

Remarks on St. Christopher

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Whoever shall behold the image of St. Christopher shall not faint or fall on that day. (Inscription frequently born by statues and pictures of St. Christopher.)

The demythologizing reforms of the modern Catholic Church have seen many saints “de-canonized.” Among those dropped from the universal calendar is St. Christopher, one of the most popular saints of both the Latin and Orthodox traditions. The cult of St. Christopher has not been suppressed as such, but it is confined to local calendars, those for a diocese, country, and so forth. Before the 1969 reform of the Roman calendar, Christopher was listed as a martyr who died under Decius. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* suggests that the existence of a martyr Christopher ‘cannot be denied, as was sufficiently shown by the Jesuit Nicholas Serarius, in his treatise on litanies, “Litaneutici” (Cologne, 1609), and by Molanus in his history of sacred pictures, “De picturis et imaginibus sacris” (Louvain, 1570).’¹ It is the mythological aspects of the legend of St. Christopher that the Church finds problematic, as evident in the Latin edition in prose and verse of 983 by the subdeacon Walter of Speyer, *Thesaurus anecdotorum novissimus* (Augsburg, 1721-23), II, 27-142, and Harster, *Walter von Speyer* (1878), and in an eleventh century edition of the *Acta SS.*, and again in *The Golden Legend* of Jacob de Voragine.

The efforts of the Vatican to demythologize the universal calendar reflect a desire to appear more “serious” in an age when myth tends to be associated with an immature phase of human intellect. In 1998, Pope John Paul II delivered a call for a renewal of Catholic metaphysics suggesting a further inclination towards a more “serious” and intellectual Church.² One must applaud His Holiness’ challenge to the Catholic institution to revitalize its intellectual foundations. However, it is somewhat

¹ F. Mershman, *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. III* Online Edition Copyright © 1999 by Kevin Knight, *Nihil Obstat, November 1, 1908*. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor, *Imprimatur*. John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York.

² John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican:1988, section 83.

ironic that, in the face of Pope John Paul's call, the Church continues to slowly but surely discard the mythological symbolisms that have been the traditional vehicles for so much of Christian metaphysics throughout its history.³ An examination of the symbolism of St. Christopher will serve both to reveal the importance of this "legendary" figure and to demonstrate, to some small extent, the value of symbolic myth in general.

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St. Christopher is commonly depicted wading across a river, holding a staff and bearing the Christ-Child. His name is said to be a Latin pun, *Christo-ferens*, "Christ-carrier."⁴ According to popular tradition, a heathen king (in Canaan or Arabia), through the prayers of his wife to the Blessed Virgin, had a son, whom he called Offerus (Offro, Adokimus, or Reprebus) and dedicated to the gods Machmet and Apollo. Acquiring in time extraordinary size and strength, Offerus resolved to serve only the strongest and the bravest. He bound himself successively to a mighty king and to Satan, but he found both lacking in courage, the former dreading the name of the devil, and the latter frightened by the sight of a cross at the roadside. For a time his search for a new master was in vain, but at last he found a hermit (Babylas?) who told him to offer his allegiance to Christ, instructed him in the Christian faith, and baptized him. Christopher, as he was now called, would not promise to do any fasting or praying, but willingly accepted the task of carrying people, for God's sake, across a raging stream. One night he was carrying a child who continually grew heavier, so that it seemed to him as if he had the whole world on his shoulders. The child, on inquiry, made himself known as the Creator and Redeemer of the world. To prove his statement the child ordered Christopher to fix his staff in the ground. The next morning it had grown into a palm-tree bearing fruit, a miracle that was said to have

³ On the idea of traditional symbolism see my "Understanding "Symbol"": *Sacred Web* 6, Vancouver: Ali Lakhani, 2000, pp.91-106.

⁴ J. C. J. Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend: 'Christopher, St.'*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1983, p.67-8. Greek: *christos*, Christ, *pherein*, to bear; Latin: *Christophorus*, i.e. Christbearer.

converted many. This excited the rage of the king of that region (Dagnus of Samos in Lycia?). Christopher was put into prison and, after many cruel torments, beheaded.⁵

