



ARTICOLO IN RISTAMPA

MEDIEVAL ENCHANTMENT TECHNIQUES: ST CHRISTPHER AND THE SIREN

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ISSN: 2283-8961

Fonte: Questo articolo viene dalla rivista “World cultural psychiatry research review”, WCPRR 2011.

Abstract.

Transcultural psychiatry has performed an in-depth study into the suggestive practices and different forms of transcendence techniques used among traditional peoples as healing practices or as a privileged means of achieving religious and ecstasy experiences. Despite the fact that

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also prevailing Western cultures savvily used and still use a plurality of psychological influencing and conditioning techniques based on figurative means and architectural techniques, there is a lack of documentation on the use made of enchantment techniques by these civilizations. This paper illustrates an example of a consolidated medieval religious influencing technique through the empirical use of perceptive detachment dynamics and the achievement of transcendence. Two frescoes portraying St Christopher, located in the Upper Valley of the Nera River in the Italian region of Umbria, are herein interpreted as an example of the savvily conceived instruments to induce special states of suspended consciousness which configure the natural groundwork for subsequent canonical devotion.

Keywords:

Transcendence, detachment, St Christopher

THE ORIGIN OF THE CULT OF ST CHRISTOPHER

St Christopher stands out among the most “carnal” and least ascetic saints described in the hagiography of Mediterranean cultures. We find him portrayed in the frescoes painted in modest mountain parish churches, often next to St Sebastian pierced with arrows. The peasant and the traveller can readily identify with both, feeling mirrored in Sebastian’s suffering and in the hope of being able to one day encounter, just like Christopher, the child Jesus, who is always portrayed candidly perched on the shoulder of the Herculean saint.

Christopher is an emblem of ailing distress, the perfect go-between to connect the believer to a pious and fatiguing existence. Indeed, St Christopher is not invoked to perform outstanding miracles and to achieve extra-mundane salvation. The Saint is not called upon to give immortality but only to prevent a bad death, a sudden and apparently unmotivated death: in practice, devotion to the saint promised a life cleansed of disease, help to “get on with life”, day after day. This makes Christopher a domestic Saint, which is his most venerated image, to be greeted like a companion. Moreover, as we will soon see, the origin of the figure is pervaded by profane aspects,

thus facilitating a hostel-type camaraderie more than liturgical devotion. The traditional image of St Christopher, which was particularly frequent in the Middle Ages, portrays him crossing the waters of a river while he is carrying the child Jesus on his shoulder. It can often be found hanging inside churches right next to the entrance, or in palazzos, towers or city gates, reflecting the tradition that promised the saint's protection throughout the day if the image was saluted before starting out on a journey (Cattabiani, 1993).

His origins reportedly date back to the 3rd Century AD when, according to oriental legends, a man by the name of Reprobos was submitted to martyrdom in Samo, in Lycia. He was a strong and husky warrior although he was deaf and had a dog's head. At least this is how he was sometimes represented in the Orient, as testified by the icons on display in the museums of St Petersburg and Sophia. The iconography of the dog-headed saint is and was no hazard and is the alleged evidence of a cult born in areas under the influence of the Egyptian religion that worshipped Anubis, the god with the head of a jackal, who was vested with a totally different type of ferrying activity: towards the world beyond, life after death.

These unseemly exotic roots coupling Christopher with Anubis gave rise to some perplexities among Christian hagiographers, and even more so considering the exceptionality of the figure of Christopher: a man who helps the child Jesus, the son of God, to cross the river beyond which the whole world would open up to his message.

It is possible to obtain data on St Christopher in the *Legenda Aurea* (literally *The Golden Legend*) by Jacobus de Voragine (1997 [1260]), written in such a way as to offer the taste of a "scientific story" quite different from the history of sacred thought or salvation. The Golden Legend tells the details of when he lifted the boy who asked him to carry him across the river. Christopher felt the child became as heavy as lead and he was in dire distress fearing that he was about to fail reaching the opposite bank.

