

The Sacred Heart and the Legend of the Holy Grail

by

René Guénon

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In his article, “The Ancient Iconography of the Heart of Jesus”, Monsieur Charbonneau-Lassy very properly calls attention to the legend of the Holy Grail as being related to what might be called the “prehistory of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus”.¹ The Grail legend was committed to writing in the twelfth century, though it is much anterior in its origins, as it is in reality a Christian adaptation of quite ancient Celtic traditions. The idea of this comparison had already occurred to us, occasioned by an earlier article (and one of great interest from our point of view), “The Human Heart and the Notion of the Heart of God in the Religion of Ancient Egypt”, from which we recall the following passages:

In hieroglyphics or sacred writing where the image of the thing often stands for the word for it, the heart was depicted only by an emblem, the *vase*. In fact, is not the heart of man the vase in which his life is continuously elaborated along with his blood?

It is in this vase, taken as a symbol of and substitute for the heart in ancient Egyptian ideography, which made us think immediately of the Holy Grail, and so much the more because in the case of the Grail, beyond the general sense of the symbol (considered simultaneously under both its divine and human aspects), we see also a special and very much more direct relation with the Heart of Christ.

Indeed, the Holy Grail is the cup which contains the precious blood of Christ and which even held it twice, as it served first at the Last Supper and then when Joseph of Arimathea collected in it the blood and water which flowed from the wound in the Redeemer’s side, made by the centurion’s lance. In a way, therefore, this cup is substituted for the Heart of Christ as a receptacle of His blood; it takes the place of the former and becomes a symbolic equivalent. And

¹ Guénon refers here and at several other points in this article, to studies in Christian symbolism by Louis Charbonneau-Lassy. These appeared in the short-lived Catholic review, *Regnabit*, published during the nineteen-twenties in Paris.

is it not still more remarkable, in this context, that of old the vase had already been an emblem of the heart?

Moreover, the cup, under one form or another and along with the heart itself, plays an important role in many ancient traditions. It was doubtless thus with ancient Celts also; for it is from them that the very core, or at least the warp, of the legend of the Holy Grail has come down to us. It is regrettable that the precise form of that tradition, as it existed prior to Christianity, can be known only so inadequately; but the same applies to all that can be known of the Celtic doctrines for which oral teaching was always the sole means of transmission utilized. But on the other hand, there are sufficient concordances so that one can at least establish the general sense of the principal symbols which figured in the Celtic tradition, and it is this which is after all the most essential.

But let us return to the legend in the form in which it has come down to us. The account of the origin of the Grail is particularly worthy of attention: angels had fashioned the cup from an emerald which dropped from the forehead of Lucifer at the time of his fall. This emerald recalls in a striking manner the *urna*, the frontal pearl which in Hindu iconography often takes the place of the third eye of Shiva, representing what one might call the “sense of eternity”. This comparison seems to us more apt than any other to clarify perfectly the symbolism of the Grail. And here one can even grasp another relationship with the heart which is for the Hindu tradition as for so many others (though perhaps even more so in Hinduism) the center of the integral being and consequently that to which the “sense of eternity” must be attached.

It is said that subsequently the Grail was confided to Adam in the earthly Paradise but that, at the time of his fall, Adam in turn lost it as he could not carry it with him when he was expelled from Eden, and that also becomes quite clear following the sense we have indicated. Man, separated from his original Center by his own fault, finds himself henceforth confined to the temporal sphere; he can no longer regain the unique point from which all things are contemplated under the aspect of eternity. The terrestrial Paradise was in fact the true “Center of the World”, which is everywhere symbolically assimilated to the Divine Heart. Can one not say that Adam, by the fact that he was in Eden, truly lived in the Heart of God?

