

# THE CLOUD AS SYMBOL

## Destruction or Dialogue

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The power images continue to wield over the human psyche was forcefully reaffirmed by the recent controversy over the satirical cartoons of Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, on September 30, 2005. Critics of the cartoons claim they were designed to insult and humiliate the Muslim minority in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> Depicting Muhammad with a bomb in his turban was considered blasphemous for Muslims who felt this implied all Muslims were terrorists. From their perspective, it would be analogous to showing Jesus leading a pogrom because Christians have killed Jews in the name of Christ. Meanwhile, defenders of the cartoons claim the right of free speech, freedom of the press, and artistic freedom. Hegel, one of the first great post-Enlightenment thinkers to address the question of art's significance for humanity, might have challenged this view of freedom in art. He believed that the role of the artistic Ideal is to convey the spiritual realm in external appearance; the Spirit is free and infinite when it rises to universality and crippled when its content contradicts the infinity of Spirit in freedom. Art is to bring harmony between the outer appearance and the inner truth;<sup>2</sup> art's imagery is to unify expressions of truth.

An examination of art imagery in world religions—arguably an expression of Spirit in the Hegelian sense—reveals a great harmony between symbols used to express the most profound mystery of the nature of the divine. One of the most significant of these is the symbol of the cloud.

From a secular perspective, the cloud has served in recent years as an image of destruction. After the catastrophes wrought by Katrina and Rita in September

of last year, the *New York Times* observed that the mushroom cloud, once the principal symbol of destruction, had been supplanted by the ominous apparition of the hurricane's storm cloud on the weather map.<sup>3</sup> For months after 9/11, I observed Ground Zero's smoking plume from my window in lower Manhattan; clouds rising over the bombers' designated targets in Afghanistan and Iraq would soon follow. Although fearsome in these contemporary manifestations, the cloud image as archetype in human consciousness has a long history, particularly as a representation of the mysterious presence of the Divine. It is to be found in all the world's major religions as a symbol not of destruction, but of divine mystery and protection.

A cloud pillar led the Israelites out of Egypt and across the desert to the Promised Land; for the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Greeks, the cloud represented creation, fertility, divine power, and protection. In China and India, images of the Divine were accompanied by clouds. Both Jesus and Muhammad ascended to heaven in a cloud, and both the gospels and Islamic scriptures employ the image of the cloud as a theophany, an appearance of the divine. In much of the mystical writings of the world, the cloud expresses the apophatic nature of the divine, the unknowable, that which will forever elude our human understanding. This profound insight, expressed through the cloud symbol across cultures, suggests the possibility of significant dialogue between world cultures in our troubled age.

Cloud imagery has served parallel symbolic functions in diverse cultures—both Western and non-Western—throughout history, recurring as a shared symbol in religious art and literature. Bernard McGinn notes in his study on Christian mysticism, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, that “the global ecumenical situation in which we now find ourselves has facilitated a new level of awareness and discussion of the richness of humanity's spiritual heritage.”<sup>4</sup> McGinn urges greater contemporary theological inquiry into the phenomenon of mysticism and its history within the Christian tradition. The study of the cloud image, as it appears in Christian art and literature, reveals a mystical symbol with shared global significance not yet fully explored either for its meaning in Christianity, or in other religions of the world—the kind of research McGinn advocates.

The symbolic value of cloud imagery persists in contemporary visual art, where it signifies the generative, the destructive, and the enigmatic—in the art of Magritte, for example, as well in the work of Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keefe. Astronomy points to the cloud as cosmic marker and originary site of all life. Photographs taken of clouds around the explosive star Eta Carinae from the tel-

escape in Cerro Paranal, Chile, provide astronomers with rare insights into the role of clouds at the beginning and evolution of the universe. Newborn stars through the dust clouds in the Orion nebula have been captured by the world's largest telescope atop Mauna Kea volcano in Hawaii. Contemporary mass media exploit the appeal of cloud image, and even technology resorts to its usage with cloud imagery in Microsoft Windows screen savers and packaging.

