

## **Topic 19: The Role of Symbols in Religious Knowledge**

**I. The Notion of a Religious Symbol:** Transcendent reality cannot be known or rendered by concepts directly. Therefore, the only "language" we have for knowing and expressing our experience of God's revelation is symbolic. Spontaneous expressions (stories, prayers) and reflective interpretations (doctrines, theological reflections) of the encounter with the transcendent are symbolic.

In general terms, a symbol is anything through which something other than itself is made present and known. More specifically, a religious symbol is anything finite that discloses and points to what is both other than itself and strictly transcendent, but which at the same time makes that transcendent other present by participation in it.

**II. The Structure of the Symbol:** In faith, that which cannot strictly speaking be "known" is nevertheless engaged by the whole person and expressed in the symbolic language of beliefs drawn from ordinary, everyday experience and knowledge of the world. (Recall that "beliefs" use language drawn from this world to express our "faith" grasp of what lies beyond this world.)

In revelation, God's universal "Presence" is historically mediated to human subjectivity. Every medium of revelation is, by definition, symbolic, as are all spontaneous and reflective interpretations of the encounter with what Rahner calls Absolute Mystery.

By definition, every historical medium of God's revelation is symbolic. Likewise, all spontaneous expressions (prayer, oral accounts, etc.) and reflective interpretations (doctrine, theology, etc.) of the encounter with the transcendent are symbolic.

Therefore, scripture is symbolic. It encompasses a complex set of symbols which make present to human consciousness an encounter with God's Presence in the church. The religious symbol mediates God's revelation.

**III. The Dialectical Structure of Religious Symbols:** A symbol is a finite reality of this world. Apart from its symbolic value or function, it exists as a finite being with its own reality.

A symbol points beyond itself to something other than itself. This function of pointing constitutes the symbol as symbol.

A symbol makes present something other than itself. It does not reveal something other than itself simply by pointing away from itself. Rather, the symbol participates in the reality of that which it symbolizes. The implication of this is that symbols cannot be arbitrarily generated or assigned; they work as symbols precisely because of their participatory link with that which they symbolize.

The structure of the symbol is called "dialectical" as a way of evoking its paradoxical character. (Note: in a dialectical structure, aspects or qualities which appear to be opposed to one another form a unity precisely in and through their mutual interaction.)

The symbol is fashioned under the influence of the God's Presence: as such, it is God's self-expression. However, it is also a historically-conditioned human work: as such, it is not (only/always) God's self-expression (it can conceal as well as reveal.)

There is an historical priority of the object symbol that causes the experience of God. But this is not the only "cause." God is also present in the subjectivity of the one who experiences God, and that person's whole life up to that point helps to "cause" the revelatory experience.

**IV. The Dynamics of Symbolic Communication:** All communication by religious symbols presupposes and is based upon engaged participatory interest. Both the truth and the meaning of religious communication depends on participation, that is, a participatory engagement with the religious reality. Moreover, real religious symbolic communication presupposes real religious questions.

The dialectic of religious experience and religious symbol mirrors the dialectical structure of the personal and communal dimensions of faith and belief. Religious symbols are thus expressive of the religious experiences that they condition and in a certain sense "cause."

Religious symbols make the a priori presence of God to the human subject a more or less clearly conscious Presence. Therefore, religious symbols have an objective realistic validity that is prior to the religious experience of the ongoing life of the church.

Symbolic reality is historical. The past historical meaning of a symbol contributes to but does not completely determine the meaning generated in present experience.

The symbol fashioned under the influence of God's Presence is both God's Self-expression and a historically conditioned human work. It reveals and conceals. God makes God's Presence known to human subjectivity under the conditions of human, historical reality.

#### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How can there be contact between transcendence and human reality?
2. How do religious symbols impact human consciousness?