THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

SYMBOLISM IN WORSHIP: A SURVEY II

V. *Components of the symbol*

THE FAITH whereby we respond to the gospel is couched in symbolic language. It is an openness to God as future. It accepts the interpretation which the symbols give to those past events which we term paradigmatic. It allows that these paradigmatic events interpret the present of the believer and open up new horizons before him.

To understand this power of symbolic and imaginative discourse, it is helpful to know something about the elements which serve to compose the symbol. It is often pointed out that symbols, even religious symbols, have roots in nature. It is also widely accepted that they have a link with man's history, that their meaning has been determined by their birth in given circumstances. Nor can one discard the measure of convention which goes into the making of the symbol in a symbol-system of determined meaning.

Water symbolism will serve as an illustration. The natural properties of water have obvious psychological connotations. It refreshes and gives life. It also destroys. In times of aridity and barrenness, it is desired. When it comes as a threatening force in flood, it is feared. Man can love to bathe in it, yet he can also drown. This of itself, however, does not determine the meaning it has in judeo-christian religion. It obtains its force in that context from the way the imagery has been used to express the meaning of certain events: the waters of creation, the waters of the deluge, the waters of the red sea, the thirst of the exiles for God's presence in the temple, the death and resurrection of Christ, the death and rebirth of the christian. In baptism, there is added to this natural and historical meaning, the further determination of convention and institution, whereby it is used as the central rite of entry into the believing community. Yet it is clear that this convention would be pointless unless water had its natural and historical significance. It is these which determine its real power, not the convention. On the other hand, to have the cohesive power of the social symbol, the convention is necessary.

The power of the religious symbol derives from its natural aptitude to convey religious experience, and from its historical usage within a given religious tradition. Several points in the composition of the symbol seem worthy of some consideration: the evocation of personal memory in the individual consciousness, the combination of archetype and historic image, and finally the force which comes from joining the image to bodily gesture. The evocation of personal memory and the use of archetypes appeal to personal history and to nascent, as yet unspecified and unformed, virtualities in man. The historic images link these to the meaning which they can be

given within the religious tradition. Finally, the bodily gesture allows for the expression and recognition of the self in the meaning offered by the religious tradition carried on by the community.[1]

(a) *Personal memory*

The relevancy of this in the action of the symbol is known from the analogy between symbol and dream-analysis, unveiling what Ricoeur calls the 'oneiric' component of the symbol. The dream-analyst can reveal to the subject his inner conflicts and unsatisfied needs. He can help him on the way to wholeness by greater integration of factors in his life which he has tried to ignore. The power of the dream to provide the clue to the person comes largely from its recall of his past history. It reveals the extent to which he has not yet made sense of his past, not integrated past experience into present self-meaning. It is in this context that the return to childhood takes on importance. It serves to exorcize the spirits of the past and to find the virtuality of new meaning in a more authentic self.[2]

The symbol is not content to leave the memory of the past to the dream but brings it into the orbit of waking consciousness. In his studies of the imagination, G. Bachelard shows that symbols such as flame, odour or water are particularly effective in recalling childhood experience.[3] The most interesting thing about this constatation is the connection between the psychic and the cosmic. The powers of the soul cannot be discerned except in relation to cosmic realities, so that the cosmic symbols can be at the same time the symbols of individual consciousness. A recent study of Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Creatures* examines the symbolism of sun, moon, stars, air, earth, fire and water in this canticle.[4] It shows that there is a profound link between Francis's affinity with nature and his mystic experience. The happy relation which he established with all natural things was for him the terminus of a dark night of the soul. Through it he passed to the discovery of the powers of his own soul for the discernment of the creator in the cosmos and for a personal harmony which coincided with the perception of the unity of all things in God. Totality of meaning and personal harmony, known through suffering but found in joy, came together.[5]

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[1] Paul Ricoeur has expressed the composition of symbols in another way by speaking of the oneiric, cosmic and poetic elements. The oneiric refers to personal history and memory or the psychic aspect, the cosmic shows that the person finds meaning in relation to the cosmos. Finally, the poetic enters in as the way of interpreting in meaningful language the oneiric and cosmic.

