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Symbolic Codes and Cultural Identity Frames

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Dan Chițoiu & Corina Domnari

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EDITORIAL

Symbolic Codes as Cultural Identity Frames

Dan Chițoiu, Corina Domnari

The contours of cultural identity can take various forms, but mainly through the persistence of symbolic codes, of patterns constantly present in the various manifestations of cultural identity. When expressing key aspects of an identity mark, cultural codes appear in different contexts and on different material supports but can always be recognized as such. To express the essence of cultural identity, a symbolic code must fulfill several prerequisites, such as the possibility of reproducing it easily and in a recognizable way, its simplicity, its ability to express something essential synthetically, its imposition in different historical periods, its impact on the collective consciousness. A symbolic code is expressed on material support, and it is obvious that a certain cultural tradition prefers certain material supports in the establishment of symbolic codes, which says a lot about the particularities of that cultural horizon. A symbolic code synthesizes and condenses in a synthetic way and with maximum simplicity an entire evolution of how reality has been represented, be it the universe, man, or community. Thus, a symbolic code can be described as a kind of "hard disk", a way of condensing complex "information" coming from an enormous accumulation of symbolization and representation. This "hard disk" is a "passive" one, not being

on an electronic medium and inaccessible on a screen, but has a material support as resistant as possible, such as stone, iron, and wood, which can withstand centuries or millennia, capable of providing multiple and complex information depending on the mode or modes in which it is accessed. The exceptional value of a central symbolic code of a cultural tradition is the capability of providing benchmarks for human understanding and behavior in different historical contexts, in diverse circumstances or needs. It is like a guide that always points to a path of theoretical understanding or a way of behavior, a path with its coordinates, different from the pathways outlined in other cultural traditions. A symbolic code, when providing guidelines for understanding or behavior, delivers no less identity contours, personal or communitarian. Of course, there are not many symbolic codes that can 'shape' the identity frameworks of a cultural tradition, rather there are a few. And therein lies their exceptionality, as they can respond constantly to different needs, quests, and challenges.

Symbolic codes play an essential role in the encounter with *cultural otherness*, mediating encounters between people of diverse cultures. The interplay of the cultural encounter is initiated and takes its contours into the mutual opening which means tattering, advancement, connection, empathy, and everything that is being moved by each of those who experience the encounter. It initiates and develops something unique in this scenario of the intercultural encounter, and outlines a meeting environment, that becomes a *place*. Something that is created, which would not have been if that meeting did not happen. What is happening in each of the actors of the meeting is the constitution of a symbolic space: that is not neutral, nor has autonomy, and cannot be sustained by only one of those who initiate it. It is an *in-between*. This symbolic space of meeting with the other is the place that is made and is transformed by the dynamics of

cultural outreach, the exposition of your cultural face in the encounter with the cultural face of the other.

There are instances identifiable as sites, edifices, and artifacts, but gaining a special condition as they contribute to the contours that the dynamics of the cultural encounter. It is the condition of the symbolic edifice, site, artifact, the exceptional and privileged product of a cultural and spiritual horizon as carrying a crystallization of fundamental landmarks. The experience of the alien artifact, place, or edifice, produced within a particular cultural horizon, are privileged instances that mediate and provoke at the same time: to sense the difference. To sense what is a culturally different code, insofar as it expresses something through a code of signs fixed in the object, site, or building, creates the consciousness of difference, of what escapes you, even though it is in front of you. Those instances play a complex role of guidance in meeting with the cultural other.

Through the various ways they appear, monuments, sites, or artifacts provide the medium and guide for the *cultural encounter with the other*. They play a critical role in intercultural encounters as they provide the symbols that shape the space of the encounter and give coordinates and frames. A place of mediation and meeting, where the actors of intercultural experience became open to each other. Such interaction is *active*, a continuous hermeneutical activity meant to always enlarge the horizon of meeting, *the place*. A place that produces signs and markings of an emotional, cognitive, and experiential horizon, offering no less space for game, for creative advance in the unfolding of the meeting with the other. The experience of deciphering the complex traces that the fundamental tradition of culture implies a creative dimension in which the recognition of those traces is carried forward to the intuition of what is not only the spirit of those codifications but also what that spirit produces during the articulations and developments of the

intercultural encounter, concretely in that unique and unrepeatable time of the encounter.

The fact that the other, whose face/surface is revealed to you, leads you to your own, is the kind of universalization through which each one finds him/her better by ways of interacting. It is, at the same time, the experience of the other's cultural face, the evidence of the difference, of his/her identity mark. Just because the cultural other is and remains different from you, within the cultural frame that gives his or her identity, he/she can offer you the extraordinary chance of an experience of the self that no other instance would allow in such a way. It is a genuine and unique discovery by which you can reach your very self as never before. It is an exceptional occasion of authenticity; it is the situation in which you make an authentic self-discovery and the discovery of the other. And this opening constitutes and is constituted by a place, a novel dimension of reality, which offers the possibility of an experience beyond the self of what it delivers yourself to you. Perhaps this is the most important dimension of the cultural difference and of meeting with the other by and with this difference.

Symbolic codes as cultural identity frames represent a main research focus of the Institute for the Study of Values and Spirituality. In November 2023, the Institute organized an international conference on *Symbolic Codes and Identity Frames in Armenian Spirituality*, a very successful meeting with in-depth presentations and debates, a great contribution to better understanding the complexity of the symbolic code's role in the Armenian tradition. This Issue of the Methexis Journal includes conference's contributions.

Mariam Vardanyan, in *Artistic Features of Armenian Liturgical Objects Abstract*, discusses artistic features of the ritual objects of the Armenian Church, interpreting them according to the types of objects, focusing on the ritual objects used during various rituals in the Armenian church, with

their types and artistic features developed over time.

Avedis Hadjian, in *Notes on the Origins and Symbolology of the Conical Dome in Armenian Church Architecture*, sees that soon after Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity, its architects developed a new sacral architecture to accommodate the liturgical requirements of the new faith, with a liturgy that made larger indoor spaces necessary, unlike the pagan temples, which essentially functioned as repositories of the sculptures of gods, the most characteristically outstanding feature became the *Conical Dome*.

From a different perspective, Umut Asanova and Asel Abdurakhmanova propose an investigation on *What Ultimate Truth is Hidden Beyond the Symbolic Code of Cultures*, invoking the examples of some legends and myths included in famous Chynghyz Aitmatov's novels.

Ikechukwu Monday Osebor, in *Inclusive Symbolic Frames and Codes Shaping Cultural Identity and Cultural Values*, points out that the moral implications associated with symbolic codes about cultural identity frames may include potential misinterpretation, stereotyping, and marginalization. The symbolic moral codes emphasize the importance of recognizing the dynamic nature of cultural identities and the need for inclusive representations in symbolic codes to foster understanding and respect across diverse cultural groups.

The issue includes Paniel Reyes Cárdenas paper on *The Experience of Deification in the Spiritualities of the Night: from Early Eastern Christianity to Saint John of the Cross*, showing the continuous trend of values and experiences proposed by what we can call 'Spiritualities of the night': the knowledge of God is concealed to the mind unless the human person undergoes a process of purification and union with God in love, this culminates in ecstasy as experience of ultimate union. The darkness involved in the senses and

understanding is, nonetheless, valued as an itinerary of growth.

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Symbolic Codes and Cultural Identity Frames

Artistic Features of Armenian Liturgical Objects*

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Abstract: The artistic features are the important provisions by which the ritual objects types and descriptions of different Christian churches can be characterized. In essence, identifying and grouping these features are the most complex processes. In this article, an attempt is made to present the artistic features of the ritual objects of the Armenian Church in general, interpreting them according to the types of objects. The ritual objects used during various rituals in the Armenian church, with their types and artistic features, developed and completed over time, forming a solid system, that both differs from and connects to the ritual objects of other Christian churches. Armenian liturgical objects represent a set of Eastern, Western, and local traditions, forming the corresponding overall picture. The study of the objects shows that the system of design of objects was formed by including both Byzantine and later Western elements, mixing them with national artistic features, as a result of which a typical image of ritual objects was formed.

Keywords: Armenian Art, Liturgical Objects, Artistic Features, Symbols

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Introduction

The artistic features are the important provisions by which the ritual objects types and descriptions of different Christian churches can be characterized. In essence, identifying and grouping these features are the most complex processes. The ritual objects used during various rituals in the Armenian church, with their types and artistic features, developed and completed over time, forming a solid system, which both differs from and connects with the ritual objects of other Christian churches.

Current article is going to present the main characteristics of Armenian ritual objects as completely as possible.

Before moving on to the objects, one important circumstance should be mentioned: most survived examples of Armenian ritual objects which came to us, were made after the 17th century. Until then, very few samples are preserved from the medieval period, due to looting by enemies, various historical events, loss of statehood, as well as the practice, when old objects were melted down to serve as raw materials for new objects in order to save money. However, the few surviving samples, also some images in miniature painting, allow to make observations of ritual objects in Medieval period.

Armenian liturgical objects represent a set of eastern, western and local traditions, forming the corresponding overall picture. They were mainly made of silver, which was defined in church laws as early as the 5th century.¹

The study of the objects shows that they initially mainly include elements typical of Byzantine art, which were expressed both in the shape of the objects and in the artistic decoration. Western elements first appear, most likely around the 11th - 12th

¹ Hovhan Mayragomec'i, "Verlucut'iwn kat'olikē ekelec'woy ew or i nma yawrineal kargac'" [Analysis of the Church and the Laws Invented for Him], *Sion. Official Magazine of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem*, no. 1–2 (January–February 1967): 72.

centuries, in the Cilician kingdom. In 15th and 16th centuries of historical development there is observed a severe lack of samples, sometimes complete absence depending on political and economic unfavorable situation. The objects begin to appear in large numbers only in the new era. So, another significant change is noticeable already after the 17th century, when, thanks to the spread of the printed book and printing, the Baroque, Rococo, and then Neoclassical elements were widely included in Eastern art.² This process has its full impact on ritual objects, making changes to their artistic decoration, as well as giving birth to new types of objects.

The Armenian Liturgical Objects and their Artistic Features

Reliquaries - As in other Christian churches, in the Armenian Church too, holy relics and their worship occupy a special place. In the Armenian church, reliquaries can be in the form of triptyches, crosses, Dexters, arks, or have more complex or simple solutions.

Describing the western and eastern reliquaries, the researchers emphasize an important circumstance, that is, Western reliquaries display the relic, while Eastern reliquaries hide it by placing it in arks or boxes.³

The observation of the large number of reliquaries in the Armenian church shows that in Medieval period the relic was hidden, but already the samples made after the 17th century do

² Helen Evance, Silvie Merian, "The Final Centuries. Armenian Manuscripts of the Diaspora," in *Treasures of Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, eds. Thomas F. Matheus, Roger S. Wieck (New York: Princeton Univ Pr., 1994), 112.

³ Irina Sterligova, "Novozavetnie relikvii v drevnei Rusi" [The New Testament Relics in Old Rus'], in *Christian Relics in the Moscow Kremlin*, ed. Aleksei Lidov (Moscow: Radunica, 2000), 29; Claire Kilgore, "Viewing Heaven: Rock Crystal, Reliquaries, and Transparency in Fourteenth-Century Aachen" (Theses, School of Art, Art History and Design, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2017), 14.

not hide the relic like the western tradition, putting it under a glass or a rock cristal.

From the Medieval period reached us reliquaries in a shape of triptychs. The most famous of them is the Skevra reliquary of 1293 currently preserved in Sate Hermitage (Russia).⁴

The study of different collections shows, that Greek cross-shaped reliquaries are strongly predominant in the Armenian Church. But it should be noted again that all preserved examples were made after the 17th century. We cannot make any judgments about the prevalence of cross-shaped reliquaries in the Middle Ages, as there are almost no preserved examples (ill. 1).

As a rule, the relic was placed in the center of the cross: the place where Christ's body was at the time of the crucifixion: This approach is also emphasized during the rite of consecration of the cross: first the center is anointed, then the crown, the cross arms, and finally the handle.⁵

Reliquaries are formed with images, colored stones, rarely enameled, the surface is often simply polished, or covered with a rich floral motif, inscriptions – which also make an artistic role, and is also made with the full filigreed technique.

Special group consists of examples made of filigree, mostly with palm-shaped wings. Filigree was very popular as in Van-Vaspurakan region⁶, as well as in other Armenian silver-making

⁴ Sirarpi Der-Nersessian, "Le reliquaire de Skevra et l'orfèvrerie cilicienne aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles," *Revue des etudes Armeniennes*, Nouvelle série, Tome I (1964): 121-47; Aleksandr Kakovkin, "Skvrski skladden of 1293" [Skevra Reliquary of 1293], *Bulletin/Review of Social Sciences*, no. 1 (1978): 92-7; Alvida S. Mirzoyan, *Le Reliquaire de Skevra* (New York, 1993).

⁵ "Kanon Xač' orhneloy ew oceloy" [The rule of blessing and anointing the cross], in *Girk' Mec Maštoc' koč'ec'eal* [Book of rituals of the Armenian church] (Costantinople: Yohannisean Polos print., 1807), 208.

⁶ On Van-Vaspurakan area silversmithing see: Hayk Ter-Ghevondyan, "ՋՋ- ՋԾ dareri Vaspurakani arca t'agorcu t'yan masin" [About Vaspurakan Silversmithing of 16th-18th centuries], *Bulletin/Review of*

centers (ill. 2). In general, this silversmithing technique was also in demand in other cultures under the Ottoman Empire's rule, for example in traditional cultures of the Balkans. In many cases, the samples have stylistic and making commonalities, despite being made in different cultural and religious environments. However, typologically, a similar group of cross-shaped reliquaries is mostly represented in Armenian churches, presenting the artistic preferences existing in the Armenian church in the 18th-19th centuries.

Body-part reliquaries - Among the types of reliquaries used in the Armenian church, the Arm reliquary or the Dexter occupies an important place (ill. 3). A large number of examples of latter have reached us. They are presented both with rich artistic decoration, with the use of complex silversmithing and goldsmithing techniques, precious stones, and with simpler solutions. Reliquaries in the shape of body-parts are not widely used in the Armenian Church. Only the Dexter is used during various rituals: for example, on the blessing of the Holy Chrism, on the occasion of the ordination of Catholicos etc.

As it is known, the use of reliquaries in the form of parts of the human body was developed in the West approximately from the end of the 9th century, but gained more importance only from the 12th-13th centuries.⁷

The Orthodox Christian Church does not use reliquaries in the form of body-parts.⁸ Similar reliquaries were avoided

Social Sciences, no. 8 (1963): 101-108; Osep Tokat, *Armenian Master Silversmiths* (Los Angeles, 2005).

⁷ Caroline W. Bynum, Paula Gerson, "Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle ages," *GESTA* 36, no. 1 (1997): 4.

⁸ Ioli Kalavrezou, "Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the byzantine Court," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 68-9; Anna Ballian, "The Treasury of the Monastery of Saint Sophia at Sis," in *Armenian Relics of Cilicia. From the Museum of the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon*, ed. Anna Ballian (Athens: Olkos, 2012), 88.

probably because, being as a shrine for the holy relic, they were either too similar to a real body part, or were close to three-dimensional sculpture.⁹

The use of three-dimensional sculptures of saints is also not welcome in the Armenian church.¹⁰ So, we can assume that this phenomenon entered our church as a result of western influence. Accordingly, it is possible to put forward the point of view that the arm reliquary began to be used around the time when certain movements, tendencies towards the Catholic Church began to be noticed in the Armenian Church. In this sense, the spread of similar reliquaries in the West coincides with the period when pro-Catholic moves began to be observed in Armenian Cilicia already in the late 12th and early 13th centuries.¹¹ It is also important that in the context of the aforementioned tendencies, changes took place in the Liturgical vestments of the Armenian Church, borrowing many elements from the Latin Church.¹²

⁹ Ioli Kalavrezou, “Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the byzantine Court,” in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 68-9.