Once he crossed the river, Christopher set the child down and said to him: «My boy, you put me in great danger, and you weighed so much that if I had the whole world on my back I could not have felt it a heavier burden!» (*ibidem*, Volume II, p 12) (**Note 1**). Then the child disclosed his identity and Christopher began to convert people to

Christianity. Christopher was submitted to martyrdom in Samo, in Lycia, where he had gone to preach the message of Christ. The giant was arrested and taken before King Dagnus, who asked him his name. «Before being baptized, my name was Reprobus and now it is Christopher». And the King replied: «You have taken a very silly name, the name of Christ on the cross who couldn't save himself and now won't be able to save you. Why don't you now want to make a sacrifice to the gods?». Faced with his refusal, King Dagnus locked him up in a jail and sent two beautiful young girls, Nicaeae and Aquilina, to corrupt him. But, on the contrary, Christopher succeeded in converting them. At that point Christopher was taken to the King who ordered that he be whipped with sticks of steel and his head covered with an incandescent helmet after he was tied to a seat that was also of scorching metal. But the seat melted like wax and Christopher got up unscathed. Lastly, the King ordered that he be tied to a pole and pierced with the arrows shot by 400 soldiers, but the arrows remained hovering in the air around the head of the Saint (**Note 2**). The following day Christopher was beheaded. The King took a little of his blood and rubbed it on his blind eyes and his sight was restored immediately.

Christopher's charisma was enhanced exactly because he proved he had the power of avoiding a violent death because, unlike Sebastian, no arrow pierced his body. The Catholic Encyclopaedia (AA.VV., 1948-1952) especially highlights the fact that he resisted the temptation of the flesh by managing to convert the two women who had been sent to him to induce him into sin and apostasy (De Rosa *et al*, 1993). It was only when the legend was spread about Jesus being carried across the river by the giant, that it was accepted by the people: Christopher thus became the protector against any danger that might surprise travellers along their journey: hurricanes, storms, natural catastrophes and especially the evil spell of sorcery-working witches.

The following are the typical verses written underneath his image: *Christophorum videas, postea tutus eas* (i.e., see Christopher and then go self-assured); *Christophore Sancte virtutes tuae sunt tantae/ qui te mane videt, nocturno tempore ridet* (i.e., St Christopher, your virtues are many: who sees you in the morning will be laughing at nighttime).

This is how Christopher's popularity grew: out of the conviction that he could not only preserve one from a bad death (i.e., death not preceded by confession, insofar as occurring far away from a church or from the assistance of a priest), but also from

inexplicable diseases and from epilepsy in particular. Christopher was not called upon to work canonical miracles, healing people from the plague or malignant fevers, but for help so as not to lose one's way in the dark and to not be abducted by the devil. And, on his part, Christopher did not ask for much: he didn't ask that the believer be cleansed of his sins, but only asked him for a glance, a greeting. This combination of a natural power and petty thaumaturgy distorted his sanctity and popularity through the lens of superstition, overshadowing the other figures in the Pantheon of Christianity.

Despite this, Christopher's strength and nimbleness in carrying the child Jesus across the river earned him the people's investiture as the protector of travellers. Also in modern times, the saint has played a relevant role in the superstitious imagination of car-drivers. His effigy has been long reproduced on large posters posted on the windows of trucks or etched onto the magnetic cards that used to be glued to automobile wind-screens. This unsought success turned out to be lethal. His power of protection, compared to that of the Virgin Mary or of other Italian female saints, resulted to be troublesome once again and so unseemly that in 1969 the Vatican downgraded his celebrations to a mere local cult, eliminating his memory from the universal calendar (Manetti & Zuffi, 2006).

ST CHRISTOPHER IN THE 'COLLEGIATA OF SANTA MARIA' IN VISSO

However, his memory was testified to by the numerous frescoes of the saint painted in churches. The iconography is clear and consistent. The saint is always portrayed while carrying the child Jesus across the river, leaning on a walking stick that, pounded on the ground, causes the sprouting of flowers. The saint is surrounded by several figures, often also including two captivating women (a clear reference to the legend whereby he redeemed two women who were sent to him in prison to seduce him and whom he converted). Furthermore, the water of the river in which he stands is teeming with fish, strange animals and sometimes also a Siren (Farmer, 1997).

This iconography can also be found in one of the oldest frescoes portraying Christopher that was unveiled recently (**Picture 1 & 2**). In 1991, a gigantic fresco of St Christopher was found following some restoration work inside the 'Collegiata di S. Maria' in Visso, which had previously been concealed behind an impersonal hand of whitewash dating

back to the 16th Century plague.