[2] The figure of the child in Fellini's films or the childhood memories of Bergman's personages show how the modern cinema makes use of this perception of psychoanalysis.

[3] Cf Naud, J.: *Structure et Sens du Symbole: L'imaginaire chez Gaston Bachelard* (Tournai/Montréal, 1971).

[4] Leclerq, E.: *Le Cantique des Créatures ou Les Symboles de l'Union* (Paris, 1970).

[5] We can here recall what was said earlier in this survey about Augustine's theory of memory as a return to personal origins which makes possible the knowledge of the Logos as both redeemer and creator.

There is a twin purpose in the evocation of past memory and return to childhood. The first is to unveil the roots of personal conflict and, in the case of the religious symbol, of the spiritual stagnation which prevents self-transcendence. The second is to discover the potentialities which were there but have somehow been lost or discarded. It is to reinterpret one's past in a new way, in the light of a new faith or decision which makes greater sense of it because it finds in it possibilities for a more authentic existence.

(b) *Archetypes*

In effect, much of the individual unconscious which grounds the evocative power of symbols seems to be identifiable with what are known as archetypes.[6] The one thing about archetypes of which we can be sure is that they form part of the common heredity of man and have their roots in what Jung calls the 'collective unconsciousness'. While Jung has given publicity to archetypes, and explains them in terms of his own particular psychological theory, acceptance of their existence cannot be allowed to depend solely on the hypotheses which he put forward nor be linked exclusively with his theories. The existence of some common experiences which have a resonance in the collective unconscious is much more widely accepted. It seems the only basis on which to explain why certain images and symbols have such universal character. Sun and moon, fire and water, earth and centre, father-figure and mother-figure, death and rebirth: all are elements which can be found in a wide range of symbol-systems, extending the width of the globe and the length of history. Without espousing any particular theory, either jungian, platonic or otherwise, it can be accepted that the cosmic and oneiric element of symbolism has a certain universality of form which determines the pattern or similarity of the images used in many different symbolic traditions.

For purposes of christian worship, it is important to note here that we should not be too ready to discard any image or symbol as alien to a particular culture or a new generation. Symbols which have their root in the cosmic pattern or in some life-function (from the most transcendental such as the intellectual or the voluntary to the most crudely physical such as the digestive or the genital) are likely to be of universal and perennial power.[7]

(c) *Historical master-images*[8]

These are less universal than images grounded in archetypes, though sometimes they can be seen as particular determinations given to archetypal images. They come from the historical experience of a people or tradition,

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[6] Cf Hart, R.: *op. cit.*, pp. 290–300. On Jung, cf Baudouin, C.: *L'Oeuvre de Jung et la Psychologie Complexe* (Paris, 1963), pp. 177–194; and Hostie, R.: *Du Mythe à la Religion* (Bruges, 1955), pp 48–67 (with a bibliography of Jung's works, pp 205–220).

[7] On a division of symbols and images according to life-functions, cf Durand, G.: *L'Imagination Symbolique* (Paris, 1968, 2nd ed.), pp 82–92.

[8] Cf Hart, R.: *op. cit.*, pp 300–305.

and are more likely to wear out than the archetypal symbols, unless they are consistently renewed in connection with ongoing historical developments. They are born out of an event, of which they interpret and signify the meaning and the power for the future. They continue the tradition of meaning from that event by being woven into the account of fresh historical experiences, or being used to express the sense of what is now happening.

An example from profane history would be the notion of the rights of man, which has taken on symbolic properties. It originated with the Virginia Bill of Rights in 1776 and entered a wider history via the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution. While the term originally referred to a specific set of rights, attached to a particular situation, it has in time taken on vaster import and has exercised considerable influence in the shaping of modern western history. This influence is partly due to the historical circumstances which gave birth to the image and partly to its frequent renewal in connection with subsequent historical events, such as the founding of the United Nations Organization in the wake of World War II.

