

## **Part II The Symbolic Dilemma – Statues and Crosses and Communion**

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How does one begin to respond, react and to offer some sort of coming together to suggest better resonance in the corporate worship of God in this age? It is not an easy task to take secular research, religious experience and principles of collective behavior and bring together a meaningful understanding let alone offer some postulates that would avoid alienation. But let us be bold for the sake of some progress and the possibility of stimulating thought for a better future in sociology of our own religion (Zion).

In an attempt at understanding human nature Ronald Johnstone makes the assumption that there is a unique ability of people to symbol, i.e. to attach specific meanings to things, sounds, words, and acts. These meanings are created by the people themselves. Language itself is the symbolic mechanism that allows us to deal with the abstract like concepts, emotions, love, justice and God. From here we choose things to sum up whole ideas and thus hopefully streamline or speed up communication between individuals and later groups.

It is groups and then the interpretation of symbols that need to be addressed. Johnstone maintains that there is no activity in which people are engaged that does not involve acts of symbolizing whether lecturing, voting, "making love", or being religious. Thus, the religionist or religious specialist knows that religion is in one sense symbols, and it is mediated by symbols. And whether the average non-sociological educated person realized it or not all have meaning when one is initiated into a particular symbolic system.

According to O'Dea religious experience is central to the life of a religious group and that it is a symbolic performance. The meaning is supplied by the believer thus, I believe, the religious organization or institution assumes that each individual experiences the same message or feeling each time a symbol is invoked. O'Dea seems to be challenging the idea that the resonance is consistent and that it fades or loses influence in later converts. How can this vision be kept, or, if it cannot, be re-presented?

Symbols are not the sacred, they only represent the sacred. And if they are profane, their use over and over again distances them from the sacred and it's O'Dea belief that the regional resonance that comes from a ritual or series of symbols turns into alienation because of loss of original meaning or loss of freshness or seeming contradictions that "creep in" (much like one use to say – worldliness) . Perhaps worldliness was just a loss of vitality in the symbols rather than the personification of the devil.

Does familiarity breed contempt? Thomas O'Dea would seem to agree with that and from his words in this section it seems inevitable to him. Society and the social forces move relentlessly on and overwhelm the puny institution of religion! The hymn comes to mind "for such a worm as I." It is bigger than all of us is the feeling one gets from O'Dea.

As the Church of the Nazarene has only two sacraments, I grew up anticipating the communion service. Long before I ever participated I heard the invitation given to "all who were worthy" and "were a child of God." I wondered if I ever would be and would my own father give me communion? But it was a symbol of being saved and would I, could I, feel saved?

Of course, I thought everyone who participated must be holy. I know little of their ups and downs and struggles. And one day I participated and I shook. I think that I shook in "holy awe" God was there and it would be "sinful" to participate with the elements and it would not be right.

But today they are the same symbols and I have administered them. Has the symbolism faded? A pastor has said "to use the time for confession and renewal." It has deeper meaning and it arrests my attention away from a busy life. The symbols turn "my head" toward Christ as the meaning behind the symbols "somehow" keeps fresh as the ritual goes one and on and over and over but "never new within me." It does not have to be relentlessly downward!

William Howells in his book *The Heathens* talks about ritual allaying anxiety. This anxiety may be the creeping kind, accumulating from the worries and disappointments of everyday life... Ritual becomes a periodic ceremony that *wipes* out anxiety because it is seen as an emotional cleansing and because it is an acceptable positive action to keep life normal he concludes.

If this be the case with the primitives, could it not be possible that even modern civilized clans and tribes like Americans, Europeans, and others, would *need* symbols and rituals to keep one's emotional and religious temperature near normal? Does something of a temporal nature with a symbolic significance need to be for the modern to keep sane and sound when his/her world is going haywire? Or by the nature of spiritual things must we always view the world, including our religious beliefs in an abstract Piagetian manner? The raising of these questions is easier than finding solutions for them.

Symbols like keepsakes, jewelry, and religious beads are used when the hostile and carnal world does not seem to make sense. Howells calls this "emergency anxiety." In religious circles, prayer, calling on the elders, and the religious specialists, and cursing the fates seems to be an answer for emergencies out of the ordinary. The Protestants could have capitalized on the recognition the Roman Catholics always knew that a "small St. Christopher" reduced anxiety about the traveling world (Even where he was demoted to Mr. Christopher, his option was not picked up!)

Thus, symbols rarely help society by dealing with individuals who make it up, but it treats them more as a whole group than as individuals. It is the last part of this statement that might provide a clue as to why ritual and symbols do not have the impact after long repetition. No one likes to be treated as a number and a number represents a symbol or a statement about a person. It seems the longer the number the more insignificant the person feels.

Perhaps the same is true for repetition of a religious act. But, I believe that it recurs more rapidly when the leaders (practitioners, clergy) deal with it rather perfunctory manner.

The place of ritual in society has several theories. Man is and certainly always has been a highly social animal, and Howells reminds us that "Durkheim long ago suggested that individuals derive an indescribable feeling of strength and support from being part of a group."

Although O'Dea tells that objectification necessary for continuity and leads finally to alienation, Elkin puts the matter more generally and simply. The dreams, he says, "preserve and thus indicate historical traditions and social sanctions (or authority) of the tribe and thereby strengthen the social sentiments; in the second place they enable the members of the assembled group or groups to express and feel their unity and common belief – a life which in the ritual wells up from the past and becomes *available for the future*."

