

# Ordering the Universe

## Numbers as Symbols of Cosmic Patterns

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My research arose out of my fascination with the astonishingly rapid reshaping of consciousness, cultures and societies that is now occurring worldwide. The ensuing shifts in values and meaning have lead me to seek a sense of cohesion in today's churning disorder and uncertainty. For many years I perused this topic by studying masculine and feminine modes of perception and operation. However, in this current paper I have shifted my focus into a more abstract perspective. That is, I have analyzed certain ancient and universal symbols, which, hopefully, can still give a sense of cohesion and meaning in today's tumultuous world.

### Key Words

symbols, numbers, god-image; zero, circle, mandala; three, trinity; four, cross; five, point of intersection

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Symbols are the "words" of the psyche. That is, they are the means by which the psyche communicates with us. It is by symbols that we are able to "see" archetypes and cosmic patterns, by which we receive divine messages, and that we speak to our soul and it to us (Shelley 1986, 4).

A living symbols springs from the unconscious depths and rises into our awareness in shapes, patterns or numbers. These in turn become instruments that influence the psyche from which they arose, making a two-way dialogue between the creator and the created. In other words, the spontaneous symbols of the psyche reflect cosmic patterns and therefore have much to teach us. Yet, as we use symbols by drawing meaning from them and pouring meaning into them, we in turn influence them, enabling them to grow and evolve as we do (ARE, n.d., 1).

Paul Tillich identified five characteristics of a true symbol. First, a symbol is plastic and points beyond itself to something that, at the moment, exceeds comprehension. Second, by itself the symbol means nothing. It needs to join with the reality of what it symbolizes before it can have meaning. Third, symbols are born and die and cannot be arbitrarily

invented. Like myth, they have a life of their own. Fourth, a symbol has a power to disclose dimensions of reality otherwise not recognized nor comprehended. Finally, a symbol has a dual aspect. That is, it is both constructive and destructive (Barz 1991, xiii-xiv.)

The core of our innermost being can be interpreted as a divine image. That is, it is the living symbol of cohesiveness that unites all aspects of ourselves is central to our identity, and yet is larger than any one individual human being. Carl Jung's concept of the Self is an excellent analogy of this definition of the inner sacred image, which is an integral part of every individual's psyche and yet which transcends the individual ego.

The self is not only the center, but also the whole circumference, which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the center of ... totality. ... The self appears in the form of a totality symbol, such as the circle, square, *quadratur circuli*, cross ... [or] as a united duality, in the form, for instance of Tao as the interplay of yang and yin ... (Sharp 1991, 119-20)

Jung and many others believed the religious instinct was an integral part of human nature (Jung 1991, 36). Therefore, the god-image is universal, yet manifests in many and diverse forms and names according to the readiness and focus of attunement of each culture and individual. In other words, the god-image is an ever-changing, ever-growing reality that takes on symbols that are comprehensible to the psyche of the perceiver, both individual and collective. One area of the psyche's symbols for God and an orderly universe is that of numbers.

For eons people have used numbers and measures as symbols of the orderly workings of God. Plato believed "every shape, every being, every thing, has its right inward measure" (Moyers 1993, 129). Pythagoras saw the heavenly spheres as "vibration and harmony following exacting mathematical formulae" (Zajonc 1993, 102). In fact, for him "the first cause and principle of all things ... is numbers" (Campbell 1990, 185). Later this belief was bluntly verbalized by the great mathematician Gauss who said, "God arithmetizes" (Jung 1991, 294). In other words, the universe is orderly and predictable. It has patterns and laws that are fundamental to its make-up. Mathematics and numbers are one way to symbolize the orderly patterns and functions of the cosmos. Likewise, numbers are also symbols that arise spontaneously out of the psyche. Therefore, by exploring the meaning of numbers, one can unlock certain secrets of the cosmos, which give a sense of meaning and purpose to all manifestations.

