
A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Symbolism in Worship.

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The purpose of this paper is not to give a historical account of the various symbols associated with the practice of religion, though it will be impossible to avoid reference to them. It is rather to examine why symbols are used, what they are intended to express, to consider the most important religious symbols and the abuses to which they are liable, and finally, the way to make them more appropriate and helpful.

Joseph Parker used to say that we all carry our cradles with us. He there uses a symbol which needs no interpretation. The present writer was enrolled as a student at Edinburgh University in early manhood, and received his first impressions of philosophy from Campbell Fraser. He was cradled in the Berkeleian system, with the result that for him the material world was dissolved into nothingness, so that only personal spirits remained. But it was not always easy to be a philosopher, especially at times when the material world seemed painfully obvious, as described in the limerick:

> There was a faith-healer of Deal,
> Who said, Although pain isn't real,
> When I sit on a pin,
> And it punctures my skin,
> I dislike what I think that I feel.

How was that sensation, and indeed all sensation to be explained? Bishop Berkeley said that God was speaking to us, and that our various sense impressions were the alphabet of His speech. Perhaps this small amount of autobiographical material may be excused as explaining the particular cradle the writer carries with him, and the standpoint from which he starts in this investigation.

The reality behind appearances is a Person who, touching our senses, causes us to perceive certain things. In our mutual intercourse we think we see and hear each other, but we are mistaken, for we are all hiding behind impenetrable barriers, across which we send signals. We are sure of the other person because we have learned to interpret the signals, not because we are immediately in contact. The method by which we communicate with each other is the same as that by which the Ultimate Spirit communicates with us. Since we are invisible and recognize others by the signals they make, it ought not to surprise us that the Supreme Spirit is also invisible. We recognize Him in the signs He makes.

The primary question in all philosophy is, Why was there ever anything? On the face of it there ought to have been nothing. We are conscious that there is some reality outside ourselves which is making impressions upon us. If it be that the Ultimate Person is signalling to us, He requires a medium through which His signals may be transmitted, an intermediate sphere where God and man can meet. And when such meeting takes place opposition or agreement must both be possible. If opposition were impossible we could have no independent existence, nor could we be held responsible for our reaction to the message of God. It is through that intermediate sphere that God indicates His purposes, and we our assent or hostility.

It is in this intermediate sphere that symbols are found to operate. There are many descriptions or definitions of a symbol. Dr. Inge says that they are the flesh and bones of ideas. In the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* we are told that 'a symbol is a visible or audible sign of some thought, emotion, or experience, interpreting what can be really grasped only by the mind and imagination by something which enters into the field of experience.' Professor H. H. Farmer says: 'By a symbol we mean a sign which indicates meaning, and the peculiar quality of a symbol is that it can only enter formatively into the mind of another, and affect his activity, if he can in some measure apprehend its meaning and accept it for himself.' He stresses the fact that genuine co-operation can only be reached when God elicits from man a spontaneous surrender, based on a perception of the essential rightness of God's demand. Meaning might be imposed without the use of symbol if the possibility of dissent were obliterated. An appeal which is not an authoritative edict must make use of symbol.

It is supposed that creatures below the level of personality do not require symbols, and that ants and bees communicate meanings directly, as though there were no frontiers separating one insect from the rest. The boundaries of each individual life seem to be porous, so that conceptions can saturate the whole hive or nest. It is as though the hive were the unit and the insects constituent elements. Though the atomic conception of individuality may need to be modified it is nevertheless true that man

can close the frontiers of his mind against unwelcome aliens. Whatever seeks entrance must commend itself, when it is the responsibility of the individual to lower the barriers. Symbolism is the use of signals to convey ideas across the barriers.

