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An Indian Temple: The Kandarya Mahadeo

The nature of the present symposium suggests the use of a single illustration, but the reader is asked to understand that my subject in the present short article is really that of *the* Hindu temple, irrespective of period and relative complexity or simplicity. The choice of this subject is one that is made especially appropriate by the recent [1946] publication of Dr. Stella Kramrisch's magnificent work, *The Hindu Temple*.

It may be remarked, in the first place, that the most essential part of the concept of a temple is that of an altar on which, or a hearth in which, offerings can be made to an invisible presence that may or may not be represented iconographically. The types of the oldest shrines are those of the "stone tables" of megalithic cults and those of the stone altars of tree or pillar cults; or the shrine may be a hearth, the burnt offering being conveyed to the gods with the smoke of the fire, Agni thus functioning as missal priest. In all these cases the shrine, even when walled or fenced about, remains hypaethral, open to the sky. On the other hand, the oldest Indian type of sacred architecture both enclosed and roofed is that of the sadas ("seat," the sacrificial operation being itself a sattra, "session") of the Vedic Sacrifice or Mass. Made only for temporary use, this enclosure is a place "apart" (tiras, antarhita) to which the gods resort and in which the Sacrificer, having put on the "garment of initiation

[Published both in *Art in America*, XXXV (1947), and in *Śilpi*, II (1947), the article was Coomaraswamy's contribution to the American review's special issue on the theme "Art as Symbol."—ED.]

¹ Cf. J. Layard, *Stone Men of Malekula* (London, 1942), pp. 625, 701, on dolmens as altars, used also as seats.

² Cf. Coomaraswamy, Yakṣas [I], 1928, p. 17.

³ Cf. Coomaraswamy, "Early Indian Architecture: II. Bodhigharas," 1930. The Greek word (as applied to Cynics and Indian Gymnosophists) = abhokāsika (as applied to Buddhist monks); cf. vivattacado ("whose roof has been opened up," said of a Buddha).

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and ardor," sleeps, becoming "as it were one of themselves" for the time being; he becomes, indeed, an embryo, and is reborn from the sacred enclosure as from a womb.⁴ This "hut or hall is a microcosm," of which the corners, for example, are called the "four quarters." At the same time, it must be recognized that no fundamental distinction can be made between the god-house as such and the dwellings of men, whether huts or palaces, as is evident in the case of those cultures, notably the Indian, in which the paterfamilias himself officiates as household priest, daily performing the Agnihotra in the domestic circle.

In addition to this, it must be realized that in India, as elsewhere, not only are temples made with hands, the universe in a likeness, but man himself is likewise a microcosm and a "holy temple" or City of God (brahmapura).7 The body, the temple, and the universe being thus analogous, it follows that whatever worship is outwardly and visibly performed can also be celebrated inwardly and invisibly, the "gross" ritual being, in fact, no more than a tool or support of contemplation, the external means having (just as had been the case in Greece) for its "end and aim the knowledge of Him who is the First, the Lord, and the Intelligible"8—as distinguished from the visible. It is recognized also, of course, that the "whole earth is divine," i.e., potentially an altar, but that a place is necessarily selected and prepared for an actual Sacrifice, the validity of such a site depending not upon the site itself but on that of the sacerdotal art; and such a site is always theoretically both on a high place and at the center or navel of the earth, with an eastward orientation, since it is "from the east westwards that the gods come unto men."9

It is constantly emphasized, accordingly, that the Sacrifice is essentially a mental operation, to be performed both outwardly and inwardly, or in any case inwardly. It is prepared by the Sacrificer's "whole mind and whole self." The Sacrificer is, as it were, emptied out of himself, and is himself the real victim. The true end of the cult is one of reintegration and resurrection, attainable not by a merely mechanical performance of the service, but by a full realization of its significance, or even by this comprehension alone. The Agnihotra, or burnt offering, for example, may