Anyone familiar with mythology and symbolism in general will recognise here a Christian account of the symbolic “traversing of the waters.”⁶ This symbolism expresses a shift in states, generally from “lower” to “higher,” with the river being an interface. Ananda Coomaraswamy has observed that the “traversing of the waters” can be related in three different ways: the voyage can be accomplished either by crossing over the waters to the other shore, by going upstream towards the source of the waters, or by going downstream towards the sea. In the case of going upstream it is a matter of returning to the source, the *Fons Vitae*, the “Well of Honey in Visnu’s highest place” (*RgVeda* 1.154.5), the Perennial Spring of Plotinus (*Enneads* 3.8.10), etc. In the case of “descent with the current,” the sea, as René Guénon remarks in considering this same symbolism, ‘must then be considered not as an extent of water to be crossed, but on the contrary, as the very goal to be reached’⁷. As Coomaraswamy says, ‘the Sea, as the source of all existence, is equally the symbol of their last end or entelechy.’⁸ Elsewhere Coomaraswamy comments that ‘this use of symbols which are contrary in their literal but unanimous in their spiritual sense very well illustrates the nature of metaphysics itself, which is not like a “philosophy,” systematic, but is always consistent.’⁹ In the case of St. Christopher we are principally concerned with the “crossing from one shore to the other,” although there are characteristics, for example his stature, which relate to the other aspects of this general symbolism.

⁵ As per Mersman, *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. III* Online Edition. See also Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend: ‘Christopher, St.’*, 1983, p.67-8.

⁶ On this universal symbolism see A. Coomaraswamy, ‘Some Pāli Words’: *samudda*’ from *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.324-27; also, R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, ch.58; D. L. Coomaraswamy, ‘The Perilous Bridge of Welfare’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 8.

⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.235.

⁸ A. Coomaraswamy, ‘The Sea’ from *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.406. Coomaraswamy continues here to say, ‘The final goal is not a destruction, but one of liberation from all the limitations of individuality as it functions in time and space.’ The sea is a common symbol of the spatio-temporal domain.

⁹ Coomaraswamy, ‘Some Pāli Words’: *samudda*’, 1977, p.324.

The symbolism of crossing from one bank to another is, as Guénon says, doubtless the more commonly known of the above variations. The crossing can be afforded by a boat or ferry, a raft, or a bridge of some fashion. Concerning the boat or ferry, it is probably fair to say that the “ferry of the dead” is the best known motif here, with the Greek myth of Charon being the most familiar example of this in the West, although there are numerous examples, so that Chevalier and Gheerbrant’s *Dictionary of Symbols* claims that ‘all civilizations have their boat of the dead’¹⁰. For Guénon, this crossing of the “waters of death” reflects the ultimate transition, where ‘the shore which is left behind is the world subject to change, that is, the corporeal state in particular...and the “other shore” is *Nirvana*, the state which is definitely set free from death.’¹¹ Death, in this context is to be recognised not in any pejorative sense but as a transition, where ‘new birth necessarily presupposes death to the former state’¹².

The “traversing of the waters” can also be made via a bridge.¹³ St. Christopher statues were traditionally placed at the entrances of churches and dwellings, and frequently at bridges. Like the boat, the bridge is associated with the notion of death and return to the source: ‘Death is a bridge whereby the lover is joined to the Beloved.’¹⁴ The bridge is often ‘broad for the righteous but as thin as a blade for the impious’¹⁵. One of the most famous examples of this is the “Sword Bridge” crossed by Sir Lancelot in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Chevalier de la charrette*.¹⁶ Guénon identifies this symbolism as being that of *Chinvat*, the “Bridge of the Separator” in Zoroastrian tradition, and also, the “narrow” and “hard” way of St.

¹⁰ J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols* (tr.) J. Buchanan-Brown, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996: “boat”. In Egyptian tradition we have the ferry-boat of Afu Ra (see W. E. A. Budge, *The Book of the Dead* ‘The Hieroglyphic Transcript and English Translation of the Papyrus of Ani’, New Jersey: Gramercy Books, 1995, ‘The Abode of the Blessed’ passim.) In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* this is the ferry of Ur-shanabi (see Tablet I, *Gilgamesh* from S. Dalley (ed.), *Myths from Mesopotamia* Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others, Oxford: Oxford Uni. Press, 1991, p.102).

¹¹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.234.

¹² Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.110.

¹³ See Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.65.

¹⁴ ‘Abd al-‘Azîz b. Sulaymân per W. N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.226.

¹⁵ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘bridge’, 1996, p.122. This is the symbolism of the “sword bridge,” see M. Eliade, *Shamanism* ‘Archaic techniques of ecstasy’, Middlesex: Arkana, 1989: ‘The Bridge and the “Difficult Passage”’, p.482; also p.456; see p.455 on ‘sword ladders’.