¹⁰ Giwt Alaneanc', *Karg astuacapaštut'ean Hayastaneayc' S. yekelec'wo* [Order of Piety of Armenian Holy Church] (Tbilisi: St. Martirosyanc' Publ., 1902), 48.

¹¹ Claude Mutaſian, *La Cilicie au Carrefour des empires*, Tome I (Paris: Société d'édition “Les belles lettres”, 1988), 408-11;

Aram Hovhannisyan, *Hayoc' ekelec'in kilikyan šrjanum* [The Armenian Church in Cilician period] (Yerevan: Copyright edition, 2018), 28-9.

¹² See: *Tn. Nersesi Lambronac'woy Tarsoni episkoposi Atenabanutiwn ew t'ult'k' ew čark'* [The Epistle and Papers and Speeches of Ter Nerses of Lambron, Bishop of Tarsus] (Venice, San Lazzaro, 1838), 203-42;

See: Nelli Smbatyan, “Haykakan ekelec'akan saſavartneri ew vakasneri gelarvestakan nkaragirə (Buxaresti haykakan ekelec'u t'angarani nmušneri orinakov)” [The Artistic Characteristics of Armenian Liturgical Mitras and Amicts (On the Example of the Specimens from the Museum of Armenian Church in Bucharest)], in *Genesis Forest, Collected Articles in Memory of Felix Ter-Martirosov* (Yerevan: YSU publ., 2015), 499-513.

Therefore, the introduction of arm reliquary was also possible in that period.

Among the arguments supporting our hypothesis in favor of the Cilician period are also the earliest examples of arm reliquaries with a clear dating, which were made in Cilicia.¹³

It is noticeable in the Cilician examples that they presenting the gesture typical for Latin ritual (ill. 4). Later, first of all changed the gesture, corresponding to the gesture of blessing accepted in the Armenian ritual.¹⁴ Besides the Cilician Dexters, the vast majority of arm reliquaries that have come down to us already displaying the relic in a visible place of the object, mostly on the forearm, under a piece of rock crystal, completely in accordance with the Western tradition. Despite this, the arm reliquary has completely become an inseparable part of the ritual items of the Armenian Church, fully bearing the features and characteristics of Armenian art in its artistic decoration.

Altar crosses – The Altar Cross is mandatory in the decoration of Holy Table in Armenian Church. It has a foot and a pedestal on which the cross rests (ill. 5a, b). Crosses can be meet also of other materials, not only silver, for example bronze, and of a rock-crystal example from medieval period. Discovered

¹³ Astghik Babajanyan, “Hovhannes Mkrtč'i ajov xač'-masunk'aran [The Cross-Reliquary with John the Baptist's Dexter],” *“Vem” Panarmenian Journal*, no. 4 (44) (October-November 2013): 94-106; Dickran Kouyoumjian, *The Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia. History, Treasures, Mission*, ed. Seta Dadoyan, (Lebanon-Anthilias, 2015), 179-81; On stylistic and artistic analysis of the arm-reliquary of Saint Nicholas see: Anna Ballian, “The Treasury of the Monastery of Saint Sophia at Sis,” in *Armenian Relics of Cilicia. From the Museum of the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon*, ed. Anna Ballian (Athens: Olkos, 2012), 87-93.

¹⁴ On the entry of the Arm reliquary into the ritual of the Armenian Church through the Cilician kingdom see: Mariam Vardanyan, “Arm Reliquary from the Collection of the Armenian Diocese of Romania: on the problem of local influences,” *Review of Armenian Studies*, no. 1 (31) (2023): 156-67.

bronze crosses of Medieval Armenia are similar to Byzantine bronze examples of current period.¹⁵

What about the illustrated decoration system of the crosses, then we can judge mainly by examples of later periods. From early Christian and medieval times, very few samples preserved, which were made with Byzantine influence, as it is seen in bronze samples.¹⁶

The observation of the samples reveals the interruption of the previous tradition of illustrating in the new era. Thenceforth, they appear by imitating the Western system of cross decoration: as a rule in the center is presented the crucified Christ or the brief scene of Crucifixion on one side and on the other side - the image of Mother of God with child or praying. The arms of crosses are often decorated with the images of Evangelists or their symbols, the angels, instruments of Passion of Christ.¹⁷ There are also examples with Greek influence can be found, where the prophets are also depicted in the artistic system of the cross.¹⁸

¹⁵ Nyura Hakobyan, “Mijnadaryan Hayastani gelarvestakan metalə IX–XIII darerum” [„Artistic metal of medieval Armenia in 9th–13th centuries”], in *Hayastani hnagitakan hušarjannerə* 10 [Archaeological monuments of Armenia 10], no. III (Yerevan, 1981), 32; “Trasures of Armenian Church. Exhibition in the State Museum of the Moscow Kremlin,” ed. Nathan Hovhannisian, text: Iveta Mkrtchyan, Seyranush Manukyan (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 1997), 51; “The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261,” ed. Helen C. Evance and William D. Wixom (New York: The Metropolitan museum of Art, 1997), 56.

¹⁶ “Trasures of Armenian Church. Exhibition in the State Museum of the Moscow Kremlin,” ed. Nathan Hovhannisian, text: Iveta Mkrtchyan, Seyranush Manukyan (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 1997), 50.

¹⁷ Mariam Vardanyan, “Armenian Altar Crosses in Romanian-Armenian Church Tradition,” *Revue Des Études Sud-Est Européennes* LVIII, no. 1–4 (2020): 193.

¹⁸ Mariam Vardanyan, “Armenian Altar Crosses in Romanian-Armenian Church Tradition,” *Revue Des Études Sud-Est Européennes* LVIII, no. 1–4 (2020): 196–97.

However, it should be noted that only the images forming the cross are western. The shape of the cross remains typical Armenian. It is the blooming cross, the wings of which end with buds or palm-shaped. Apart, after the 17th century, rays or beams almost always come out from the crossing point of the cross-arms. Sometimes rays can be replaced with angel heads or lush leaves. This whole composition symbolizes the Tree of life.

In addition, the Armenian cross can be known thanks to “INRI” written in Armenian «ՅԼԹՀ».

Altar Radiances – One of the unique objects in Armenian Church is the altar Radiance, which decorates the Holy Table (ill. 6).

The name of the object comes from its form: it usually represents round or oval metal sheets made mostly in the technique of chasing or having transparent compositions, framed by rays. Radiances could be decorated from one side or from both sides. The center usually depicts either the Crucifixion of Christ or Madonna with the Child, which are the most common scenes. There are other scenes as well, mostly in the churches of the Armenian colonies, for example the All-see eye of God, the Dormition of the Mother of God (Romania). Examples with a three-dimensional sculpture of a dove in the center differ to some extent from the basic described invention of Radiances. As the study shows, they are the importation of Armenian silversmiths from Iran (ill. 7).

The comparison of the ritual objects used in different Christian churches, brought us to the conclusion, that the altar radiances were formed and used in the Armenian Church under the influence of the Western Church tradition, perhaps after the 17th century. The model for the creation of the object and its artistic decoration was a western Monstrance or Ostensorium, which in its shape and rays was in harmony with the requirements of the period. From the 16th century onwards, the appearance of the Monstrance began to change, and after the

emergence of the Baroque style, they received their finished composition framed by rays.

After the cultural and iconographic changes of the 17th century, one of new elements which entered Armenian art, were rays of sun. Until this period, such an abundance of rays has never been observed in the Armenian art. So, it becomes obvious that the artistic decoration of the radiances bears the characteristic features of the artistic principles prevailing in the new era.

The fact that the radiances entered the Armenian Church much later, testifies to its non-ritual function.

Our research on the Altar Radiances, has shown, that the radiances are typical exclusively for the Armenian Apostolic Church. This is another phenomenon which distinguishes the Armenian Church from the other Christian churches. It is also one of the manifestations of cultural interaction, when even with other influences it is possible to create a new and unique type of an object.

In this regard, the current conclusion can serve as a basis for the accurate attribution of radiances preserved in different collections, without Armenian inscriptions not attributed yet, as well as for the unknown documental photographic materials depicting church altars and church vessels.¹⁹

Chalices - the chalice must be silver, if not the base, at least the cup itself, and inside gilded²⁰ (ill. 8).

The origin of the Armenian chalice goes back to early Eastern Christian examples. In early examples, judging from the miniature painting examples had conically shaped cup rested on an almost little foot and circular pedestal. Later, the pedestal get

¹⁹ On the Altar Radiances see: Mariam Vardanyan, "Altar Radiances among Ritual Objects of Armenian Church (On the Example of the Collections of Armenian Diocese of Romania)," *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art: Collection of articles* 13 (2023): 244-52.

²⁰ Malakia Ormanian, *Cisakan bararan [Ritual Dictionary]* (Yerevan: Hayastan Publ., 1992), 182.

wider, the cup get smaller, the foot get longer and the object become decorated in different ways.

The decoration of Armenian chalices was canonical. They were decorated with images of angels, cherubs, evangelists and their symbols, apostles, biblical scenes, included rich floral motifs and clouds.

Pedestals come in different shapes: round, wavy, square with wide or narrow spread. Especially in the 18th century, a step-shaped floral cut is often found.

Various stylized floral designs are more common, geometric ornaments are less. Although this decoration is the result of the influence of the Baroque and Rococo styles, it also became popular as a symbol of the heavenly paradise. They could be installed both in sections, and decorate the entire surface of the chalice, or completely fill the open spaces between the images of thematic medallions, angels or other figures. Grape vine and wheat, which symbolize the Eucharist, also often appear.

Here also, as in the case of reliquaries, separate group consist filigreed chalices.²¹

Paten: Patens, which present in pair with chalice are generally simple in design, mostly only polished, shallow bottomed plates. There are differences in size between them, depending on which chalice they were made and used for, so the bottom of the paten had to match the circumference of the chalice lip. Judging by the donative inscriptions, as a rule, each chalice had its own paten.

Pyx: In the Armenian Church, the pyx is generally represented as a small silver box, in which are kept fragments of

²¹ About the characteristics of Armenian Chalice see: Mariam Vardanyan, "Haykakan yekelec'akan skihneri ev Buxaresti hayoc' Srboc' Hreshtakapetac' yekelec'u tangarani arcate skihneri masin" (About Armenian Church Chalices and the Chalices of the Museum of Armenian St. Archangels' Church in Bucharest), in *Genesis Forest, Collected Articles in Memory of Felix Ter-Martirosou* (Yerevan, 2015), 485-88.

the Eucharistic bread, which are given to the believers outside the liturgy or taken by the priests to the sick.²² Pyxes can be oval, round, rectangular, octagonal etc. In fact, we can associate the Pyxes with their shape, with the earliest Byzantine stone reliquaries. Essentially, they repeat the same form, but in smaller sizes and in a different material.

Images mainly cover the caps. The scenes mainly concern to sacrifice of Christ and the Eucharist. The image of Agnus Dei is the most common, can be met also images of St. George,²³ glorification of St. Chalice, etc.

Censer: The censer is one of the important ritual objects used in church rites and, especially, during the liturgy. From medieval round forms, they were transformed again with western influence into small, elongated architectural forms (ill. 9), symbolizing the Heavenly Jerusalem. The symbolic meaning of the Heavenly Jerusalem is also carried by the *arks* (ill. 10), again appearing in the form of Churches.

Dove-shaped vessel for Holy Chrism – This vessel stands out as a symbol of the descending Saint Spirit. The latter circumstance is fundamental for creating the form for the vessel in which Holy Chrism is stored in the Armenian Church (ill. 11). The Dove-shaped vessels often with outstretched or movable wings, are an obligatory attribute of the Baptism rite.

Flabellum's typical traditional appearance is the decoration with images of cherubs, are fixed all around with little bells. Basically, flabellum decoration has not undergone changes over time.

Hand or benediction crosses – The hand cross is always present in the Armenian church ritual life. No ritual is performed without a cross. It is one of the most practical

²² Ormanian, *Cisakan baʻaran*, 100.

²³ The art historian Manya Ghazaryan considers that the origin of pixes with the image of St. George is Romania. See: Manya Ghazaryan, “Ējmiacni harstut‘yunnerə” [The Riches of Echmiadzin], *Echmiadzin, Official journal of the Patriarchal See*, no. 5-6 (1987): 99.

elements of church vessels, an important component of a priest's dress, a sacred symbol and a special object.²⁴ Hand crosses are basically small, Greek cross-shaped, with a handle attached to the lower arm. These are available with or without images, designed with floral ornament, precious or semi-precious stones. Even in the small sizes, it bears all the characteristics of the Armenian cross, which we described above (ill. 12).

Book bindings - The Gospel book is mandatory in the decorating system of the Holy Table in the Armenian Church. It symbolizes Christ in the altar, being his image and witnessing his presence.²⁵ As we can see, the Gospels placed on the Holy table are enclosed usually in richly decorated silver bindings. Besides the Gospels other books used in the church were decorating too.

Bindings can be classified into two main types:

1. Bindings made of full plates,
2. Bindings consisting of separate metal parts.

Regardless of whether the bindings are made of a complete plate or with separate parts, their principle of composition is the same: that is, to emphasize the five main points, in the center and at the four corners.

3. As a rule, the central detail for the decoration of the upper cover depicts the Crucifixion of Christ, with brief or large iconography. The central plate of the lower flap represented either the Resurrection of Christ or Madonna with the Child. These were the main scenes of the central plate. Of course, depending on the taste of the master or the customer, their location could be

²⁴ Hakob K'yoseyan, A. Łazaryan, "Xač' [Cross]," in *K'ristonea Hayastan hanragitaran* [Christian Armenian" *Ennciclopedia*] (Yerevan, 2002), 423.

²⁵ *Srboyn Nersesi Lambronac'woy Tarsoni Episkoposi Xorhrdacutiwnk' i kargs ekelec'woy ew meknutiwn xorhrdu pataragin* [Reflections of Saint Nerses of Lambron, Bishop of Tarsus, on the order of the church and the interpretation of the Liturgical Council] (Venice, San Lazzaro, 1847), 129.

changed, as well as replaced with other scenes. Images of the Evangelists or angels were placed in the corners.²⁶

The surviving medieval examples of compositions still follow Greek principles. The first Western influences appear again in the Cilician period, appearing as symbols of the evangelists placed in the corners.²⁷

Most of all the western influences, were expressed on the bindings of Cesaria²⁸ (ill. 13), then in Constantinople silver centers²⁹ (ill. 14a, b), sometimes practically copying the western

²⁶ About the artistic decorations of Armenian silver bindings see: Babken Araqelyan, “Kazmeri zardarman arvestə mijnadaryan Hayastanum” [The Art of Decorating of Book Bindings in Medieval Armenia], *Bulletin of Matenadaran*, no. 4 (1958): 183; Armen Malkhasyan, *Surb Ėjmiacni metale krknakazmerə* [The Metal Bindings of Holy Etchmiadzin] (Etchmiadzin, 2011); Mariam Vardanyan, “The Collection of Silver Book Binding of the Armenian Museum in Bucharest and Their Relationship to Eastern and Western Arts,” *Series Byzantina* XV (2017): 81-97; Flora Ghazaryan, “Western Iconographic Influences on Armenian Silver Book bindings from Ottoman Constantinople (Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries)” (MA Thesis, Central European University, 2017); Levon Chookaszian, “Metal Covers of the Certain Armenian Manuscripts and books from the Eastern European Collections,” in *On the Borderline Between the East and the West. Materials of the international conference dedicated to the 90th anniversary of Yaroslav Dashkevich* (Lviv, 2018), 319-23.

²⁷ Anna Ballian, “The Treasury of the Monastery of Saint Sophia at Sis,” in *Armenian Relics of Cilicia. From the Museum of the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon*, ed. Anna Ballian (Athens: Olkos, 2012), 82.