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<sup>4</sup> ŚB III.I.1.8, III.I.3.28; TS VI.I.I.I, VI.2.5.5.
<sup>5</sup> TS VI.I.I.I, with Keith's comment in HOS, XIX, 483, n. 4.
<sup>6</sup> I Cor. 3:16, 17.
<sup>7</sup> AV x.2.30; CU VIII.I.1-5.
<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, Moralia 352A.
<sup>9</sup> ŚB I.I.2.23, III.I.I.I, 4.
<sup>10</sup> ŚB II.4.I.II, III.3.4.21, III.8.I.2, IX.5.I.53.
<sup>11</sup> ŚB x.4.2.31, X.4.3.24.
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be—and is for the comprehensor—an interior self-sacrifice, in which the heart is the altar, the outer man the offering, and the flame the dompted self.¹²

The human frame, the constructed temple, and the universe being analogical equivalents, the parts of the temple correspond to those of the human body no less than to those of the universe itself.¹³ All these dimensioned (nirmita, vimita) forms are explicitly "houses," indwelt and filled by an invisible Presence and representing its possibilities of manifestation in time and space; their raison d'être is that it may be known. For this unifying and constructive Principle, the Spirit or Self of all beings, is only apparently confined by its habitations which, like other images, serve as supports of contemplation, none being ends in themselves but more or less indispensable means to liberation from every sort of enclosure. The position, in other words, is primarily iconolatrous, but teleologically iconoclastic.

Each of the "houses" we are considering is dimensioned and limited in six directions, nadir, quarters, and zenith—the feet, floor, or earth; bulk, interior space, or atmospheric space; and cranium, roof, or skydefining the extent of this man, this church, and this world respectively. Here we can consider only one or two particular aspects of these and other analogies. The temple has, for example, windows and doors from which the indweller can look out and go forth, or conversely return to himself; and these correspond in the body to the "doors of the senses" through which one can look out in times of activity, or from which one can return to the "heart" of one's being when the senses are withdrawn from their objects, i.e., in concentration. There is, however, in theory, another door or window, accessible only by a "ladder" or the "rope" by which our being is suspended from above, and through which one can emerge from the dimensioned structure so as to be no longer on a level with its ground, or within it, but altogether above it. In man, this exit is represented by the cranial foramen, which is still unclosed at birth, and is opened up again at death when the skull is ritually broken, though as regards its significance it may be kept open throughout one's life by appropriate spiritual exercises, for this God-aperture (brahma-randhra) corresponds to the "point" or "eye of the heart," the microcosmic City

¹² ŚA x; ŚB x.5.3.12; S 1.169.

¹³ Cf. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta, 1946), II, 357-61, "The Temple as Purusa."

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of God (brahmapura) within us, from which the Spirit departs at death. Architecturally, the brahma-randhra or foramen of the human cranium or man-made temple corresponds to the luffer, smoke hole, or skylight (Lichtloch) of the traditional house; and in some ancient and even relatively modern Western temples, this oculus of the dome still remains an open circular window, and the structure therefore remains hypaethral. In the early Indian timbered domes, the opening above is apparently closed by the circular roof-plate (kannikā) on which the rafters rest like the spokes of a wheel or the ribs of an umbrella, but this plate is perforated, and in any case functions as a doorway or place of exit through which the Perfected (Arahants) movers-at-will and "skyfarers" are repeatedly described as making their departure; it is an "upper door" (agga-dvāra). In later Indian lithic structures, in the same way the

14 BU IV.4.2; CU VIII.I.I.4; Hamsa Up. I.3. For the breaking of the skull, see Gāruda Purāna x.56-59, bhitvā brahmarandhrakam, corresponding to bhitvā kannikā-mandalam architecturally (DhA III.66) and to bhitvā sūryamandalam ("breaking through the solar disk") microcosmically (MU VI.30). In the Purāṇa, this "breaking through" represents explicitly the rebirth of the deceased from the sacrificial fire in which the body is burnt; cf. JUB III.II.7.

For the "eye of the heart," cf. J. A. Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World* (1631, based on J. V. Andreae, *Civis Christianus*), tr. Spinka (Chicago, 1942), chs. 37, 38, 40 ("in the vault of this my chamber, a large round window above," approachable only by ladders; through it on the one hand Christ looks down from above, and on the other "one could peer out into the beyond").