An example of historical master-image taken from the bible is that of exile. The symbol derives from the actual experience of exile. It was used to interpret sin and its results in the story of Adam and Eve and, with its counter-symbol of return, served to interpret the deliverance of the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt. It then continued as a fecund image throughout Israel's history, describing the whole gamut of her relations with God as these were lived out in historical situations and episodes.

Other such images in the scriptures are the covenant, the figure of the Son of Man, the kingdom of God, Jerusalem as God's dwelling place, the *ekklesia* of God's people. Like all symbolic language, these images are non-discursive and are not in themselves to be conceptually analysed. As Hart puts it, they are the *id quo cognoscitur* rather than the *id quod*. They are the medium of relating and discovering, not that which is discovered. The image of the *qahal* or *ekklesia* is a good example of this. Taken up by the New Testament, this image served to create the christian community as a people gathered by God, a people living in fidelity to his word, one which worships him by spiritual sacrifice. It is only later in christian tradition that it took on a more distinctly structural reference, and came to stand for hierarchical and social composition instead of giving form to experience. The same can be said for a number of biblical images. At the stage of birth, they served to form and direct experience. Only later did they take on a fixed conceptual content and static reference. Examples are what happened to the images of body, baptism, eucharist, anointing, kingdom, pastor, presbyter, resurrection, sacrifice. The return to the scriptures which marks today's theological endeavour is not simply the attempt to revive the conceptual content of these images, or if it is, it is barren. What is of more consequence is that they be revived as a mode of language and expression which informs religious experience, *orthopraxis* and faith.

If historical images are used only to bring us back to the past, they will fail. To be effective they have to be used as a way of dealing with the world's givenness, and provide the form of perception whereby we view present reality. Thus in sacramental celebration or liturgy of word, we cannot be content to listen to the scriptures merely to know how God dealt with his people of old, or how he was revealed to the disciples in the person of Jesus Christ. The vital question is whether the master-images of Old and New Testament events can be used in a poetic and prophetic way of current reality. In as much as Christ's sacrifice stands for self-giving and the hope to which it gives rise, can we discover through this image the current forms of self-giving in face of the current evil? Through the image of Christ as the one who broke down the barriers of division between jew and gentile, can we find in him the way to unity and reconciliation across present barriers? Can the lament of the exile in psalm 137 give meaning to the hollow men who now in our time feel a sense of inner alienation? Or to approach the same problem in another way: the desert can still stand for aridity and struggle in face of the powers of this world and loss of God, provided it is not too closely attached to a representation of the desert of Sinai or Judea. Death and rebirth cannot be left at the vague stage of a harking back to Christ, but must express the experience which persons today live through in face of such enigmas as war, abortion, right-wing fascism, social chaos, profiteering and exploitation of various sorts: all the things, in short, which constitute our current enslavement.

(d) *Bodily gesture*[9]

It is in the body and through the body that man finds and expresses himself in relation to his environment, his history and other persons. He becomes a subject, a finished self, through all that he assimilates of the world around him, experientially and consciously. While creating the self, he also creates the world. The meaning of nature, of space and time, comes from its integration by man into the intelligible world. Through bodily contact, man discovers the meaning in other things. It is not just the discovery of an objectified meaning which is already there, but the realization of a virtuality. In other words, through his abode in the bodily world, the human subject encounters new experiences which have for him possibilities of self-creation. At the same time, it allows him through his bodily expression to bring meaning into being for the world around him, by integrating it into his intelligible world.

