THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

SYMBOLISM IN WORSHIP IV

OUR CHRISTIAN symbols come to us from a religious tradition.[1] They have undergone modification in usage and meaning in the course of time. Today it is asked whether they can express both the current culture and the tradition. Can they allow us to hear God speak in the here and the now? Can they give us a christian footing in the present time?

In attempting to answer these problems, I will first ask how and why it makes a difference to our perception of life to speak in symbols. This will permit some comment on liturgical usage. Secondly, I will try to specify what vision and mode of living is communicated through the symbols of christian worship. And finally, I will make some suggestions about the way in which to enhance the power of christian symbols.

I The functioning of symbols

All reality needs to be symbolized if it is to be experienced fully and meaningfully. A few examples may help to bring this home to us. We are living in the age of the machine. If we see the machine only as a means of production, we will exploit its possibilities to the full and, in doing so, we will probably exploit many other things and even persons. If, however, we symbolize the machine as a beast which devours the earth, we may have thoughts about the use made of it. Another example could be the attempt to save certain breeds of animals or birds from extinction. If we think of them only as potential game or food, we run the risk of hunting them out of existence. Gaming laws help to preserve them, but their survival depends on the vigour with which the laws are enforced. The ritual devised to surround gaming and hunting is more effective than the laws, for the simple reason that it instils into the hunter a sense of reverence and respect.

The point here is that in using symbols we give special perspective to the ways in which we see so many things and so much of life: ways which involve man fully, with all his affective and psycho-dynamic energies. Through the symbol a meaning is sought out and expressed. Because it engages the whole

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[1] In this final article on symbolism in worship, I will follow a more synthetic approach than in the preceding ones. There will thus be less reference to available literature and the presentation will be more deliberately personal. I am grateful to my friend, Fr Piero Archiati O.M.I. of Brescia, Italy, working with whom has helped me greatly to work out this synthesis.

man, it humanizes his relations with the world around him, and allows him to create order and sense in his environment.[2]

Three processes are involved in this changing of our perspective through the symbol. The first brings us from a vision of persons and things as objects around us to a perception of the meaning with which they are endowed, at least potentially. The second is a movement from the utilitarian to the relational. (This process follows necessarily from the first, since meaning has to be spelled out in relational and not in utilitarian terms.) Finally, a third process leads from the point where we are looking for outer signs of presence to one where we begin to grasp that presence is a relation and thus constituted by an inner word or spiritual sense. Presence means that two or more persons share a common meaning and orientation. The external symbol is needed, but it is not to be taken as a pointer to a physical presence of one person or thing to another. It rather becomes the expression of a meaning, in which diverse realities and diverse persons are brought together in communion of being.

If liturgical symbols are to reassume true values in a culture, there must be fidelity to these three processes. Each of them carries implications both for the way in which we look upon liturgy itself and for the effect which liturgy has upon life.

Take the first transition – that from facts or objects to a sense of meaning, or from data to significance, as it may be called. The data or facts of liturgy are the signs, words and actions we use. They are furthermore the persons and realities referred to, such as the grace given or the body and blood of Christ. He who remains on the level of objects and things can easily give most interest to the physical reality of eating and drinking the body and blood, to the reverence which must be shown to the species, or to a pseudo-physical force which he calls the movement of grace. Or again, he may be caught up in wondering how the spatio-temporal fact of Christ's death may be re-enacted in liturgy. Shifting the primacy of interest from objects to meaning, frees us from such concerns. We learn to see the realities of sacrament as determined by the significance which they convey. Many of the questions of catholic theology in recent centuries, as well as some of the present fears of heresy and irreverence, begin to appear less important. We are enabled, for example, to see that when we speak of the 'symbolizification'[3] of the bread and the wine 'in order that they may become for us the body and blood of Christ', there is no contradiction of the analogies latent in the term

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[2] Greeley, A., in *The New Agenda* (New York, 1973), illustrates how the use of symbols influences several important areas of human living.