The human psyche seems to have a built-in need for a system of stories and symbols that "reveal" to us the order of the universe and tell us what our place within it is. It is a hunger for meaning and purpose. (Eisler 1987, 182)

One of the reasons for seeing the universe mirrored in numbers and, as an extension, for understanding the function of symbols in general is that in so doing the psyche orders the incomprehensible, putting perimeters around cosmic vastness. This establishes protective limits so one will not be overwhelmed by the awesome extensiveness and mystery of the infinite. Therefore, the symbolism of numbers is to be honoured because it serves both to give meaning and to “contain” the universe in manageable and orderly dimensions that the psyche can handle.

“[N]umbers create this order because, beyond their symbolization, the psyche is connecting to the most disturbing aspect of the unconscious ... numbers and counting can exclude those images of horror, those psychic movers, by replacing their unbearable impact” (López-Pedraza 1989, 172).

For the remainder of this report, I shall discuss the meaning of certain numbers as they relate to the image of God and to the ordering of the infinite. In this discussion, I shall include a brief survey of mandalas and crosses and what they symbolize in the psyche.

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Zero is the symbol of the cosmos itself. It is the matrix from which all things arise and to which all return. It is the cosmic egg, the cosmic womb, the Eye of God. Like the uroboros, it has no beginning and no end; and its center is the Void, the Absolute, the Nothingness that is central to Buddhism. As Hedin states, “the circle above signifies the incomprehensible unity of all physical creation. It stands for God, beginningless and endless, and is the symbol for spirit” (1995, p. 32). It also has the function of linking — linking ourselves with others and the universe. It symbolizes agape or selfless love (Eisler 1987, 193).

An important image of the zero is the mandala. In Buddhism symbols are not an end in themselves, as is most often the case in Christianity. Rather, for Buddhists, a symbol is a springboard by which the viewer moves beyond the images of the symbols to discover a living, changing, universal reality of the cosmos (Mehra 1981, 40). By meditating upon symbols — in this case a mandala — which originally arise from the unconscious, one can move through their forms to discover by, for and within oneself the secrets and patterns of their manifestation and laws of the cosmos. The purpose of a mandala is not to worship the symbol per se, but to use it as a tool of discovery. This is quite unlike the usual use of symbols in Christianity, where Christ himself is worshipped as an end in himself, rather than as a symbol of a phenomenon in all of us and yet much larger than any one individual. That is, for orthodox Western Christianity, Christ alone is seen as a manifestation of God in human expression and he is worshipped as such. He is most often not viewed as a symbol of

what each and every human being is within her or his deepest center: the Self (Campbell 1990, 56). However, Jesus did not see himself as the end-all. He pointed forward to the Pentecost, when every soul would have the conscious indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and thus live out what Christ symbolized (Stein 1987, 164).

So, returning to the mandala symbol, the outer edge represents the cosmic womb, the matrix of all life and form. Within this pregnant void are very meaningful figures and shapes that most often follow patterns of squares surrounding a central figure. As will be seen further on, the square symbolizes the number four. In mandalas it also contains the idea of the world of duality, and thus, manifestations. The figure in the center is the Self, or the cohesive dynamic that unifies all aspects of oneself and the cosmos into a harmonious whole. In so doing, it transcends the dual world we normally live in. Therefore, a mandala, when viewed properly, is a key that unlocks the secrets of the make-up and functioning of the universe (Henderson 1984, 88-89).

Mandalas are found not only as paintings, but in many other media as well. In architecture, the famous Angkor Watt of Cambodia and Borobudur of Indonesia are mandalas in stone. These masterpieces combine what Shingon Buddhism calls womb mandalas with diamond mandalas; that is, the real world with the ideal world. It must be remembered, however, that the carved images depict the workings of deities, which stand for mental qualities, not actual events outside the human mind (Westman 1983, 188-90).

As will be seen shortly, mandalas are also found in Christian art and architecture. Also, they are found in visions and dreams of people worldwide. A very powerful account of a mandala dream in ancient times is Ezekiel's vision, as described in chapter one of the Book of Ezekiel in the Bible. A more recent mandala dream was one of Black Elk, a Native American Sioux. His dream was a warning of what was to happen to his tribe. The dream symbols included a world hoop, surrounding two intersecting roads with a tree growing in the very center of the circle at the intersection of the cross (Campbell 1990, 116-17). That is a perfect mandala image.