There is considerable dispute concerning the origin and meaning of conscience, but it is quite possible that it is an 'authoritative edict' communicating to us directly the will of God. Even if that be so there is a parallel use of the symbolism. Without some intervening medium, revelation of the Divine might inflict injury instead of conferring blessing. On a certain occasion we are told that the Israelites around Sinai shrank with fear when Jahweh's voice was heard in the thunder. So fearful were they that they besought Moses to receive the message and pass it on to them. They dreaded the thought of direct contact. R. H. Hutton says that 'a powerful and massive character, though it be nearly perfect, often positively injures those within the circle of its influence. They lose the spring of their mind beneath the overwhelming weight of its constant pressure.' Much more is this the case with the Divine Personality. God hides Himself from us, not from unwillingness to communicate with us, but out of consideration lest our personality should suffer. Some medium must be interposed, just as we can only observe the sun through darkened glasses. The symbol is the darkened glass which permits our ordinary powers to function. Thus it both conceals and reveals—conceals what human nature could not bear, reveals what is in its compass to comprehend.

According to Dr. Inge our consciousness of the Beyond is the raw material of all religion; but being itself formless it cannot be brought directly into relation with the forms of our thought, and has to incorporate itself in symbols. Nature is the great symbol in which God expresses His thoughts. But Nature is too vast for our feeble comprehension. The intellect can only deal with its manifestations sectionally; and the total complex is more than the sum of the sections. There are gaps which no science can fill, and even if it could, the whole is placed in the midst of an unexplored ocean of being. The movement of billiard-balls on the level of the table may be accounted for by mechanical science, each movement being explained by a proximate cause. Behind all is the uncaused cause, the personality of the player, of which mechanics knows nothing. Religion is concerned with the Divine Originator who lies outside the sphere of science.

Logical speech is confronted with an impossible task when it attempts to explain the reality lying behind the apparent world.

> Words are weak and far to seek
> When wanted fifty-fold;
> And so if silence do not speak,
> And trembling lip and tearful cheek,
> There's nothing told.

Science may deal with the grammar of Nature, but not with that represented by the 'trembling lip and tearful cheek.' It may explain the words of the song, but cannot set forth what is expressed in the melody. Science can explain the phenomena of Sinai in terms of a thunder-storm. Religion knows that the sights and sounds denote much more than can be expressed in a scientific formula. 'Where one heard thunder, one saw flame, I only know He named my name.' Religion is concerned with the inexpressible kinds of reality.

Human culture at an early stage invented an alphabet, a series of pictures symbolizing facts of common experience. Much more then is it natural to suppose that symbolism will prove needful when dealing with the deeper experiences of religion. If thunder becomes a symbol of the voice of God, so sacrifice becomes the speech of man to God. The prophets are unable to think of God without the aid of symbols, and certainly need them when speaking of the Divine realities. Nor does that need diminish with the advance of civilization. The sacred writings of the New Testament are as full of symbol as are those of the Old. It seems necessary that the worshipper pass through temporal gateways before he can apprehend the spiritual world. The spoken word, sublime architecture, solemn music, and sacraments, all have their part to play.

Consider the stories of the temptation of Adam or of Jesus, of the call of Isaiah or of Jeremiah, of the transfiguration of Jesus or of the presence of the angel in Gethsemane. We are not being told bare facts, but facts full of significance, charged with deep inner meanings of which they are but the husk. One might find abundant material in the Fourth Gospel alone for a whole treatise on the writer's use of symbolism. The commonest event is for him the vehicle of some deeper truth. Apart from the spoken parables, the miracles, which he calls 'signs,' are acted parables. Sometimes the key to their meaning is appended, as when Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life,' 'I am the light of the world,' 'I am the good shepherd.' The selection of incidents to be recorded of the experiences of Jesus are such as will enable us to discern the Deity incarnate in the human life. Abelard says that though the Ascension of Christ was a real fact, we

are not to suppose that the body of Christ now occupies a local position. The material ascension was a picture-lesson of the better ascension in the souls of Christians. This, and not a flight through the air to some unknown goal, is the inner truth.