²⁸ Harutyun Qyurtian, “Kesarioy voskerč‘akan dproc‘in arcat‘ kazmerə. ŽĖ dar” [Silver Bindings of the Jewelry School of Cesaria], “Hask” *Armenological Yearbook* (Anthelias, 1948): 51-61; Armen Malkhasyan, “Kesarahay kazmarvesti patmutiunic” [From the History of Caesarian Armenian Book Binding Art], *Echmiatsin*, no. 5-6 (1996): 174-90; Sylvie L. Merian, “The Armenian Silversmiths of Kesaria/Kayseri in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Armenian Kesaria/Kayseri and Cappadocia*, ed. Richard G. Hovhannisian (Costa Mesa: Mazda publishers, 2013), 117-85.

²⁹ On the Armenian jewelry and silversmithing in Constantinople see: Armenak Sagzyan, “K.Polsi hay voskerč‘utiwnə. ŽĖ - ŽT‘ dar,”

engravings, for example from the first Armenian Bible printed in Amsterdam in 1666.

Western influences brought innovation even in book bindings, giving birth to a new group of design - Mirrophores Gospels (ill. 15a, b). According to our studies, they were formed in the Constantinople silver-making center, and then spread to other centers from the very beginning of the 19th century. The Mirrophores Gospels contain only the texts relating to the burial and resurrection of Christ and are read on the Feast of the Resurrection. So, appropriate themes were chosen for decoration: scenes of Christ's burial and Resurrection.

Conclusion

Based on the above mentioned, we can conclude that despite various influences, Armenian ritual objects have shaped their unique features over the centuries.

The study of different collections of the Armenian liturgical objects shows that the system of design of objects was formed by including both Byzantine and later Western elements, mixing them with national artistic features, as a result of which a typical image of ritual objects was formed. Also very important is the fact that among the ritual objects over time, such objects

[Armenian jewelry in Constantinople: XVIII-XIX centuries], *"Anahit" journal of thinking and art*, no. 5 (January-February 1930): 9-14; Hasmik Stepanyan, *Hayeri nerdrumn Osmanyan kaysrutyunum [Contribution of Armenians to the Ottoman Empire]* (Yerevan: Gasprint, 2011), 584-600; Garo Kürkman, *Ottoman Silver Marks* (Istanbul: Mathusalem Publications, 1996); Ronald Marchese, Marlene Breu, *Treasures of Faith. Sacred Relics and Artifacts from the Armenian Orthodox Churches of Istanbul* (Istanbul, 2015); Garo Kürkman, *Sultan's Jewelers in the Ottoman Palace 1853-1871* (Istanbul: Korpus Yayinlari, 2019); Arsen Yarman, *Osmanli Döneminde Mücevher ve Ermeni Kuyumcular* (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Yayinlari, 2022).

were formed that are characteristic only for the Armenian Church.

The stylistic and artistic traditions of Armenian liturgical objects collected and systematized over the centuries, are preserved during the 20th century and even now. Masters preserve the characteristic features, developing, but not departing from the basic forms.

However, during the search or study of Armenian ritual objects, apart from the artistic forms and features, first of all suggest the Armenian origin Armenian writings included in the artistic system, which are present in the vast majority of ritual objects.

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Notes on the origins and symbology of the conical dome in Armenian church architecture

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Abstract: Soon after Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity in 301, its architects developed a new sacral architecture to accommodate the liturgical requirements of the new faith, with a liturgy that made larger indoor spaces necessary, unlike the pagan temples, which essentially functioned as repositories of the sculptures of gods. In medieval Armenian church architecture, the most characteristically outstanding feature became the conical dome. There is uncertainty about the origins of the dome, which Armenian architecture historian Toros Toramanyan traces back to Persian architecture. In the early literature, we find an indistinct use of *khoran* (canopy) and *gmbet* (dome) in early literature. While the terminological ambiguity may be confusing, the semiotics are the same: the church, a meeting place of the faithful, is a symbol of the kingdom of heaven. This is represented by the dome, the absence of which by the 6th-7th centuries had become almost inconceivable in Armenian church architecture. Toramanyan has indicated that the conical dome represents the summit of Mt. Ararat, later also mimicked by the cowl (*veggar*) worn since at least the 11th century by the celibate priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church, yet there is no evidence to corroborate this hypothesis. As Armenian studies scholar Robert S. Thomson has noted, ancient Armenian authors did not dwell much on the symbology of art and architecture other than generalities.

Keywords: Armenian Church, conical dome, Toramanyan, church, Armenia



Figure 1. An Armenian priest wearing the distinctive cowl or veggar outside the church of Gandzasar, in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), February 2021. (Photo: Avedis Hadjian)

As Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity in 301, architects needed to break new ground from scratch with the new religion. The devotional architecture of the Hellenistic, Roman, or Persian tradition did not offer a satisfactory template for the liturgical needs of the Christian faith and architecture had to reflect the tenets of the new faith. The structural requirements of Christian liturgy were fundamentally different from those of the pagan era, as Suren Mnatsakanyan has pointed out.¹

Whereas pagan temples essentially functioned as repositories of the sculptures of gods or other deities, while most ceremonies were performed outside with people gathering in the open, Christian rites called for different, large interior spaces for the performance of the rites.²

¹ Suren Mnatsakanyan, *Հայկական վաղ մեմորիալ հուշարձանները* [Armenian Early Medieval Memorial Monuments] (Yerevan: Art Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, 1982), 54-5.

² Mnatsakanyan, *Հայկական ճարտարապետության պատմություն, հատոր Բ*. [History of Armenian Architecture II] (Yerevan: National Academy of Sciences, 2002), 137.

These included the eucharist but also the needs of the evolving liturgy, which in the case of the Armenian church, during Tabernacle feasts and other Church holidays, included the Procession of the Cross during the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and, after the 12th century, the *Andastan* (Blessing of the four corners of the world) ceremony, which is believed to have moved indoors in the Armenian church in Cilicia in the 1300s (up to that moment it was held outside, possibly as a residual leftover from the pagan era). This was not very helpful for the preservation for the pagan era temples, which were demolished to pave the way for the new architecture of God in Christian Armenia.

“[...] Pagan temples were not conceived at all as gathering places for the community,” says Mnatsakanyan. “The statues of the deities were placed there while the fundamental ceremonies were performed outside, where the people met.” Christianity, however, required “structures with interior space to congregate the public to listen to the prayer being recited from the chapel.”

Burial vaults escaped destruction because they basically served for the same purpose—preservation of the dead. They only required a minor change in the symbology of the structure, essentially, the substitution of pagan markers for the cross, but there were no fundamental differences.

Another possible factor may also have been to completely differentiate the churches from the “hated *atrushans*.”³ We do not know what these sanctuaries for fire worshipping looked like in Armenia back in the day as St. Gregory the Illuminator and the newly Christianized country set out to vigorously destroy pagan temples, yet we can make

³ Ibid., 192.

an educated guess from the surviving examples in Suraxanı, near Baku.⁴ In any case, little is known about the *atrushans* in Armenia. While they were resisted as representative of an imposed religion by a foreign oppressor—in this case Iran—Christianity may not have always been welcome by Armenians, as walls surrounding ancient Armenian churches were there to protect them from local population that may have resisted conversion to the new faith. Evidence, however, points to the walls existing as protection against raids by invaders as soon as the 5th century, including first the Persians and then, after the 7th century, the Arabs.⁵

Yet there is something to be said in support of the view that the fire temples were destroyed with collective approval in Armenia. One subtle, yet important detail, is that the version of Mazdeism Persians were still trying to impose on Armenia—it's interesting to note here that religious proselytism seems to be a constant in the various iterations of the Iranian state—was Zurvanism, an alien form of Mazdeism that Armenians did not recognize.⁶ To this, we should add that the Armenian nobility was Parthian—indeed, St. Gregory the Illuminator, the foremost Patriarch of the Armenian Church and who was Parthian himself; in classical Armenian

⁴ Rufat Sattarov, “Aspects of Religious Beliefs among the Azerbaijani Turks,” in *Man and Nature in the Altaic World. Proceedings of the 49th Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Berlin, July 30-August 4, 2006* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2012), 311. It should be noted here that attributing the *atrushans* or anything preceding 1918 to the “Azerbaijani Turks” would be inaccurate. “Azerbaijan” (the former Soviet republic) was a hurried invention by the Committee of Union and Progress, the Turkish regime that planned and executed the Armenian Genocide of 1915, in an attempt to gain a foothold in the Caucasus as they pursued a pan-Turkic program in the immediate aftermath of the First World War.

⁵ Mnatsakanyan, *History of Armenian Architecture II*, 193.

⁶ James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), 138.

literature, he is known as Grigor Partev, Gregory the Parthian—at a time they had been violently displaced by the Sassanians in Persia. In other words, it is fair to assume that there was no lack of reasons for animosity in Armenia towards Iran.

In any case, with conversion to Christianity in 301, the new architecture developed in Armenia at the service of the new religion the architect gave an “eminent place to the vault and especially to the dome.”⁷ Yet in any case, according to Toros Toramanyan, Armenia takes the idea of the dome from neighbouring Persia, often the ruling power of Armenia too, where monumental domes were used for palaces back in the Mazdeism era. In Armenian church architecture, the most characteristically outstanding feature is the conical dome, which is the focus of this article. There is uncertainty about the origins of the first domed Christian church. It is usually believed to have begun in the East, possibly in the Eastern Christian Roman Empire, with the first domed church often thought to be the Domus Aurea in Antioch, built in the 4th century and destroyed in an earthquake in 588.⁸ There is also a claim to be made for the Syriac Cathedral of Edessa, thanks to Early domes, Edessa, Constantinople with the 6th century Byzantine hymn “Another Sogitha” or “On the great church of

⁷ Patrick Donabedian, « Les débuts de l'architecture chrétienne en Orient: Les premières églises à coupole d'Arménie » [The beginnings of the Christian architecture in the East: The first domed churches of Armenia], in *Археологія домобудівництва Європи* [*The Archeology of Buildings in Europe*] (Kyiv: The Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, 2013), 346.

⁸ Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 76-8. See also Hugh N. Kennedy, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (Ashgate: Variorum Collected Studies 860, 2006), 185–87.

Urha,” being generally considered the first textual reference to the dome as a representation of the heavenly vault.⁹

Let me quote here from the hymn:

*“Behold! Its ceiling is stretched out like the sky and without columns, arched and simple, And it is also decorated with golden mosaic, as the firmament with shining star. And its lofty dome—behold it resembles the highest heaven, And like a helmet it is firmly placed on its lower part. The splendor of its broad arches—they portray the four ends of the earth.”*¹⁰

The number four here, or the bases of the structure supporting the dome, has another symbolism as you will often see in the Armenian churches that the four Evangelists are depicted there.¹¹ While most references to the idea of “church/ecclesia” or *եկեղեցի* (in Armenian) in the early Christian literature refer to the congregation of the faithful, there are precise references to the physical space, the building of the church, in the ancient texts.¹²

⁹ Kathleen E. McVey, “The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol,” in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983): 91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹¹ Tagouhi Avetisyan, «Հայկական միջնադարյան եկեղեցիների թմբուկների քանդակային հարդարման խորհրդանշական եւ պատկերագրական ավանդույթները» [The Symbolic and Iconographic Traditions of the Sculptural Decor of the Medieval Armenian Church Drums], in *Banber Matenadarani*, no. 25 (2018): 357-58.

¹² Robert W. Thomson, “Architectural Symbolism in Classical Armenian Literature,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 30, no. 1 (April 1979): 103.

Odznetsi describes the threefold division of the church into sanctuary (*khoran*), nave (*tachar*), and narthex (*gavit*) as mystically prefigured by Noah's ark with its three decks. Thus, the building of the church is the ժողովարան (*zhoghovaran*, "assembly" or "gathering," in a literal sense), the House of God since the Son of God is sacrificed therein, said Catholicos Hovhannes III Odznetsi (John of Odzun).¹³ Gregory of Narek in his Mystic Soliloquy 75, said that the church is built as the dwelling place of God; it is a form of the upper vault of heaven. Let me quote Odznetsi once again: "The Lord's temple... is the supernatural vault of heaven at the ends of the world."¹⁴

Yet even though the basic idea of the symbolic parallelism between the vaults or the dome of the church and the celestial vault of heaven was familiar to Armenian historians, they rarely dwell on the symbolic meaning of the architecture.¹⁵ The same spirit is reflected in the famous mention of St. Gregory the Illuminator's vision by Agatangeghos, upon which Etchmiadzin, the Holy See of the Armenian Church and possibly the oldest Christian cathedral in the world, was built, if we follow the tradition. In the vision, the main site where the Etchmiadzin Cathedral was erected was marked with a circular base of gold on which rested a column of fire and capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light... the whole was surmounted by a wonderful canopied (*զմբէթաձէլ խորանարդ; gmbetadzev khoranard*) construction of cloud in the form of a dome.¹⁶ We also find an indistinct use of *khoran* (canopy) and *gmbet* (dome) in early literature. Even though the terminological ambiguity may be confusing in

¹³ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fr. Barsegh Sargisian, *Ագաթանգեղոս եւ իւր բազմադարեան գաղտնիքն* [Agatangeghos and His Ancient Secret] (St. Lazarus, Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation, 1890), 102.

terms of architectural accuracy, the semiotics are the same: the church is a meeting place of the faithful; it is a symbol of the celestial city, the kingdom of heaven. And this symbol is represented in physical terms by the domed or canopied roof supported by vaults that rest on pillars.¹⁷ The central dome—seen as the symbol of the divine perfection—became the organizing principle of composition of church architecture. After its early beginnings in the 4th and 5th centuries, by the 6th and 7th centuries the domed churches ruled Armenia's religious topography.¹⁸

“The regular celebration of the liturgy needs a longitudinal, east-west oriented plan. The dome introduces another principle: a radial form generated around a vertical central axis. The different compounds among liturgical rules and architectural forms produce different typologies.



Apart from an extraordinary ability in drawing inspiration from the experiences about the building of central spaces by neighbouring traditions—the Roman one, through Byzantine culture, the Hellenistic and the Iranian ones—the Armenian experimentation on the dome in the designing of

¹⁷ Thomson, *Architectural Symbolism*, 106-108.

¹⁸ Hilde Romanazzi, “Domed medieval churches in Armenia: form and construction,” in *Actas del Sexto Congreso Nacional de Historia de la Construcción* [Proceeds of the Sixth National Congress of the History of Construction], eds. S. Huerta, R. Marín, R. Soler, A. Zaragoza (Madrid: Instituto Juan de Herrera, 2009), 1199.

churches probably started for liturgical reasons.

Figure 2. (Photo: Avedis Hadjian)

In the middle of the 5th century, the division between Armenian and Byzantine cults caused the definition of Armenian own sacred ceremonial for the foundation of a church and the dedication of the site on which it was built.¹⁹ In many sacred texts, some words as “gmbet”, meaning dome, or “khoran”, meaning canopy, are indifferently used meaning both the physical spaces and the symbolic dimension of heaven.”

The fascinating model pictured in *Figure 2* dates back to the 5th-7th centuries. It shows us how the Holy See of Etchmiadzin looked at the time with its distinctive conic dome, (*վերաբարձեւ գմբէթ*, *vegharadzev gmbet*) in Armenian. “*Veghar*” in Armenian is the cowl or hood worn by the celibate monks. It comes from the Latin word *velarium*, and it has its meaning in the religious symbolism of vestments, and it has, as we now see, its correspondence in Armenian architectural symbolism.²⁰

In any case, even though there can be no certainty, the cowl of the Armenian monks must have followed the church dome much later. The earliest record of the priestly *veghar* in Armenian sources or historiographical literature dates back to the 11th century. These were very dark times for Armenia. On the one hand there is some testimony about millennial awe or terror –it was the first millennium of the Christian era and there were fears about the Second Coming. It is the century when the Kingdom of Vaspurakan cedes its territory to the Eastern Roman Empire, better known to us as the Byzantine Empire, and retreats to Cesarea and Sebastea, the series of events that led up to the creation of the Kingdom of Cilicia. It

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Helen C. Evans, ed., *Armenia: Art, Religion, and Trade in the Middle Ages* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 50.

is also the century of Alp Arslan's victory over the combined Byzantine-Armenian army at Manazgerd in 1070, when the Turks finally make an inroad into the Armenian heartland. Such is the centrality, both literal and figurative, of the conical dome in the Armenian conception of sacral architecture that ever after its conception in the early centuries of Christianity, Armenians beholden to this shape of heaven on earth have been reproducing it throughout the world, including in Bucharest, where the splendid cathedral consecrated in 1915—a few months after the onset of the Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire—evokes the outlines of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin and the Cathedral of Ani, the hometown of the early Armenians who settled in Romania in the Middle Ages.