¹⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, ‘Le Chevalier de la charrette (The Knight of the Cart)’ from *Arthurian Romances* (tr.) W. W. Kibler, Middlesex: Penguin, 1991.

Matthew (Mt.7:14). This symbolism is universal. The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, recalls an Eskimo shaman crossing an abyss on a bridge as narrow as a knife.¹⁷ In the *Katha Upanishad* the path is a “sharpened edge of a razor” (3.14). This symbolism is again found in the assimilation of a bridge to a ray of light, on which point Guénon observes the double sense of the English word “beam” which designates both a girder, in the sense of a single beam or single tree trunk, as is the case with the most primitive form of bridge, and a luminous ray.¹⁸ The “luminous ray” is a bridge between the terrestrial domain and the celestial or solar domain. Its narrowness indicates its treacherous nature—the “hard way”—and it is properly speaking the path of the “solar hero.”

The bridge, in the most general sense, connects the two “shores” which will always, from a certain level of reference, have between them a relationship corresponding to that between heaven and earth.¹⁹ Guénon: ‘The bridge, therefore, is the exact equivalent of the axial pillar that links heaven and earth even while holding them apart; and it is because of this meaning that it must be conceived of as essentially vertical like all the other symbols of the “World Axis”—for example, the axel of the “cosmic chariot” when its two wheels represent heaven and earth. This establishes also the fundamental identity of the symbolism of the bridge with that of the ladder’²⁰. The vertical nature of the World Axis (*axis mundi*) is found in the symbolism of the solar hero’s journey “upstream.” The foremost symbols of the *axis mundi* are the Mountain and the Tree, but it is also commonly recognized that the giant can, in certain cases, play this role. The most obvious example here is the Greek titan, Atlas. In the Hindu tradition, Agni unites both the ideas of the solar ray and the *axis mundi* inasmuch as he is the “Sun-Pillar,” who is the “heaven supporting pillar” (*RgVeda* 4.5.1). Here two seemingly distinct aspects of St. Christopher’s symbolism, that of his stature and his role as a means of traversing the waters, coincided.

The case of St. Christopher presents a most interesting addition to the boat-bridge symbolism, with St. Christopher himself being the means of traversing the

¹⁷ J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982, p.333.

¹⁸ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.260, n.2.

¹⁹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.261, n.4.

waters. This homology of boat and human body is not unique. St Ambrose saw the Ark of Noah as representing the human body; St Augustine felt that the Ark prefigures the City of God, the Church and Christ's body; and Hugh of St. Victor, in his treatise, *De arca Noe morali et de arca mystica*, says that the mystic Ark is represented in the human heart. Ibn al-'Arabi, also compared the basket, which was to the baby Moses his "Ark," to the body in his *Fusûs al-Hikam (The Bezels of the Prophets)*.²¹ In Hindu tradition it is said, 'The human body is like a boat, the first and foremost use of which is to carry us across the ocean of life and death to the shore of immortality (*Srimad Bhagavatam* XI, xiii).

Man—and here the English term "man" signifies at once the male and the human being *per se* like the Greek *anthropos*, the German *mensch* or the Arabic *insan*²²—is the *pontifex* (bridge-builder).²³ Frithjof Schuon, puts it thus,

Man's mission is precisely to join the vision of "the Outward" to that of "the Inward;" to be at once witness to God as Principle and to God as Manifestation or Theophany, for "everything is Atma". Man has therefore a God-given right to these two perspectives; they constitute his sufficient cause and therefore serve to define him; in other words, man is essentially a pontifex, a link between Earth and Heaven, and between the Outward and the Immanent.²⁴

Man is potentially "true God and true man," as realized in Christ. Man is the pontifex inasmuch as man is both Principle and Manifestation. This is the doctrine of "Universal Man," *El-Insanul-Kamil* of Islamic esoteric tradition,²⁵ *Adam Kadmon* in

²⁰ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.261.

²¹ Ibn Al-'Arabi, *Fusûs al-hikam* Chapter on Moses, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (tr.) R. W. J. Austin, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, p.252-53.

²² As Seyyed Hossein Nasr, remarks, ' There is no need to torture the natural structure of the English language to satisfy current movements which consider the use of the term "man" as a sexist bias, forgetting the second meaning of the term as *anthropos*' (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p.183, n.1).

²³ See Guénon, *The Lord of the World*, 1983, Ch.2, par. p.6, n.4; Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, Chs.9, 14 & 17; also See Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*: 'bridge', 1996, p.123.

