

Human Birth as Theophany

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

“This precious human birth ... is difficult to obtain ...
all the victors relied on it to go beyond ...
day and night, without leisure, practice the genuine dharma.”¹

- Padmasambhāva

“[The] human body ... is like a ... boat—so difficult to secure ...
the man who does not strive to cross the ocean of Samsāra [cycles of birth-
and-death], is verily a suicide.”²

- Uddhava Gītā 15:17

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into
his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

- Genesis 2:7

“This human creation ... was created by God in His own image.”³

- Ibn ‘Arabī

Gazing into the boundless eyes of a newborn child can convey the feeling of transcendence, as though one is looking into the face of the Absolute. In this encounter, the separative sense of ‘self’ and ‘other’ may diminish or dissolve altogether. To witness a human birth itself is to understand it not merely as a biological event, but as a “naturally supernatural” or “supernaturally natural”⁴ theophany. The birth of a human being is itself an expression of mystery. It is something which, in the present day, is often taken for granted and insufficiently contemplated. If we do not reflect on the nature of birth and death, can we truly claim to know ourselves or to understand the meaning and purpose of life?

¹ Padmasambhāva, quoted in Dzatrul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, *A Guide to the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, trans. Christopher Stagg (Boulder, CO: Snow Lion, 2020), p. 23.

² Uddhava Gītā 15:17, quoted in *Uddhava Gita or The Last Message of Shri Krishna*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1971), pp. 221–222.

³ Ibn ‘Arabī, “The Wisdom of Breath in the Word of Jonah,” in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W.J. Austin (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 208.

⁴ Frithjof Schuon, “Modes of Spiritual Realization,” in *The Eye of the Heart* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1997), p. 129.

Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) observes as follows about the momentous quality of birth and death:

There are two historical moments in the life of every person on earth which are inexorably real and yet totally outside the reach of empirical consciousness: the moment of birth, and the moment of death. These two decisive events occur moreover exactly once, over the entire lifespan of the individual, and scarcely enter into his reflections at all—everything else considered.⁵

There is a part of us which is not of time—not born when we are born, and does not die when we die. This brings into play an inescapable paradox, for what is eternal does not perish with time, yet birth and death are fundamental facets of human existence. Zhūangzi (Chuang Tzu, c. 369–c. 286) acknowledges a non-dual reality beyond both birth and death which ultimately defines who we are: “Birth is not a beginning; death is not an end.”⁶ It is through the rare opportunity afforded by the gift of life that we can come to know ourselves and realize our full potential.

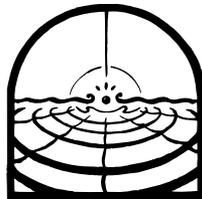
Our intrinsic connection to the sacred defines who we really are; therefore, when we ignore this dimension, our true identity becomes distorted and compromised. This happens due to the obscuration of that transpersonal faculty in us which knows our spiritual reality (the “eye of the heart” or the Intellect) and which is often confused with mere “reason.” The Qur’ān states: “It is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts within the breasts” (22:46). Through the awakening of this inward faculty, we can abide in a state that approximates our primordial nature. We cannot forget that “There is no theophany that is not prefigured in the very constitution of the human being, made as it is ‘in the image of God.’”⁷ The sacred that permeates the entirety of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not, as the Spirit is the supreme gift: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). In fact, only the Divine knows what the human being is and will ultimately become. We are reminded, “Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return” (Qur’ān 2:156).

⁵ Whitall N. Perry, “The Dragon that Swallowed St. George,” in *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), pp. 129–130.

⁶ Zhūangzi, quoted in Lionel Giles, *Musings of a Chinese Mystic* (London, UK: John Murray, 1906), p. 104.

⁷ Frithjof Schuon, “Two Esoterisms,” in *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, trans. Gustavo Polit (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1986), p. 117.

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