The “most impressive—and surely the most renowned instance—of resolute reclamation of the ethnic identity within the religious architecture is the cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Archbishopric in Bucharest, dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, built between 1911 and 1915 after the plans signed by Dimitrie Maimarolu,” says Vlad Bedros. “The cathedral, quite faithful to the volumetric model of the Holy Etchmiadzin, displays a profusion of traditional decorative elements which mark the main horizontal accents, generously expanding on the frontons of the transept's two arms.”²¹

In Bedros's description, one may discern yet again the Greater Ararat-Lesser Ararat pattern in the profile of the church. “A conspicuous majestic but nonetheless slender feature is the belfry resting on top of the porch which opens on four large arches sustained by massive piers,” he writes. “The belfry, with its graceful columns, seems a kiosk suspended above these compact volumes, as a delicate,

²¹ Vlad Bedros, *Armenian Artistic Heritage in Romania: Between Exilic Nostalgia and Cultural Integration* (Bucharest: Media Print, 2011), 141.

elegant counterpart for the imposing dodecagonal central dome.”²²

The Bucharest Cathedral style set it apart from the rest of Armenian church architecture in the rest of Romania. It is the only Armenian Apostolic place of worship in the country, with a specific Armenian architectural style, designed after the model of the Holy Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, and with strong architectural accents taken from the Cathedral of Ani, the former medieval capital of Armenia.²³

Architect Maimarolu had been sent by the Parish Council of the Armenian Church of Bucharest to Armenia in 1910, where he stayed for three months studying the local church architecture, particularly in Etchmiadzin.

In general, the Armenian churches in Romania do not present an Armenian architectural style, as they have been designed following the architectural patterns of the Romanian Orthodox or Russian Orthodox churches, has explained Andreea Tănase. “The reason is that, in past centuries, the Armenian Church was considered schismatic and the Armenian-Gregorian religion heretical,” she writes. “This caused the Armenians to build their churches after the model of the surrounding religious edifices, calling on local master builders and thus keeping the external appearance similar to the other churches so that they could not be distinguished.” She goes on to add that sometimes they were built in valleys (Cetatea Albă, Ismail) or with low towers (Hotin) to make them inconspicuous. A further, and possibly more powerful

²² Ibid.

²³ Andreea Tănase, ed., *Biserica Armenească din București: 100 de ani de la târnosirea Catedralei Arhiepiscopale Armene din București, 1915-2015* [*The Armenian Church of Bucharest: Centennial of the Consecration of the Armenian Archbishop's Cathedral in Bucharest, 1915-2015*] (Bucharest: Editura Zamca, 2016), 41-2.

reason for that, was that “the towers of the Armenian churches had to be lower than the minarets of the Turkish mosques not to arouse the jealousy of the Turks.” There were even *fermans* (decrees) issued by the sultans which “forbade the construction of Christian church towers taller than the Muslim minarets.”



Figure 3. The monastery of Khor Virap, with Mt. Ararat in the background, February 2021. (Photo: Avedis Hadjian).

The pointed, conical domes are believed to symbolize the volcanic cones of the mountains Ararat yet there is no proof to demonstrate it other than the stylistic correspondence among the cowls worn by the Armenian celibate priests, the conical domes of the Armenian churches and Mt. Ararat.

Usually two cones appear, the larger one is positioned above the nave, and the smaller one is placed at the entrance to the church. They can symbolize the Greater Ararat and the Lesser Ararat. Viewed laterally, many of the Armenian churches resemble the mountain range Ararat. Toramanyan says that the symbolic association of the dome with Mt. Ararat is based on popular belief. We can infer by this affirmation that the notion that the shape of the dome was deliberately conceived as based on Mt. Ararat cannot be demonstrated. At

the same time, right after saying that it is a popular tradition, Toramanyan adds that in pre-Christian, pagan Armenia, the Ararat was a mysterious, holy mountain, in the same way that Mt. Olympus was the revered abode of the gods for the ancient Greeks.²⁴

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²⁴ Toros Toramanyan, *Նյութեր հայկական ճարտարապետության պատմության* [Materials for the History of Armenian Architecture: Second Collection of Articles] (Yerevan: National Academy of Sciences, 1948), 31-2.

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What Ultimate Truth is Hidden Beyond the Symbolic Code of Cultures (on the example of the Kyrgyz culture)

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to reveal the ultimate truth which is hidden beyond the symbolic codes of cultures. The main function of the culture is to make humanity to survive, exist and be happy in this world. The role of culture is becoming extremely more important in global times, when the humanity is facing climatic changes, environmental crises, different social crucial problems, the danger of nucleus war that can put an end to the whole civilization. Culture is manifested not only in behavior, mutual interrelationships, different activities norms and rules, traditions and rituals but also in the system of folk tales, songs, proverbs, myths and legends transmitted from ancient times to the present, by memory. Each of them displays their own codes to be discovered, understood and interpreted not only by philologists but mainly and sometimes only by philosophers.

The authors try in the examples of some distinguished legends and myths, on famous Kyrgyz writer Chynghyz Aitmatov's novels to understand the meaning of symbols given there. These cultural symbols are interpreted to show deep environmental, social, cultural, personal crises, manifested in different destructive processes of nature, danger of nuclear war, social and personal criminalized pathology, loss of memory leading to danger of

disappearance of positive cultural achievements. It is stated that all these problems were symbolically shown as special cultural codes used in ancient tales, legends, myths. Their symbolic providential role is inestimable for us, present living generation. The author underlines their universal value for all the humanity.

Keywords: ultimate truth, symbolic code, culture, global times, social memory, love for God, universal principle, integrity, civilizations, identity, concept of global family, moral laws

Any fairytale, any myth may be understood as a certain code beyond which there lies some eternal truth. That is why they are precious, valuable having existed from time immemorial. On conception of culture and its symbolic codes there are well known classical researches of K. Levi-Strauss, F. de Saussure, S. Pierce, Umberto Eco. Basing on them we will try to show on some examples of the Kyrgyz culture as the codes for revealing vital truth. Kyrgyz people is considered to be one of the most ancient peoples in the world. In Chinese manuscripts dated back to the beginning of the 3d century BC Kyrgyz is said to have had its own powerful state. Though during centuries due to caused migrations, being fought and separated, it had lost its powerful state. Two centuries ago nomadic Kyrgyz people peacefully joined to powerful Russia. But during tsar regime it suffered from exploitation on its behalf and would strike against discrimination but it was suppressed and had in 1916 to escape by running to the Chinese borders. Around a million of the Kyrgyz people died of shooting on behalf of the Russian Tzar army and of hunger on their way to be escaped to China. In history it is known as Uirkuin (Great Terror). Only Socialist Revolution 1917 could put an end to Tzar regime and gradually establish a society based on common property for means of production, which in its turn was the only

foundation for equality, justice and brotherhood between people of different nations and religions. Kyrgyz people, former nomads, mountainous people, under the leadership of the new, socialist state could powerfully develop educational system when practically all the people became literate, have an access to higher education, could develop a stable system of health care service, culture in all its manifestation: universities, institutes, colleges, schools, literature, theater, cinema, opera, ballet. The great communist idea of the unconditional primacy of the interest of people over the interest of a certain man lied in the roots of the socialist society being as an essential device for construction of the new society of equality, justice, freedom and respect of the right and dignity of each man. That was a fantastic society which was being constructed and developed during 80 years, a society of 15 socialist states, which was called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Due to inner and external reasons it collapsed 33 years ago. Three leaders gathered together and signed a Declaration on the Collapse of the USSR. All the fifteen republics silently accepted that Declaration and began to exist separately. There started a hard process of survival of each republic. The former society was based on the united system of economic, technological, scientific, ideological interdependence, inter assistance. Their separation immediately revealed their weakness without a united economy. It was the door to chaos in all spheres, success in which had been achieved thanks to the hard united energy of all the Soviet people. It was the door to overwhelming corruption of those who were in power. There arose a question whether the communist idea was true or not if those who were in power could easily betray the ideas of unconditional primacy of people's interests of which they had been swearing heartily. After the collapse of the Soviet Union most of honest scholars would ask these torturing questions on the crisis of

the Soviet culture, on its reasons and ways out¹. Even during the Soviet times, though it was prohibited to criticize the Soviet regime, our great writer Chynghyz Aitmatov would write his novels with hardly noticed critical view towards the Soviet system. He used ancient myths or tales parallelly with the plots in order to underline those problems in metaphor which he was writing of. These were the problems which started to be of great concern to humanity in the twentieth century. These were serious environmental problems. He used the Kyrgyz fairy tale of Mother Bugu (Deer). Once upon a time there was a great war between Kyrgyz people and their enemies. Kyrgyz people were totally destroyed in that war. An only woman who did not die but was in danger put her newly born baby in the basket and threw the basket into the lake where a baby was saved and raised by the deer. Since then the deer has been considered as a saint Bugu Mother and never was to be killed or shot. Raised by his great father named Momun (the word “Momun” means still, calm, never arguing), especially by his fairy tales, a child in the writer’s novel could not bear a killing of the deer on behalf of his great father’s son-in-law for hosting “high quests from the capital”. A child became horribly sick and with high temperature he steps in the water of the river and walks down to the lake where, in his belief, goes a white steam boat, where there works his father whom he missed so much... Aitmatov’s novel “White Steam” is a tragedy. It symbolizes a tragedy of a humanity who does not obey the laws of Mother Nature. Mother Bugu is a symbol of Nature. Ancient people

¹ See: Vehi. *Intelligentsia v Rossii*. – Moskva: Molodaya Gvardiya. – 1991. – P. 22, 24, 64, 170-174; Umut Asanova, “*Crisis of Soviet Ethics and the Development of New Paradigms of Ethical Thinking*,” Collections of Abstracts to the International Conference: *Ethical Thinking – Past and Present: Contemporary Ethical Theories*, May 22-23, 2013, Presovo University Slovakia.

created inestimable artistic expression of this law. When Bugu Mother is killed or when the laws of Nature are broken the humanity is awaited by a catastrophe.

Practically all the novels of the great Kyrgyz writer Chynghyz Aitmatov are the expression of the symbolic codes manifested in the ancient myths. Code within a code. Alongside with positive sides of the Soviet culture in his novels we see negative ones: environmental mismanagement, atheism bordered with not farseeing treatment of natural resources caused by brutality, lack of proper knowledge, hypocrisy, egoism. Evil qualities are more powerful in comparison with those good ones. Half a century ago Chynghyz Aitmatov in his novels expressed his doubts in truthfulness of communist ideas, in truthfulness of the society based on such ideas, considered by him as false. He did not openly told of that, but his novels did. That was the power of the symbolic codes he used. His monumental novel “Plakha” is a manifestation of the use of the symbol of the collapse of the system we lived. With literary language he constructed quite a philosophical system where Mother nature is demonstrated in Akbara (female wolf) and Tashchainar (male wolf). Akbara means Great. In order to save their kids they had to move from one place to another. The first loss of their wolf cubs occurred when people burnt all the reeds that grew in the fields in order to construct some mine in the place of reeds and all living substances and newly wolf cubs that were hidden in reeds were burnt. Wolves, having lost their little cubs, silently moved to another place. The second place of their residence again became the place for killing of deers by shooting from the above from helicopters, deers’ meat to be delivered to special offices for reporting the government on execution of the state plan. Frightened wolves escaped running away from that horrible place, again newly born cubs cruelly shot from above by heartless people from helicopter. And again wolves Akbara and Tashchainar are

seeking a safe place and found at last the place in the mountains of the Issyk-Kul lake. There they loved safely each other, bore again little cubs, loved them with all their maternal and paternal love. Wolves showed an example of mutual love, responsibility and care towards each other and their kids, while most people show the contrary: violation, abuse, betrayal, irresponsibility.

But again there continued the persecution after little cubs. This time it was an alcoholic who promised a cub to one of tourists for a bottle of wine. Having found a proper time to take the cub from the hidden place, when Akbara and Tashchainar left their kid for hunting, Bazarkul the alcoholic caught the cub and ran to his horse in order to escape from the wolf. Akbara suddenly felt that her baby is under threat. She quickly reached their residence and having not found the cub ran after Bazarbay. Bazarbay remembered of God when in danger and pleaded to be saved. Bad people remember of God only being in trouble. Bazarbay reached the village and entered the house of Boston, a good man, who had an only child who was born when he became an elderly person. His son was only two years old. Akbara reached the house where Bazarbay entered and was not going to leave it. The whole night she was yowling suffering from missing her cub. Boston did not like what Bazarbay had done, scolded, reproached him, demanded to give the cub back, but Bazarbay did not listen to him and quit Boston's house from the back side. Early morning Akbara saw a baby crawling from outside the house. As soon as she noticed a baby all her maternal instinct woke up and in a second she reached the baby, caught him with her teeth and with all her might ran away from the house. Boston discovered the absence of his child and came out to the yard. As he saw the wolf with his child on its back immediately he took his hunter's gun and shot the wolf. But

Boston appeared to have shot his own baby.² This tragic scene goes back to a similar scene from the well known ancient Kyrgyz legend. Not obeying the laws of nature, harshly breaking them have their catastrophic end. This is tragic truth lying beyond the symbolic code of this ancient myth. History is repeated. Aitmatov's tragedy refers to the 20th century. His novel *Plakha* turns also as a symbolic code of the environmental crisis together with the human crisis predicted dozens of centuries ago in symbolic codes of an ancient myth.

There is another ancient Kyrgyz myth. Once upon a time some group of young men were captured in war and enslaved. One of them, whose name was Jolaman, did not want to obey those who had caught them and be their slave. Earnestly willing to be free he would struggle against them and dreamed of his land, his family, his people; he would dream of freedom. His owners saw how he did not want to obey them and decided to put an end to his disobedience. They took the skin of breast part of newly killed camel and wore it on Jolaman's head. He would be doing his slave's hard work under the sun. Days passed. The skin cap was becoming harder and harder, toughly pressing his head, his hair not finding way through hard skin to grow back gradually injuring his brain... Slowly Jolaman was losing his memory. Time has come when he completely forgot of everything, of his name, of his family, of his land, of what he had dreamt – of freedom. So he became a true slave, thoughtless and obedient, ready to do everything ordered by his owner. Even he followed the order to shot his mother who had come to their place and found her only son after months of search. He could not

² See: Umut Asanova, *Krizis kultury: Filosofskiye aspekty* // *Izvestiya NAN KR* (1998); Umut Asanova, *Cengiz Aytmatovun Eserlerinde Kultur Bunaliminin Felsefesi* // *Bilge/Ataturk Kultur Merkezi Baskanligi Yayinlari* (2000).

recognize his mother who was pleading him to remember lullabies she would sing him in his childhood. Without any sense, coldly he killed his pleading mother. His name became then Mankurt.

From this ancient Kyrgyz legend we may summarize the truth: identity is not possible without memory, thus human freedom as the essential manifestation of identity is impossible without memory.

Philosophical understanding of self identity goes far beyond its traditional aspects such as awareness of belonging to certain race, nation, ethnical group, gender, age, education etc., i.e. someone's demographical, social, economical and political status, which may be physically reflected, visualized, measured. Self identity is an infinite process while a man is living. Self identifying is obtaining more and more knowledge of self, of his goal of life, of self comprehension until he finds truth of the ultimate source of his living, his true being. Not only understanding of his belonging to some externally reflected national, ethnical, economical and other aspects, but more – understanding and displaying himself as a good, kind, knowledgeable, wise, generous, loving and trusting substance – that is what is more precious, more valuable in philosophy of self identity. That is what was the morale of the above written legend. Only memory can give a man the power to identify himself as a human being, loving, trusting, intending to the most precious thing - freedom.