That which follows is more enigmatic: Seth was able to return to the terrestrial Paradise and thus recover the precious vase. Now Seth is one of the types of the Redeemer, and so much the more so as this name expresses the ideas of foundation and stability, and in a way announces the restoration of the primordial order destroyed by the fall of man. Thus there was henceforth at least a partial restoration, in the sense that Seth and those who after him possessed the Grail could thereby establish, somewhere on Earth, a spiritual center which was an image of the lost Paradise. Furthermore, the legend does not say where or by whom the Grail was preserved until the time of Christ, nor how its transmission was assured; but the Celtic origin of the legend points to the understanding that the Druids had a part therein, and that they must be numbered among the regular keepers of the Primordial Tradition. In any case, the existence of such a spiritual centre, or even of several centers—simultaneously or successively—cannot be

questioned, whatever one may think of their localization. What must be noted is that always and everywhere there is attached to these centers, among other designations, that of “Heart of the World”, and that in all traditions the descriptions that relate thereto are based on an identical symbolism which it is possible to follow even down to the most precise detail. Does this not show sufficiently well that the Grail (or that which is thus represented) already prior to Christianity and even from all time, had the closest of ties with the Divine Heart and with *Emmanuel*² that is to say with the virtual or real manifestation according to the times (but one always present), of the Eternal Word in the bosom of terrestrial humanity.

According to the legend, after the death of Christ, the Holy Grail was brought to Great Britain by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Then began to unfold the history and exploits of the Knights of the Round Table, which we cannot follow here. The Round Table was destined to receive the Grail when one of the Knights would succeed in winning it and bringing it from Britain to Armorica.³ And this Table, probably also a very ancient symbol, is one of those which were associated with the idea of these spiritual centers mentioned above. The circular form of the Table links it to the “zodiacal cycle” (itself a symbol which merits special study) by the presence around it of twelve principal personages, a particularity which is found in the make-up of all these centers. That being so, cannot one see in the number of twelve Apostles one sign, among a multitude of others, of the perfect conformity of Christianity with the Primordial Tradition, to which the name “pre-christianity” agrees so precisely? A propos the Round Table, we have noted a strange concordance in the symbolic revelations according to Marie des Vallées;⁴ in question is a “round table of jasper which is the Holy Sacrament of the Altar” and which, with its “four fountains of living water”, is mysteriously identified with the earthly Paradise. Is this not also a striking and unexpected confirmation of the relationship pointed out above?

Naturally, we cannot pretend that these hasty notes constitute a complete study on a question so little known as this. We must limit ourselves at present to simple indications. And we are well aware that in all this there are considerations which, at first glance, may be somewhat surprising to those unfamiliar with ancient traditions and their common modes of symbolic expression. We hope to develop and justify more fully these topics at some future date in articles where we may also be able to touch upon other points no less worthy of interest.

In the meanwhile, we mention as also concerning the Holy Grail, a strange complication which so far has not been taken into account. By one of the verbal assimilations which often play a far from negligible role in symbolism (which assimilations may have more profound reasons than at first glance one might imagine), the Grail is simultaneously a vase (*grasale*) and a book

² Emmanuel, “with us (is) God (El)”.—Translator.

³ An ancient name for Lower Brittany.—Translator.

⁴ Marie des Vallées, “la sainte de Coutances”, was a seventeenth century French nun, contemplative and visionary. She was also a confidante and inspirer of St John Eudes who was himself the apostle of the public devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.—Translator.

(*gradale* or *graduale*). In some variants of the legend the two senses are even quite closely related, for the book then becomes an inscription made by Christ or by an angel on the cup itself. We do not now intend to draw from this any conclusion, even though there are rapports easy to establish between the “Book of Life” and certain elements of Apocalyptic symbolism.

We could add further that the legend associates other objects with the Grail and notably a lance, which, in the Christian adaptation, is none other than that of the centurion Longinus. But the noteworthy point is the pre-existence of the lance or of one of its equivalents, as a symbol complementary to the cup in ancient traditions. With the Greeks, the lance of Achilles was believed to heal the wounds that it had cause; and the medieval legend attributes precisely the same virtue to the lance of the Passion. This recalls another similarity: in the myth of Adonis (which name signifies “the Lord”), when the hero was mortally gored by a wild boar (the tusk here representing the lance) his blood, flowing out on the earth, gave birth to a flower. Now, Monsieur Charbonneau, in *Regnabit*, has called attention to “a mold (or press) for altar breads, of the XII century, on which is represented blood from the wounds of Christ Crucified falling in droplets which are transformed into roses. And in a stained glass window of the thirteenth century cathedral of Angers, the divine blood, flowing in rivulets, also spreads out taking the form of roses.” Recently we have spoken of floral symbolism viewed from a somewhat different aspect; but whatever the multiple senses which nearly all symbols present, all the elements serve to complete one another and are perfectly harmonized. And this very multiplicity, far from being a disadvantage or defect, is on the contrary, for him who can understand, one of the principal advantages of symbolism as a language that is much less narrowly limited than ordinary speech.