15 For instance, the Roman Pantheon; cf. Piranesi's engraving of the Tempio della Tossa. "Even today lest he [Terminus] see aught above him but the stars, have temple roofs their tiny aperture" ("exiguum . . . foramen," Ovid, Fasti 11.667–668). For Islamic architecture, cf. E. Diez in Ars Islamica, V (1938), 39, 45: "Space was the primary problem and was placed in relation to, and dependence on, infinite space by means of the widely open opaion in the zenith of the cupola. This relation to open space was always emphasized by the skylight lantern in Western architecture. . . . Islamic art appears as the individuation of its metaphysical basis (unendlichen Grund)."

18 See Coomaraswamy, "The Symbolism of the Dome," "Pāli kannikā," and "Svayamātṛṇṇā: Janua Coeli" [all in this volume—ED.]; for the agga-dvāra, cf. Coomaraswamy, "Some Sources of Buddhist Iconography," 1945, p. 473, n. 12. For the exit via the roof, cf. Odyssey 1.320 where Athene, leaving Odysseus' house, "flew like a bird through the oculus"; Cross and Slover, Ancient Irish Tales (1936), p. 92, "And he [the god Mider] carried her [Etain] off through the smokehole of the house . . . and they saw two swans circling"; and H. Rink, Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo (London and Edinburgh, 1875), pp. 60, 61, when "the angakok [shaman] had to make a flight, he started through an opening which appeared of itself in the roof."

It is through the cosmic opening that the Man, the Son of God, looks down, and descends (Hermes, Lib. 1.14). And just as the kannikā is a symbol of samādhi, "syn-

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summit of the spire is apparently closed by a circular stone slab (āmalaka), but this, too, is perforated for the reception of the tenon of the finial that prolongs the central axis of the whole structure; and the term brahmarandhra remains in use. Finally, in the world of which the sky is the roof, the Sun himself is the Janua Coeli, the "gateway of liberation" (moksadvāra), the only way by which to break out of the dimensioned universe, and so "escape altogether." 17

We have considered so far the altar (always in some sense a sacrificial hearth, analogous to the heart) and the oculus of the dome (always in some sense a symbol of the Sun) as the proximate and ultimate goals of the worshiper who comes to visit the deity, whose man-made "house" is the temple, there to devote himself. The altar, like the sacred hearth, is always theoretically at the center or navel of the earth, and the solar eye of the dome is always in the center of the ceiling or *coelum* immediately above it; and these two are connected in principle, as in some early structures they were in fact, by an axial pillar at once uniting and separating floor and roof, and supporting the latter; as it was in the beginning, when heaven and earth, that had been one, were "pillared apart" by the Creator.¹8 It is by this pillar—regarded as a bridge¹9 or ladder, or, because of its immateriality, as a bird on wings,²0 and regarded in any case from

thesis," so is this Greek capstone a "harmony," as Pausanias says, "of the whole edifice" (Pausanias, VIII.8.9 and IX.38.7).

In connection with the term agga-dvāra it may be observed that agga (= agra, cf. Plato, Phaedrus 2478 and Philo, De opificio mundi 71), "summit," is predicated of the Buddha (A 11.17, D 111.147), who "opens the doors of immortality" (Vin 1.7, D 11.33, M 1.167) and is in this sense a "Door-God," like Agni (AB 111.42) and like Christ (John 10:9; Sum. Theol. 111.49.5), this Janua Coeli being the door at which the Buddhas are said to stand and knock (S 11.58).

Further pertinent material will be found in P. Sartori, "Das Dach im Volksglauben," Zeit. des Vereins f. Volkskunde, XXV (1915), 228–241; K. Rhamm as reviewed by V. Ritter von Geramb, ibid., XXVI (1916); R. Guénon, "Le Symbolisme du dôme," Études traditionelles, XLIII (1938); F. J. Tritsch, "False Doors in Tombs," JHS, LXIII (1943), 113–115; and more generally in W. R. Lethaby, Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth (New York, 1892).

¹⁷ JUB 1.3.5, i.e., "through the midst of the Sun," JUB 1.6.1, the Janua Coeli, JUB 1V.14.5, IV.15.4 and 5, or the "Sundoor" of MU V1.30 and Muṇḍ. Up. 1.2.11.