Picture 1 St Christopher in the 'Collegiata of Santa Maria in Visso'



Picture 2 Detail of the siren at the feet of St Christopher in the 'Collegiata of Santa Maria in Visso'

The atypically over-sized fresco (10.68 metres high and 4.22 metres wide) painted between the two doors leading into the church is thought to be the work of an unknown 'Visso-born Artist' (Venanzangeli, 2001). The painting is simple, in the Byzantine style, without the use of perspective. In the saint's large face, which is in two dimensions and with a flat nose, stands out his wide-eyed look, with his pupils set apart by his eyebrows, staring out into the distance. (**Note 3**) He is donning a red cloak edged in white, falling to his knees. Between his knees, it is surprising to see the presence of a two-tailed siren that we will find again in the fresco of St Christopher by Paolo da Visso.

THE FRESCO OF ST CHRISTOPHER BY PAOLO DA VISSO

Visso is known to have painted a number of works of art between 1435 and 1482 (Venanzangeli, 2001). Among these stand out the fresco of St Christopher (**Picture 3 & 4**), painted in 1474 in the Church of St Liberatore in Castel Sant'Angelo on Nera, a tiny little village lying between the town of Visso and Norcia. In 1970, the fresco was

removed from the church to be transferred to the premises of the cloistered convent right above the church. At the moment, it can be viewed only after receiving a special permission.



Picture 4 Detail of the Siren in the fresco of St Christopher by Paolo da Visso

Picture 3 Paolo da Visso's fresco of St Christopher as it presently hangs in the corridors of the Cloistered Convent

The fresco dates back to the 15th Century, a pictorial period that witnessed the flourishing of a local school of painters in Visso and in the Upper Valnerina, concomitantly to the great painting schools in the bordering Tiber Valley, which painted important religious themes with their humble local artistic skills. (**Note 4**).

Paolo da Visso (Venanzangeli, 1993), who had certainly seen the St Christopher's fresco in the Collegiata and from which he is sure to have drawn his inspiration, painted his series of paintings fully respecting the classical religious iconography mainly featuring the Madonna and Child, but also

Painted more personal versions such as in the case of his portrayal of Christ the Redeemer in the Church of St Martin in Castel Sant'Angelo, in which Christ is

surrounded by the implements of a range of trades, with the specific aim of pointing out the activities to be banned on the day of the Lord. The iconographic force with which Paolo da Visso portrays the good-hearted giant primarily aims at inducing a dutiful awe of the saint in the mind of the viewer. The legs of the saint, left bare beneath his wind-blown cloak, are Michelangiolesque in their muscle structure, a feature seldom found in ecstatic portrayals, which are often decorated with the glistening gold and glitters used by other local artists to depict sanctity.

On the other hand, the saint's good-humoured face instils a sense of tranquillity, just like the expression on the face of the child Jesus, who looks evidently happy to have found such a secure support. Christopher shows no uncertainty: his physical strength and experience convey a message of his laboursome and strength-consuming crossing of the river.

The pictorial space is subdivided into three sections: the faces of Christopher and of child Jesus in the upper section, right below the empyrean skies. Next to their faces lies a round Earth divided into 3 parts: Eur-Aff-Asia. (Europe, Africa, Asia), recalling the universality of his message. The middle section instead represents the mundane and features a monk, St Benedict the Hermit, in the middle, who holds up a beacon to show the way (Venanzangeli, 1993).

The most problematic section is the lowest one, where the water in which Christopher stands is teeming with popular fish species but also infested with spell-binding figures (**Note 5**). In the crystal-clear water surrounding Christopher's feet, we can see squirming fish and slithering eels together with a female figure sitting on a little boat, but what truly stands out is a sneering siren: enticing in her act of displaying the two valves of her fish tail. It is impossible not to perceive the contrast between the siren and the solemnity of the setting.

As the fresco was placed at the exit of the church, next to the shell with holy water embedded in the wall (a grey space can now be seen where the fresco once stood) where worshippers dip their fingers before taking leave with the sign of the cross, this means that believers, on approaching their hands to the holy water font, necessarily had to take a glimpse of the siren and perceive the contrast between the siren and the

holiness of the scene lying above.

Then and there, on exiting the church, worshippers were forced into making an immediate choice: either the purity of holy water and the sanctity of St Christopher or the spell-casting siren.

In order to secure Christopher's protection, worshippers had to at least make an offering: undergo a private micro-exorcism to free themselves of the sexual attraction exercised by the siren, the all-powerful mythological symbol of the fascination of the temptation of the flesh.

In the wake of Sunday sermons or of the legends on the apotropaic use of the name of Christ (**Note 6**), in the case of St Christopher's fresco, it is the very pictorial set-up that forces (more than convinces) the worshipper into an extremely sophisticated operation: forming an alliance with sanctity by assertively wiping out the blatant sexuality of the siren.