When we consider the surrounding world we discover two aspects of it in closest combination. There is Nature the non-personal, and Society the personal. We may think them apart but only experience them in association. Standing beneath the starry firmament we realize the awful majesty exhibited in Nature, and have some experience of the Ultimate Person. When we form part of a great company there is something warmer and more intimate in our experience, but that great company is set in a background of Nature. The two are always intermingled. When God signals through the overarching sky, or the forest glades, we are filled with a sense of awe, and are oppressed by the overpowering Spirit. When the signal comes through the person of another, or a company of others, we are conscious rather of the intimacy and friendliness of the Divine. Thoreau in the woods was 'made aware of the presence of something kindred to me'; but however much he felt the sympathy, there was in his experience an element lacking, which John Wesley knew when in the company of worshippers his heart 'was strangely warmed.' In both cases, contact with the Divine Spirit is realized through some medium serving as symbol.

Symbolic ceremonial has played an immense part in the religious life of the race. Sacrifice is said to have had a magical origin, but at least it is evidence that the sense of awe and dependence expressed itself in giving something or doing something, even though the worshipper might be unable to explain the impulse that moved him. When he attempted an explanation the reasons he assigned may have been very inadequate, there being a deeper reason for which he could give no explanation. Such practices when once established tended to perpetuity, and though their origin might be forgotten they became for later generations a protecting husk of the deeper spiritual truths through ages in which their meaning was only dimly discerned. They were pictures of spiritual blessings at a time when the blessings themselves could not be appreciated, and served to bring them to that state of mind which could appreciate the better thing prepared for them.

The Christian religion has two great symbols—Baptism and the Holy Supper. The Early Church called them symbols, implying that in them a mystery was concealed. Spiritual facts demand material expression, and the Sacrament is the appointed means for expressing a state of the soul. It is remarkable that Jesus, seeking to establish a spiritual religion, should have enjoined or countenanced such acts as these. Reducing ceremonial to a minimum He still found some symbol essential for the realization of His purposes for mankind. He wore upon His garment tassels of violet cord as a reminder of God's commandments and His own holy vocation. Here was clear sanction to an ancient custom which might be made the vehicle of religious truth. Buchanan Gray says that the motive for wearing these was a 'religious afterthought,' an attempt to make a deeply rooted custom serve a fitting religious purpose (*Numbers*, 183). Further, He attended the services in temple and synagogue in which elaborate use was made of forms and ceremonies as vehicles of Divine truth. And He so impressed the disciples that from the day of His crucifixion to the present they have partaken of an imitation meal because of its Divine significance, while those who have joined the fellowship have done so in the rite of baptism.

There are great Christian experiences which gain by outward expression, especially that moment when the soul welcomes the Christian hope, and those recurring periods when it acknowledges the constant nourishment and inspiration in communion with its Divine Lord. Outward acts aid the imagination, gather about themselves associations which create a congenial atmosphere for the spiritual life, and help to deliver the soul from pure subjectivity. But the most obvious and valuable aid is the linking of the will with the roused emotion. Whatever justification there may be for a form of baptism making less material demand than does immersion, it will be generally agreed that immersion is the mode set forth in the New Testament. Knowing this ceremony, both as subject and as administrant, the writer can testify that in it an inward state finds expression and satisfaction. This is frequently indicated by a certain radiance of countenance which can be likened to nothing so much as that seen on the face of the Lord at a corresponding moment in His experience. It means that a new position has been taken up involving the whole being. It is not that the outward act effects the inward change, but the inward change seeks outward expression. The essential change is the spiritual one, and yet there is distinct gain in the outward act. This is not surprising, for we lightly esteem a love which fails to reveal itself in outward and material form. 'If ye love me, keep my commandments,' said Jesus. 'Let us not love in word,

neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth,' says the First Epistle of John. One seriously doubts the love which never utters itself in gifts. 'God *so* loved that he gave.' Von Hügel says: 'I kiss my child, not only because I love it; but I kiss it also in order to love it.' Regimental colours may be accurately described as a rag at the end of a pole, but he is unlikely to be a good soldier who sees in them nothing more. The material symbol incarnates in itself imperishable values and gathers into a focus vague and wandering emotions.

