

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

SYMBOLISM IN WORSHIP: A SURVEY III

VIII. *The ontology of religious symbols*

THIS is a difficult question to treat and one on which we will be content to be brief. It is difficult because it involves so many other theological questions, chief among them the nature of revelation and the nature of religious experience. These are both questions up for redrafting in current theology. According as they are re-worked, so they affect our ideas about the sacraments as channels of grace and expressions of faith.¹

What is the basic ontological question in a theology of religious symbol? It seems to me that it is equivalent to the one put by Hart about the ontology of revelation:

It worries the point of revelation's insertion in man's being and reality-sense. For example: if the revelation-tradition says, in one of its modes of saying, that man is 'new' in Jesus Christ, it remains to say this new man eventfully; it is still the problem of *logos*, of bringing the dynamics of manhood to a speech in which man can recognize himself.²

To put it simply: the sacrament-symbol as word serves man's self-creation and brings him towards his future. At what point of self-creation does it enter into the operation, what is its mode of entry, what are the conditions for its creativity and what future does it envisage?

Karl Rahner has worked out an ontology of religious symbol, the starting-point of which is that every christian symbol is a mode of God's self-communication to man.³ First of such symbols is Jesus Christ. The Church as community participates in his reality as symbol; and finally the sacramental rites (as well as other symbols) are a particular expression of the Church. The point about this hierarchy of symbols is that because of their interlocking they all share in the power of God's Word and are his address as Other to man, an invitation to *become* through communion with him. When man uses this language which God gives him, in his very response to God he is self-creative.

A danger to which this presentation might be subject is that it could be used to give an idea of God as 'God behind us', moving us by his word to action. Hence it needs to be completed by a sense of the word as a word which

¹ For a good example of this, cf. K. Rahner, 'Ueberlegungen zum personalen Vollzug des sakramentalen Geschehens', in *Geist und Leben*, 43 (1970), pp 282-301.

² *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*, pp 120-1.

³ 'The Theology of the Symbol', in *Theological Investigations IV* (London, 1966), pp 221-252. The symbol is self-expression, self-communication, and thus self-realization.

invites to a future, a word spoken by 'God ahead of us', God calling us to himself as object of hope.⁴ It also needs to be remembered that the hope is one which is attained through the fulfilment of man's own ontological potency (or what Rahner chooses to call obediential potency). At this point, Rahner's christology fits in very well with his theology of symbol.⁵ The corner-stone of this christology is that in Jesus Christ, precisely as Son of God and God's revelation, we have the utmost fulfilment of mankind's capacity for God, achieved in self-transcendence.

Another point from Rahner's theology which helps to fill out the ontology of symbol is his thesis that God is always revealed in judeo-christian tradition as *God for us*.⁶ His name is always relational, an invitation to come and see rather than a statement of what he is. This means that we do not need to see God's word as an object-lesson on the divine nature. Rather is it a word which tells man that if, in self-authenticity, he pursues his own desire for beatitude and his call to self-transcendence, he will become like God. In the becoming is the knowledge. The man who lives by this word trusts in the promises of God in that it is no immediate achievement which gives him his goal, but that all immediate achievement bows before what is yet to come. Revelation is always found in a historic event, because, in the event, the person (or the people) discovers a new fidelity to God in a fidelity to the insight of his own conscience with regard to self-making. Since religious symbols bring us back to revelatory events, they bring us back to points of new-found human awareness, which are at the same time awareness of God as the hope of man's future.

To complete the ontology of symbol as divine self-communication, some explanation of the power of the word ought to be added. Through the word we inhabit the world, of things and of men. Through the word we discover and unveil the meaning of things. But a distinction needs to be made between the world of perception and the world mediated by meaning, and to this twofold world there corresponds a twofold word. The world of perception is the world of immediate experience, and all that language does in this area is to record the reactions of touch, sight, hearing, taste and feeling. The word of meaning takes us out of this immediate world into another. There, to the language of the symbolic and the imaginative, we can apply Fr Lonergan's fourfold distinction of the functions of meaning, namely cognitive, efficient, constitutive and communicative.⁷ The Word of God from history enters into the world of the christian through the sacraments in all four of these ways. By inviting the participant to share in the incarnate meaning of

⁴ This is where Rahner's affirmation that the Father is object of hope fits into sacramental theology.