PICTORIAL AND COGNITIVE ENCHANTMENT TECHNIQUES

technique counter-opposing the Good (Christopher) and the Evil (the Siren) used in the fresco would not have been sufficient to motivate me to talk about it, had Paolo da Visso not added a specific cognitive technique to his numerous sacred portrayals: the written scrolls surrounding Christopher indicate the winning formula to avoid falling prey to fascination.

The three written scrolls of the fresco recite, in vernacular rhyme, a precise formula acting at psychological level:



Picture 5 Detail of the three written scrolls in the fresco of St Christopher by Paolo da Visso



Xristofori collo sedeo qui tot crimina tollo

Xristofori picturam cernidit qui gnorat figuram

Si devote intueris nullo morbo murieris

Nam semper letus ibit nec mala morte peribit Cum solus de santis

Tenet ipse formam iagantis.

(i.e., I sit on Christopher's shoulder who frees you from all ailments

Christopher will be distinguished in the painting by whoever ignores the figure

If you are devote in looking, you will perish from no ailment But will always be happy, nor will you die a bad death Because he is the only one among all saints

with the shape of a giant).

The words in the scrolls highlighted in bold print call upon the viewer to perform a perceptive detachment, an operation that is different from all the functions invoked by sacred paintings whose aim is to simply show the magnificence of the divine in counter-opposition to the brutality of the malign (Baltrusaitis, 1993).

What is required in this case is to: look without looking or, better said, to look while ignoring...the figure of the siren. The writing on the scrolls, that might have been read by the priest to illiterate peasants, patently requests the viewer to suspend his/her visual function.

Although the detachment of sensorial perceptions is one of the means used to achieve altered states of consciousness (Wulff, 1997; Bartocci, 2004; Bartocci & Dein, 2005) or an indication found in spiritual liturgies – suffice it to consider the ritual lowering of the worshippers' glance at the monstrance during mass – these scrolls recite a formula that is more closely associated to magic than to religious devotion (Bartocci, 2000). Don't look; it's almost like the technique used in hypnosis: "look at me now".

SENSORIAL DETACHMENT GATE TO SPIRITUALITY

While in the case of Paolo da Visso's fresco the worshipper, in order to free himself of the siren, can obey the injunction made in the scrolls and ignore the figure by raising his eyes and, in so doing, set his glance on the soothing features of the saint and of the child Jesus, in the fresco in the Collegiata, it is not possible to easily recover the vision of the sacred images: by looking up, it is not easy to catch sight of the face of St Christopher and the child Jesus because they are simply too high up.

In the fresco in the Collegiata, in order to free one's glance from the fascination exercised by the siren, which is situated at eye-level on exiting the church, and see the face of the saint and of the child Jesus, it is necessary to take a step back. By taking a step backwards, the figure of the Siren disappears and is therefore "ignored", whereas by taking a step forward, the faces of the saint and of the child Jesus are lost in the height of the church. The viewer loses the perception of either one or the other alternatively. Which of the two perceptions will prevail? On exiting the church, the worshipper, on

his way to the holy water font to dip his fingers in it, inevitably comes across the Siren. So what can he do? Look at her and surrender to her fascination or avoid making visual contact by taking a step back and thus recover the sight of Jesus? However, it is impossible to step back to recover the sight of the saint because that would mean remaining forever trapped in the church, in an unending spiral of stepping forwards and backwards.



Picture 6 Close-up of the fresco of St. Christopher in the Collegiata di S. Maria in Visso

Centuries of efforts made to achieve the pureness of Tao by escaping the fascination of the flesh, refined Sufi techniques to achieve states of ecstasy, reiterated Dhikr ceremonies to perceive the Greatest, heaps of books “scientifically” extolling the value of Freudian Nirvana, all find a pictorial synthesis in the behaviour induced by Christopher’s Collegiata fresco and in the microscopic messages painted on the fresco of St Christopher by Paolo da Visso.

The experience perceived: I won’t look at the Siren, I will wipe out my sexuality, I will devote my life to sanctity and I will cross into the world beyond intact, thus becomes operational.

CONCLUSION

In the light of this particular characteristic, both of the frescoes illustrated in this paper are an example of considerably more complex techniques of proposing, more or less

explicitly, the counter-opposition of sacred and profane images.