Also, in literature, mandala images abound. For example, Dante's journey was in stages up the mountain of Purgatory, with Paradise at its summit. His climb took him through and beyond the spheres of sun, moon and planets and even the heaven about them.

There, transformed by the fountain of divine light that floods his sight, he beholds the rose of Heaven, a perfect replica of those many — petalled lotuses — here reshaped by the Christian tradition - that form the center of so many mandalas ... are the symbolic dwelling place of the Absolute, and serve as a frame for its unfolding into the world of illusion (Zimmer 1990, 239).

The same can be said of a passage from *Moby Dick*. Ishmael, the one telling the story of Captain Ahab and Moby Dick, saw a large pod of whales forming a mandala.

We were now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks at the heart of every commotion. And still in the distracted distance we beheld the tumults of the outer concentric circle, and saw successive pods of whales, eight or ten in each, swiftly going round and round, like multiplied spans of horses in a ring (Melville 1992, 425).

And for a brief time he was able to actually *experience* that mandala as part of his own being.

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still forever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.

Likewise, Jungian analysts find that even today significant dreams with mandalas occur with great regularity (Jung 1991,23). Jung believed mandalas sprang up spontaneously from within the psyche in all humans, whether they were Buddhist or not. This is because they are true symbols and therefore belong to the Collective Unconscious, to everyone (Henderson 1984, 82).

Joseph Campbell was not so sure. He remained open to the possibility that mandalas were a product of social conditioning (Campbell 1990, 144). Campbell, and later Joseph Redfearn, felt that Jung's concept of the mandala was too idealistic. For them the image came not from a psyche prior to differentiation of consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Campbell believed that mandalas originated in the psyche only after culture itself had reached a level of sophistication that demanded separate social roles for specific people. According to him, this occurred about 3500 BC in the Middle East and was originally mainly the work of the Sumerians (op. cit. p. 150). The result was "hieratic city states," which were towns modeled on mankind's conception of the cosmos. There was a temple in the center (or a king) and

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<sup>1</sup> Redfearn carried this idea a bit further when he pointed out that the magnificent grace and harmony of mandalas reflect only a partial picture of the cosmos and the psyche. For him mandalas omit the chaotic, nonharmonious and destructive dimension of the psyche, which is equally as powerful and significant as the harmonious dimension (Redfearn 1992: 218). Likewise, for him mandalas reflect a defensive aspect of the psyche because they serve to "wall out" what is "bad" or destructive to the well-being of what is included inside the mandala (op. cit. p. 218-19). Another way of viewing this is that a mandala includes "wholeness and harmony combined with resilience" (op. cit. p. 219). However, for the purposes of this project, we will follow Jung's line of thinking about mandalas.

streets radiating out from this (or from ministers and priests). The whole system was surrounded by a wall, so it became an enclosed structure or a microcosm. This, of course, is the exact image of a mandala, as are the wheel and the calendar, which were also developed at that time.

Yet Campbell believed these images and forms could come about only as the individual psyche had matured to a point to encompass differences, self vs. other, and specialization. Prior to that, Campbell argued, mandalas did not appear because the psyche was not developed enough to conceive of them.

However, he pointed out that the rose windows in churches and cathedrals around the world served the same function as the mandala, albeit with Christian symbols. Rose windows are circular and have pictures and patterns around the central figure of Christ. Just as in a mandala, the images, most often the four Gospels, around the center represent the duality and movement of life, while the main focal point is the cohesive self that holds all things together and that transcends the opposite poles that come together to make the world as we know it (Jung 1991, 36). So, from very different traditions and from places far apart, the same symbol is alive. It is an image unifying God transcendent and God immanent, the Creator and the created.

Another mandala, albeit secular, and unfortunately popularized into meaningless superficiality, is the zodiac. It is circular in form and very precisely divided and calculated according to mathematical formulae. In other words, the horoscope chart is another attempt to bring order, prediction and meaning to the awesome workings of the cosmos (Barz 1993, ix-xvii). As Campbell said in *Occidental Mythology*, “the zodiac had come to represent the bounding, ever-revolving sphere of time-space-causality, within which the unbounded spirit operates” (1992, p. 255). The same is true of the calendar (Campbell 1990, 151).