⁵ Cf Rahner, K. & Thuesig, W.: *Christologie – systematisch und exegetisch: Quaestiones Disputatae* 55 (Freiburg, 1972).

⁶ 'Theos in the New Testament', in *Theological Investigations I* (London, 1965), pp 79–148.

⁷ Cf Lonergan, B.: *Method in Theology* (London, 1972), pp 76–81.

the christian tradition, it asks him to broaden his world beyond that of perception and immediate experience, and to learn the meaning of life from Christ and christians, to know therefrom something of the range of man's possibilities. In the acts of worship, the Word is expressed as efficient, as setting up community, as making man holy, as realizing the communion of inter-subjectivity. But what is done changes the world in which the community lives. It is not just a matter of using the raw materials at our disposal. It is the making of a new creation, the constitution of the new world in which communion with the Father through his Word of wisdom determines meanings and actions. It is the introduction of a new force into the shaping of existence: the life of the Spirit which teaches and enables. And it is a common meaning, one which comes from the community and one which, shared, shapes the community and gives rise to new events which form the stuff of history.

There is some difficulty in bringing together an ontology of symbol and what phenomenology tells us about symbols as a particular mode of language. Karl Rahner explains the symbol as both self-expression and self-realization through self-communication. On the basis of this notion, he can even speak of the Logos as a symbol within the mystery of the triune God. This does not immediately fit with what we have said previously about the place of symbolic language in man's quest for the sacred. The question still remains: why must this particular type of language be used?

What the ontology of symbol as outlined does bring out is the *point at which* the sacramental symbol enters into 'man's being and reality-sense'. It allows us to see the symbol as a call which comes from God and a language which man can use in a corresponding self-communication. It brings out the fact that it is this very response which is also the fullest realization of man's nature and being. To appreciate the power of the symbol, however, phenomenology is necessary. Can we also give ontological reasons why this type of language must be used in man's self-realization through his communion with the sacred? Perhaps it can be said to have something to do with the fact that only in the openness which is inherent in the symbol, the attitude which it implies of *orthopraxis* and discovery, can man give himself to the incomprehensible mystery which is God.

IX. *The use of symbols in worship today*⁸

It is at times suggested that the use of symbols in worship runs into difficulties because of the scientific mentality of the present age. There is no point in trying to take up the whole problem of secularization here. Suffice to say that the real difficulty can be put something like this. We have been taught to give a literal meaning and conceptual content to many of the images, symbols and myths of biblical revelation and liturgy. On the one

⁸ For a brief survey of the problematic, cf Fawcett, T.: *The Symbolic Language of Religion* (London, 1970), pp 272-282.

hand science and on the other the hermeneutical process of 'demythization' have now made this impossible, or at least questionable. Hence we remain ill at ease in the religious use of symbolic language, both because we cannot give it literal meaning and because we feel deprived of a secure religious ground on which to base ourselves.

It is for this reason that Paul Ricoeur talks of a *seconde naïveté* which follows on a hermeneutics of symbols. We have to demythize our religious tradition, decipher the symbols, come to know something of the human experience of the sacred which is expressed in them. Ricoeur himself has studied the symbols of evil and the symbol of the Father. The resurrection of Christ has been given fresh study in recent decades as part of a process of demythization. And of course we also need to go into a proper understanding of the biblical cosmology of heaven, earth, hell (and purgatory), as well as the realities signified in the figures of the angels and devils. Once a critical attitude has been developed about the meaning of these symbols and images, and there is greater appreciation of the interiority of religious experience, the *seconde naïveté* involves returning to their usage in a new frame of mind.

This frame of mind can be compared to an appreciation of poetry and artistic expression. Anybody with the remotest sense of poetry knows that the beast in W. B. Yeat's *Second Coming* is not meant to be taken literally. If he has a prosaic mind, he will disdain the use of the poetic image as useless and irrelevant to what he calls 'real life'. Endowed with any sense of aesthetic appreciation, he will know that the poem 'does things' for him which he would not care to have to write an essay about, since it is too hard to describe the experience. He will also allow the possibility of an explanation of the poem which grasps the point and origin of the images, but he will separate his enjoyment of it from its analysis.