"Such means of maintaining the social sanctions and ideals and of strengthening the common life is essential for the Aborigine if not for all mankind."

Thus, the human need to have ritual and symbols can be mainly embraced by the religious community if the fear of intimidation can be overcome. "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself."

If the history of religion shows us the dangers of symbols being alienated, then the religious world needs to be original to keep freshness in the ritual and the historical perspective be taught along with the repetition. As one of my students said after seeing the PBS video "Amazing Grace" in Sociology of Religion class, "I never knew the setting or anything about the writer until now." The symbolism became "fresh" or "came to life" as never before. Maybe, just maybe, we do not have to succumb to the mishaps of religious history.

There is no doubt that O'Dea sees the sacred, thus the sacred symbol, as above the profane and that the profane "causes a loss of sacredness" when as part of the sacred. He seemed to say that it always went in this direction. If this be so, O'Dea has a dilemma that only permits pure symbols of religious nature. When used as ritual or are practiced over and over they lose their sacredness. Whenever this happens, O'Dea sees the loss of the original emotional meaning. It is really a pessimistic view. Perhaps the awareness of this usual trend is one step toward keeping the fire in the sermon and the meaning of resonance in the symbol.

Roberts, writing in *Religion in the Sociological Perspective*, flatly states that symbols transform fact into value. He adds that the function of sacred symbols is to encapsulate, or summarize, the system of meaning and to deliver that meaning system with power and authority at appropriate times. Thus, symbols have power to bind world view and others into a unified system of meaning, he contends.

One cannot get very far the process of socialization here. For it is here the child builds his/her world view and where the child fits life, theories and explanations. When all things fit there is congruity or resonance. It is true, symbols of religious significance have their place. But when there is no fit for an experience there is dissonance. Thus one has to change world view or as Piaget says "reorder" when this occurs. Hence, the alienation of O'Dea is akin to an individual finding dissonance in the world of religious symbols. Is there anything wrong in considering "good religion" as having a "good fit" in one's religious world?

There is a complexity of relationships in the components of religion. For example:

1. Ritual oral myth tend to be mutually reinforcing as symbol systems.
2. Symbols (including rituals, myths, and artifacts) encapsulate the world view and ethics of a people. Hence they can elicit powerful emotional responses and (by repetition) help reinforce a general world view.
3. The ethos and world view are themselves mutually reinforcing.
4. Together they provide a compelling basis for social values.

There can be problems when all these things do not harmonize. It is this lack of "harmonization" (sounds like Schmelzenbach) that upsets the worshipper and raises doubts as to the meaning of symbols and ritual. This probably brings doubts to the origin of faith and other components of one's religious belief.

I am in complete agreement that repetition destroys original meaning. Nowhere more so than in the cult where the repetition becomes a chant and then into a frenzy. The individual seems swept into the routine without the benefits of the original purpose. Even within worship services the repetition of two-line choruses borders on this experience to the extent of losing the vitality of corporate worship.

The cult standoff at Waco showed that symbols can unite and that opposing symbols such as A.T.F. can solidify the in-group against the out-group. Symbols are powerful and can be manipulated by the mind of a leader who understands group psychology.

It is too bad that reactions are in the extreme when it comes to the rejection of symbols that have lost their meaning. All wars are dirty but religious wars seem the dirtiest and wars between factions often go one step further. The excesses of the Reformation take away from the lofty.

Unfortunate, this disregard for the other person's symbols did not end in Reformation times. When the Atlantic Wesleyan Church decided to buy Caton's Island in New Brunswick, Canada, it had been owned by the Catholic Church as a retreat for the clergy. As negotiations took place some of the historical symbols (idols, statues and other artifacts) were fair game to be vandalized or trashed by the Protestants. They seemed to lack a sense of history if not a respect for objects d'art (One such object remains safe today somewhere in Brown's Flat having been transported to mainland in an old Indian canoe!)

There is a fear in use of symbols by Protestants as to intrinsic value being placed in the object. But the fear is that of symbols being forgotten and not for the respect they bring.

On the West coast, the group that rented the Pasadena campus for a while worshipped "ascended masters." Images were in the old gymnasium where once again there was little respect for anything outside "of the pale." Man's need for symbols should have the respect of all so that the world might understand others better.

In summary, the Church of the Nazarene takes on baptism and communion as its only two sacraments which in turn symbolize the Christian life. According to W.T. Purkiser "Baptism

makes the Christian as a member of the new covenant community and sets him off from other men. He was baptized 'into' Christ – that is, became a Christian, a follower of Christ's 'Way' and henceforth belongs to Him."

Once again the communion stands apart not as a commemorative meal but of reverence and Thanksgiving. It is this sense of awe that the symbol must maintain if it is to escape the alienation repetition. The infrequent time of communion in the church might contribute to maintain it somewhat mystical sense.

Symbols have meaning only because people give them meaning, only because people agree that a particular symbol is going to be used to refer to a particular thing. The development of culture or sub-religious culture depends upon the development of consensus of meaning for the symbols used. A symbol does not necessarily accurately represent the thing for which it stands. After all, a symbol is a representation, not the thing itself.

In conclusion, if it is true that symbols can probably never accurately represent the things to which they refer, a basic question is asked about social interaction. Perhaps it is the interaction between persons that breaks down symbol meaning or at least contributes to it. Is behavior influenced more by definitions attached to the symbols or by the things to which the symbols refer? Does the individual pattern his behavior according to this characteristics of the thing itself or according to the definition which man gives it?

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