There is a type of religion which distrusts symbolism and seeks to abolish it. Titus, penetrating the Holy of Holies, exclaimed in surprise, 'There is nothing.' But that empty chamber was itself a symbol whatever the conscious intention of it, and it indicated the Jewish conviction of the transcendent majesty of God. There is something of the same sternness in Calvinistic worship. Had it been possible, all forms would have been abolished as unnecessary creaturely aids. There was a bleak lucidity in the thinking of these devout souls, which scorned the use of stepping-stones to cross the void between the temporal and the Eternal. No organ, no choir, no colour were permitted to distract the intent soul. When in more recent days organs were gradually introduced, intense feeling was roused which expressed itself in riots. Nevertheless, psalms were sung, since they were scripture, and the tables of the Commandments were painted on the walls.

The same type of mind is found amongst the Quakers, who are more thoroughgoing than any branch of the Church Universal in rejecting all symbols. In a building destitute of ornament there is a service without arrangement. The purpose is to leave the soul in adoring silence in the presence of the Eternal and Holy, without any intervening medium. Robert Barclay testifies: 'When I came into the silent assembly of God's people I felt a secret power amongst them which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up.' The demand here is for absolute sincerity, laying bare the soul before God, a fear of all sorts of formalism and a positive dread of institutional religion. The religious consciousness seems to have gone full circle, holding hands with the hermits and mystics who fled from the elaborate apparatus of worship, to seek God in the silence of the desert.

The aim in most of the Free Churches is to be simple, direct, free from ordered forms. The priesthood of all believers is emphasized, and the separate responsibility of each soul. It has been said that the *Pilgrim's Progress* is the Divine Comedy of Free Church Christianity, and that is concerned solely with the experience of the individual believer. In its assemblies for worship, edification is sought, and what is mysterious is lightly esteemed. There is constant fear lest liturgical acts should absorb attention which ought to be directed to personal communion and the absolute demand of God upon the soul. Even in such an environment need is felt for some symbols; and during the last quarter of a century changes have taken place. Buildings and services are made more beautiful; mosaic floors, marble pulpits, stained-glass windows, flowers on the holy table have evidenced a subtle change. Some fearful souls see in these innovations a leaning towards those beggarly elements which our fathers discarded at the Reformation. Can we judge between symbolism that is desirable, and symbolism that is a snare?

It was not for nothing that our fathers erected bleak and gaunt buildings. They dreaded lest outward forms should distract the mind from the contemplation of God, and should absorb an attention which ought to be fixed on God alone, thus luring the soul into the ancient sin of idolatry. They banished images from churches, and pictures from the walls; but they transferred the pictures to the windows, and expended upon them a wealth of art which would have been denounced had it expressed itself in images. It is strange that art in two dimensions should be deemed helpful, but in three dimensions hurtful. Forsyth thinks that all art is a peril to religion, since it is often careless about the moral foundations of life, and is able to cast a glamour about evil and make sin doubly engaging.

Let us then note that mere prettiness and decoration have no symbolic value. A symbol to be true and helpful must reveal in itself a law at work in the wider realm of God's activity. When our Lord used the Vine as a symbol of the relation between Himself and the disciples, He was comparing God's operation in two realms—the material and the spiritual. When the convert is immersed in water in the name of the Trinity, and rises again from it, he is saying in material language that he has undergone a complete spiritual change. When we partake of bread and wine we are expressing in appropriate actions the spiritual dependence of the believer on the constant supplies furnished by God for the sustenance of the new life. But when Romano Guardini says that the worshipper must strike his breast and not merely touch his garments, because it is a prescribed action it lacks the reality manifest when the publican involuntarily smote his breast