Yet another, also secular, is the famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci of a perfectly proportioned man within a circle. In this instance, of course, the center is a human, rather than God. This is because at the time the drawing was made, consciousness had shifted from worshipping God “up there” to worshipping human potential (Henderson 1984, 68-69). The Renaissance brought the awesomeness of divinity down from heaven right to earth within the individual human being.

Jung spoke of modern mandalas in the same vein as da Vinci’s drawing. He said: It is evident that in the modern mandala, man — the complete man — has replaced the deity... This replacement is a natural and spontaneous occurrence... There is no deity in the mandala, and there is also no submission or reconciliation

to a deity. The place of the deity seems to be taken by the wholeness of man (Campbell 1990, 156).

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Skipping ahead, let us now look at the numbers four and five, which are also internal aspects of mandalas. Although the Japanese view four as ominous because its pronunciation is the same as “death,” in other circles four is rich with positive meaning. Jung spoke of incorporating the “missing fourth” as the next stage in the evolution of human consciousness (Edinger 1992, 124). For him, four was a symbol of wholeness — wholeness, but not completion.

In the current Christian world, the trinity is a symbol of the godhead. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are *the* three dimensions of God, according to popular Christian views. However, for Jung, this was not enough. In his eyes, the trinity left out half the cosmos, that is, the feminine dimension of God.<sup>2</sup> It rejected the dark, the chthonic, the earthy, the evil, the feminine and the subjective. For him, that splitting off of half the psyche and calling it evil, repressing of, projecting of, or denying it was an exceedingly dangerous thing to do. He felt that the survival of the planet depended upon recognizing and incorporating that aspect of the psyche, which is alive and well whether we recognize it or not (Stein 1985, 175).

However, according to Edinger, “there seems to be a deep-seated archetypal tendency to organize temporal or developmental events in terms of a threefold pattern (Edinger 1995a, 134). For him, the Christian trinity symbolizes the developmental stages of psychic growth. He believes that one is the number of unity and totality. It symbolizes God the Father, which is a state of original oneness with life. Two comes about because of the capacity to separate and distinguish one thing from another. It is the ego emerging from the original matrix of life. It symbolizes God the Son and contains the irreconcilable conflict of opposites longing for redemption. Three, then, according to Edinger, unifies one and two within itself. It is a reconciling symbol and is of the Holy Spirit (op. cit. p. 110-11).

An attempt at officially incorporating the feminine in the godhead occurred in 1950 with the dogma of the Assumption. For Jung, this was one of the most hopeful, positive and influential steps the church had taken since the Reformation (Edinger 1992, 126). Again on June 30, 1968, the Assumption of Mary was reaffirmed by Pope Paul VII. However, since that great event, the Church of Rome has backslided to become overwhelmingly

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<sup>2</sup> John Sanford (*Mystical Christianity* 1994: 296-97) felt that Jung’s view of the number three was biased by personal issues he suffered from his father. Sanford felt three was valid in its own right and was a full manifestation of an archetype. In the Bible, for example, three is the number of the completion of a dynamic process. (See the Books of Jonah, Samuel, Ecclesiastes, and Acts II for a few examples.)

conservative and as male dominated as before.

Other attempts at including the feminine in the Trinity involve the Holy Spirit. Some consider the fourth member of the Trinity to be Sophia, or Divine Wisdom, which is feminine. Others see a connection with Aphrodite because they both share the image of the dove (Campbell 1990, 131 - 32).

Agreeing with Jung, Phyllis Moore (1992) believed the great task before us is to reunite the Great Mother/Satan/anima with Yaweh/Holy Spirit/animus. This new quarternity will unite the human psyche at a higher level of consciousness than we have ever known (op. cit. 64). It will take us to what she called “androgynous monotheism.” That is, a union of opposites in one image, which is the function the mandala symbol has served for centuries.

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Embedded in the numbers four and five is the symbol of the cross. Two perpendicular lines intersect, creating a point of union between opposites.<sup>3</sup> Again, seeing the four tips of the cross and the intersecting center, one is taken back to the mandala image. However, with the cross, the feeling of the symbol shifts from one of encircling wholeness to one of logos, of sequencing, of separating before uniting. This, too, is an integral aspect of the function of the psyche and a major power in the shaping of Western thought.