Another symbolic code of freedom is expressed in the following ancient legend on the king eagle Budaiyk. Once upon a time there was a king who ordered his people to catch the king eagle Budaiyk. A lot of gold he promised to those who would catch the wild bird. One young man decided to go to the mountains and catch it. His granny was extremely against. She told him that she had heard that the wild bird would be tamed only if it would gouge out the eyes and liver of the person who had caught it. She cried and tried to stop him. But

he would not obey. He marched to the mountains. On his way all kinds of creatures would follow him to help him to catch the wild eagle. With their help and thanks to his own fearlessness he could catch the wild king bird Budaiyk. And solemnly the young boy presented Budaiyk to his king. The king gave all kinds of food to the eagle but it would not eat and would not be tamed at all. Then the king gathered all the wise men and asked them for an advice how to tame the bird. He was told of the above key that that young man was to be buried along the road and that everybody should read that this is a grave of the fearless young man who caught the king bird Budaiyk who gouged the eyes and ate the liver of the this young man. So did the king. Everything was done according to the requirements. Only then the wild bird became immediately tamed. The king began to take the bird for hunting. The bird would fly up and headlong down and catch different animals: deers, goats, hares. Once it did so, twice he did so, but for the third time Budaiyk flew up to the sky and did not return. Again the king gathers people again he asks for a fearless youngster to catch the bird Budaiyk, again another fearless boy goes to the mountains with all his creature assistants, with their help he would catch the king eagle Budaiyk and presents it to his king. But again it would not be tamed until all the former actions were performed. But at last it again flew up to the sky and disappeared. The symbolic code of the legend is: freedom is never gained without great victims. The price paid for deprivation of freedom is so immense. Freedom is the essence and goal of life. You can never deprive of freedom those who are by their nature born free. A human being finds his true identity only in Freedom.

Kyrgyz culture is rich with tales, myths, legends. It has a great epical song Manas on which there should be a separate talk. It contains half a million lines. Only in one version it is written to be as 40 times bigger than the ancient

Greek Iliad and Odyssey taken together. It is called an Encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz culture. We can add that this epical song may be serve as a great symbolic code of the whole Kyrgyz culture.

All the world of culture contains different symbolic codes of justice, equality, unity, harmony etc. We find universal values or truths beyond these codes. The most universal value is Love for God or the ultimate code lying beyond all the symbolic codes of culture. Indeed, what happens when a man is moved by creed, jealousy, ignorance, hatred, false ideas as it was shown in all above told stories or tales? Each of them ends with tragedy, overwhelming catastrophe. Why? Because ultimately there was a lack of love for God, which means obeying the laws of God or nature, respecting and loving others by understanding each other as children of God, being grateful to everybody and everything as manifestation of the will of God, protecting the environment and living according to its laws. The tragedy of a human being is understanding by reason all these laws but not following them in their true faith. Symbols of culture turn to be reality. And now we are living this reality predicted very long ago. Global climatic changes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, landslides ... are the examples of God's fury for the lack of true love of Him.

As soon as we, people of the world, understand that it is Love which makes our Being possible, which makes all uniquely diverse cultures to exist in this world, we are to comprehend the very nature of Love, its great potentials awareness of which may develop a new stage of international, intercultural and inter - civilization relations, characterized with a high spirit of Humanity, Friendship and Cooperation. May this journal "Methlexis" be a bright manifestation of such a wonderful Spirit.

At the same time it is this principle which lies or hidden beyond the symbolic code of any culture. The author

underlines that the humanity is to comprehend the very nature of Love, its great potentials, awareness of which may develop a new stage of international, intercultural and inter - civilization relations, characterized with a high spirit of Humanness, Friendship and Cooperation. In them there lie the very roots in which Civilizations find their identity, closeness, kinship. The concept of a Global Family is put forward as based on these moral laws.

We are to reveal the very roots in which Civilizations find their identity, closeness, kinship. These very roots lie in the principle of Love for God, having been perished and aimed as the last and eternal Truth since the time immemorial in all the cultures and nations of all the epochs and times. Approached vertically, or historically, evolutionarily, and horizontally or geographically, all the cultures or civilizations can be stated as to have this fundamental principle and Goal, differentiating only in the level of being reflected, rationalized, understood, perished, reached and experienced, practiced.

This principle may be considered from many points. First let us regard the civilizations in their historical development and development of this principle in this interconnection. Even more we could dare to differentiate the stages of such a development according to this principle manifestation. As the first stage we could refer it to the stage of integrity of God principle with Nature. All the phenomena of Nature were regarded as manifestation of God, the omni powerful, omni existing, omni living Force. Love for God was manifested in absolute devotion, absolute worshipping, absolute subordination and coordination with Nature and its laws.

Kyrgyz culture though greatly influenced by the Soviet atheism almost during a century, have retained all these ancient traditions of regarding the Nature and all the living phenomena within as manifestation of God, demonstrated in

different rituals, customs, habits, some of them existing up to this modern time in real life or being depicted in their rich Art and Folklore - legends, fair-tales, epical songs - great and small.

This period of the so called "Nature worshiping" or period of "shamanism" or "zoroastrizm" should be re-evaluated in regards with the necessity of considering it as an inevitable path of human history as in an individual history when such a period may be associated with a childhood, not knowing contradictions of soul and reason, body and feelings, nature and human being.

For a child mind everything comes in wonderful non-reflected and non-speculated unity, integrity, oneness. We should have a dialogue with our own history first, we should settle our own contradictions first, should find harmony within ourselves first, in order to prepare for a dialogue with other cultures and civilizations. This is the same as one person is preparing to have a dialogue with another person. In order to understand the other person and appreciate him as he is worth of, one should understand himself, his own roots and heritage, his own state. One should purify his mind and heart. One should possess or develop the ability of understanding the other person not saying of another culture and civilization. Only provided with that, the dialogue may be as efficient as it is possible.

This self understanding refers to the very question of the ancient stages of beliefs regarded by most of nowadays people as if ancient people did crimes. And it is not unknown that some retained in human memory and thus their every day life ancient traditions seemed as "nature worshiping" rituals are in most cases fully and categorically rejected and proclaimed as to be sin and to be blamed.

Let us have a glance at many million Moslems hadj perfection, and will the reflection over this wonderful movement of human spirit not remind us an image o

pilgrimage to sacred places and worshipping them regarded as true manifestation of Supreme Omni Powerful God?

Only Love for Him demonstrated in self - rejected devotion and sacrificing, is moving a human to pass all the difficulties and tortures of the long way, in its direct and figural meaning, in order to have a long perished and all heartily desired Meeting with Him. It is such rational or scientific comparison of ancient and modern civilizations unity or similarity to be cultivated, as it is supposed, that will help get rid of their clashes, displayed sometimes in views of modern religious authorities to accuse and strongly blame some tendencies of old traditions living in some places among people.

It is more important to study their essence, reveal their reasons, understand them from the point of rationality than to furiously decline and throw away. This is the point where a dialogue is needed. This is the very point where contradictions and discomfort in our own self should be solved. This is the point where the approach from the view of "Love for God" principle should be taken as the basis of a dialogue for exactly this principle is a fundamental one in all the cultures and civilizations. To respect human rights of choice freedom in religious affairs is the next moral basis of successful dialogue for the sake of Sustainability, Creativity and Progress.

Let me demonstrate some examples on our rituals among the ancient Kyrgyzes some of them to be existing even now. Manifestation of God in all the phenomena of Nature - is an essential characteristics of pre-Islamic culture of the Kyrgyz people.

The Kyrgyz history, traditions, customs, art, the whole culture may be regarded as a unique culture, ecologically oriented in all its manifestations. Their way of life, economy, thinking, actions were uniquely ecological. And to-day when we are suffering difficulties of transitive period and thus of a

good deal of environmental problems we should first of all appeal to this traditional heritage of the Kyrgyz people to give a re-birth to our traditional mentality, to appeal to our own roots, to develop a dialogue with ourselves and within selves.³

It should be said that the Soviet time though it brought many positive results in the economical, political, educational life of the Kyrgyz people, made a great fault in having destroyed the institute of religion gone from the time immemorial thus fully minimizing its role as an inner strongly regulating force of peoples' behavior. In the attempt to unify mentality of all the people of the Soviet Union and socialist countries developing the mentality of the so called one "soviet narod" (people, nation) a great deal of unique traditions, rituals, customs were gradually becoming to be forgotten, especially by younger generations.

Even the native language was being replaced by one more powerful (in its historic, social and political aspects) language - Russian. A nation forgetting its own native language is not surprising to have forgotten its own heritage. It was the Soviet time when Kyrgyz people the same as other Soviet ones learned to drink alcohol and some of them to become terrible alcoholics as never they had done and been before. It was this time when they learned to be double-minded, to conduct a disordered life, to do crimes, to divorce, to leave children to grow without ever knowing what love of loving mother or father means... .

³ Umut Asanova, "Philosophy of Environmental Ethics Education," Papers to the NATO ARW: *The Issyk-Kul Lake: Evaluation of Environmental Status its Remediation*. Held 25-29 May, 2000, in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. Series of NATO Publications (Brussels, 2001), 14; Umut Asanova, Asel Abdurakhmanova, "Problems of Education in Islam Philosophy," *Izvestiya of National Academy of Sciences* (2001): 15-17. (In Russian).

It is not surprising then what and how will be the attitude of them to the Nature, or to the principle of "Love for God". A person not able to feel other person's sorrow and pain never is able to feel pain for the Nature or experience a Devotion to God. A person not responsible in his own social and family life never is able to be responsible for the Nature, all this being the result of forgetting the Supreme Power ruling the laws of Nature and Human life. So the primary task is to awaken a consciousness of God, Love for Him and devotedly serving Him. The law of Nature, the Law of God is to grow, to move spontaneously to happiness, order, harmony, quietness. This law also lies in the base of Human's body. This law of natural intention of a body must be taken as a basis for an education of human ethics founded on Love for God principle. This may be reached by the transcendental meditation practice as one of the necessary and most powerful intellectual tools of harmonizing the human mind first. ⁴

The second powerful instrument of divine ethics education is as it was told above - appealing to our own heritage. Rich folklore, very unique in their symbolic meanings traditions, rituals, customs may serve as this ever strong tool. Cult of Nature and considering it to be God's manifestation - this is the most important characteristics of the Kyrgyz and Mongol Traditional heritage. Cult of mountains, rivers, water, lakes, trees, different animals, sky, sun, moon, earth and other natural phenomena to be loved and worshiped as Omni Present Being runs all through different legends, fair tales, epical songs, taboo, traditions and rituals.

These traditions of the Nature worshipping have been retained up to present days, displayed in different rituals of

⁴ Umut Asanova, "On the Universals in Monumental Memorials of the Oral Culture of Different Cultures (on the examples of Mahabharata, Bible, Manas)," *Izvestiya of the Kyrgyz National University after Jusup Balasagyn. Special Issue* (2012): 84-91.

sacrifices to the God of Sky, called *Tengri*, which refers also to the Sun *Tengri* or the Moon *Tengri*. The concept of *Tengri* is associated with the highest God - the Sky. Moreover its meaning is very much broader, embracing the meaning of the Universe. Attitude to different places as to sacred ones (*mazars*) and performing the rituals of pilgrimage and worshiping - is another aspect of the cult of Nature.

The Issyk - Kul Lake was the very sacred place (*mazar*) to perform the pilgrimage and worshiping not more than some centuries ago. Even now one can meet traditional elderly people who do not even swim in the Lake and regards it as a divine (alive) phenomenon. Mountains and rivers running to the Lake were considered sacred, animated ones.

There are a lot of places such as Saimaly Tash, Cholpon Ata, located near the known resort town of the same name, Kara Kol Ata etc. considered as *mazars*. For ex., it is believed that a "*saint*" Cholpon Ata (Father Cholpon) was buried on the hill - *dobe*. There one could find two sources (springs), one - with hot and another one - with cold water, there grew poplars and willows. Barren women and sick people came here from the north coast of the Issyk-Kul Lake inhabiting from Chon Oructu till Toru Aigyr villages. Here people maintained rituals of sacrifices - the so called *tuile*. People took with them also sick cattle or sheep, spent the night, pronounced prayers, coming here on Thursdays night and departing on Fridays. Prayers for *Earth - Water (Jer-Suu)* were also done with the aim of requesting rain. Burials of rich people (*manaps*) living not far were also maintained here on the foot of the hill.

There is a belief that the spirit - patroness of the Issyk-Kul Lake is a legendary Fore-Mother of the *Bugu* (Deer) tribe - *Muyiyzduyi Ene* (Horned Mother). One can find a lot of legends concerning this horned mother - deer, who gave the birth to this tribe of Kyrgyzes - *bugu*.

The river Ack Suu (that is the inflow of the river of Jergalan, Issyk Kul basin) was very well known among ancient Kyrgyzes with its warm healing sources, called Alma - Arasan (mineral source in the valley of the river of Ack-Suu, another spring is called Altyn-Arasan), is rounded by dense trees, many apples to grow among them. These trees rounding the spring are considered sacred; one can find many rags of different colour and size hung on the trees: these were and are the sacrifices of Kyrgyzes to the genius of the spring. This *mazar* is called *Almaluu* (place where many apple trees grow, *alma* means apple trees), people in the past came here, cut the sheep, made bread, drank water from the spring, bathed in the dig filled with spring's water. Some visitors said that they had seen a white young camel (*ack tailack*). He is considered a "patron" of this spring (*bulacktyñ aesi*).

There are a lot of similar beliefs existing in the Kyrgyz culture, in the memory of the elderly Kyrgyz people. It would be wrong to consider them as only tales or simple prejudices. It might have taken centuries of experience for the Kyrgyz people in order to establish such a system of the God - Nature worshipping. We should rationalize them and see the main law in them: unity with Nature; living in harmony with it; strict subordination to natural laws that were not formulated as we are now trying to do, but it was just in practice without any theoretical speculation. It was a practical knowledge of the environmental laws.

And now when we see the Nature being in great danger together with people living within it will be more than silly to think that Kyrgyz people were ignorant in their knowledge of natural laws. The example of unique Kyrgyz natural astral (moon and sun) calendar and activity unexceptionally based on it (when to sow, move from one place to another for Kyrgyzes were nomadic people, when to marry, when to maintain big holidays, how to manage with cattle and sheep breeding, the names of months and years

according to the moon and the sun, and many other unique rules of every day life) is the bright evidence of this practical knowledge of the laws of Nature as manifestation of God's will.

So understanding of ancient stage of our own civilization, learning much from it, respecting it, explaining it as an objective and inevitable path of human development, having a dialogue within ourselves, is quite a necessary way of understanding another culture and civilization and having a beneficial dialogue with it.

The Dialogue of Civilizations may be really beneficial and fruitful when we can find their common religious bases. It sounds strange from the first glance - to find common roots of different cultures, different civilizations. These common roots may be displayed in their historical, ethnological, geographical and other aspects. We would rather talk of the spiritual, religious bases displayed in the concept of God and cultivation of the principle of "Love for God" in all cultures and civilizations. Great cultural monuments as "Bhagavat Gita", "Bible" and "Quran" are true manifestation of such a common religious principle.