¹⁸ RV passim. In general, the axial column of the universe is a pillar (mita, sthūnā, vamśa, skambha, etc.) of Fire (RV 1.59.1, 1V.5.1, X.5.6) or Life (RV X.5.6) or solar Light (JUB 1.10.10), Breath or Spirit (ranāh, passim), i.e., the Self (ātman, BU 1V.4.22). The primordial separation of heaven and earth is common to the creation myths of the whole world.

¹⁹ D. L. Coomaraswamy, "The Perilous Bridge of Welfare," HJAS, VIII (1944). ²⁰ PB v.3.5.

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its base, for "there is no side path here in the world" that the "hard ascent after Agni" $(d\bar{u}rohana, agner anv\bar{a}rohah)^{22}$ must be made from below to the Sundoor above; an ascent that is also imitated in countless climbing rites, and notably in that of the ascent of the sacrificial post $(y\bar{u}pa)$ by the Sacrificer who, when he reaches its summit and raises his head above its capital, says on behalf of himself and his wife: "We have reached the heaven, reached the gods; we have become immortals, become the children of Prajāpati." For them the distance that separates heaven from earth is temporarily annihilated; the bridge lies behind them.

The nature and full significance of the cosmic pillar (skambha), the Axis Mundi referred to above, can best be grasped from its description in Atharva Veda x.7 and 8,24 or understood in terms of the Islamic doctrine of the Qutb, with which the Perfect Man is identified, and on which all things turn. In the Vedic Sadas it is represented by the king-post (sthūņarāja, or śālā-vamśa) that the Sacrificer himself erects, and that stands for the Median Breath, 25 in the same way as within man, as the axial principle of one's own life and being.26 In the Vedic (Fire-) altar, a constructed image of the universe, this is also the axial principle that passes through the three "self-perforated bricks" (svayamātrnnā), of which the uppermost corresponds to the Sundoor of the later texts; it is an axis that—like Jacob's ladder—is the "way up and down these worlds." In visiting the deity whose image or symbol has been set up in the womb of the temple, the worshiper is returning to the heart and center of his own being to perform a devotion that prefigures his ultimate resurrection and regeneration from the funeral pyre in which the last Sacrifice is made.

We are thus brought back again to the concept of the three analogous—bodily, architectural, and cosmic—"houses" that the Spirit of Life inhabits and fills; and we recognize at the same time that the values of the oldest

²¹ MU vi.30.

²² TS v.6.8; AB IV.20-22.

²³ TS 1.7.9, v.6.8, v1.6.4.2; ŚB v.2.1.15. Cf. Coomaraswamy, "Svayamātṛṇṇā: Janua Coeli" [in this volume—ED.].

²⁴ AV x.7.35 and 8.2, "The *skambha* sustains both heaven and earth . . . and hath inhabited all existences. . . Whereby these twain are pillared apart, therein is all this that is enspirited (*ātmanvat*), all that breathes and blinks."

²⁵ AĀ III.I.4, III.2.1; SA VIII; cf. Coomaraswamy, "The Sun-kiss," 1940, p. 58, n. 30. ²⁶ BU II.2.1, where in the subtle and gross bodies of individuals, "the Median Breath is the pillar" (madhyamah prāṇah . . . sthūnā).

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architectural symbolism are preserved in the latest buildings and serve to explain their use.27 I shall only emphasize, in conclusion, what has already been implied, that the Indian architectural symbolism briefly outlined above is by no means peculiarly or exclusively Indian, but rather worldwide. For example, that the sacred structure is a microcosm, the world in a likeness, is explicit among the American Indians; as remarked by Sartori, "Among the Huichol Indians . . . the temple is considered as an image of the world, the roof as heaven, and the ceremonies which are enacted during the construction almost all relate to this meaning,"28 and as related by Speck in his description of the Delaware Big-House, "the Big-House stands for the universe; its floor, the earth; its four walls, the four quarters; its vault, the sky-dome atop, where resides the Creator in his indefinable supremacy . . . the centre-post is the staff of the Great Spirit with its foot upon the earth, with its pinnacle reaching to the hand of the Supreme Being sitting on his throne."29 In the same way, from the Indian point of view, it is said with respect to the way up and down that "within these two movements the Hindu temple has its being; its central pillar is erected from the heart of the Vastupurușa in the Brahmasthana,

²⁷ "En effet, il est bien connu que la construction de l'autel du feu est un sacrifice personnel déguisé. . . . L'activité artistique de l'Inde s'est toujours ressentie, nous l'avons reconnu, de ce que la première oeuvre d'art brāhmanique ait été un autel où le donataire, autrement dit le sacrifiant, s'unissait à son dieu," Paul Mus, Barabudur (Paris, 1935), I, *92, *94.