The image of the cloud since ancient times has held profound meaning for the human psyche. The symbolic visual language used by artists past and present, provided an opportunity to synthesize diverse ideas, theories, emotions and opinions in a creative unity. This is possible, according to Mircea Eliade in *Images and Symbols*, because images by their very structure are "multivalent." The mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts.<sup>5</sup> The mythical symbol becomes a potent source of understanding and creative expression.

The process of observation and interaction between a symbol created in the past and the contemporary viewer was closely analyzed by Husserl in his essay "Transcendental Aesthetics"<sup>6</sup> in his discussion of the dynamic between subject and object. Most analysis focuses on an object of perception and often neglects to consider the perceiving subject. Husserl wrote that in order to understand the "full givenness of a thing . . . in which the thing exhibits its actual reality" we must consider the subject as well. He points out that material properties as they present themselves intuitively to the self, prove to be "dependent on my qualities, *the make-up of the experiencing subject*, and to be related to *my Body and my 'normal sensibility'*."<sup>7</sup> He believed all mythological, religious, artistic and other forms of knowledge have their *Origen* in the *Lebenswelt* or lived experience. It is within context of the life experience of one's own traditions or personal history that one examines the history of the past.<sup>8</sup> Husserl used the word *Stiftung*—"foundation" or "establishment"—to emphasize the unlimited fecundity of each lived present and especially to describe "that fecundity of the products of culture which continue to have value after their appearance and which open a field of investigation in which they perpetually come to life again."<sup>9</sup>

The importance of this insight into the creative power of images of the past shows them not to be mere dead, inert objects of antiquarian interest, but to be both living communicators of their own historic period and able to transcend time. Thus it is possible to engage in authentic dialogue with art of the past, not only for historical appreciation but also for inspiration and meaning for the

present. Gadamer developed Husserl's notion of *Stiftung* with the following observation:

. . . the encounter with art belongs within the process of integration given to human life which stands within traditions. Indeed, it is even a question whether the special contemporaneity of the work of art does not consist precisely in this: that it stands open in a limitless way for ever new integrations. It may be that the creator of a work intends the particular public of his time, but the real being of a work is what it is able to say, and that stretches fundamentally out beyond every historical limitation.<sup>10</sup>

The cloud appeared as a symbol of the presence of the Mesopotamian Storm Gods and as a Creation Deity in Ancient Egypt. The Egyptian Orphic myth of creation describes the world emerging out of the Cosmic Egg from a cloud. The Ancient Hebrews adapted the image of the cloud for Yahweh. As an aniconic people, who could not use a tangible material image to represent their god, the cloud provided a convenient insubstantial object to use as a visible symbol. During the wanderings of the Jews in the desert, the cloud hovers over or in the "tent of witness" and plays a symbolic role as a recurrent theophany (an appearance of the Divine) in Old Testament scripture to witness to the presence of God.<sup>11</sup> In Exodus, a pillar of cloud led the Israelites out of Egypt by day. A cloud led them through the desert and stopped when Yahweh wanted them to stop. In the Tent where the Ark of the Covenant was held, the presence of Yahweh within was indicated by a cloud. Moses ascended the mountain to receive the law in a cloud. Some scholars speculate that this cloud recorded the presence of smoke from torches leading the Israelites, or clouds of incense in the temple. Whatever the source, the cloud entered biblical literature in the tradition of the cloud symbolism of the Ancient Near East and Egypt. Baptism, linked by the Early Christian writers to the passing through the Red Sea, already had existed in Judaism. Proselytes to Judaism underwent a rite of initiation which was a form of Baptism, and intended to cause the proselyte to imitate the crossing of the Red Sea at the Exodus. This ritual was not merely a purification, but a deliverance and a creation.<sup>12</sup> For the Christian, the story of the deliverance from the Egyptians was a type (*typos*) of the salvation obtained by Baptism. The symbol of the cloud was central to this theme, and mythical segments of the Old Testament which involve water, essential to Hebrew cosmology. The symbol of

the cloud was central to this theme, and mythical segments of the Old Testament which involve water, essential to Hebrew cosmology. This cosmic view was based upon the Hebrew myth of a primordial ocean that surrounds the earth. It both threatens it and brings it life, through the oceans and rivers from below, and rain from above. Yahweh's struggle with these demonic waters (personified by the sea monsters Rahab & Leviathan) was the beginning of time. This battle continued against the forces of the sea and Nile in the incarnation of the Pharaoh.<sup>13</sup> Yahweh was victorious over the dark ocean and original chaos, and appeared as a cloud to protect his Chosen People.