The material things which are either used or imaged in sacramental action have many virtualities for integration into human living. Their sacramental use reveals how the different virtualities may be realized in the order of meaning which is centred on Christ. The bread and wine of the eucharist are toil, earthiness, hilarity, conviviality, and all of these meanings are taken

[9] For relevant literature, cf Vergote, A.: 'Symbolic Gestures and Actions in the Liturgy', in *Concilium*, vol. 2, n. 7 (February, 1971), pp 40–52.

into the Body of Christ in the eucharistic memorial. The person who uses these things in the eucharist assimilates them to himself in the action. This very usage means a difference in all his use of the fruits of the earth, because he has come to see where they belong within the order of faith.

Such rites as procession, penitential action, kiss of peace, sacred dance, baptismal immersion, anointing, all represent the discovery of christian virtualities in the use of the body and the world. The bodily gesture or action in the context of faith represents a virtual experience, an exploration in form of the possibilities of fuller living in a richer world. It is constitutive of meaning because it is the conscious performance of a transformed subject in a transformed world, a liberation from a ready-made world for the exploration of the possibilities of new expression. The subjective intentionality which prevails is that of exploring with others the potentialities of a world transformed in Christ. The realization is the ongoing constitution of that world.[10]

With the axiom, 'the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived',[11] Mary Douglas draws attention to the close relation between the way we perform in the body and the way in which we perceive and live society. Her thesis is that of a correlation between the limits of social control and those of bodily control, due to cultural conditioning by the society in which a person lives. If social controls are loose and ill-defined, the sense of belonging vague, then inarticulateness and various forms of bodily dissociation (for example, trance) will prevail in corporeal religious expression. If social controls are tighter, the sense of identity with one's society firmer, then there is a greater penchant for bodily rituals of exact pattern.

Needless to say, this raises questions about the type of society we want the Church to be and about the form of community to which we try to give expression in liturgical worship.[12] The social anthropology of Victor Turner may come in useful here, particularly his theory about rituals which contain elements of both structure and anti-structure.[13] The human enterprise can never go forward without its structures and social institutions, and these need to be bolstered by ritual and symbol. At the same time, growth and renewal cannot be fully provided for through structures. What Turner calls *communitas*, or what corresponds roughly to the realities of fellowship, intersubjectivity, freedom and creativity, cannot be confined within a structure

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[10] 'The love in which we fully identify ourselves with this transient, vulnerable and mortal life and the resurrection-hope belong together and interpret each other. The christian resurrection-hope does not deny the importance of our earthly life by making us dream of heaven. If rightly understood, it makes us ready to accept our mortal life and completely to identify with it'. (J. Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope', in *Harvard Theological Review* (1968), p 141).

[11] Douglas, M.: *Natural Symbols* (London/New York, 1970), p 65. Cf pp 65–81.

[12] Cf Power, D.: 'Sacramental Celebration and Liturgical Ministry', in *Concilium*, vol. 2, n. 8 (February, 1972), pp 26–42.

[13] Cf Turner, V.: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London, 1969); and 'Passages, Margins and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas', in *Worship*, 46 (1972), pp 390–412, 482–494.

and an institution. Hence society always needs to be able to break the restrictions of its own structures. It needs members who, while they are of the society, in some respects live marginally to it. It needs to subject the majority of its members to periods or experiences of marginality. It needs to contain within itself a bias in favour of the poet and the prophet. This is also an attitude which can be favoured and fostered in rite and symbol. Indeed, in christian ritual the central symbols of the cross and the eucharist, since they commemorate the experience of Jesus Christ, should of their very nature stand for the capacity for just such marginal living. Historical disputes about the preference for a greek or a latin cross, or many a theological discussion about the form of the eucharist and the structure of the eucharistic prayer, can allow concern with form and structure to overshadow the potential for creative liberation which these two symbols contain. Focussing the problem on these two examples allows us to see it as one which covers the entire range of christian symbolism.