The following comparison of three Books of God is aimed only at revealing of "Love for God" principle made rather on the basis of collecting lines from these Books testifying of common, unified grounds of different cultures and civilizations, then on rational analysis of them. "Love for God" principle demands the actualization of Love excluding dry rational logistics. It requires devotion and full acception of all human beings' rights to sing the Glory of God, praise Him, unexceptionally submit Him, serve Him - these the being a language of Love for All Mighty Being. The choice of lines from Great Books (Bible, Quran and Bhagavat Gita) was done just on chance without having scientifically differentiated their structures, history and other specifics. It is determined by the fact that the author of these lines has

not experienced rationalization of all these monuments in a scientific way, having got acquainted with Them only as a devoted reader, lover of Them and seeker of Truth. More and more being back to reading of Them the author has come to an idea: The ever reason of endless ideological religious battle is a simple ignorance of people of their own cultural heritage, their own Great Books' great meaning. Reading only some of the lines that might prove of one's convictions in this or that convenient for a struggle thought, not reflecting over the essential meaning, essential idea, thus cultivating it among people as an only truth and giving birth to negative feelings as isolation, extremism and alike, is our ever trouble interfering with a true and peaceful, creative dialogue.

On the contrary we are proposing to study these Great Spiritual Sources with Love Principle as God taught, with dialogue mentality and find wondrous spiritual fruits. This does not exclude scientific approaches leading to enlightenment, wonderful sparkles of thought and feelings, revealing new exciting sides of these eternal creations. Let us be back to our grounds, be back to Love, to our Omni Powerful Creator and Teacher. He lovely taught us Love Him and find in everybody His expansion, let us be good students and behave each other lovely and see in everybody our Single God's manifestation! Only then a Dialogue will be useful, fruitful and mutually beneficial!

Great monuments of Humankind were perfected with the aim of finding similarities, unity, equity in demonstration of the global and ever present rule: Love for God. Actually, each line of them is breathing with it. Glorifying, praising, devoting, bowing, hoping, believing - all these human feelings towards God - are the demonstration of Love and Hope for Mighty's Love towards a man.

Civilizations should only perpetually learn from them, learn their universal teaching. We can see that there is one Root of all the civilizations - the Root that is Being and that

for being aware of It one needs Love for Him. Love as a Tool, as a Means of Reaching a Being, as a Divine State of Consciousness, as a real Power for one's integrity with Being. These Monuments are the Words of God sent to a humankind in different time and different place. As it is said: One Sun may be shining in thousands of baskets with water remaining the one and the same, All Mighty God is the One and the Same though He may be named in different way, reflected in different way, explained in different way. All the civilizations have been cultivating this Principle - Principle of Love for God. This is the universal, general, overwhelming principle that lies in the base of all the civilizations and that should be restored and re-enlightened in order to build a new phase of contemporary civilizations coexistence.⁵

The dialogue is made by people belonging to different civilizations. For Dialogue mentality people should change their consciousness. There should take place a transformation of alienating consciousness to loving one. There is an urgent objective demand in it.

Alienating Consciousness leads to unhappiness, instability, chaos, disorder, thus different mental and physical diseases. Loving consciousness on the contrary leads to harmony, stability, order, happiness. There are physical and physiological laws lying in the base of Love for God - the supreme kind of Love differentiating from all other kinds of love. That is why Love for God is an Ideal State of Consciousness for all the Civilizations of all the epoches and all the times.

That is why Love for God remains for ever as an unreachable ideal, a high dream for people of all the civilizations.

⁵ Ibid.

It is extremely necessary to study the nature of Love for God not leaving it as a natural one, understandable merely by imagination for exactly This is all the civilizations integrity principle.

God is everywhere and in everybody. If you reach this divine state of mind then you begin love everything and everybody in spite of different culture, different education etc. Then a real Dialogue commences. Dialogue leading to Creativity, Peace, Harmony, Progress.

The XX century was a tragic century of Cultures Conflicts. May we construct the XXI century as a century of Peace and Love. May the Nostalgia for Love for God become a Real Love - the true base of Peoples' Progress and Happiness. All people have their natural rights in various ways of worshipping God. But we, scientists, have no right to misinterpret the very essence of these Great Books. Only appealing to them, to thorough investigation of common roots and ideas we could build a true base for a friendly dialogue, thus for actual development of the great law of life: Love for God, that means love and respect for everything and everybody, devotion, praising and glorifying each aspect of life for everything is God's expansion and manifestation. That means: to build heavens on the earth. May our today's international Dialogue promote a construction of this ever dreamt paradise in the whole world!

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Inclusive Symbolic Frames and Codes Shaping Cultural Identity and Values

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Abstract: Cultural identity frames, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others within a cultural context. The moral implications associated with symbolic codes in relation to cultural identity frames include the potential for misinterpretation, stereotyping, and marginalization. Moreover, the symbolic moral codes emphasize the importance of recognizing the dynamic nature of cultural identities and the need for inclusive representations in symbolic codes to foster understanding and respect across diverse cultural groups. The study concludes by discussing potential solutions to these challenges, such as promoting cultural sensitivity, engaging in dialogue, and embracing diverse perspectives to create more inclusive symbolic codes that accurately reflect the complexity of cultural identities. Ultimately, navigating symbolic codes in cultural identity frames requires a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and a commitment to respecting other cultural beliefs.

Keywords: symbolic, moral codes, culture, frames, identity, marginalization

Introduction

The symbolic codes are cultural identity frames that play significant roles in shaping how individuals perceive

themselves and others within a society. They have a cultural causal role in shaping action, through which people experience and express meaning.¹ Cultural identity frames are often open to interpretation, leading to the organization and shaping of people's interpretations of things and symbols, or representations, which serve to render the world self-evident symbols. There is variability in how different individuals or groups perceive them.² The moral implication of symbolic codes and identity frames is that what one group might consider a positive symbol of identity, another group might view as offensive or derogatory, leading to identity negotiation. In order to negotiate mindfully with people from diverse cultures, interactive identities play out in verbal and nonverbal symbolic forms for identity framing perspective.³ This can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and challenges in communication. Communication difficulties stemming from cultural and communication differences exist.⁴ It is often intertwined with power dynamics within a society. Although certain symbols or frames may be historically associated with dominant groups, while others may be linked to marginalized or oppressed communities. It can be made visible in our cultural

¹ Ann Swidler, "Culture in action: Symbols and strategies," *American sociological review* (1986): 273-86.

² Uri Gal and Nicholas Berente, "A social representations perspective on information systems implementation: Rethinking the concept of "frames"," *Information technology & people* 21.2 (2008): 133-54.

³ Stella Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory: Crossing cultural boundaries," *Theorizing about intercultural communication* 387 (2005).

⁴ Perihan Korkut, Mustafa Dolmaci, and Burcu Karaca, "A study on communication breakdowns: Sources of misunderstanding in a cross-cultural setting," *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 18.78 (2018): 139-58.

expressions, including language, symbols, and media of racial framing, and cultural racism more broadly, as it blames oppressed racial groups.⁵ This could lead to oppressive policies that result from racist nativist framing that constructs particular rights as benefits that undocumented communities should not be allowed to access.⁶ The ethical implications of power imbalances can perpetuate inequalities and hinder efforts towards social justice and equality. They can also reinforce stereotypes and prejudice when they are used to generalize or categorize individuals based on superficial characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, or religion.⁷ Discrimination and marginalization of certain groups within society, limiting their opportunities and perpetuating social divisions, are moral issues related to cultural appropriation. This occurs when elements of a marginalized culture are adopted or exploited by members of a dominant culture without understanding or respecting their significance. It is important to recognize and respect these hybrid identities and promote inclusivity and diversity in order to prevent further marginalization and discrimination. By embracing diversity and promoting cultural exchange, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society for all. While this can promote cultural exchange and understanding, it can also create challenges in maintaining

⁵ Eli K. Michaels, et al., "The water surrounding the iceberg: cultural racism and health inequities," *The Milbank Quarterly* 101.3 (2023): 768-814.

⁶ Lindsay Perez Huber, "Challenging racist nativist framing: Acknowledging the community cultural wealth of undocumented Chicana college students to reframe the immigration debate," *Harvard Educational Review* 79.4 (2009): 704-30.

⁷ Veronica Paz Arauco, et al., "Strengthening social justice to address intersecting inequalities post-2015," *London, Overseas Development Institute*, 2014, www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9213.

and preserving cultural heritage and identity in the face of homogenizing forces, expressed through language, which can pose challenges for individuals or groups who are not fluent in the dominant language of a society.⁸ This can lead to exclusion and marginalization, as well as difficulties in accessing resources and opportunities. Despite these moral implications, symbolic codes and cultural identity frames can also be sources of resistance and empowerment for marginalized communities.⁹ Through reclaiming and reinterpreting symbols and frames that have been used to oppress them, these communities can assert their agency and challenge dominant narratives, contributing to processes of social change and transformation.

Conceptual clarifications

Symbolic codes refer to the use of symbols, signs, and images to convey meaning beyond their literal interpretation.¹⁰ Symbolic codes involve the use of signs, symbols, and language to convey meaning, while cultural identity frames encompass the ways in which individuals perceive themselves within the context of their cultural backgrounds.¹¹ Symbols can have various meanings in a culture. Colors, objects, animals, and other symbols may hold different significance in different cultures. For example, the bald eagle represents strength, power, and freedom in the United

⁸ Gouri Shanker Meena, "Digital Media and Cultural Identity in India: A Globalization Perspective."

⁹ Ashraf Ibrahim Zidan, "Cultural Appropriation in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*," *Journal of the Faculty of Arts Port Said University*, no. 25 (2023).

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolism and interpretation* (Cornell University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Anat Rafaeli and Monica Worline, "Symbols in organizational culture," *Handbook of organizational culture and climate* 7 (2000): 1-84.

States, while the dragon symbolizes strength and wisdom in many Asian cultures.¹² These symbols often carry cultural significance and can evoke specific emotions or ideas. For instance, a red rose might symbolize love and passion in Western culture, while a white dove often represents peace and purity. In media, symbolic codes are used to convey themes, motifs, and messages to the audience. These can include colors, objects, gestures, and even characters. For instance, in literature, the use of a lighthouse might symbolize guidance or enlightenment. In film, a recurring motif of birds flying might represent freedom or escape.

Philosophies of symbolic codes and cultural frames

Philosophical views on symbolic codes and cultural identity frames delve into the intersection of language, symbols, and identity formations. One major philosophical perspective on symbolic codes and cultural identity frames is rooted in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation. Philosophers like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce explored how signs acquire meaning through their relationships with other signs and within specific cultural contexts, giving a mentalist account of meaning.¹³ From this viewpoint, symbolic codes are understood as tools for constructing and negotiating cultural identities. Another perspective draws from hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. Philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasize the role of language and interpretation

¹² Adrienne Phillips, "Cultural Symbol | Definition, Uses & Examples," *Study.com*, 2023, <https://study.com/learn/lesson/cultural-symbols-importance-examples.html>.

¹³ Gerard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs. Essays in Comparative Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1867).

in shaping our understanding of ourselves and others. In this view, cultural identity frames emerge through ongoing processes of interpretation and dialogue, where individuals negotiate meaning and significance within their cultural contexts. Postmodern philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault further complicate the relationship between symbolic codes and cultural identity frames by highlighting the instability and plurality of meaning. They argue that symbols are not fixed but are subject to multiple interpretations and power dynamics.¹⁴ Cultural identity, therefore, becomes a site of contestation and negotiation rather than a stable essence. In this sense, culture is sites of internal contestation, and the notion of true essence becomes meaningful to us when we are able to negotiate.¹⁵ Additionally, critical theorists like Stuart Hall examine how symbolic codes and cultural identity frames are shaped by broader social structures and power relations.¹⁶ They emphasize the role of media, institutions, and discourses in constructing and perpetuating certain cultural identities while marginalizing others. Overall, philosophical perspectives on symbolic codes and cultural identity frames offer rich insights into the complex ways in which individuals and communities make sense of themselves and their place in the world through language, symbols, and cultural practices. Symbolic codes and cultural identity frames are crucial elements in understanding how culture is communicated and

¹⁴ François Cusset, *French theory: how Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Rita Dhamoon, "Shifting from 'culture' to 'the cultural': Critical theorizing of identity/difference politics," *Constellations* 13.3 (2006): 354-73.

¹⁶ Michael J. Shapiro, "Language and Power: The Spaces of Critical Interpretation 1," *Language, Symbolism, and Politics* (Routledge, 2019): 269-87.

represented in various forms of media, including literature, film, art, and advertising.

Inclusive symbolic codes and frames

The concepts of inclusive symbolic codes and cultural frames are closely interconnected, as they both contribute to the construction of social reality and identity. Both are normative. It allows the relation of world and deserve inclusion side these symbolic sets are also tightly intertwined.¹⁷ Inclusive symbolic codes reflect the cultural values and norms of a society, while cultural frames shape individuals' interpretations and engagements with those symbols.¹⁸ Inclusive symbolic codes contribute to the representation of diverse identities within a society, validating the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups.¹⁹ Cultural frames influence how individuals perceive and internalize these representations, shaping their sense of identity and belonging. Inclusive symbolic codes foster social cohesion and solidarity by promoting a sense of belonging and recognition among diverse groups.²⁰ Cultural frames influence the extent to which individuals identify with and participate in collective efforts toward social justice and inclusion. Inclusive symbolic codes encompass a broad array

¹⁷ Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Twelve Citizen and Enemy as Symbolic Classification: On the Polarizing Discourse of Civil Society," *Cultivating differences: Symbolic boundaries and the making of inequality* (1992): 289-308.

¹⁸ Rhys H. Williams, "The cultural contexts of collective action: Constraints, opportunities, and the symbolic life of social movements," *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (2004): 91-115.

¹⁹ Stella Ting-Toomey and Tenzin Dorjee, *Communicating across cultures* (Guilford Publications, 2018).

²⁰ Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson, *Shaping school culture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

of visual, linguistic, and cultural cues deliberately crafted to foster inclusivity and representation across various contexts, including but not limited to media, advertising, education, and design.²¹ These codes are deeply embedded within societies and shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, thereby playing a crucial role in promoting diversity and equity. At the heart of inclusive symbolic codes lies the recognition of diversity in its myriad forms, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and socioeconomic status.

It is a philosophy that incorporates diverse representations into symbolic systems, challenging hegemonic norms and dismantling exclusionary narratives, thereby affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals. This deliberate act of representation extends beyond mere tokenism to authentically reflect the richness and complexity of human experiences. One of the most prominent manifestations of inclusive symbolic codes is the portrayal of diverse characters in media and popular culture. From films and television shows to advertisements and literature, the presence of protagonists and supporting characters from various backgrounds serves to normalize diversity and challenge stereotypes.²² Furthermore, inclusive symbolic codes extend beyond visual representation to encompass language and communication. Linguistic choices, such as gender-neutral pronouns and inclusive terminology, play a pivotal role in acknowledging and affirming the identities of marginalized groups. In education inclusive frames also serves as a critical

²¹ Henry Jenkins, "Fandom, negotiation, and participatory culture," *A companion to media fandom and fan studies* (2018): 11-26.

²² Jessica E. Tompkins and Nicole Martins, "Masculine pleasures as normalized practices: Character design in the video game industry," *Games and Culture* 17.3 (2022): 399-420.

domain for the dissemination of inclusive symbolic codes.²³ Curriculum materials, textbooks, and teaching practices should reflect the diversity of students' backgrounds and experiences. By incorporating diverse perspectives into educational content, educators can empower students to embrace their identities, challenge stereotypes, and develop critical thinking skills. Moreover, inclusive symbolic codes play a vital role in shaping organizational culture and policies. Workplace diversity initiatives, anti-discrimination policies, and inclusive hiring practices signal an organization's commitment to equity and inclusion. An anti-discrimination policy reinforces that commitment from the top by signaling that senior management assumes responsibility for equal employment issues and is committed to diversity.²⁴ "Inclusive symbolic codes" and "cultural frames" are fundamental concepts that shed light on how societies construct meaning, identity, and inclusivity. It explores the significance, interrelation, and implications of inclusive symbolic codes. Inclusive symbolic codes play a crucial role in shaping social interactions, identities, and power dynamics, as well as the ability to represent and accommodate diverse groups within a society, including marginalized communities based on factors such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion.²⁵ Language serves as one of the primary mediums through which inclusive symbolic codes are transmitted.²⁶ Inclusive language

²³ Ingrid Piller and Kimie Takahashi, "Linguistic diversity and social inclusion," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 14.4 (2011): 371-81.