[3] I am alluding to the discussion in recent years about theories of transignification and transfinalization, and to the truly extraordinary fear which they aroused in some ecclesiastical and theological circles. Rather than these two terms, however, I believe that the word *symbolizification* comes closer to the core of the anthropological analogy which is put to use.

'transubstantiation'. Likewise, we know that the representation of the Lord's death requires no space/time reproduction. Instead we come directly to the heart of the matter, which is the meaning of the historical event, a meaning which is made permanent in the reality of his Body.

When in liturgy life is seen in this symbolic way, there is a freedom from 'concern with what we shall eat or what we shall put on'. It is no longer the seventy times seven which counts but the truth that forgiveness itself is at all possible. It is not the amount of bread shared in the community which is entered into the deposit side of the book of life, but the reality of sharing in love. In place of the fear of physical death there comes an awe at the mystery of death as passage into life.

If the transition from facts to meaning has this effect, what is implied in a change from the utilitarian to the relational? In this understanding of worship, interest no longer resides in the theories which explain sacraments as sources of grace or channels through which help flows to man so that he may be sanctified and gain everlasting life. Instead, liturgy is celebrated as an encounter with Christ in his Church. It is a communion in what Christ signified in his death for us, and in what was preached in the kerygma of his death and resurrection. This is the pattern not only for liturgy, but for life itself, which is endowed with new vigour as it becomes the continuing relational reality of Christ's body.

Finally, both worship and life are renewed by the transition from outer sign to inner word. There is no need to be worried about the external signs of a physical presence, nor about the conditions for the institutional validity of prescribed actions. Instead, we see ourselves engaged in a shared communication of meaning, in an exchange of an inner word of faith. The external words and signs are ways in which meaning is expressed and appropriated. They are not the agents of external actions, nor the signs of 'out there' things. Their place in worship is to bring about a presence which is strictly personal, a presence of shared meaning, shared love and shared life. This is a presence and a vision which is carried over into the whole of life, since its permanence depends not on the external sign but on the inner word which is brought to being through the appropriate use of the symbol or sign.

II Symbols leading to transcendence

There is much complaint about a breakdown of our traditional christian symbols. The root of the trouble is that their usage can suggest a mode of being in the world which is in conflict with what is otherwise accepted in our current culture.

Of its nature, a complex but co-ordinated symbol-system is meant to give unity to being and convey a sense of wholeness. It gives finality and dynamism to all the relationships of a person or community. The sense of wholeness and order begins to fall apart when the symbols appear to contradict other accepted feelings and perceptions. They then become counter-symbols and

provoke dissociation. What is suggested, for example, by a youth who wears the american flag on the seat of a pair of jeans? Since he associates the flag with the establishment which he rejects, he expresses his own values by this rather ribald use of the symbol.

The danger of contradiction and dissociation seems more than commonly present today in the use of christian symbols. Why is this so? It is probably due to the fact that in recent centuries christian tradition has relied rather unilaterally on images of divine intervention in the world and used these to evoke reverence and religious response. This comes from an excessively literal reading of the bible. God speaks in history, we are told. This was taken to mean that he is the agent of history, that he speaks through events of which he himself is the agent-cause. Thus the image of divine action prevailed over that of the symbol of God's word. Yet the power with which the bible accredits God is the power of his word. It is when God is heard that the Spirit renews the face of the earth. God speaks to us in human events when, via the human words of the prophet, these events are made to challenge us to a search for religious meaning. God speaks to us through history, not by making an event take place, but through a word that turns the event into a religious one.

Man today is aware of the extent to which he himself makes history. He is also sensitive to the grounding of religious experience in his own self-consciousness and dynamic being. Images which put reality in a well-ordered universe existing outside of men evoke little response. If these images are only secondary expressions of christian tradition, and if the basic use of symbols can be man-centred and experience-grounded, then a modern and culturally appropriate use of christian symbols is possible. In other words, it is the human basis of christian symbols which has to be recovered, otherwise they will speak of a reality 'out there', and not of man's own experience, personal and communitarian.

