THE PERIL OF THE UNEXPLAINED SYMBOL

ALEXANDER C. BRYANS

Religious symbols (Greek: *symbolon*, "a sign") have been defined as "objects, or representations of objects, used to suggest to the mind, by association or analogy, things or ideas of a religious nature other than those directly presented."[1]

The Christian Church has given no small place to the religious symbol. Indeed an extravagant measure of time, effort, and expense has been devoted to their adornment and interpretation. They have been placed in the sanctuary so that the attention of the worshiper has been centered on them at, on, or near the altar. They have been the subject of debate and ecclestiastical controversy. Witness the Iconoclastic Controversy which played so large a part in the final separation of the Church in the east from the Church in the west in 1054. The devout have placed them in their homes, worn them for personal adornment or protection, and have given them so large a place in the practice of religion that as one aspect of the historic Church we must not underestimate their importance. The cross, the image, the crucifix, selected numbers, monograms, the triangle, circle, dove, lamb, star, crown, phoenix, palm, and various colors indicate the extent to which symbolism has become and in some areas remains a part of the life of that religious institution we call the Christian Church.

Some symbols were borrowed and some created. The process of creating a symbol was not always deliberate or conscious. Since values necessarily arise in specific situations, it is not difficult to see why some items in a given situation should become identified with the values therein realized and in time become media of representation of those values. Since some experience would precede the designation of a symbol, attention would first be turned to the value and after that the establishment of the symbol would follow as the most natural move to make. It was after Jacob dreamed his dream, in the Genesis story, that he raised the stone upon which his head had rested through the night. In the case of the images of saints, the creation of an image would always be with reference to those items, aspects, or phases of the saint deemed worthy of preservation and remembrance.

Symbols found their rise in some factor of utility. Had they served no purpose and satisfied no need, obviously they would not have been used. Some found their rise in rather mundane ways. The practice of placing candles on the altars of liturgical Churches apparently rose from the need for light when the early Christians worshipped in the catacombs of Rome, or in rooms not lighted by the sun. At first they could have had no religious significance but they became so familiar a feature in the setting of worship that when Christians built Churches and worshipped in the light of day, the candles remained as fixtures on the altar with increasing religious significance attached to them. It is not without significance that candles were first placed on altars in a day when the only means of lighting a room, other than the sun, was by means of candles.

Today these items are an important feature of the setting of worship in many Churches. So far are we removed from the day when candles were necessary for light that some ele-

[1] *Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*, page 433.

ment of interpretation is added, claiming either aesthetic value or particular religious significance. Some Protestant ministers, wishing to make use of such items, attempt to render them doctrinally significant, such as the curious insistence that the two candles on the altar or communion table represent the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

The utilitarian theory finds another shade of meaning in a probable factor of memorial. Crosses were familiar features of early Christian communities, but the adoption of the cross as the sign of the Christian faith was not with reference to any cross; it was specifically with reference to the death of Jesus of Nazareth which, for the Christians, became a central fact in a cosmic scheme of salvation. As the initial and brutal event was reinterpreted in the light of all they believed it to represent, the physical item of the cross became the sign with which the resulting values were identified. That it also became in time an object of art in no way lessens the fact that it was a convenient device to "suggest to the mind . . . ideas of a religious nature." The use of the images of saints involved the same factor of memorial.

I

Underlying the development of Christian symbolism at least two factors were involved.

First a fundamental dualism. In so far as the religious symbol was useful in representing that which was more than, and therefore beyond, the symbol, we have an unquestioned dualism at hand; a dualism of things and meanings, of phenomena and value, of physical representations and theological interpretations. The symbol, as here defined, is meaningful with reference to that body of meaning or doctrine of which it is an adjunct. That it may come to involve more than this we shall see shortly.

The dualism here is reminiscent of Platonic "things and ideas." That the Christian Church was strongly influenced by the Platonic tradition and that Platonic dualism involved a transcendentalism which led Plato, and any stream of philosophy which found its source in him, to a disparagement of the natural world, thereby drawing attention to a realm of transcendent value and being is not without significance for this study. The Christian pattern of transcendentalism, dualism, and supernaturalism simply could not be unrelated to the Platonic pattern, when we realize that it arose in a world where Platonic influences were strong. Plato's doctrine of two worlds, the world of sense and the world of ideas, of objects and forms, of particulars and universals, and his emphasis on the ideal at the expense of the practical world men see and know, has been clearly reflected throughout the history of Christian thought.

Given a setting in such a philosophic tradition, the religious symbol could be important only as a device to call attention to that transcendental realm of absolute truth, beauty, and goodness which was believed to be far more real than immediate beauties, truths, and goodness. The symbol, at best, was but a suggestion, a hint, a taste, a reflection (as was the total physical world) of a more enduring and significant realm of reality beyond.

A second factor to be recognized represents a development of the underlying dualism. Issuing from the fact that the symbol, so defined, was given so large a place in the life and practice of the Church, inescapably there came in time an adoration of the symbol in and of itself, and a subsequent investment of it with the meaning, value, and power which previously it was designed to represent.

This could be explained either as the result of the prominence enjoyed by the symbol, at, on, or near the high

altar, or by an increasing inability to make the fine distinction necessary to appreciate the difference between a representative function for the symbol and the actual possession of power by the symbol. All this proceeded still within the framework of the historic dualism but with the difference that the distinction was now not wholly a matter of the "here" and "there" but a distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular." The symbol now had become no longer representative or suggestive; it had become important in and of itself. It is in the light of this that we can explain why the Roman Catholic Church, as well as some Protestant Churches, maintains that the elements of bread and wine used in the Mass, or the communion service, are themselves the actual body and blood of Jesus, that burial plots can be "consecrated," that water can be made "holy," and that the water used in Baptism possesses such potency, when accompanied by the trinitarian formula, that it imparts a blissful immortality, whoever may administer it.

The uncritical person in religion, as in other areas, always prefers visual images and objects to concepts. Patriotic addresses designed for the average audience repeatedly make use of such key words as "flag" and "home" because these refer to familiar items around which emotion and loyalty have been organized. When once the layman lays hold of some object, article, or item which he believes provides access to religious reality, he clings to that failing to see that he is turning means into ends. Of course this is to be understood. It is convenient. The item is something tangible, something he can get his hands on, something to which he can turn his eyes. A concept seems cold by comparison. But lo! the symbol has become significant beyond its first representative function. In the light of this analysis it comes as no surprise that Jesus has become the layman's God, or that the Roman Catholic prays to the Virgin Mary or the saints, or even that it is somehow considered playing safe to hold membership in the Church.

Two comments follow. First, this is clearly a move in the direction of primitive magic. Second, this development has served to accent a false distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular."

II

All this presents a problem of major proportions. Recent Protestant interest in beautiful Church buildings and aesthetically satisfying services of worship confronts us with the necessity of coming to terms with the great wealth of Christian symbolism. Liberal Churchmen are caught in a curious dilemma. In order to introduce beauty into the place and act of worship they have turned in precisely the direction of the historic symbols, rooted as they are in supernaturalism and transcendentalism. Churches are built cruciform; crosses, candles, and altars are given prominence; choirs and clergymen are gowned.

Interestingly enough it is the liberal wing of Protestantism which has moved in this direction. Clearly it raises the question of the adjustment of the transcendentalism of the historic symbols to a position of immanence whereby God is held to be active within the order of the worlds. Liberal Churchmen have a responsibility to clarify their thought and purpose in this area. Worshippers should not find it necessary to resist the feeling that they have been projected into medievalism when they enter a Church and share a service which has been "enriched" with historic symbols. There is danger lest in using these, without interpretation or explanation, we promote a point of view with which we have taken serious issue. What can be

done? Three suggestions might be made concerning the use of historic symbols.

1. We should keep clearly in mind the historic values these symbols, however defined, represent. That is we should remember they are items which have been significant in the long story of the developing Church. Whatever we may think of them or however we may estimate them this fact stands; it is a matter of record. The Church is basically a religious community and such a fact of itself invites both knowledge and appreciation of the record of the community across the centuries. In this lies one possible approach to the use of historic symbols today.

The cross may be meaningful for us if on no other grounds than that we realize it has served for centuries as the universal sign of the Christian faith. No theological commitments are involved in appreciating that. If a Church member declares, as some do indeed declare, that he finds no meaning in Baptism or the service of Holy Communion, a point of beginning might be made with him by suggesting that he share in these services recognizing that historically they have been two of the most significant and distinctive features of the historic institution. Thereby one admits that a stated form or service or symbol may be dated, or that meanings may be dated too, but it clearly enlarges the field of one's appreciation and understanding to see a specific item in the light of the developing stream of which it is a part. Many so-called and would-be liberal Church members declare they find no meaning in such items, yet at the same time engage in the most meaningless and monotonous rituals within the bodies of their favorite lodge, which are as certainly related to antiquity and which for them are helpful as they represent a tie with the past. A plea for consistency might well be made here.

This fact alone would be sufficient reason for the use of such items as cross and candles in the service of worship. It is a means of sharpening our sense of historic continuity. It should not, however, become grounds for filling the Church building with so many items of antiquity that the place takes on the character of a religious museum. Discrimination and good taste must determine the choice.

2. Then too, the historic symbols may be reinterpreted to be rendered useful in an aesthetic approach to worship. Symbols bear a beauty of their own. There is all the appeal of form, symmetry, color, and harmony. Had they possessed no such appeal it is questionable if they would have maintained their place for long. A crucifix, for all its crude physical realism, is not without such appeal.

If we can find in the historic symbols, not a hint of or a gateway to some transcendental realm of light and beauty, but a means of enriching the immediate experience of those who behold them, we have something good at hand. The cross with its symmetry and beauty of polished wood or gold or brass, the flames of tall tapers, the drama of worship and the ceremony of the sacramental services, can become useful in yielding values definitely religious in character.

It is altogether possible to imagine an aesthete sharing in the services of the sacraments solely through appreciation of the element of drama involved. There is all the appeal of measured movement, the human voice, choice phrases and prayers, along with a definite opportunity for lay participation. A lady once remarked to her pastor that the service of Holy Communion meant so much to her because she was given an opportunity "to do

something"—to read, to pray, to kneel, to receive. She said it was the only time she was given an opportunity in her Church to kneel in a public service. Though such a person were unaware of any other values than those of physical participation, in so far as such a service provided an opportunity for sharing in an act of consummate beauty, there might come to her some new adjustment of herself, to herself, to a new scheme of life, to those sources and resources which yield strength and renewal and uplift for the daily venture. In so far as this would take place, the aesthetic approach is validated as of definite religious value.

While, admittedly, an art institute is not a Church, nevertheless it is within the realm of possibility that, for some, an hour spent in the contemplation of some supreme work of art may yield values of such a character as to make that in fact a holy place. Both the creation of art and its appreciation can turn in this direction.

There are times when the minister, the choir, and the organist in a service of public worship may be said to worship more genuinely than those in the congregation. It is possible we have talked too much about the minister and the musicians as "leading" the congregation in its worship, failing to see that they, as much if not more than the congregation, have an opportunity to make of that hour a profound and uplifting experience through actual participation in an act of rare beauty. Their sharing, their worship, is definitely creative. The use of aesthetic situations for religious purposes has not been sufficiently investigated. The fact that the service of Holy Communion when awkwardly administered yields little satisfaction to most people in Protestant congregations lends support to the aesthetic approach.

Observe now that in the aesthetic approach to the historic symbols we are not concerned with the meanings we attach to symbols but with the meaningfulness the contemplative and worshipping situation yields. If from the contemplation of something beautiful, whether a cross, a burning candle, or a flower, if by sharing in an order of worship or uniting in the offering of a prayer, there issues forth some revaluation of values, some deepening of our insight into the worth, the wonder, the goodness of the venture which is life, some new laying hold of those realities which in their unity we call God, that becomes a profound religious experience.

Plato in Book VI of his *Republic* asks, "Can a man help imitating that with which he holds reverential converse?" Whether imitation or not, for imitation can frequently be superficial, there may issue forth some new organization of life in such terms that meanings emerge to undergird the business of living.

3. Finally let us suggest a change in terminology. It might be in the interests of clearing the field if we should stop talking in terms of "symbols" to speak rather of religious "aids" or "techniques." Since, as defined here, the symbol implies an inescapable dualism and transcendentalism, it might be wise if we used the term "symbol' sparingly, if at all. Physical items and stated forms must be means and never ends; they must be used and never worshipped; they must be employed and not adored. This introduces an instrumentalism which insists they become devices, techniques, aids, whereby we enter into experiences altogether religious in character.

Jesus as a symbol of deity is soon worshipped; as a technique, an aid, a "way," he becomes demonstrative of that kind of life which is deeply and

profoundly religious. The cross as a symbol becomes a fetish; as a technique it is useful for all who face life's inexorables. The elements in the sacraments as symbols are soon invested with potency verging on primitive magic; as techniques they may be helpful in achieving a higher synthesis of life's puzzling varieties. The question of the sacraments might be pressed somewhat further.

Liberal Churches must some day deal more honestly with the service of Holy Communion than, for the most part, they have shown a willingness to do. The ritual for this service as used by The Methodist Church reveals a striking similarity to the ritual for the Roman Mass, even to the point of similar words, phrases, and order of prayers. That we are celebrating an expurgated Mass would indeed surprise many people. The pattern of such a sacramental service unquestionably springs from pre-Christian and non-Jewish sources; it rises out of the Mystery Religions, as cults of dying and rising gods, which pervaded the world in which the Christian faith began. Such a book as *Pagan Regeneration* by Harold R. Willoughby opens a field all too unknown to laymen and clergy alike. The sacramental meal, whereby the devotee shares in the divinity of his god, did not begin with primitive Christianity. That there may have been a last supper attended by Jesus and His disciples could most certainly be true, but that it involved the sacramental features subsequently read into it, is altogether unlikely. If we accept the gospels as products of reasonably well developed Christian communities concerned years later to interpret the life of Jesus of Nazareth in the light of what they believed him to be, it is incredible that a simple supper in an upper room could have involved the elements of a developed sacrament. The words put upon the lips of Jesus, "this is my body," and "this is my blood," clearly reflect the reading back of a developed body of doctrine by later writers who were concerned that their faith should be able to take its place in a day when the Mystery Religions, as religions of redemption, were dominant.

The liberal Churchman, recognizing all this, faces of course some obligation to preserve this historic service, whatever its sources. Nevertheless he is free to give such direction to it, through or in spite of any institutional obligation, that will render it as significant as it can be made for those for whom the traditional sacramental pattern is without meaning. The aesthetic approach is one possibility, as we have seen. The element of historic appreciation is another, as noted earlier. A third possibility might lie in the direction of its use for the encouragement of a sense of the immediate presence of God. The idea of sharing in God through the act of eating and drinking is valid, for such acts anytime bespeak our human dependence upon sources outside ourselves.

Care might be taken to call this service "Holy Communion" rather than "The Lord's Supper." In place of the sentence in the ritual which reads, "This is my blood," and "This is my body," some such sentence as the following might be used to indicate that this is an act of high communion with God upon whom we most certainly depend:

> This is our act of communion with God. These elements, the fruit of the field and the vine, witness to God's presence in His world, in the gifts of each day, and supremely in the lives of those who seek to do His will. May our awareness of His presence be strengthened as here we receive these with thanksgiving.

If by receiving the elements the communicants are brought to feel that they are personally and intimately related to the life of God, as Jesus himself was so related, the service moves on the plane of communion with a God who is immediately and vitally present. Thereby the possibility is lessened that confusion arise concerning the purpose of these elements; they cease to be symbols; they become useful aids in stirring our awareness of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Such an approach as this is, of course, without meaning for those who are concerned to maintain the tradition of the sacraments, but for those who feel they must both interpret and reinterpret before any measure of meaning emerges, this may prove suggestive.

III

Dr. A. N. Whitehead writes, "Symbols without explanation run to theological mummery; explanations without symbols run to theological dry bones." To use historic symbols without explanation or reinterpretation may be to promote a point of view, to advance a body of doctrine, whose cause we do not wish to serve. The more we turn to the field of symbolism for the enrichment of the act of worship and the adornment of the house of worship, the greater becomes our obligation to render such items meaningful with reference to the same liberalism which has introduced them.