

# The All-Wise Door Keeper: Some Considerations upon the Symbolism of the Sundoor

By Nigel Jackson

'The righteous shall return to a blessed retreat: the Gardens of Eden, whose gates shall open wide to receive them.'

(*Holy Qur'an, Surab 38:49-50*)

**T**he Sundoor as the archetypal portal recurs in the art of all traditional societies from the ancient Egyptian temple-pylon with the winged *Aten* disc upon its lintel to the sacred architecture of Christendom where it becomes assimilated to such features as the central 'eye' of the Byzantine dome and often associated with iconographic representation of Christ Pantokrator. This axial aperture or 'eye of heaven' is referred to in John 10:9 in which Jesus Christ says: 'I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved...'—as this is the portal of light through which at its 'opening' the avataric descent of the Logos occurred. So emergence via the Sundoor is synonymous with ascent to spiritual Deliverance and Liberation, and with emergence from time and becoming into eternity and being. The Door is the threshold of initiation and as the knight of the *Fraternité des Chevaliers du Divin Paraclet* was instructed: 'The purpose of and reason for Initiation being to open the way to spiritual realization, it is fitting that the knight make this realization the ultimate and constant object of his efforts.' (*La Voie Paracletique*, 1947)—every effective initiation being nothing other than a passage from one state to another and superior state.

As in Hindu tradition the divinity Ganesh is lord of mantra and initiation, remover of obstacles and opener of the way, in occidental tradition it was Janus (the affinity between the names of Ganesh and Janus indicating their co-identity of function), the two-visaged Janus Bifrons bearing the wand and the key as the divine doorkeeper whose function is echoed

in the minor orders of the primitive Church in the office of *Ostarius*. Martianus Capella in 'De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii' has described the archetypal Janus, guardian of the 'Gate of Heaven' (Janua Coeli) and the *Ianitores terrestres* who are the wardens of the 'Gate of Man' (Janua Inferni), corresponding respectively to the winter and summer solstice, the stations of the north-south axis marked by the zodiacal signs of Capricorn and Cancer. The two faces of Janus are resumed in the symbolic lore of the two Saints, John the Evangelist and John the Baptist whose liturgical feasts occur at midwinter and midsummer. In the emblematic lore of the guilds of stone-masons, mediaeval builders of the Gothic cathedrals, the two Saint Johns are signified by two parallel lines on either side of the solar circle. Titus Burckhardt has traced this luminous symbolism in relation to the great north and south doors of Chartres cathedral; he has remarked as follows about these two solstitial *januae* through which the sun passes in the ascending and descending phases of the annual cycle, the bright and dark phases of the year:

Janus was the protecting deity of the *collegia fabrorum*, whose heritage seems almost certainly to have passed to the craft corporations of the Middle Ages. The two faces of Janus became identified in Christianity with the two St. Johns, while the third face, the invisible and eternal countenance of the god, showed himself in the person of Christ. As for the two keys of gold and of silver, the appurtenances of the ancient god of initiations, they appear again in the hand of St. Peter...<sup>1</sup>

The initiatory door opens upon the path of immortality via the 'straight Angelic Way' as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy terms it, whose divine guardian, the Door-god, is in essence the very Self of the initiate, the eternal Christ-nature.

In the Middle Ages the corporate associations of guild craftsmen orientated the axis upon which a church building was laid out by assembling with the bishop and clergy just before dawn on the feast day of the patron saint to whom the edifice was to be dedicated, chanting prayers and hymns until the rays of the rising sun cast the shadow of a ceremonial stave set upright in the ground which determined the co-ordinates of sacred space for the ground-plan. As in a traditional civilization the house, temple, town or city is always a sacral *imago mundi* the inception of its building always constitutes a recovery of the cosmogenic instant of creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Titus Burckhardt, 'I Am the Door' in *Sacred Art in the East and West: Its Principles and Methods*, Lahore 1967 pp.109-110.

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