²⁴ Alan S. Gutterman, "Embedding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," *SSRN* (December 20, 2023).

²⁵ Nicole M. Stephens, Lauren A. Rivera and S. S. Townsend, "What works to increase diversity? A multi-level approach," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 39 (2020): 1-51.

²⁶ Basil Bernstein and J. Gould, *A socio-linguistic approach to social learning* (1965).

acknowledges and respects the diversity of identities and experiences within a society. Cultural practices and rituals carry symbolic meanings that reflect societal values and norms.²⁷ Inclusive practices accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds and beliefs, ensuring that everyone feels respected and represented. Cultural frames refer to the lenses through which individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of the world around them. These frames are shaped by cultural beliefs, values, norms, and experiences, influencing how individuals understand themselves and others. Cultural frames serve as cognitive frameworks that guide behavior, decision-making, and social interaction. Cultural Identity: Cultural frames influence how individuals perceive their own identities and the identities of others.²⁸ For example, someone belonging to a collectivist culture may prioritize group harmony and interdependence, while someone from an individualistic culture may emphasize personal autonomy and achievement. Social hierarchies and power dynamics also shape perceptions of social hierarchies and power dynamics. In some cultures, hierarchical structures based on factors such as age, gender, or social class are deeply ingrained, influencing patterns of authority, respect, and deference. The interpretation of events and phenomena determines how individuals interpret events, phenomena, and social issues.²⁹ Different cultural perspectives may lead to varying understandings of the same situation, highlighting the subjective nature of reality. Cultural frames influence approaches to conflict resolution and cooperation. Cultural differences in

²⁷ Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy," *Sociological theory* 22.4 (2004): 527-73.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hagar Salamon and Harvey E. Goldberg, "Myth-Ritual-Symbol," *A Companion to Folklore* (2012): 119-35.

communication styles, negotiation strategies, and conflict resolution mechanisms can lead to misunderstandings or facilitate constructive dialogue.³⁰ However, achieving inclusivity in symbolic codes and cultural frames is not without challenges. Dominant cultural narratives and power structures often marginalize certain groups, perpetuating exclusion and inequality.³¹ Addressing these challenges requires deliberate efforts to deconstruct oppressive symbols and narratives while promoting alternative representations and perspectives. By reimagining and redefining inclusive symbolic codes and cultural frames, societies can facilitate social change and transformation. This involves challenging entrenched stereotypes, biases, and prejudices while amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized communities.

The Relevance of Identity Frame and Codes

Understanding symbolic codes requires cultural literacy, as the meaning of symbols can vary across different cultures and contexts.³² What holds significance in one culture may not have the same meaning in another. For example, while the color white symbolizes purity in Western cultures, it can signify mourning in some Eastern cultures. In Africa, stories construct cultural identities and are considered important by a significant number of people, shaping the symbolic world and narratives of institutional identities.³³ Cultural

³⁰ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (Routledge, 2002).

³¹ Mark Shucksmith, "Class, power and inequality in rural areas: beyond social exclusion?," *Sociologia ruralis* 52.4 (2012): 377-97.

³² Bernardo Ferdman, "Literacy and cultural identity," *Harvard educational review* 60.2 (1990): 181-205.

³³ Donileen R. Loseke, "The study of identity as cultural, institutional, organizational, and personal narratives: Theoretical and empirical integrations," *The Sociological Quarterly* 48.4 (2007): 661-88.

identity frames refer to the ways in which cultural identity is constructed and represented within media texts. These frames shape how individuals and groups perceive themselves and others within their cultural context and reinforce the values, beliefs, and norms of the dominant culture within a society. While culture plays a significant role in shaping our view of the world, these frames are also supported and reinforced by the existing cultural norms.³⁴ They often marginalize or exclude minority cultures, reinforcing power imbalances. Challenging the dominant culture, these frames offer alternative perspectives, values, and identities. It may highlight the experiences of marginalized or oppressed groups and critique mainstream ideologies. The frame acknowledges the blending of different cultural influences and identities. It recognizes that cultural identity is fluid and can be shaped by multiple factors, such as migration, globalization, and diaspora.³⁵ The frame emphasizes the process of individuals or groups adopting the cultural norms and values of the dominant culture, often at the expense of their own cultural heritage. This frame highlights acts of resistance against cultural assimilation or oppression. It celebrates cultural pride, resilience, and activism within marginalized communities. Cultural identity frames are often used in media analysis to examine how cultural identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested within different media texts. They provide

³⁴ Stella Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory: Crossing cultural boundaries," *Theorizing about intercultural communication* 387 (2005).

³⁵ Ann Swidler, "Culture in action: Symbols and Strategies," *American sociological review* (1986): 273-86.

insight into power dynamics, representation, and cultural politics within society.

Conclusion

Symbolic codes and cultural identity frames play integral roles in shaping how culture is represented and understood. They influence how individuals perceive themselves and others within their cultural context and provide valuable insight into power dynamics and cultural politics. Understanding these codes and frames is essential for critically analyzing and interpreting media representations of culture. In conclusion, inclusive symbolic codes serve as powerful tools for challenging exclusionary narratives, promoting diversity and equity, and fostering belonging and representation. This approach not only fosters a sense of belonging and representation for marginalized groups but also challenges dominant narratives and promotes social justice. It is crucial for all sectors of society to actively engage in the process of diversifying symbolic systems to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and their experiences are acknowledged. Embracing diversity in symbolic representation is a powerful tool for promoting equity, understanding, and solidarity among all members of society.

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IN FOCUS

The experience of Deification in the Spiritualities of the Night: from Early Eastern Christianity to Saint John of the Cross

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Abstract: According to the mystical Christian tradition, the utmost point of union with the Divine is experienced by humans as “deification”. In this study, I show the continuous trend of values and experiences proposed by what we can call “Spiritualities of the night”. For the spiritualities of the night, the knowledge of God is concealed to the mind unless the human person undergoes a process of purification and union with God in love, this culminates in ecstasy as an experience of ultimate union. The darkness involved in the senses and understanding is, nonetheless, valued as an itinerary of growth. The study traces the continuity of this tradition from Saint Gregory of Nyssa, then moves into Evagrius Ponticus, then on Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, to Saint Symeon the New Theologian up to Saint John of the Cross.

Keywords: Spirituality of the night, John of the Cross, Deification, Eastern Christian Spirituality

Introduction

The use of the symbols of light and darkness, day and night, sun and clouds is a favourite metaphor of Christian spiritualities that emphasise both experience and the apophatic nature

of mysticism and the experience of the Divine. In this article, I would like us to call these spiritualities with the general term “spiritualities of the night” (though one might as well use terms such as darkness, cloud, etc.). This article proposes to establish that the spiritualities of the night are a continuous and growing tradition that originates in the early patristic times and flourishes in the works of St. John of the Cross. The goal of human life and of revelation is to bring human beings to their true end: transformation and union with the Divine. In the Eastern tradition, this is contained in the term “deification”. I will argue that the transformation and union that St John of the Cross testifies in his works is this same deification and that there is a consistency and deepening of the tradition received in his contributions to the mystical Christian Tradition. Sanjuanine understanding of deification and divinisation puts him in direct touch with the tradition of the spiritualities of the night.

In these lines the progression will start from the Capadocian fathers with particular focus on St. Gregory of Nysa, will then touch on some of the aspects of Evagrius Ponticus’ thought, then it will introduce the outstanding contribution of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite and before entering into St John of the Cross will consider the ideas of St. Symeon the New Theologian. The list of authors is certainly longer but the space here is limited and we want to chiefly talk about the main similarities and progression that are relevant to the argument: we want to consider the way in which the spiritualities of the night allow the interaction of the triadic structure of theology: symbolic theology, cataphatic and apophatic theology. This proposal originally comes from Pseudo Dionysius but it reaches an impressive development and profundity in St John of the Cross.

The spiritualities of the night emerged, as Andrew Louth (2006) rightly points out, from the crisis of Christian

Platonism. Indeed, the work of some early Christian Platonists had the danger of considering the soul limited part and parcel of God's being, and the risk of Pantheism was real. Some early spiritualities such as Origen's, though not explicitly, had this risk. Origen's spirituality is a spirituality of the light, he follows St. Clement of Alexandria in considering ecstasy as a union with the Divine and this is given in terms of light. The recognition of the "*Creatio ex nihilo*" was a very definite move to cut every temptation of pantheism, and it also reminded Christians that God was completely and radically different in being from all creation, and thus the apophatic negative way was the natural approach that will be cautious of respecting God's sovereignty. However, the Christian Platonic mysticism did not disappear but transformed. The nature of this Christian Platonic mysticism was negative, but with this apophatic way gained a deeper grasp of the mystical experience: apophatic way leaves the door open to the inexhaustible nature of God's presence, and it recognised in a better way the always surprising and creative nature of God's love. This apophatic way is the original source of the metaphors that allow us to see God in the darkness, in the night and in the cloud. The light that can only be seen in the darkness and through the clouds then, develops the paradox of God's knowledge: we cannot know God through concepts, encapsulate his being in human comprehension, but we can know God in love. The mystical knowledge of love, nonetheless, has a very powerful cataphatic and symbolic depth and renders us a huge deal of spiritual knowledge of God: this is the reason why the negative way tells us so much about the Trinity and about our own souls, in the loving relationship the deeper nature of ourselves and the image and presence of God in ourselves is disclosed. This is the reason why the humble beginnings of the spirituality of the night get to the towering profundity of St. John of the Cross, who explains to the profi-

cient the different nights (the *Dark night*) of the spiritual itinerary and the caverns of our own selves (the *Living Flame*). Since Christianity also has a positive knowledge of God by revelation and mediated by sacramental realities, its mysteries are also objects of cataphatic and symbolic reflection, in other words, the theology of mysticism is integrated by the acknowledgment of the Triune revealed God that is known in His acts of love. The intimate nature of Christian mystical experience is lived and described by St. John of the Cross as a “cauterisation”, a burning intimate experience that transforms, but the nights of the senses and the spirit are a necessary preparation across the tradition.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa

The most important of the three Cappadocians fathers (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Basil of Caesarea and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus) for the spirituality of the night is Saint Gregory of Nyssa. From his work, in addition to the continuation of the mystical tradition, we also have a strong biblical grasp of this spirituality, and, as it will become very clear below, there are two favourite Biblical sources that we will find continuously studied over and over again: The *Song of Songs*¹, that develops the spousal union in the mystical experience; and Moses’ ascent to the Sinai, which becomes the powerful archetype of the soul’s ascent (and inward descent) to God. God in Gregory’s Homilies on the *Song of Songs* appears as a lover who enamours the soul. He speaks of the soul’s successive entry into light, cloud, and darkness: *phos*, *nephelē*, and *gnophos*. This is the guiding metaphor for the apophatic aspect of the encounter, but he also acknowledges the cataphatic and symbolic value of revelation and the mysteries (sacraments) of the

¹ However, the mystical path was already described by Origen by commenting the *Song of Songs*, so Gregory builds in this same established tradition.

church that provide us with real knowledge of God. Gregory's understanding of the three ways of knowing God is illustrated in his *Life of Moses*. And in this text from his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he discloses how the three ways are manifested:

The revelation of God to the great Moses began with light as its medium, but afterwards God spoke to him through the medium of a cloud, and when he had become more lifted up and more perfect, he saw God in darkness. What we learn from this is something like the following: the first withdrawal from false and erroneous notions about God takes the form of a transition from darkness to light. More attentive apprehension of hidden realities, which leads the soul to the invisible realm by way of what appears, is like a cloud that casts a shadow on everything that appears but yet induces and accustoms the soul to look upon what is hidden. But the soul that has made its way through these stages to higher things, having left behind whatever is accessible to human nature, enters within the innermost shrine of the knowledge of God and is entirely seized about by the divine darkness; and in this darkness, since everything that appears and is comprehended has been left outside, only the invisible and the incomprehensible remain for the soul's contemplation—and in them God is, just as the Word says concerning the Lawgiver: “Moses entered into the darkness where God was”(Exod 20:21).²

St Gregory has an abundant vocabulary to express that the contemplation of the Divine departs from the initial light

² Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 11,” in *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 339-41.

of faith that illumines the person and participates in the mysteries of God's loving *energies* (actions). He believes in *theoria*-contemplation, but wants us to be aware of the importance of entering the cloud and darkness of the senses in order to be truly contemplative. In the *Life of Moses*, he tells us:

The Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness. Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated.

For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, 'No one has ever seen God', thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.³

³ Gregory of Nyssa, "Book II," in *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), n. 162-3, p. 94.

The Cappadocians' contributions to the doctrine of deification are many and too deep to be summarised here. However, an important concept that marked their influence on the subsequent mystical tradition was the understanding of the Greek word "*Ektasis*", which means a lot more than our contemporary word "Ecstasy". It is a word composed of the preposition "*Ek*", meaning "outside" and "*stasis*" position; "*Ek-stasis*, *Ektasis*" then means a movement from an inside to the outside, and its theological use was to explain the divine movement of God's energies, i.e., God's way of acting: God created the cosmos in a movement out of nothing conferring being to reality. God loves by "*Ektasis*": by giving Himself; God saved us by an "*Ektasis*" in the incarnation and His Paschal mystery. There was an "ecstatic" deed in God's self-emptying (*Kenosis*) in the Incarnation and God's self-emptying (*Tapeinosis*) in experiencing death on the cross (Flp 2). Man is a being brought to God's otherness by an "*Ektasis*" of receiving faith. The ascetic life (the practical life, as the fathers like to say) is "*ektasis*" from our own ways into God's ways. Mystical contemplation is, then, for the Cappadocians (and more specifically for Gregory of Nyssa) a life of ecstatic contemplation. Thomas Merton, on this regards tells us:

The Fathers, unanimous in stating that divinization is the end of the Christian life, stress the transformation of the Christian in Christ. In all these treatments there has been present the acknowledgement that our gnosis and divinization involve a transitus, a passing over into a hidden realm, so that our "life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). This implies that the experience of union with Christ is a hidden experience, something secret and incommunicable, an experience of something that is hidden on the ordinary levels of

Christian life. Hence we must discuss the first appearance of the concept of mysticism and mystical experience in Christian tradition.⁴

Thus, Saint Gregory's mysticism is an apophatic (negative) "mysticism of night". Why did Gregory of Nyssa stress the mysticism of night and unknowing? The dogmatic reasons for this are to be sought in the treatises of St. Basil *On the Holy Spirit* and of St. Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*. In these we can appreciate a needed acknowledgement of the limits of human reason, this care is also present in the homilies preached by St. John Chrysostom "*On the Incomprehensibility of God*." The Eunomians or Anomeans were Arians who held that the essence of God could be and was known, this was the core of the "gnostic" heresy that led to a false and oversimplified intellectualism in contemplation.

For Gregory and Basil, thus, the mystical ascent is negative: The ascent to God in Gregory of Nysa (*De Vita Moy-sis*) is a passage from light to obscurity to total darkness. To penetrate into the total darkness is to enter into the "Holy of Holies", the sanctuary of God, ' *Lampros gnophos*'. Gregory describes the process of the spiritual life as a triple way, as stated above. The triple way unfolds as follows: First, the image of light represented by the burning bush means purification—we die to the passions by *apatheia*. Second, the image of the cloud (obscurity) means illumination of the intellect (*gnosis*)—we die to intellectual knowledge on the natural level and attain *theoria (physica)*, i.e., contemplation. Third, we enter the "Holy of Holies," namely, the deep Darkness that means union—not *gnosis* (knowledge) but *ousia* (substance). For Gregory and Basil, the exercise of the spiritual senses is limited and analogical. In this exercise of "unknowing", grace, or

⁴ Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2017), 46.

the action of the Holy Spirit, supplies for the inaction of the senses as well as the limits of our minds.