²⁸ Sartori, "Das Dach im Volksglauben," p. 233.

²⁹ F. G. Speck, on the Delaware Indian big-house, cited from *Publications of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission*, II (1931), by W. Schmidt, *High Gods in North America* (Oxford, 1933), p. 75. Fr. Schmidt remarks, p. 78, that "the Delawares are perfectly right in affirming this, the fundamental importance of the centre-post," and points out that the same holds good for many other Indian tribes, amongst whom "the centre-post of the ceremonial hut has a quite similar symbolical function and thus belongs to the oldest religious elements of North America."

On the importance of the center-post, cf. also J. Strzygowski, Early Church Art in Northern Europe (New York, 1928), p. 141, in connection with the mast-churches of Norway: "The steeple marking the apex of the perpendicular axis appears to be a relic of the time when the only type was the one-mast church." For China, cf. G. Ecke, "Once More Shen-T'ung Ssu and Ling-Yen Ssu," Monumenta Serica, VII (1942), 295 ff. Cf. the invocatory verse of the Dasakumāracarita: "May the staff of His foot, the Three-strider's (Viṣṇu), bear thee across—viz. the staff of the umbrella of the Brahmānda, the stalk of the Hundred-Sacrificer's (Brahmā's) cosmic lotus, the mast of the ship of the earth, the flag pole of the banner of the nectar-shedding river, the pole of the axis of the planetary sphere, the pillar of victory over the three worlds, and death-dealing club of the foes of the gods—may this be thy means of crossing over."

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from the center and heart of existence on earth, and supports the Prasāda Puruṣa in the Golden Jar in the splendor of the Empyrean."³⁰

Finally, inasmuch as the temple is the universe in a likeness, its dark interior is occupied only by a single image or symbol of the informing Spirit, while externally its walls are covered with representations of the Divine Powers in all their manifested multiplicity. In visiting the shrine, one proceeds inwards from multiplicity to unity, just as in contemplation; and on returning again to the outer world, one sees that one has been surrounded by all the innumerable forms that the Sole Seer and Agent within assumes in his playful activity. And this distinction between the outer world and the inner shrine of an Indian temple, into which one enters "so as to be born again from its dark womb," is the same distinction Plotinus makes when he observes that the seer of the Supreme, being one with his vision, "is like one who, having penetrated the inner sanctuary, leaves the temple images behind him—though these become once more first objects of regard when he leaves the holies; for There his converse was not with image, not with trace, but with the very Truth."

The deity who assumes innumerable forms, and has no form, is one and the same Puruṣa, and to worship in either way leads to the same liberation: "however men approach Me, even so do I welcome them." In the last analysis, the ritual, like that of the old Vedic Sacrifice, is an interior procedure, of which the outward forms are only a support, indispensable for those who—being still on their way—have not yet reached its end, but that can be dispensed with by those who have already found the end, and who, though they may be still in the world, are not of it. In the meantime, there can be no greater danger or hindrance than that of the premature iconoclasm of those who still confuse their own existence with their own being, and have not yet "known the Self"; these are the vast majority, and for them the temple and all its figurations are signposts on their way.

³⁰ Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple, II, 361.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

³² Plotinus, Enneads vi.9.11.

³³ BG IV.11.

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Note: This index, compiled by Kenneth J. Storey in consultation with Roger Lipsey, is arranged according to the Devanagari alphabet. Translations are those of Coomaraswamy when these are given in the text, and standard modern translations elsewhere. In the case of Sanskrit and Pāli cognates, the Sanskrit form appears first and the Pāli second.

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