To bring these notes to a close, we will indicate several symbols which, in diverse traditions, are sometimes substituted for that of the cup, and which at the bottom are identical with it. This is not a departure from our subject, for the Grail itself (as one can easily confirm in the remarks that follow) originally had no other significance than that which is generally accorded the sacred vase wherever this latter is encountered—notably, in the Orient. The sacrificial cup, e.g., containing the Vedic Soma (or the Mazdean *Haoma*) are both extraordinary eucharistic “prefigurations”, to which topic we will perhaps return on some other occasion. What the *Soma* properly represents is the “draught of immortality” (the *Amrita* of the Hindus, *Ambrosia* of the Greeks—two words etymologically similar) which confers or restores, to those who receive it with the requisite dispositions, the “sense of eternity”, which has been mentioned above.

Another symbol of which we wish to speak is the triangle with the point directed downwards; it is a kind of schematic representation of the sacrificial cup and it is to be found in this sense in certain *yantras* or geometrical symbols of India. On the other hand, and which is quite remarkable from our perspective, the same figure is equally a symbol of the heart, the shape of which it represents in a simplified form. The “triangle of the heart” is a common expression in the eastern traditions, and this leads to a further observation of interest: the representation of the heart inscribed in a triangle disposed in this manner is thoroughly legitimate, whether it be a question of the human or of the Divine heart. And this is the more

significant when one relates it to emblems used by certain Christian Hermetic groups in the Middle Ages, whose intentions were always orthodox. If, in modern times, some have wished to attach a blasphemous sense to such figures, this is because, consciously or not, the primary significance of the symbols has been altered to the point of reversing their normal value. This is a phenomenon of which one can cite many examples, and which finds its explanation in the fact that certain symbols are actually susceptible of a double interpretation and have, as it were, two opposed faces. The serpent, for example, and also the lion—do they not signify, as the case may have it, Christ and Satan? We cannot dream of expounding here a general theory on the subject, which would lead us too far afield; nevertheless, one will understand that there is something in all this that makes the manipulation of symbols very delicate, and that this requires quite special attention when it is a question of discovering the real sense of certain emblems and of interpreting them correctly.

Another symbol which is frequently the equivalent of the cup is the symbolic flower: in fact, does one not speak of the “calyx” of a flower? In the Orient, the symbolic flower *par excellence* is the lotus; in the West, it is more often the rose which plays the same role. We do not say, of course, that this is the only signification of either the rose or the lotus; on the contrary, we have indicated another significance earlier. But we can readily see the rose as symbolic cup in a design embellishing an altar canon of the Abbey of Fontevrault, where the rose is placed at the foot of the lance along which flow drops of blood. The rose appears in association with the lance exactly as the cup does elsewhere, and the former seems to collect the drops of blood rather than to develop from a transformation of these latter. But the two significances complement much more than oppose one another; for the drops, in falling on the rose vivify it and make it bloom. It is the “celestial rose”, the figure so often employed in connection with the idea of Redemption, or with the ideas related to regeneration and resurrection. But that, too, would require long explanations; and in any case we must limit ourselves to pointing out the agreement of the different traditions with regard to this other symbol.

As the Rose-Cross of Luther’s seal has been in question elsewhere, we will say that this Hermetic emblem was at first specifically Christian, whatever the false and more or less “naturalistic” interpretations which have been advanced from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards. And it is not remarkable that in this instance, at the center of the cross, the rose occupies the very place of the Sacred Heart? Apart from those representations where the five wounds of the Christ are figured as so many roses, the central rose, when it stands alone, can quite properly be identified with the Heart itself, the vase which contains the blood and which is the center of life and also the center of the entire being.