VI *Imaginative discourse*

From all that has been said, one thing ought to be clear: the importance of imaginative discourse which is active rather than passive. As Hart expresses it, we need to be shocked into a realization of life's potencies.[14]

We tend very easily to inhabit a world of images which are unproductive. They have a purely representative function, illustrating things that we think we already know everything about. They are pure reminders, like the family photographs on the dining-room wall, and have no creative force other than a passing evocation of sentiment. This has been the way with much church art, the statues and pictures of the sacred Heart, the Madonna and saints, or even the majority of our undisturbing crucifixes.[15] This is even what we have made of sacramental symbols, identifying with dogmatic rigour the graces which come with them and using them as road-signs which mark the various spots of note on the way of life, or paper-wrappers which enable us to identify the contents of the package. With baptism comes purification from original sin and the grace to be children of God, with anointing the fulness of the Spirit, and with the eucharist the very body and blood of

[14] *Op. cit.*, p 216.

[15] 'Today the Church tolerates utterly bad painting and sculpture, and banal music, in the belief that saccharine Virgins and barbershop harmonies are "nearer to the people" than the "distanced" visionary Madonnas to which great artists gave (and still give) their souls and skills. And so they are, those sentimental reminders of pious ideas; they are as near as the china kitten and the long-legged doll, and all that sets them apart from such worldly objects is their literal meaning. They corrupt the religious consciousness that is developed in their image, and even while they illustrate the teachings of the Church they degrade those teachings to a level of worldly feeling'. Langer, S. K.: *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), pp 402–3.

Christ. We are then caught up in the endless repetition of having to call the same things to mind every day or every week, in the frustrated hope that we may as a result be found more faithful.

When imagination becomes active, it deserts the side of representation and reminder and launches us into a new range of experience. As Shelley saw not merely the bird flying into the air but the soaring of spirit, so we learn to see not just the washing in the waters but the struggle with all the powers of darkness in which we are immersed.

To come to this point, it is necessary to destroy the accepted representative range of the image. The picture on the wall is not just grandfather at the age of seventy, but a man of the soil who has fought all the struggles of providing for a family and fighting the extortions of landlords in a time of famine. The oil of anointing is more than a sign of grace in sickness. It bears all the scents and memories of childhood, all the history of kings, priests and prophets, all the cries and tears and the full-throated exultation of the Anointed of the Father. Dismemberment of accepted categories and creation of new vision are two functions of imagination which go hand in hand.

We may recall here the distinction which Paul Ricoeur makes between the archeological and the teleological (or eschatological) function of the symbol. The former is that whereby the symbol dismembers the self, finds the source of tensions and conflicts, discovers the needs and desires unsatisfied and often undeciphered. By virtue of the latter action, it expresses the way of truth, the search in hope, the decision for being of the authentic self.[16]

The biblical myth of Adam and Eve illustrates these two functions. It unveils the nature of man's sin, the elements of constraint and of personal responsibility present in every man's sin, the conditioning and the freedom of the act. But on the other hand, it also shows that despite man's sin, God upholds his promises. Man still has it in him to live in fidelity to God, provided he lives in the hope of the promises.

VII *The symbol of the father*

In the first instalment of this survey, it was said that christianity presents a kerygma of salvation because it is the Word which reveals the Son-Father relationship of Christ as something to be shared. The act of faith is to live this relationship, to *become* sons in Christ. In the preceding paragraph we have just spoken of the teleological function of the symbol, the hope which it gives of a future to the man who practises self-transcendence. This future is that which is given to those who come to know God as Father. The living relationship, the form of experience, in which the christian symbol-system involves us, is that of coming to know the Father. He is the object of our

[16] J. Manigne makes a rather similar distinction between *poétique nostalgique* and *poétique éfficiente*. Cf *Pour Une Poétique de la Foi: Essai sur le Mystère Symbolique* (Paris, 1969), pp 129–137.

present hope and the fulfilment of our future.[17]