We begin, then, from the fact that, in its true essence, religion involves man in a quest for self-transcendence.[4] God speaks to man in the invitation to transcendence. Religious perception of any event takes us beyond the social, the political, the cultural, beyond the event's ethical or strictly moral demands, to a sense of a future hope. It requires not justice but love, not a solution to human problems but a self-giving in service. It is not the quest for selfhood, but a desire for the consummation of all things in unity. It is a move towards something, which is not closed within time but which remains true even beyond time. Events are transmitted as religious or salvific when it is shown that they involve man in this religious quest.

In the first part of this article I spoke of a triple process which is sparked off by the use of symbolic language. What I now want to suggest is that this process is in fact the road to religious transcendence.

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[4] For an explanation of what constitutes religion, cf B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, 1972), pp 101–124.

First of all, when, instead of defining objects in categories, we look for their meaning, we are involved in that religious quest which is the quest for unity. Many people gather together for worship, many words are spoken and many actions performed. If each of these persons, words and actions is defined and separated from the others by reason of the special category to which it belongs, then we have a multiplicity of objects, connected only spatially and temporally. The unifying element can only be that of the desire for transcendence, shared by the persons and expressed in the words and the actions. The many are brought together as one through that shared meaning. This is why the liturgical tradition meets the mystical. Both express the desire for the consummation of all things in God. Person and community conquer the fear of corporate or individual death when they no longer seek selfhood and individuation, but foretaste death as birth to the new life of the oneness of all things.

That symbolic language which expresses religious concern also has its moral implications. These are adverted to in the movement away from the utilitarian to the relational motivation. When morality is based on a relational value, it is no longer a question of commandments and of rights, of what is good because it is useful either to the subject or to some other person. The values by which man lives are now grounded in religious meaning. In gospel terms, they are the beatitudes of the kingdom of God. It is particularly when symbols are given in narrative form (the myth, the parable, the prophetically narrated event) that they serve this moral conversion, carrying as it were the deed which is rooted in religious meaning. Such discourse provokes intuition into the sense of things and into the self. It demands of man that he explicitate the patterns of behaviour which go with his belief in Jesus Christ. That is faith in its fulness: to live in consent to the mystery of transcendence, to the pursuit of absorbing unity by the dialectic of death and rebirth.

Finally, it is in moving from outer sign to inner word that the power to be transcendent truly becomes man's own. The symbol and the spoken word are assimilated as an inner force, giving man his own personal vision and his own dynamic centre of action. This is the mystery of man as his own maker, which is simultaneously the mystery of God within man.

It is nothing less than the recovery of a truly symbolic expression which saves liturgy from its conflict with contemporary culture. If they are used as static images and categories, our christian symbols stand for division rather than unity, for a morality based on utilitarianism rather than on transcendence, and for a divine action which is an extraneous interference rather than an inner word.

III Seeking a relevant harmony of christian symbols[5]

The contemporary relevancy and religious value of christian symbols

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[5] Cf Dillistone, F. W. *Traditional Symbols and the Contemporary World* (London, 1973), for much that is helpful on this score.

depend on their power to bring people through this triple movement towards transcendence. What I would like to suggest now is a model, according to which traditional symbols might be related to experience and unified around this trilogy. It is of course no more than a model and a hypothesis. Much more research through the methods provided by the human sciences is needed before we can be confident about what our traditional symbols evoke in people.

In harmonizing symbols, we must first keep in mind that part of human experience to which meaning is given. After that, we must allow for the complexity of a symbol system, which includes the sensorial, ritual action, image and word. With all these factors in mind, I suggest the following scheme:

Movement	*Experience*	*Sensorial*	*Action*	*Image & Word*
Facts to meaning	Community	Bread and Wine	Shared table	Body of Christ Kingdom of God
Conversion (utilitarian to relational)	Road to community	Cross	Confession of sins Procession	Death-resurrection Exile-return Sacrifice Bondage-freedom
Interiorization	The road inwards	Fire	Proclamation-response	Word of God
(Outer sign to inner word)			Laying-on of hands	Spirit of God

The first column in the scheme refers to the three processes involved in the quest for transcendence; the second refers to that side of human experience which is more particularly related to each of these processes. Then I suggest a set of symbols which could be used to give the required orientation to this experience. These are symbols of unity, of conversion and of interiorization respectively, and they all converge on the realization of the transcendent in man.