The list of techniques already known to any religious seeker who, as an experimentalist, tries to gain new knowledge of the relationship between himself and the external world by means of concentrating his whole attention on a chosen object of contemplation while refusing other aspects of the picture.

The religious methods used to perceive the world, which are mainly characterized by excluding oneself or objects from the scope of consciousness, have already revealed unsuspected qualities like the realization of a heightened significance or of an intensified existence in uncommon things (see for example St John of the Cross). The “uncouth message” of “looking without looking” conveyed by the frescoes illustrated herein can be likened to apophatic (negative) theology, insofar as they both pave “the way of negation” in order to meet God by freeing consciousness of every image and concept (Ware, 1974). The cycle of frescoes portraying Christopher and the Siren, by exercising a graphic Medieval pictorial transcendence technique, highlight the transition from a folkloric message to considerably more pervasive canonical liturgies through sensorial and cultural messages that can also be conveyed by modern-day mass media.

The globalised 21st Century’s need for spirituality goes beyond the function exercised by the Medieval Christopher, whose statue-like image aimed at reassuring the worshipper only enough to help him through the crossing without becoming ensnared in the fascination of the Siren/Sybil. Today, spirituality is marketed through anything ranging from New Age to Scientology, from Pentecostal denominations to ‘Natuza’ (Prince, 1970; Littlewood & Bartocci, 2005), from inter-religious dialogue to monotheistic religions and all the thaumaturgical forms of healing proposed by every religious faith (Baydala *et al*, 2007).

NOTES

1. Translated into English by the author [GB]
2. Stopping the arrows shot at St Christopher recalls a commonplace also found in Saint

Martin of Tours: i.e. stopping movement. «Between 380 and 385 AD, while he was walking along a country footpath, Martin saw a crowd of peasants in the distance proceeding towards him. At first the Bishop feared an ambush but, in actual fact, it was only a funeral procession, albeit pagan. It was sufficient for Martin to do the sign of the cross and order the peasants to put down the coffin for all the participants in the ceremony to stand like stones; they vainly tried to walk forward but their legs would draw back, rotating them into a ridiculous swirl». (Giardina, 1990) (Note 1)

3. The rounded face, the eyes wide open, the lack of pupils and a fixed gaze stigmatised the portrayal of power and transcendence in pagan Rome and during early Christianity. This portrayal highlighting the unsettling timelessness of the features to which the viewer is attracted through the negation of a real-life glance (this also applies to the alluring power of the face of the Gorgons), was typically expressed in ancient Rome with statues looking upwards, thus showing utmost detachment from the trivial troubles of the world and, at the same time, the mystic inspiration and proximity to the god (Ensoli & La Rocca, 2001).
4. Works by Giotto (1267?-1337) can be found in the nearby Assisi, while the frescoes by Piero della Francesca (1415?- 1492) and Luca Signorelli (1445-1523) along the upper Tiber Valley.
5. «In religious iconography, a great number of paintings feature the co-existence of a degraded sexuality and the pureness of sanctity. A large number of Medieval paintings show fish-like women, which are also frequently found in Brittany, where they are portrayed in sculptures or bas-reliefs alongside the Apostles on church doors. At times, these figures allude at – or symbolise – the sexual act, or are represented with long hair flowing into the hair of statues of the Virgin» (Pont-Humbert, 2003) (Note 1).
6. The power of enchantment of the Siren is similar to the one attributed to her Sybil counterpart (Venanzangeli, 2001). The spell-binding power of the Siren, just like that of the Sybil, whose cave is just beyond the mountain pass leading to Norcia, miraculously disappears on evoking the name of Christ. The following is the description of the stratagem used by Guerrino as a means of defence and of annulling the magic and sexual attraction of the Sybil:

«..in the evening he was taken to a luxurious room and the Sybil came with all the pleasures and games capable of making a human body fall in love and, once he had laid down on the bed, she turned sideways disclosing her beauties to him and the whiteness of her flesh and her breasts really looked like ivory. Meschino was once again overwhelmed by his fiery love so he crossed himself with the sign of the holy cross but this did not induce the Sybil to leave but rather to draw closer to him in order to fuel his desire. He then remembered the words of the three hermits and repeated thrice over 'Jesus of Nazareth, help me' and this he murmured within his heart. This name has such power that at the mere mention of it, she got up and out of the bed and left without knowing what had reasoned her to leave» (da Barberino, 1971 [1567]) (Note 1).

The mere thought of confiding oneself to Christ obliges the Sybil to get up and disappear.

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