Preachers, liturgical commentators and catechists tumble all too easily into the mistake of giving erudite explanations of biblical and liturgical symbols at the most inopportune of moments. In trying to help people to avoid a literal sense in the symbols, they turn prosaic and stultifying in their explanation of them. What a dreadful experience it is at Easter to hear a well-intentioned commentator unsmilingly explain that the paschal candle stands for Christ and the procession up the church in darkness reminds us of the jews leaving the land of Egypt accompanied by a pillar of fire! Or at Mass to hear it belaboured that the communion signifies that we are all made one together in the Body of Christ. Poetic language does not need to be explained that way (except perhaps in erudite monographs) but must be allowed to communicate its own form of feeling and thirst for knowing, to translate an experience of those here present and not just tell them about somebody else's.

More than a decade ago, J. Jungmann remarked that it was unwise to allow the use of the Canon of the Mass in the vernacular. He rightly saw that a translation of the latin text (and one might now add a compilation of oddments from greek texts) would not be appropriate. He feared that we were not as yet sufficiently inspired to be able to bring forth new canons in

modern languages. In the meantime, new latin eucharistic prayers have been put together, the texts have been translated into various languages, latin has been largely abandoned as a liturgical medium, and since we are without creation,⁹ the last state is worse than the first.

If such prayer-experiences as pentecostalism are not to take over the role played by rosary, *via crucis* and eucharistic devotions in the middle ages, it does seem necessary that we boldly introduce an era of liturgical creativity. One of the main concerns of such creativity would be the apt use of image, symbol and poetry. Since it is hard to move from literal-mindedness in the use of words, it is fitting that use be made of other forms of expression. Audio-visual techniques (which can be made a new form of artistic expression) are to enter into their own. The harmony of music and the rhythm of the dance, the very shape of the environment in which we worship, all enter into the composition of the symbol.¹⁰ Passivity however must be eschewed, and the liturgy made the self-expression of the whole assembly. For this purpose, getting people to repeat the rather tiresome refrains of the post-epistle meditation is hardly enough. Nor need we think that elaborate gestures and actions are required. There is much poetry to be discovered in the simple sharing of a cup, in bread which is broken and distributed, in the common prostration of a face-to-face congregation in sign of penance or supplication,¹¹ or in the touch of hands in a gesture of shared concern and desired peace.

As so aptly brought out by a theology of celebration and the comic,¹² worship makes man free. Useless however to seek freedom from a slavery which does not touch him. Despite himself, western man seems to be ruining the air he breathes and blighting the landscape with his towers. To remain free in an age of manufacture, he needs to retain an ultimate independence of human artefacts and the capacity for creativity. His need to remain close to the earth is the counterpart of a freedom of the spirit. In this context, the things that we use in worship take on new force and significance, because of their very simplicity. Bread and wine, oil and water, the light of a candle, the scent of fresh flowers and of incense, are still apt materials for the celebration of christian freedom and fellowship.¹³ The trouble is that they are

⁹ Unofficial attempts at creativity are many; my reference here is to what is ecclesiastically approved.

¹⁰ Liturgists need to study works such as Langer, *Feeling and Form* to broaden their range of perception and their understanding of the human.

¹¹ The shape of our assemblies in the strictly material sense is itself important – not serried ranks of christian soldiers in battle array, but a people gathered around with Christ in the midst.

¹² Cf Cox, H.: *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969); Moltmann, J.: *Die ersten Freigelassenen der schoepfung* (Munich, 1971).

¹³ It is not my intention to solve the problem about substituting new materials for the traditional in the eucharistic sacrament. Once asked whether in a certain part of Africa a beverage other than wine might be used, I found that the most apt reply was the counter-question whether it was a drink of common usage and whether like wine it was

often put to use by persons concerned only about valid matter and correct rubrics. Given some attention to their human significance, they will form an apt focal point and bond of christian feast.

In many places political freedom and christian freedom are correlated and the celebration of christian freedom cannot ignore the matter of political. This is an issue on its own and can only be touched upon here. Yet it needs to be mentioned, for otherwise we would be playing false to the desire to promote a better use of christian symbols.¹⁴

Indeed, it is on this score that we see the greatest lack in our use of symbols, namely the absence of a historical dimension. Sometimes the embarrassment experienced with judeo-christian symbolism has been blamed on out-moded biblical cosmology, at others it is attributed to a naive credulity regarding the existence of angels, devils and the like. Whatever part these have to play, the lack of historical sense is more fatal. It is this which bereaves our age of any affinity with many current forms of worship. A worship devoid of a historical sense, of an awareness of man becoming, fails to correspond to the felt experience of our century. In our use of the judeo-christian tradition to interpret the religious meaning of our time, what we most need to recover is the historical dimension of this tradition. This means the sense of God's action and revelation through history. The history, however, through which God reveals himself cannot be made to stop at the resurrection or with the scriptures. We need to become aware of the revelation of God which comes to us from our own history and through our own religious experience. This is the main issue involved in the discussion of paradigmatic event which we surveyed at an earlier stage.

Essentially, what is needed is the expression of hope in an age of political slavery and political commitment. Liturgical symbolism and prayer has always somehow located the presence of evil and of power in the world which we inhabit. Unfortunately, it has often been too precise in its classification of the forces which shape human lives and society. It is so easy to see the church institution or the established temporal power as the force of good, and all its enemies as the forces of evil (heretics, schismatics, communism, enemy nations). In so-called political liturgies of the present day, we notice a similar bias: only the revolutionary is the good christian, and american imperialism or economic capitalism is as wrathfully denounced as were the medieval devils who festered the cooking-pots or cast blight on the crops.

To symbols of power and evil we need to restore a sense of ambiguity, that is of the ambiguity which is inherent in all human actions, as well as of the sharply limited success of any political achievement. The jews came to know Yahweh through what was initially a political reality, their delivery from bondage and their creation of themselves into a single people and

apt to inebriate. Given these qualities, one might at least begin to consider the possibilities.

¹⁴ A recent issue of *Concilium* (February, 1974), deals with the question of liturgy and politics.

nation. This was turned into a religious event by interpretation. The prophet could read the significance of the event in such a way that it was possible for the people to achieve a new self-awareness through the recollection of what they had experienced. Many of the social and legal prescriptions of the Pentateuch come across as reflections on the way that historical experience has changed relations among the people themselves. They are taught by their own experience of bondage and escape to adopt new attitudes towards the slaves and the poor among them. Their experience of injustice at the hands of their Egyptian task-masters makes them more aware of the type of justice which must be respected in their midst if they are to survive as a people. The kind of recollection which the prophet prompted was such that self-awareness was an awareness of self-transcendence in human brotherhood. In this way, it was an opening out to the reality of the sacred and the divine.

It is this same kind of interpretation which can make sense of today's political realities. But the interpretation requires that the symbols of good and evil, or the symbols of power, be used in a non-manipulating way. If they encompass the element of the comic and the use of paradox, they can free man to make responsible decisions without pursuing ideologies. The appropriate sense of the comic is that which is found in the divine comedy. It conveys the feeling that the parts sometimes seem ridiculous, but that harmony is to be found in the divine design which runs from beginning to end. The use of paradox allows us to live in a world of apparent opposites and contradictions in the hope of growing in the awareness of a harmony which as yet we hear only in the distance and of which we still miss many of the notes. Comedy and paradox help us to avoid moralizing or turning our ideals into ideologies. They keep us alive to the ambiguous capacity for good and evil which is found in so many things and so many human enterprises (as the water is the abode of both the Spirit and Satan, the force of both destruction and life). Yet the result is one of ultimate meaning. Through involvement in this world man becomes. This is his hope, yet also his cross, for he knows that there are times when his becoming is possible only on condition that he recognizes that possibly he has been wrong in everything he thought and did up to this.

As should be clear, the sense of God in history needs to be completed by a capacity for interiority. That is one of the reasons why we need parabolic discourse. The parabolic mode can find expression either in the story or in the putting together of contrasting images. Its objective is to cause man to question himself, and to look inside himself. This is why it helps interiority, and in helping interiority, it helps the hearing of the Word. It is not in the listening to an external message that man knows God, nor in external observances that he becomes in the image of God. It is by that appropriation of his own action which permits him to find personal authenticity in loving beyond measure and without any visible limit to the measure of the beyond.¹⁵

¹⁵ On religion, religious experience and self-transcendence, cf Lonergan, B.: *Method in Theology*, pp 101-124.

As Augustine would have it, God is found in the knowledge that the self is made in the image of God. To this we are led by the Word, who is given to us as the meaning of our own becoming, and by the power of the Spirit which keeps alive in us the desire for beatitude and external communion, the *fruitio Dei et se invicem in Deo*.

There is an affinity between the parabolic mode and the mythic. To note both the affinity and the difference may be worth while.

As explained earlier, the myth weaves a number of primary symbols together in narrative form. The single symbols evoke particular experiences, hopes, desires – that which needs to be given meaning, such as the fear of death, the sense of guilt, the hope of life, the search for brotherhood, the awe of the holy, etc. The myth expresses total meaning, gives unity to the parts. While the myth seeks truth, the story is fabulous. Where mythic forms are used to describe historical events, the narrative introduces elements of the fabulous. Because people have been taught for so long to give a literal meaning to the fabulous elements of the judeo-christian tradition, when this is no longer possible they do not know how to respond to the narratives. This crops up not only with Adam and Eve, but also to some extent in hearing of Christ's miracles, his resurrection or his infancy.

The parable avoids the problem because its intention is more obvious. There is clearly no intention of telling a true story, yet it does interpret life and challenge conscience, and in doing this may well use some of the primary symbols of human experience. A greater use of parable in liturgy (for example in the homily or in audio-visual representations) may be one way to enable people to interiorize their faith. It can be used to relate religious experience to Christ, to convert to concern for God's kingdom of justice and peace, to provoke an attitude of love in face of revelation. Eventually, this may even bring us back to a reading of the gospels, not as a supposed narrative of historical episodes but as the expression of faith in the freedom which comes to us through the appearance of God among us in Jesus Christ. In that kind of reading, the mythic elements no longer cause problems: they are there to question us about our response to Christ and to help us to formulate that response.

M. Nédoncelle, in his personalist philosophy, shows that an appreciation of the ultimate values of the true, the good and the beautiful can be the starting-point on the way of access to God. When perceived in some concrete instance, they reveal the transcendental quality of the mind and its incarnation in person and action.¹⁶ By themselves, however, they are incomplete. They only prepare us for a personal rapport with God. This is accomplished

¹⁶ Nédoncelle, M.: *La Réciprocité des Consciences* (Paris, 1942); *Vers une Philosophie de l'Amour* (Paris, 1946); *Conscience et Logos: Horizon et Méthodes d'une Philosophie Personnaliste* (Paris, 1961); *Personne Humaine et Nature: Etude Logique et Métaphysique* (Paris, 1963, 2nd ed.). For a presentation of this philosophy, cf Rafferty, K.: 'Nédoncelle's Personalist Way to God', in *Philosophic Studies* XX (1972), pp 22–50.

when we know that we are called to an inter-subjective relation with God as person in which all human inter-subjectivity is perfected.

This perspective seems a good note on which to end this survey. Our liturgical symbols can make it possible for us to grasp the true, the good and the beautiful. The good appears when active imagination leads us to an awareness of moral authenticity. Such is the fidelity of Jesus Christ to his mission, the self-possession which withstood opposition to remain faithful to the gospel he preached and the values he proposed. Such also is the generosity of Mary Magdalen when she ignored people's scorn to show her love for her Master, or the ardour of Paul in suffering many stripes for the sake of his gospel of freedom.¹⁷ We know the true in the constant openness to the pursuit of ultimate reality. It is the attitude we can liturgically celebrate among politically committed christians, who are generous enough to be involved but wise enough to acknowledge their shortness on truth and their need to continue to seek it. It is incarnated in the journey of Elijah to Mount Horeb or in the forty days which Jesus spent in the desert in learning the name of God. The beautiful is harmony. It brings the joy we feel when we perceive wholeness and unity. It is above all the harmony of the mystery of the cross, which brings contradictories together and celebrates the life which comes from death. It comes home to us particularly in aesthetic expression, in the sound of music, in the rhythm of dance, in the splendour of the visual or the gentle strength of the tactile.

The symbols of worship can thus bring us to a sense of moral values, a desire for truth and the ecstasy of beauty. They do this concretely, by the insight they give us into historic events and persons, and by awakening us to their incarnate presence in contemporary persons and realities. This is as yet only a beginning. It is the kerygmatic nature of the christian gospel which completes our communion with God. As explained earlier, the christian kerygma personalizes the myth and the symbol. It is God himself who speaks to us in his Word. In this Word we can live as sons of the Father. All that we know of the good, the true and the beautiful in the world of man is perfected in community with God.¹⁸

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¹⁷ For the importance of the saint as incarnation of the sacred, cf *Conscience et Logos*, p 113.

¹⁸ On the divine Logos, cf *Conscience et Logos*, pp 117-118, 231-237.