A few words of explanation about each set of symbols may be helpful. Bread and wine are obvious symbols of man's relation to the earth. They are, moreover, already suggestive of human community, because they show a common relation to the earth, and their production is a work of a variety of contributing persons. A shared table is the ritual which activates the power latent in the material realities. Finally, the ritual action itself is determined in meaning by the images and words which accompany it.

If we depend mostly on the gospels, we find that the gesture of a common table is related closely to the kingdom of God or the messianic kingdom. Jesus's love for his disciples and his saving goodness are shown in the sharing of a common life and a common table. The parables of the kingdom include those of the heavenly banquet. The eucharistic rite is related to the meals which the disciples enjoyed with the Lord, and future hope is expressed in the image of the heavenly table. This entire imagery also enjoys clear Old Testament resonances, especially those of the Messiah who unites and saves from conflict and disharmony.

If we look instead to St Paul, the symbol of the Body of Christ comes to the fore. This recalls the Old Testament concern with corporate personality, and the hope for salvation in the suffering Servant who bears the sins of all. It also puts us into contact with Jesus in the mysteries of his flesh, and points forward to the Body of Jesus in glory as the unifying centre of mankind and of history.

Since the Body symbol is related to the Adamic symbol, it serves to bring the fact of sin into focus. Indeed, it is worth noting how often sin is linked with the disintegration of a people, or with exile, whereas salvation brings together and unites. At Babel, the sin of pride caused the confusion of tongues. Correspondingly, at Pentecost, messianic salvation is marked by the miracle which allowed all to hear the same proclamation of the lordship of Jesus.

Conversion to religious values and to a new morality is necessary to put us on the road to community; it is this with which I am concerned in the second set of symbols. The human experience involved is complex. Not only the more blatant sins of egoism and selfishness, but also feelings of isolation and dissolution are to be overcome. Self-giving must replace self-seeking, and there is a whole new range of moral values to be taken into account. This means suffering and death to self, but when this is lived through in the pursuit of good there is always some awareness of rebirth through death. A visual symbol which serves to harmonize these aspects of the search for community is the cross. One could no doubt appeal to such a liturgy as the Good Friday veneration of the Cross as a ritual action which corresponds to this visual symbol. Instead, however, I have mentioned something much more common, namely the confession of sins. Needless to say, this is not to be understood merely as a cataloguing of faults. It is the process which medieval writers pregnantly described as the 'fusion of consciences', whereby the confessor chose to bear the burden of the penitent's sin. This fusion of consciences is still meaningful for personal penance; but it can also acquire new meaning in community penance.

An important image or word to give due form to the physical and ritual symbol is that of death-resurrection. Ready alternatives to this are exile-return, sacrifice (both as offering and as expiation through death), and bondage-freedom. These images are often used in the bible to express the meaning of the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the death of Jesus of Nazareth. They fit well with an action of conversion, such as confession of sins,

because they themselves are symbols of passage or transition.

Something of the present possibilities of the death-resurrection symbol can be gleaned from the following:

> A critical conjunction of death and resurrection, not an omnipotent determination of life and death, is the symbolic sequence which for the christian gives final meaning to all other 'social' symbols. Whether the gospel of death and resurrection is to be conceived in more other-worldly terms, as it was until the sixteenth century, or in its more this-worldly, inter-racial, inter-social, inter-psychic patterns as has been the more recent emphasis, the death-resurrection dialectic remains an impressive and appealing symbol to relate man to his wider social world and to provide a model for the interpretation of the whole drama of social history and social destiny.[6]

Ultimately the road outwards towards the building of community depends upon the success of the road inwards towards a discovery of the true self. Man is not determined by outer forces, but by his own dynamic patterns of behaviour and self-determination. Taking full possession of the self is a struggle, and means wrestling with the alienated self in order to give freedom to the transcendence which is the basic gift of our nature. A singularly appropriate sensory symbol of this process is fire, often linked in judeo-christian narrative with the presence of God among his people. The laying-on of hands is a ritual action which could be used to establish the sense of an inner force. More directly linked with the act of taking consciousness of meaning is the dual action of proclamation and response.