in an agony of contrition. Guardini knows the peril, for he says, 'It is true that in all such symbolism there is danger of mere childish play-acting. The sweet-smelling clouds (of incense) may bring on a kind of haze in the imagination, a kind of mystical play-acting. If this occurs, then the Christian conscience rightly protests, and calls us back to prayer "in spirit and in truth." It warns us to be both simple and upright.' When a Christian wishes to come into the presence of the Holy God, he instinctively bows his knees, closes his eyes, and clasps his hands. These are natural symbols which one uses without thinking about the form, differing widely from a devotion so occupied with postures and correct procedure, that the attention remains on the material level, thinking its end accomplished when the correct words and actions have been used. It is no longer spontaneous but arbitrary, so that meanings have to be imposed upon the forms; whereas in a true symbol the soul finds the relief of a natural expression. Attention absorbed in trivialities forgets the weightier matters of the Law. In the second stage of the Oxford Movement discussion became quite acrimonious concerning minute details to the neglect of the great truths supposed to be expressed in the disputed observances. If one who has been nurtured in a ceremonial religion feels the snare, much more is the Protestant likely to find in some of these signs stumbling-blocks rather than aids.

Doubt has been expressed as to whether Baptism and the Supper were 'prescribed' by our Lord as perpetual ordinances. There was at least the sanction of Divine example for their adoption, and the universality of their observance would then testify more forcibly to a universal need and a universal satisfaction. In both the sense of oneness with the Lord is very vivid. In Baptism the disciple enters sympathetically into the redeeming acts of Christ, the death, burial, and resurrection. The outward actions do truly express inward states. It is the essence of these symbols that they shall really picture in material forms changes taking place in the inner life. As Professor Wheeler Robinson puts it, you may emphasize the importance of Baptism as much as you like provided that it is the Baptism of the Believer. So in the Holy Supper the events of that last night are recalled and imitated as closely as possible. In some churches the memorial aspect is most evident, in others the spiritual sustenance, or the communion, with all the faithful and with the Lord. The best observance combines them all. The whole is a majestic symbol in which the material objects—the table, the bread and wine—become types of the heavenly feast, and the food and drink are not physical but spiritual.

Many symbols may be considered as kindergarten apparatus wherein truth is adapted to minds unfamiliar with abtruse intellectual processes. Von Hügel admits that there is truth in the contention of some philosophers that 'the Church is essentially a condescension to the multitude, a largely childish symbol and kindergarten for what philosophy alone holds and teaches with virile adequacy.' He nevertheless maintains that religious life would be richer if the use of symbolism were more considered. The purpose of this paper is to commend such consideration. One section of the Church Universal may have unduly elaborated symbol, whereas other sections have reacted by suspicion of all symbols. Dr. C. J. Cadoux, in his book on *Catholicism and Christianity*, pays full tribute to Rome for the many excellences to be found in its organization and practices. He specifies in particular the 'peculiar ability to apprehend the objects of worship with vivid concreteness, and, mentally at least, to clothe them with reality and objectivity.' He speaks also appreciatively of 'the whole Catholic sense of the Divine in human life, and in particular to the sense of the reality of Christ.' These are advantages not to be lightly valued. It ought to be possible to secure for Protestant worship something of the same quality, without sacrificing a rigid sense of truthfulness which is equally to be desired.

We may therefore rejoice in an increased interest in the employment of symbolism in worship. Duncan-Jones, writing on *The Necessity of Art*, reminds us that 'when other parts of religion lose their appeal, when men find it difficult to place faith in the sacred writings, or to accept the formulas or creeds, yet this action will retain its attraction, and seem filled with a reasonable, serene, and lofty mystery. . . . The dumb instinctive ceremonial of the Cenotaph is a warning that something stirs in the human heart which we have by our conventions too long made men forget.'

In all this we have not ventured to discuss the greatest symbol of all. God is a Spirit whom no man has seen or can see; yet has He spoken to us in One who is 'the very image of his substance,' the Mediator between God and man; and to this day when we desire to establish contact with the Most High, we scarce need to press behind the symbol, so adequately does He express to us the majestic and tender qualities of the Eternal.