²⁴ F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, London: World of Islam Festive Trust, 1976, p.182.

²⁵ Of particular importance here are the treatises of Ibn 'Arabi and al-Jili. See also Titus Burckhardt's translation and commentary on 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili's, *al-insan al-kamil* (Universal Man), Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983; see also R. Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1975, Ch.II 'Universal Man'.

the Kabbalah.²⁶ Universal Man, as René Guénon remarks, is the principle of all manifestation.²⁷ Guénon further observes that most traditional doctrines symbolize the realization of Universal Man by the “sign of the cross.”²⁸ This symbolism informs the Crucifixion and Christ’s role as Universal Man; and this, with relation to the boat or vessel, makes one think with St. Peter, of the analogy between Christ and Noah.²⁹

St. Christopher (*Christo-ferens*, “Christ-carrier”) is none other than the vessel by which Christ “traverses the waters.” In *The Golden Legend* it is said that St. Christopher bears Christ in four manners: ‘He bears him on his shoulders by conveying and leading, in his body by making it lean, in mind by devotion, and in his mouth by confession and predication.’³⁰ St. Christopher is here an exemplar for the Christian who must accept Christ in all things.

St. Christopher as “vessel” is comparable to the human form of Jesus Christ, which was the earthly vessel to the “Word made flesh.” Here we recall the story of Jesus walking across the waters (Mt.14:22-33; Mk.6:45-52; Jn.6:16-21). In this story Peter is also able to walk upon the water. Peter’s faith upheld him, which is to say that faith is, in a sense, the “vessel.” In a third century Chinese account of the universal miracle of “walking upon water” the Buddha explained that ‘faith (*sraddha*) can cross the gulf’³¹. St. Christopher well expresses this idea of faith “in mind by devotion” and as he waits unquestionably at the stream for his coming master.

St. Christopher can also be seen to represent the essential religious element of submission. He is the son of a king and of “extraordinary size and strength,” yet, for all his power, he wished to submit himself to a master. Here we are presented with a likeness of Christ who is himself the son of the greatest king, moreover, Christ is himself God, yet he submits himself to Himself in the ultimate act of out flowing

²⁶ See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.215, n.31, 267; Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, Ch.VI ‘The Mystery of Man’, par. p.83, 126.

²⁷ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross* 1975, p.8.

²⁸ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross* 1975, p.10.

²⁹ Christ is not only the “new Adam” but also the “new Noah.” St. Peter says that the baptism of Christ corresponds to the passing through the waters of the Flood in the Ark (1Pt.3:21).

³⁰ Jacob de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* Vol.IV, New York, AMS Press, 1973, p.111.

³¹ *Fa Kui P’i Yu King* cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.226.

Mercy. This is the doctrine of Christ's *kenosis* (Ph. 2:1-11).³² Furthermore, the very image of St. Christopher is one of submission, of being beneath the load (Christ and thus the World) that he carries.

We are presented with an obvious comparison between St. Christopher and Atlas. Both were “giants” who bore the weight of the world, yet the analogy is more complex than first appears. Atlas was condemned to bear the weight of the world for eternity. He was only relieved momentarily of this weight by Hercules, a solar hero with Christic resemblance. In Christian tradition it is Christ who bears the weight of the world and is relieved, in a sense, momentarily by St. Christopher. Thus to make a direct analogy it is Christ who equates with Atlas as St. Christopher equates with Hercules. According to inverse analogy St. Christopher equates with Atlas as Christ equates with Hercules. In truth Christ is the Axis linking heaven and earth, thus it is right to compare Atlas and Christ; equally so, Christ is the solar hero, traversing the waters of Existence—‘being in everyway like a human being’ (Ph.2:7)—and thus it is right to compare Hercules to Christ.³³ Similarly St. Christopher is analogous to both Atlas and Hercules according to the perspective adopted. This is another example of the interplay of symbolisms that has nothing arbitrary about it but expresses a precise relationship.

St. Christopher's axial symbolism is reinforced by his staff, which Christ ordered be fixed in the ground and which then grew into a palm-tree. The staff is a well-recognized symbol of the *axis mundi*.³⁴ The blossoming of the staff recalls the similar events of Aaron's rod (Num.17:1-11 [16-26]), the miracle of Joseph's rod signaling his betrothal to Mary (*The Protevangelium of James* 9.1),³⁵ and the

³² On the doctrine of kenosis see my ‘*Withdrawal, Extinction and Creation: Christ's kenosis in light of the Judaic doctrine of tsimtsum and the Islamic doctrine of fana*’, *Sophia*, Vol.7 No.2, Winter Issue, Oakton: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 2001, pp.45-64.