When the laying-on of hands is preferred, the image which best determines its sense is that of the Spirit of God or of the Spirit of Christ. If the ritual of proclamation and response is more highly prized, then the appropriate image is that of the Word of God.

These images are in fact related to one another in christian revelation. The word of God expresses the meaning of events, in such a way that this meaning is communicable to other events. Thus the jews lived in the power of the Exodus, and christians live in the power of the Pasch of Christ. The response to this word requires that the hearer assimilates it in such a way as to be able to use it to express the meaning of his own life. This happens through faith, which is an inner word locating the power of God within man himself.

The kerygma of Jesus Christ as Word of God is accompanied by the promise of the Spirit to the community of believers. It was in the power of the Spirit that Jesus himself was able to pronounce the word 'Father' in the mystery of his death, thus passing over into oneness in glory with God. It is

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[6] Dillistone, *op. cit.*, p 171.

likewise the power of the Spirit which enables his disciples to hear, believe and proclaim Jesus as Word of God. It is through this same Spirit dwelling in men's hearts that the Church hears the scriptures, calls to mind the things that Jesus told his followers, and commemorates him in the liturgical action.

Conclusion

The threefold movement which I have connected with symbolic language and transcendence finally converges on a sense of 'otherness'. The ultimate religious experience is that of otherness, and unity is achieved in a conversion to communion in this experience. By this I mean that the experience of the ultimate Oneness which man seeks is bound up with a sense of something totally other to any this-wordly reality. This can blur, though it need not destroy, the distinction between creator and created. True to the mystical dimension of the religious, we have to let it be blurred, simply because every effort to maintain predicamental oneness (which distinguishes) is in some way a negation of the oneness demanded by transcendence (or the transcendental unity of being). What this other-worldly experience is to be, we do not know. It is what eye has not seen nor ear heard, what has never entered into the heart of man.

How can we symbolize this convergence of all religious awareness upon a sense of expected otherness? It is in this connection, I believe, that the symbol of the father, or the son-father relationship as known by man, takes on its full importance. As Paul Ricoeur has put it, the image of the father must die for us if the symbol of the father is to live.[7] This is because we can fill out the name of God with too many of those things familiar to us from present existence. What counts, however, is fidelity to the desire for transcendence; and this asks of us that we abandon ourselves totally to a God who is to us complete mystery. It is not without meaning that Jesus's utterance of the word 'Father' occurs in the hour of his abandonment. This is the hour at which he becomes truly Son of Man and Son of God, a person who fulfils human destiny in the abandonment of his own self into the otherness of God.

The use of symbols, as I have described it here, can make of worship the path to the point of highest contemplation, as described, for example, by Tauler:

> It is the mysterious dankness wherein is concealed the limitless good. To such an extent are we admitted and absorbed into something that is one, simple, divine, illimitable, that we seem no longer distinguishable from it . . . This obscurity is a light to which no created intelligence can arrive by its own nature.[8]

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[7] Cf Ricoeur, P.: 'La Paternité: du fantasme au Symbole', in *Le conflit des Interpretations* (Paris, 1969), pp 458–486.

[8] Cited by L. Dupré, in *The Other Dimension* (New York, 1972), p 539.

This allows me to sum up the content of this article in the following schema:

Symbolic Process		*Human Reality*		*Christian Symbols*	
Facts to meaning	Beyond the empirical	The many & the one	Otherness	Symbol of community	Father
Utilitarian to relational		New relations		Symbol of passage	
Outer sign to inner word		Life as inner dynamism		Symbol of new life	

David Power O.M.I.