There have been many interpretations of the cross. Originally in prehistoric times it was a symbol of birth and growth, of giving and nurturing life (Eisler 1987, 187). It has been found on figurines of goddesses from Palaeolithic and Neolithic times. However, over the centuries it came to mean death. This was because of crucifixion practices of Assyrians, Romans and other patriarchal cultures. However, the close connection between the cross and Christ led to a new interpretation, which is the symbol of rebirth and of victory over death (Pelikan 1985, 99 - 100).

For the Gnostics, the cross was “the boundary” of all things. They saw the cross as meaning that the limits of the universe are not on the periphery, but in the *center*. That means cosmic limits are within and yet transcend this world (Jung 1991, 241). This refers to the famous quotation: “The center of God is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.” (Campbell 1990, 180)

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Jung wrote a great deal about the symbolism of the cross and the crucifixion. He viewed them as “the central image of the Christian myth” (Sharp 1992: 128). For him the cross symbolized “being torn between the opposites (op. cit., 129) which we must endure in order to become conscious. Likewise, the crucifixion symbolized the necessity of remaining consciously suspended between opposing fields: “Conflict heralds the birth of consciousness.” (ibid. 129).



A more basic view is that of Thomas Merton. He saw the vertical element as the *axis mundi*, connecting us to eternal life, while the horizontal implied reaching over to others. In that way a cross unites the individual to both a personal God and the collective (Henderson 1984, 82; Provost 1994, 56).

Along the same lines, the cross is seen as a way to image cosmic structure and functioning. The vertical is the heights of the universe, the horizontal its breadth. The convergence of the two is the unification of all aspects of the cosmos (Pelikan 1985, 105).

In history, the vertical was manifested in gothic art aspiring upward to God above the earth, whereas the horizontal reflects the Renaissance view that “man is the measure of all things” (Stein 1987, 154). Even today many churches and cathedrals are built in the shape of a cross. Campbell said, “the cross has dual sense. One, of our going to the divine; the other, of the coming of the divine to us. It is a true crossing” (Osborn 1991, 170). Hedin added to this by stating that the upright post is “spirit and the movement of energy in time.” It symbolizes the two-way dialogue between the Creator and the created. The horizontal bar, on the other hand, is “the soul and matter existing in space.” It is the divine connection here on earth between human beings (Hedin 1995, 33).

Campbell also felt the function of a cross was the same as that of a mandala. That is, it puts boundaries around part of the infinite, making it manageable in human terms. “It is the marking off of all things” and it “spiritually [binds] the All together.” (Campbell 1990, 374).

Buddhism also closely associates the number four with a perimeter of the cosmos. Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha explained his knowledge, which was based on what are called the “four noble truths.” These truths are: (1) that unhappiness exists; (2) that there is a cause for this unhappiness; (3) that unhappiness can cease, and (4) that there is a way that can lead to the cessation of unhappiness (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, 24). These “four noble truths,” like a cross, set the entire foundation for Buddhism, which continue to the present day.

The fourth noble truth, that there is a way out of suffering, provides an “answer” based on two sets of four: “the eight-fold path.” These eight principles are: right understanding, right resolve or motives, right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation or concentration.

In other words, the Buddha established very practical means by which one could live a full life with a spiritual focus. His guidelines, or perimeter around human potential for behavior, being based on eight, could be visualized as a double cross or as a mandala, which

takes us directly back to where we began, with zero, or the circle.

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Since we have come full cycle, let us summarize this exceedingly brief discussion of the structure and functioning of the cosmos found in the symbolism of the numbers zero, three, four and five, by turning to Campbell's description of the sound A-U-M, which incorporates the cross and the mandala, the beginning, the process and the end of life.

A-U-M. The birth, the coming into being, and the dissolution that cycles back. AUM is called the 'four-element syllable': A-U-M — and what is the fourth element? The silence out of which AUM arises, and back into which it goes, and which underlies it ... That is what we call the immutable ... The meaning is essentially wordless ... that's why it is a peak experience to break past all that, every now and then, and to realize, 'Oh ... ah...' (Campbell 1990, 231).

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