³³ In the Judeo-Christian tradition Hercules is most obviously paralleled with Samson, who is also a solar hero.

³⁴ See Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘staff’, 1996, p.918.

³⁵ According to this account a dove came forth from Joseph's rod and flew on to his head. As the *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, 1991, p.430, notes, this alludes to Matt.3:16 and the baptism of Christ. Of course, as St. Peter says, baptism corresponds precisely to “traversing the waters” of the Flood (1Pt.3:21).

blooming of Christ's Cross at the Crucifixion.³⁶ The image of a rod that bursts into flowers, usually lilies, is also an attribute of St. Mary the Virgin.³⁷

The choosing of Aaron as the priestly intermediary between man and God comes just after the rebellion and punishment of Korah. We are told here that Aaron 'stood between the living and the dead' (Num.17:13 [48]), an image that portrays him with one foot in either realm, a bridge between worlds. In the story of the betrothal of Joseph and Mary, Joseph is particularly reminded of the punishment of Korah if he should not obey God's command to accept Mary. In a sense, just as Aaron, and with him the priestly caste, act to bring man to God and God to man, so too does Joseph act to bring the Virgin Mother and Child to mankind.³⁸ St. Mary for her part is the very vessel of Christ and in this sense the symbolism of St. Christopher coincides with that of St. Mary the Mother of Christ. Here we should not forget that it was the baby Christ that St. Christopher carried across the stream.

The staff is also associated with the idea of fecundity, an idea that resonates with the idea of marriage, as with the marriage of Joseph and Mary, and more particularly with Mary herself as the Heavenly Mother. This symbolism of the fecundity of the staff expresses itself most prominently in the analogy of staff and phallus but has its final source in the creative diremption and polarization of the complementary Principles, Essence and Substance. Prior—in a logical rather than chronological sense—to their polarization, Essence and Substance abide in a nondual biunity, coincident but not composed, fused but not confused. The diremption or polarization of Essence and Substance is, metaphysically speaking, the creative act *par excellence*. This fecundity is well seen in the miracle of the staff becoming a palm tree and bearing fruit. The palm tree is regarded as a symbol of victory, ascension, regeneration and immortality.³⁹ The traversing of the waters, in the sense

³⁶ Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*: 'Cross, legends of the', 1983, p.76.

³⁷ Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*: 'Flowering rod', 1983, p.101.

³⁸ Guénon has remarked on the curious fact that it was a "Joseph" who possessed the "oracular cup" (Gen.44:5) and a Joseph, Joseph of Arimathaea, who possessed the Grail (*Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, pp.198-99). We also note it being another Joseph, Joseph husband of Mary, who possessed, so to speak, Mary, herself a well known symbol of the Grail and again the vessel of the blood of Christ.

³⁹ See Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*: 'Palm', 1983, p.188; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*: 'palm', 1996, p.734.

of crossing to a higher state, precisely accords with victory and ascension. Inasmuch as this is a death to one state and the birth of the primordial state this is regeneration; and inasmuch as the primordial state is the state of divine Unity beyond both Time and Space, this is exactly the abode of immortality. Furthermore, the symmetry of the palm leaf and the androgynous nature of the palm tree perfectly symbolize the resolution of the contraries, Nicolas of Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*, from multiplicity through duality to ontological biunity within divine Unity, from contraries to complemetaries.

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There is a notable and somewhat peculiar variation on the St. Christopher mythology that deserve mention for the manner in which it fleshes out this symbolism. Professor John Metford, among others, remarks on the artistic depiction of St. Christopher with a “dog’s head.”⁴⁰ Metford conjectures that this is derived from Christopher admitting to having been a Canaanite before his baptism, the Latin *cananeus* (“Canaanite”) being confused for *canineus* (“dog-like” or “canine”). This may well be so, and if so it would seem to be an interesting case of hermeneutic relationship as discussed by Coomaraswamy in his essay, ‘*Nirukta = Hermeneia*’.⁴¹ Without dismissing Metford’s conjecture, let us suggest that this depiction of St. Christopher accords with the complex symbolism of the “dog,” including its worldwide role as psychopomp. The dog is commonly seen as the guardian of the Underworld, as with the Greek Cerberus and associated with death, be it as Cerberus, the Egyptian Anubis, the Germanic Garm, or the Chinese T’ien ‘kuan. Furthermore, Chevalier & Gheerbrant’s *Dictionary of Symbols* recalls instances, in the Aztec tradition, of a dog being sacrificed on its master’s grave to help him cross the nine rives which bar access to the eternal house of the dead.⁴² The dog is both guardian and guide, the one who has the “key” to the barrier between the two worlds, or even

⁴⁰ Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*: ‘Christopher, St.’, 1983, p.68; also J. Coulson (ed.), *The Saints A Concise Biographical Dictionary*, London: Burns & Oates, 1958, p. 110.