Not all who say 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, and not all who say 'Abba, Father' really know him as such. 'Abba' is a word whose meaning is not self-evident, one which has to be learnt. There are many religions in which God is given the name of Father, and many christians who pray to him as such; but there is an altogether unique sense in which Christ addresses God as Father. This is a name which is discovered as much through the experience of abandonment as it is the fruit of an awareness of divine providence. Central to the pronunciation of this name is the reality of the cross, and the reality-symbol of the resurrection which gives the meaning of the cross.[18] The point of many of our remarks on symbols has been that they do not speak to us about a reality but bring us to the reality, on condition that we learn to dwell in the language of the symbol. This has particular application in the case under consideration. The cross of Christ is the way to the Father, and the Father is known if we travel that way.

In the first instance, the name may be used in a descriptive sense of God's providence. It is then a word about God, rather than a word addressed to him, even if at times it is given a vocative form.[19] As a description, the image is shattered by God himself in the word which he speaks in the prophets and in Jesus Christ. He lets it be known that he is not to be worshipped as provider. Through the prophets, he even deprives Israel of the name 'father' and substitutes 'spouse'. Israel's infidelity is not the ranting of a spoiled child but the wanton harlotry of a faithless wife. She will be brought back to fidelity not through the restoration of her fortunes but through being left abandoned in the wilderness. She must learn to desire God, to seek him in self-emptying and in the experience of her own nothingness. She cannot make a name for herself and proclaim God's name at the same time; her name gives way totally to his. Babel and Jerusalem are not two cities which can live together in peaceful coexistence. In the final fulfilment of prophetic utterance, it is as abandoned that Jesus reveals the name of his Father.

Paradoxically, when God decides to utter forth in time the Word which speaks his name, it has to be a word of failure, one which cannot withstand the powers of this world but which inevitably sustains persecution at their hands. Only when they have disappeared will it prevail. Jesus is the one who speaks the name of 'Abba', and he is the symbol of this name in the speaking of it, because he is himself the way to follow in the learning of it.

In hearing and then using the name 'Father', the christian is caught up in the dual operation of the symbol, the archeological and the teleological, the nostalgic and the creative. In his own subconscious he harbours a father-

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[17] Cf Rahner, K.: 'Towards a Theology of Hope', in *Concurrence*, I (Spring, 1969), pp 23–33.

[18] In the letter to the Hebrews the title *Son* is given to Christ when he has entered by the cross into glory: Heb. 1, 1–5.

[19] Cf Ricoeur, P.: 'La Paternité: du Fantasme au Symbole', in *Le Conflit des Interprétations*, pp 458–486.

experience, and its counterpart, a mother-experience. Together these express the desire for symbiotic union and the desire for self-realization through recognition from the other.[20] The symbol of the father in biblical revelation gives a new finality and hope to these desires, the possibility of a higher integration for those who can 'pass over' into the experience of Christ and say 'Father' with him.[21]

It is really rather pointless to say that a child who has a poor father can never appreciate the doctrine of God the Father. This kind of statement involves a confusion between representative image and symbol. Every person has an experience of father- and mother-hopes, whatever their concrete experience of father and mother might be. These hopes are appealed to and fulfilled in the symbol of the Father, provided it is used to bring into being a relationship similar to that lived by Christ. If the child's own father is made the point of comparison for an illustration of the divine paternity, then indeed God will become a shop-keeper, worried about the rent. It is however to be expected that the *image* of the Father will change for him, according as he is faithful to the *symbol* of the Father given in the Son.

A sound religious tradition contains a certain capacity for iconoclasm within itself. This is true of the tradition as such and true also for the path traced out by each of its faithful. Fidelity to the reality foreshadowed by one symbol can make it necessary to find another to replace it, if the quest for truth is to continue. Images too must be constantly renewed if they are not to fall victim to ossified (Hart's word) imagination.

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[20] Cf Vergote, A.: *La Psychologie Religieuse* (Brussels, 1966, 3rd ed.), pp 180–200.

[21] Cf Dunne, J.: *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (Toronto, 1967).