of an unending movement around its circumference, and this relates to the eternal nature of marriage but, along with this, the fact that the circle has one centre that is outwardly reflected by its circumference means that the wedding ring is also symbolising unity—the place where time stands still and where all dualities are resolved.

The wedding ring differs from the engagement ring in the fact that it is, as it were, “equal in all directions.” The engagement ring has a precious stone at what might be looked upon as its “zenith” and so this brings an element of hierarchy into the circumference of the engagement ring. By hierarchy it is meant that there is one point on its circumference that is more distinguished than all the others. A helpful symbolism here can be seen within the sun’s daily arc through the sky. The sun rises from the East, higher and higher, until it briefly stops at the zenith of its circular path. From then onwards it begins to descend westwards. Within this transitional point, where the sun is stationary at the top of Heaven, we are able to see a particular point in its circular path that stands out from all the others. In this way the focal point of the engagement ring is the diamond at the zenith of its circumference; henceforth, this circumference has a top and a bottom and so thus its expression of hierarchy is a vertical one.

On the other hand, within the wedding ring, we see equality in all directions. There is no particular point on the circumference of the wedding ring that is anymore distinguished than any other and so the focal point in terms of the wedding ring is the central point in the middle of the ring—a point in space which is effectively within the actual ring finger of the ring wearer—and thus hierarchy is expressed here via inwardness towards a centre.

We can see this principle within a *vesica* shaped door handle from the Vicars Hall in Wells Cathedral. If the lower circle is the engagement ring and the upper circle the wedding ring, it is the axis of the door lock—the form whose turning allows the door to open—that is the focal point of both of the circles. This cubic shaped form that marks the visible end of the lock’s axis is at the zenith of the lower circle and it is the one point of the lower circle that remains stationary. It is the diamond of the engagement ring and its focal point. This same cubic

form, however, is at the centre, or the heart, of the upper circle of wedded union. If the transition from engagement to marriage can be expressed as a movement from the centre of the lower circle to the centre of the upper circle, we are able to see an upward and an inward movement occurring simultaneously. From the perspective of the lower circle there is a movement from its centre up to its zenith whereas with the upper circle we see a movement from its circumference inwards to its centre.



An important point to make in relation to all of this is that the two focal points in question are the same thing being viewed from two different directions. When we see the focal point as being at the top of a vertical hierarchy we are looking at the “holy mountain” from a terrestrial viewpoint, in the sense of viewing it along the horizontal axis whereby we can see the bottom of the mountain (that begins from the earthly plane where we are standing) as well as its peak above us.

When, on the other hand, we see the focal point as being at the centre of a circle we are viewing that same mountain along the vertical axis from directly overhead of the mountain so that the peak of the

mountain is the centre of the circle whereas the base of the mountain is the circumference.

In this way the engagement ring is something that relates to the outwardness of this world “down here”—the circumference that is the base of the mountain—and indeed the focal point of the engagement ring, the diamond, is on the circumference of that ring for all to see. The engagement ring relates to our life in “this world” where we are betrothed to Christ.

The wedding ring, on the other hand, relates to the finality of union and is thus pointing towards the inwardness of the other world “up above” and henceforth the focal point of the wedding ring is within the ring finger itself, where there is traditionally believed to be a vein that leads straight to the heart, the “centre” of the body and symbolically the centre of all being.

In some Christian denominations the religious minister wears a long scarf called a “stole” and at this point it will be used as a symbol of unification, again expressing the minister’s intermediary role within the wedding. The bride and groom, who are holding each others right hands, have the stole wrapped around these hands and the minister then quotes verse 6 of chapter 19 of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says ‘What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder’.

Another very beautiful ritual is the lighting of candles. There are three candles standing in a line with the central candle raised up above the other two. For the duration of most of the ceremony the two side candles are alight whereas the central candle is not. At an appropriate point in the ceremony, the bride and groom go over to the candles with the bride standing on one side of them and the groom on the other. The bride and groom then use tapers to take a flame from the particular side candle that is next to each one of them and they then bring the two flames together as “one” to light the central candle. After this has happened the two side candles are sometimes blown out. The symbolism here is obvious and only goes to emphasise yet again that the wedding ritual expresses “three-ness” in terms of the bride, the groom and their union.

By this point in the ceremony the veil has been lifted—face now looks upon face—but the final moment of union takes place as the two faces come together to join as one for a final cleaving kiss. After this

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kiss, husband and wife walk westwards down the aisle towards the place of the setting sun.



*Creation is allowed in intimate love to speak to the creator as if a lover. As the Creator loves the creation, so the creation loves the Creator. The whole world has been embraced by this kiss (Hildegard of Bingen).*

### **Final Word**

To understand the language of symbolism relies upon an equal balance of inwardness and outwardness, or more to the point, a recognition of their interdependence as a dual unity. With this idea in mind, it is only when the inner face opens its eyes, and thus shines its light outwards, that the outer face becomes illuminated and henceforth unveiled. But this revelation of divine light is nothing but an inverted mirror reflection of the inner face that gazes outwards—towards the outer face that gazes inwards—and it is in this loving gaze that the Knower and the Known join as one in a blissful marriage of Knowing.