There is still at least one more symbolic equivalent of the cup: this is the lunar crescent; but a proper explanation of this would require developments which are quite outside the subject of the present study. We mention it, therefore, only so as not to neglect entirely any side of the question.

From all the relationships which we have noted we will even now draw one conclusion which hopefully we may be able to make clear later. When one finds such agreement everywhere, is this not more than a simple indication of a Primordial Tradition? And how can it be explained that, in most cases even those who feel obliged to admit this Primordial Tradition in principle then think no more of it and in fact reason as if it had never existed, or at least as if nothing of it was preserved over the centuries? If one really ponders what is abnormal in such an attitude one will perhaps be less astonished at certain considerations which, in truth, do not seem strange except in virtue of the mental habits that characterize our time. Moreover, a little unprejudiced research suffices to reveal the marks of this essential doctrinal unity, the consciousness of which has at times been obscured among men but which has never entirely disappeared. And as one advances in this search, the points of comparison multiply as if of themselves and new proofs appear at every moment. Certainly, the *quaerite et invenietis* (“seek and ye shall find”) of the Gospel is not a vain saying.

Addendum

We must respond to an objection that has been made about the relationships that we have envisaged between the Holy Grail and the Sacred Heart, even though the remarks already given in that study would seem to us fully satisfactory.

It is of little importance that Chrestien de Troyes and Robert de Boron did not see in the ancient legend (of which they were the adapters only) all the significance which was nevertheless there, and we have made it explicit without introducing anything “modern” whatsoever into our interpretation. It is quite difficult, moreover, to say exactly what the writers of the twelfth century saw or did not see in the legend; and given that they only played the part of simple “transmitters”, we readily agree that they did not see all that was seen by those who inspired them, i.e., the real holders of the traditional doctrine.

As regards the Celts, we have been careful to recall precautions which are necessary when one wants to speak of them in the absence of any written documents. But why would one suppose, in the know absence of contrary indications, that the Celts were less favored than other ancient peoples? We see everywhere, and not in Egypt alone, the symbolic assimilation established between the heart and the cup or the vase. Everywhere the heart is viewed as the center of the being, center at once divine and human in the multiple applications to which this notion lends itself. Everywhere also, the sacrificial cup represents the Center or the Heart of the World, the “abode of immortality.”⁵ What more is necessary? We well know that the cup and the

⁵ We could have recalled the Hermetic *athanor*, the vase where the “Great Work” is effected, the name of which, according to some, was derived from the Greek *athanatos*, “immortal”. The invisible fire which is perpetually maintained there corresponds to the vital heat which resides in the heart. Likewise, we could have shown the relationships with another very widely used symbol, that of the egg, which signifies resurrection and immortality and to which we may have occasion to return. On the other hand, we note

lance, or their equivalents, have yet other significations than those we have indicated. But without lingering over these, we can say that all these meanings, no matter how strange some of them may appear to modern eyes, are in perfect agreement among themselves and that in reality they express applications of the same principle in diverse ways, according to that law of correspondence on which is founded the harmonious multiplicity of meanings which are contained in all symbolism.

We hope to show in other studies not only that the Center of the World is effectively identified with the Heart of Christ, but that this identity was plainly indicated in ancient doctrines. Obviously, the expression “Heart of Christ” in this case must be taken in a sense which is not precisely that which one would call the “historical”. But it must be said yet again that historical facts themselves, like all the rest, translate superior realities according to their own proper mode and conform to the law of correspondence to which we have alluded, a law which permits one to explain certain “prefigurations”. It is a question, if one will, of the Christ-principle; that is to say, of the Word manifested at the central point of the Universe. But who would dare to pretend that the eternal Word and His historical, earthly manifestation are not really and substantially one and the same Christ under different aspects? We touch here on the rapports between the temporal and the timeless, and perhaps it is not convenient to insist further on this; for these things are precisely those which symbolism alone can express in the measure that they are expressible. In any case, it suffices to know how to read the symbols in order to find in them all that we have ourselves found; but alas, in our age especially, not everyone knows how to read.

that the cup in the deck of Tarot cards (the origin of which is quite mysterious) has been replaced by the heart in ordinary playing cards, which is another indication of the equivalence of the two symbols.