Evagrius Ponticus

For Evagrius, prayer is the activity that allows human beings to be themselves fully. In Evagrius's language this is understood as a conversation in which the human being needs to search for “purity of heart”. Stillness (*hesychia*) and dispassion (*apatheia*) are at the beginning of the itinerary, but their tension is towards peace (*anapausis*), delight and joy (*chara*), and love (*agapē*) through desire (*pothos*). The constructive phase in the movement of prayer, according to Evagrius is integrative, at this stage, he calls prayers “the issue of joy and thanksgiving”.⁵ In what ways do the dynamism of asceticism and mystical presence come together in a unifying joy? I believe that this can also be appreciated and compared with a liturgical analogy that Evagrius used: The daily monastic office in the desert settlements of Nitria, Sketis, and Kellia (in the golden age of the Desert fathers and mothers) included monastic service in the evening, this service was extended in Saturday nights to reach the time of Eucharist at dawn.⁶ The “gnostic life” as described by Evagrius is a similar itinerary: the *synaxis* of our life of prayer is encouraged by “thoughts of light”⁷ that help us persevere in the ascetic life, but the end in sight is the dawn of transformation and contemplation, the

⁵ Evagrius of Pontus, “Chapters on Prayer,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, ed. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford Early Christian Studies & Oxford University Press, 2003), n. 15, p. 194.

⁶ See Rufinus of Aquileia, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2009), XXIII, n. 1, p. 113.

⁷ Of Pontus, “To Eulogios. On the Confession of Thoughts and Counsel in their Regard,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, chap. 9, p. 35.

mind and the heart are transfigured and unified in love, the human being experiences the “contemplation of the worlds”, which is a way to express that the end of love is knowledge of God,⁸ a participation on the “*perichoresis*” and divine life of the Holy Trinity. Kevin Corrigan writes on this: “Impassibility and rest from dividedness (*anapausis*) raise the heart through soul into the mind where in the wisdom of God, the heart becomes enlarged with ‘contemplations of the worlds’”.⁹

Since the *nous* (mind, soul) is created for the knowledge of God and is constituted by three dimensions, then contemplation will have a consequence in each of the dimensions of the soul, one can also sense a hint that there is a Trinitarian participation convenient to each dimension of the soul, but for now it is enough to see how Evagrius sees them actualised:

Since the rational (*logiké*) soul is tripartite according to our wise teacher, when virtue arises in the rational part (*logistikón*) it is called prudence (*phrónesis*), understanding (*synesis*), and wisdom (*sophía*); when it arises in the concupiscible part it is called chastity (*sôphrosyne*), love (*agapê*), and abstinence (*egkrateia*); and when it arises in the irascible part is called courage (*andreía*) and perseverance (*hypomonê*); but when it penetrates the entire soul it is called justice (*dikaiosynê*).¹⁰

⁸ Of Pontus, “To Monks in Monasteries and Communities,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, n. 3, p. 122.

⁹ Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory. Mind, Should and Body in the 4th Century* (London: Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology, 2009), 66.

¹⁰ Of Pontus, “The Monk: A Treatise on the Practical Life,” in *Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius of Pontus, The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, n. 89, p. 111.

Interestingly enough, the “wise teacher” here is former teacher and guide, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, and this is relevant to understand that the unitive peace of contemplation is also a manifestation of the deification of our beings. But even Evagrius himself understands the need of the night and the darkness, the knowledge of the “holy ignorance”:

3.86. Blessed is the one who has loved nothing from the secondary natural contemplation except the contemplation itself [...].

3.87. Blessed is the one who has hated nothing from the primary contemplation of natures, except their evilness [...].

3.88. Blessed is the one who has reached the knowledge that cannot be abolished (beyond what cannot be, it cannot be gone).¹¹

Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite

The writings of Dionysius are a thoughtful fusion of Neoplatonist cosmology and a core of Christianity, with clear influences of Plotinus and Proclus¹². The prestige of these writings

¹¹ Evagrius of Pontus, “Third Discourse”, in *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika. A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, trans. Illaria L. E. Ramelli (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), n. 86-88, pp. 193-94.

¹² We still have four treatises and ten letters that are in close relationship with each other.

Treatises: *On Divine Names*: inquires on the essence and attributes of the Divine. *On Mystical Theology*: studies the union of God and the human soul. *On Celestial Hierarchy*: presents the different angelical beings and their grouping in triads with three choirs each (Seraphim, Cherubim, and thrones; virtues, dominations and powers; principates, archangels and angels). *On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: He draws a parallelism between the triads of sacraments, three sacerdotal degrees and three lay degrees (of which the last one divides in three).

was huge in all the Middle Ages (Thomas Aquinas alone quotes him 1700 times). For Pseudo Dionysius the itinerary of mystical theology is necessarily triadic: there is symbolic theology, cataphatic theology and apophatic theology. The level of analogical thought had a powerful impact on Saint Thomas Aquinas and many other important mediaeval mystics, it will also have an important place to play in St. John of the Cross's continuation of the mystical tradition. As cause and principle of all things, God encompasses all names, but being infinite cannot be reduced to any definite description, not even the totality of things (transcends all) and then it is 'innominable'. From here we have to walk the apophatic way, which means negating everything that in any perfection, to the eyes of a knowing being, can have imperfection: i.e., we need to describe what God is not, reaching a mystical silence and the naked conception beyond knowledge.

Some of Dionysius' later medieval interpreters suggest that God possesses the attributes of creatures in their most proper and ideal form, but Dionysius himself does not suggest this. Instead, the most proper object of the names is the highest creature. The exemplary instances of "goodness," "being," and "life", for example, are the highest of the angels or intelligible minds, as Dionysius also calls them. For this reason, Dionysius frequently refers to this type of name as an "intelligible name."

Dionysius incorporates into the number of intelligible names the traditional Neoplatonic intelligible categories: being, identity, difference, rest, and motion, as well as the Neoplatonic triad of being, life, and intellect. The fact that God transcends the proper meaning of these names does not mean that He ought to be called "non-being," "non-life," or "non-intellect." Dionysius prefers simply to say that God is "over being," "over life," and "over intellect", or perhaps beyond every category (even possible not yet known categories). Now, sym-

bolic theology enters the picture once the knowledge by unknowing is embraced. Symbolic theology is also the gate for mystical theology: The Godhead is beyond the lifeless as well as beyond the living. For this reason, Dionysius says that our affirmations of the godhead are not opposed to our negations, but that both must be transcended: even the negations must be negated. The most controversial and arcane passages of the *Mystical Theology* revolve around the mystical as taken in itself and not as the act of negating the other forms of theology. Dionysius says that after all speaking, reading, and comprehending of the names ceases, there follows a divine silence, darkness, and unknowing. With regards to the relationship between God and the world, Dionysius uses the term ‘emanation’ to explain creation (*ek-stasis*), but it is clearly far from the pantheism of other neoplatonism, for he defends the spontaneity and freedom of God in creating. God is not ‘obliged’ to create, but creates out of a completely free will, that is unknown to us. Nonetheless, even creation is an act of self-giving, of love. Dionysius continues to argue about this as follows:

And we must dare to affirm (for ‘tis the truth) that the Creator of the Universe Himself, in His Beautiful and Good Yearning towards the Universe, is through the excessive yearning of His Goodness, transported outside of Himself (*exo heautou ginetai*) in His providential activities towards all things that have being, and is touched by the sweet spell (*thelgetai*) of Goodness, Love (*agapesis*) and Yearning (*eros*), and so is drawn (*katagetai*) from His transcendent throne above all things, to dwell within the heart of all things, through a super-essential and ecstatic power whereby He yet stays within Himself.¹³

¹³ Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Divine Names,” in *The Mystical Theology and The Divine Names*, trans. C. E. Rolt (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), chap. IV, n. 13, p. 106.

Dionysius consolidates the mystical tradition as a triple quest to love and know the loving Trinity: symbolic theology, cataphatic theology and apophatic mystical theology. With his comprehensive corpus of works, Dionysius will leave a heritage of movement from God (as the creator) to God (as the end of all things). St John of the Cross will receive this heritage in the works of the great scholastics, as a mysticism of *Exitus-reditus* (exit and return).

Saint Symeon the New Theologian

Saint Symeon the New Theologian (Greek: Συμεών ὁ Νεός Θεολόγος; 949-1022) was a monk and poet, he was the last of three saints canonised by the Eastern Church and given the title of "Theologian" (along with John the Apostle and Gregory of Nazianzus). "Theologian" was not applied to Symeon in the modern academic sense of academic theology. The title was designed only to recognise someone who spoke from personal experience of the vision of God. One of his principal teachings was that humans could and should experience *theoria*. Saint Symeon sings in one of his *Ethical Discourses* in joy very similar to that of St. John of the Cross' *Living Flame*:

O grandeur of ineffable glory! O excess of love! He Who embraces all things makes his home within a mortal corruptible an, He by Whose indwelling might all things are governed, and the man becomes as a woman heavy with child. O astonishing miracle and incomprehensible deeds and mysteries of the incomprehensible God! A man carries God consciously within himself as light, carries Him Who has brought all things into being and created them, including the one who carries Him now. He carries Him within as a treasure inexpressible, unspeakable, without quality, quantity, or form, immaterial, shapeless, yet with form in beauty

inexplicable, altogether simple, like light, Him Who transcends all light. Who can then adequately explain the joy of such a man? Will he not be more blessed and more glorious than any emperor?¹⁴

The mysticism of union and transformation is for St Symeon, an itinerary of being set on God's fire, but this requires being accustomed to having all the other lights turned off, the soul needs to be comfortable, as it were, in the darkness of unknowing. Symeon tells us on this:

God is fire and He is so called by all the inspired Scripture (cf. Heb. 12:29). The should of each of us is a lamp. Now a lamp is wholly in darkness, even though it be filled with oil or tow or other combustible matter, until it receives fire and is kindled... The man whose soul's lamp is still in darkness, that is, untouched by the divine fire, stands the more in need of a guide with a shining torch who will discern his actions.¹⁵

Saint John of the Cross

Saint John of the Cross is the final stage in our progression, in this short study we will amply see how he developed the received tradition to a new depth. Saint John of the Cross, actually, directly quotes many of the spiritualities of the night in his commentaries to his works. In this short space, we will briefly consider in which ways he developed the mystical tradition and how deep his understanding of the experience of deification came to be.

¹⁴ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, trans. Alexander Golitzin, vol. 1-2 (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 135.

¹⁵ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C. J. De Catanzaro, vol. 1-2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 339.

For St. John of the Cross, we draw close to God in being called to depart from ways of prayer and devotion that give satisfaction in themselves and, out of love for God in Himself, to enter on the night of contemplation. We should remember that he writes for nuns and friars (and experienced lay people too) who are considered “proficient”. This means that he presupposes that there has been a progression that at least presupposes a night of the senses. So John says:

The first and chief benefit this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery. Besides the fact that all the favors God imparts to the soul are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge, the aridities and voids of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make the soul recognize its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of its prosperity.¹⁶

What is indirect in the spiritualities of the night becomes very clear in the works of St. John of the Cross: while in the mystical tradition, the darkness and night are associated with knowledge, for John of the Cross there is a clear distinction of different nights: firstly, the night of the senses, then the time of proficiency and finally the dark night of the spirit.

The works *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (*Subida al monte Carmelo*) (1581-1585) and *Dark Night* (*La noche oscura*) (the *Declaración*, 1584-1586) are commentaries on the homonymous poem, explaining its meaning line by line. The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is divided into three books that reflect the two

¹⁶ Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (London: ICIS Publications, 1991), Book I, chap. XII, n. 2, p. 385.

first phases of the dark night. The first is a purification of the senses (titled "The Active Night of the Senses"). The second and third books describe the more intense purification of the spirit (titled "The Active Night of the Spirit"). The active purification of the senses reflects the first of the classical three stages of the mystical journey, followed by those of illumination and then union. The passive purgation of the spirit takes place between illumination and full union, when the presence of God has already been felt but is not stable. At the beginning of the commentary *Dark Night*, John wrote:

In this first stanza, the soul speaks of the way it followed in its departure from love of both self and all things. Through a method of true mortification, it died to all these things and to itself. It did this so as to reach the sweet and delightful life of love with God. And it declares that this departure was a dark night. As we will explain later, this dark night signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things.¹⁷

The dark night of the soul is a stage of final and complete purification, and involves experiences of confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of the withdrawal of God's presence: these are all very important mystical experiences *per se*, real spiritual growth in ecstasy in the sense we considered in St. Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Dionysius and Symeon the New Theologian. This last night is the period of final "*un-selfing*" and the surrender to the Divine Will. The final stage is union in love (spiritual marriage) with the object of love, the Triune God. Here the self has been permanently

¹⁷ of the Cross, "The Dark Night," in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Book 1, n. 1, p. 360.

established on a transcendental level and liberated for a new purpose.

As Fr. Ronald Rolheiser (2018) explains, the different nights can be understood as stages of Christian discipleship: the night of the senses as the essential discipleship that struggles to get our life together; the stage of proficiency as the period of generative discipleship, in which we learn to give our lives away; and the dark night of the spirit as the stage of radical discipleship, or the struggle to “give our deaths away”.

Without a doubt, the Dark Night is really the greatest masterpiece of Spanish mystical poetry, but not only that, the commentary that accompanies it is really a well of insight in the nature of both God, the soul, and the transformative relationship between them. The words used for the poem “*Noche obscura*” really connect with the spirituality of the night in the ways mentioned above, for not only the term “night” but the Spanish word “*obscura*” not only translates to “darkness”, it actually translates to the mist or haze that the cloud effects *obscuring* the light. In other words, there is a sense of indeterminacy to the word “*obscura*” that goes beyond pure “darkness”.

The *Living Flame of Love* (*Llama de Amor Viva*) is a very important poem different to the *Dark Night* and often is recommended as a prolegomenon to the study of John of the Cross’s work. Indeed, for the *Living Flame* is as though the view from the summit helps us start the journey. The different dark nights are bearable because the cauterising power of the Holy Spirit is the tending force that guides the return (“*Reditus*”, “*Telos*”) to the creating Love.

When John of the Cross writes the commentary to the poem, he uses the Spanish word “*Declaración*”, this word more than commentary has the meaning of “Statement”, i.e., he is going to reveal the meaning of the poem in a similar way in which a person can provide a testimony. Thus, in the commentary to the Stanza III St John explains the “deep caverns of

feeling” within the soul, each of them corresponding to the potencies of the soul: memory, understanding and will. A soul that has been purified by the dark night is ready to experience the innate unfathomableness of God. St. John tells us:

It is an amazing thing that the least of these goods is enough so to encumber these faculties, capable of innate goods, that they cannot receive these innate goods until they are completely empty, as we shall see. Yet when these caverns are empty and pure [namely, when the soul is in complete detachment] the thirst, hunger, and yearning of the spiritual feeling is intolerable. Since they have deep cavities they suffer profoundly, for the food they lack, which as I say is God, is also profound.¹⁸

The caverns mean the triple understanding of the soul as having potencies: understanding, will and memory. However, the point of the caverns is that there is an infinite potential capacity and longing for God in the soul, one that speaks of the Image of the Trinity that created it. The fourth Stanza talks about spiritual marriage, the moment of union by which the Holy Spirit kisses, and cauterises, the soul. This union is transformative and divinising: the experience of complete union in love that gives the full completion of the itinerary of the soul into searching for the beloved God, and the God that emptying Himself gives Himself fully to the soul. Let us remember the Stanza IV:

How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;

¹⁸ of the Cross, “Living Flame of Love,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Stanza 3, n. 18, p. 680-1.

and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.¹⁹

Conclusion

The spiritualities of the night are spiritualities of deification and transformation, it is a continuous mystical christian tradition that nonetheless has been increasingly deepened by the works and experiences of the great Christian mystics. They have offered us a dynamism and an itinerary of the soul into the Triune God, the goal is the same in all of them: the union in love, the spiritual marriage of God and the soul that culminates the universal vocation of deification. St. John of the Cross, through the lens of this study, comes across as the summit of this tradition.

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¹⁹ of the Cross, "Living Flame of Love," in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Prologue, p. 639.

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