⁴¹ A. Coomaraswamy, ‘*Nirukta = Hermeneia*’ from *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, 1977.

⁴² See Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*: ‘dog’, 1996, p.297 citing H. B. Alexander, *The World’s Rim: Great Mysteries of The North American Indians*, Lincon (Nebraska), 1953, p.202, also J. Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, London, 1959.

as the “keyhole” itself, so to speak. The “ferryman” is the means of this crossing. The relationship here is similar to that between the door (the ferryman) and the key (the dog). These are two elements of the one symbolism. In the case of the depiction of St. Christopher with a dog’s head there seems to be a recognition of this symbolic interplay.

Related to this depiction of St. Christopher with a dog’s head is the connection observed by Whitall Perry between St. Christopher and the “Precursor” to the Second Coming of Christ (Elias, John the Baptist, Al-Mahdi).⁴³ Perry remarks that ‘St. John the Baptist, whose feast day is June 24, is identified with the summer solstice as the Saint John of Summer’.⁴⁴ Hence, ‘the Forerunner to Christ, in his association with the summer solstice, is thus in some manner allied with the constellation of *Canis Major*, due to its heliacal position at this period.’⁴⁵ Moreover, as Guénon says, the solstitial symbolism of the “two St. John’s” is related to the symbolism of the Roman Janus, who, with St. Peter in the Christian tradition, is the “holder of the keys”.⁴⁶ Furthermore, with respect to the “traversing of the waters” both St. Peter and Janus have as elements of their respective symbolisms the symbol of the boat. Christ excepted, St. Peter may be said to be the fisherman *par excellence* of the Christian tradition; and, as Guénon remarks, Janus had as one of his chief emblems a barque that could move in both directions, forward and backward, corresponding to the two faces of Janus himself.⁴⁷

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The Catholic tradition is resplendent with traditional symbolisms and blessed with a wealth of mythologies divinely inspired to communicate symbolic truths to all

⁴³ Perry, *The Widening Breach*, 1995, p.76. Analogous allusions to this preparatory function are to be seen in Hinduism (the *Kalki Avatar*) and in Buddhism (the *Maitreya Buddha*); see also Lings, *The Eleventh Hour*, 1987, Ch.1.

⁴⁴ The feast day of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist is December 27th and St. John the Baptist, June 24th, these dates being those of the traditional Roman calendar; see Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.169, n.4.

⁴⁵ Perry, *The Widening Breach*, 1995, p.75, 76.

⁴⁶ On the symbolism of Janus see Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Chs.20 & 39; also Coomaraswamy, ‘*Svayamātrnnā: Janua Coeli*’.

⁴⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.92.

levels of the human consciousness, which will necessarily be found in any human collectivity. Myth at its most basic level is the property and right of the “general” peoples, the “folk” element, so to speak. Thus the mythic nature of St. Christopher poses little or no problem for the folk mentality. Regardless of rational explanations or conscious recognition of the symbolism involved the folk element of the Catholic Church is well able to accept and benefit from the “simple” truth that St. Christopher offers.⁴⁸ It comes as little surprise that while the Church has dismissed St. Christopher from the universal calendar he nevertheless remains one of the most popular saints of the Catholic tradition.

To show that elements of St. Christopher’s symbolism are found in various mythologies around the world is in no way intended to suggest that the mythology of St. Christopher is simply a “borrowing,” or that it is in any way non-Catholic. As Guénon remarked, ‘there are symbols which are common to the most diverse and widely separated traditional forms, not as a result of “borrowings,” which in many cases would be quite impossible, but because in reality they pertain to the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’⁴⁹ Truth is Truth in any tradition. That the fundamental doctrines of any orthodox tradition should find support in the authority of many or all of the other orthodox traditions should come as no surprise. It is in fact a great comfort and confirmation.

⁴⁸ I do not deny that this simple devotional character can decline into mere superstition, but one does not throw the baby out with the bathwater, as the saying goes.

⁴⁹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.27