This cloud, a visible sign of the presence of the Divine for the Jews through their wanderings in the desert and in their Tabernacle, continues through the New Testament. It functions as a sign of the Divinity of Christ, as the Logos dwelling among us, and the glory of Christ as the only Son of the Father (John 1:14). It appeared at the Transfiguration and the Ascension, a manifestation of the Divine nature of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> The image of the cloud also connected with the human nature of Christ, for a cloud rested on Mary at the moment of the Annunciation (Luke 1:35), to affirm the Incarnation of God become man, and at his Baptism.<sup>15</sup> To understand the use of the cloud in association with the figure of Christ in early Christian art, one "must understand the fundamentally different approach of the early Christians to the sacred story of Christ's life. The Lord of Life, not the Man of Sorrows, was He to Whom they looked; not the human Jesus so much as the Cosmic Christ touched their souls."<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament, the believers in Jesus themselves are described as surrounded by a "cloud of witnesses"<sup>17</sup> of the prophets and martyrs of the Old Testament.

Early Christian art functioned as a conduit between the traditions of ancient cultures and the emerging European Christian medieval cultures. It established many of the artistic conventions and motifs that would persist through western art and culture. The symbolic use of the cloud in this art was consistent and pervasive. The compositions in which it appears often contain a complex symbolism derived from many early and diverse civilizations.

In our global situation, the art and literature of the world reveals parallel uses of the symbol of the cloud beyond Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Tibetan mandalas, in Chinese dragon symbolism, in Native American art, in African mythology, the image of the cloud recurs as an important expression of inexpressible divine realities. Perhaps an understanding of the significance of cloud symbolism between different cultures today could present a bridge to brotherhood, rather than an image of hatred, bombing and destruction.

## Notes

1. Some Muslims object to any representation of Muhammad. However, there has been much latitude in Islamic art in this regard, varying through different times and places. Some prohibited all figurative representation as a violation of the ban on idols; others were willing to show the figure of Muhammad *sans* his face, as in late 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman art. See “Islamic Art” in Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, Rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. 1 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005) 349.
2. G. W. F. Hegel, “Art As the Ideal” in *The Nature of Art*, Thomas E. Wartenberg, (Belmont, CA: Thompson/Wadsworth, 2001) 76-77.
3. Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “The Nation: Saturation Point; Imagine 20 Years of This,” *The Week In Review*, *New York Times*, 25 September 2005.
4. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Vol. 1, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) , xi.
5. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (N.Y., N.Y.: A Search Book: Sheed and Ward, 1961) , 15.
6. Edmund Husserl, *The Essential Husserl, Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology* ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1963) .
7. *Ibid.*
8. McGuire, xxix.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” *Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964) , 59. Quoted in Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, *Ibid.*, xxvii.
10. Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” *Ibid.* 96.
11. *Ibid.*, 83-84. Exodus 33:9-11 RSV.
12. Jean Danielou, S.J. *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1956) , 87-88.
13. Bonnefoy, 160-161.
14. Bonnefoy, *Ibid.*, 91.
15. The cloud is not specifically named in scripture—Mary is instead told that “the power of the Most High will overshadow you”—early Christian art depicts a cloud at the Baptism of Jesus, for this is when he became the Christ in early Christian tradition. The Baptism in early Christianity was the actual birth of the Christ, and “Christmas” was celebrated on January 6, the day of the Baptism (“epiphany” means “appearance,” the manifestation of the Christ in Jesus).
16. Emil Block and Robert Goebel, *The Catacombs*, Second Edition, ed. Alfred Heidenreich (Stuttgart: The Christian Community Press, 1962) , 22.
17. Hebrews 12:1 RSV “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . .”