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Symbols and Sacraments from Christian and Religious Phenomenological Perspectives

Abstract: This paper examines the difference between a general conception about the symbol as it is found in the religious phenomenological perspective and the specific one provided by the Eastern (Orthodox) Christian theology. The study emphasizes the specificity of Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity regarding the problem of symbolism in a tripartite comparison based on three major paradigms that enter into dialogue: 1) a general, merely a scientific approach on symbol as developed in traditional Cultures and Religions by taking advantage on Mircea Eliade's important theoretical landmark; 2) a broader Christian understanding in general; 3) the Christian Orthodox specific attitude - having Father Dumitru Stăniloae as guide in this matter.

Keywords: sacraments, symbols, church, phenomenology of religions

Introduction

This paper draws contrasts between two interpretations on symbol, merely between a broad religious approach of the symbol and the more unique-to-Christianity understanding of the symbol. The analysis is based on the implications they have in the perspective of the religious practice in general and the one more specific to the Christian life.

From a phenomenological point of view all human religious expressions have symbolic importance and impact (Velasco 1978, 154-155). As Mircea Eliade notes, the symbol is a reality which relates to the very deep constitution of man - it is the way in which his religious unconscious is revealed (Eliade 1965, 189). From the Christian theological perspective, man's entire existence has a symbolic-transcendent character (Stăniloae 1957, 433; Balthasar 1990, 317-20; Barth 1958, 184-186). Man is in himself a symbolic (iconic) being, which upholds a jointly theological and symbolic relationship with the fellow-men and with the world. Hence, everything around him has symbolic implications. Therefore, the symbol has many forms and meanings from a religious point of view. Christianity makes no exception to this phenomenon. The symbol has as many dimensions as many contents/types of relationships that it supports and signifies.

As a whole, the religious phenomenon is symbolic, at least at the level of its actions. It is through the symbol that man partakes of the

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knowledge and life of the Invisible One. According to Mircea Eliade, man has the ability to create symbols which communicate/convey a deep spiritual treasure that otherwise could not have been externalized (Eliade 1965, 190). Man cannot exist without symbol, or rather the symbol itself represents the means by which he connects with the Divine. Therefore, from the religious perspective, the symbol exists because of the creation of man and the need to participate in the mystery of God, and thereby, to accomplish his destiny through perfection.

In the Eastern Christian Orthodox tradition the symbol has a Trinitarian origin. The divine reason (λόγος) of the symbol can be identified in the plan of the Holy Trinity. It could be said that the divine Persons co-exist in the Holy Trinity in a “symbolic” inter-personal and mutual relationship. “Symbolic”, that is, the Son is in the Father and in the Holy Spirit and every One of Them in the other Two. There is an absolute unity and communion, but every Person is different from the other Two. Because the Three of Them are One, each relationship with One is a “symbolical” relationship with all Three Persons. “Symbolic”, here, depicts an absolute divine and theological reality, understood as a communion of the Three divine Persons over any confusion or mix-up. There are a couple of biblical texts which could argue towards this understanding of the Christian symbol. These references express and underline precisely the divine co-habitation and personal co-existence of the Son in the Father: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father[...]Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake” (John 14: 9 &11); “And whoever sees Me sees the One who sent Me”. (John 12:45);” The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, upholding all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”(Heb.1:3).

The importance of the symbol in the Orthodox Christian tradition is given by the Symbol¹ par excellence who is Jesus Christ, “image” and icon of the invisible God (“The Son is the image (εἰκόνα) of the invisible God” Col. 1:15). He is in Himself a Symbol of the Father and a Symbol of Himself as God and Man. Through the incarnation, as St. Maximus the Confessor highlights, He became as Man the Symbol of Himself as God: „For in His measureless love for mankind, there was the need for Him to be created in human form (without undergoing any change), and to become a type and symbol of Himself, presenting Himself symbolically by means of His own self” (Maximus, 2014, 269)².

In Christ, the symbol gained a Christological dimension, a human-divine `content` and an ontological and personal character. In the Christian tradition, the Symbol is a divine and a human Person at the same time. As

such, through Christ, as St. Maximus the Confessor remarks, a transition is made from sensitive to intelligible symbols. It is through Christ that it is possible to go beyond *types* towards *icons*, which reveals the truth and the state of the things that are to come (PG 4, 137D). The theological symbols are in Christ the communion-type (eucharistic) realities of the everlasting life and dimension.

In the Orthodox theology, the symbol is the way of the divine Revelation. The way is not divine but has a divine content and a human form and it is a revealed reality. Not only does it signify something, but it also represents *the means* for God's Revelation. The theological symbol makes the one who partakes of the symbol to partake of the *One* that is symbolized, God (Schmemmann 1987, introduction). In the Christian teaching the encounter of man with the Divine takes place through a symbol that, far from being only a *representation* of a religious reality, it actually *unifies* (gr. *συνβάλλειν*: to put together, to unite) two different realities. More precisely, as stated by Father D. Stăniloae, through symbol man participates in the divine paradigms according to which he was created³.

In many instances, when it comes to defining the character of the symbol, it has been presented as an external representation of the symbolized reality⁴, without any link or association between the symbol and the symbolized, thus reducing the symbol to symbolism. But, as we have pointed out above, in the Eastern Christian Orthodox the symbol is, in a concrete and fundamental sense, understood as an organic and important form and pattern of communication with the Divinity. The symbol mediates the presence of the other, precisely of a real *other* who, given the conditions of the creation, can only be partaken of through symbol. The symbol fulfils, as Paul Evdokimov remarks, a function of "significance" and, at the same time, it grows as the expressive receptacle of the divine "presence" (Evdokimov 1972, 143).

Therefore, inescapably, the Christian (regardless the confessional tradition) has to achieve his goal of existence through symbol, conceived as an epiphany and a mystery at the same time. Whether we speak about a simple symbol or a set of symbols that make manifest a sacrament with a cultic, purifying, unifying or atoning character, Man follows his destiny (that is, the *resemblance to God*) by participating in mysteries through a symbolic manner.

Thus, the Christian life of the human being is fulfilled through symbols. The perfection of man is realized in connection with the Symbol par excellence, Jesus Christ, as Mystery of Life, and through all symbols related to Him. The relationship with Jesus Christ presupposes the participation in cultic expressions with symbolic implications and meanings. This is because man is attracted to divinity, as God reveals Himself to man,

and man, in his turn, reveals himself to God in a continuous process of growth into communion.

This leads to the specificity of the Orthodox theological perspective in comparison with the religious symbol as understood in religious literature. From Orthodox Christian perspective the latter could not express in itself the presence of God as a way of His Revelation. When considering the case of man being outside of the Divine Revelation, in this case, man may relate to God through a religious symbolical setting. Although, from Christian point of view the religious symbol could not sustain a fully symbolic relation with God. God remains distant to man. So, this is a fundamental difference between the religious symbol and the Eastern Christian symbols. The essential difference between the two types of symbols is that Jesus Christ, as incarnated God (and perfect image of the Father), is the theological source of any theological symbol and of all implications.

From religious symbol to the Christian symbol - a liturgical and sacramental dimension

From the phenomenological religious perspective, the soul is an abyssal inner world that influences all human acts, deeds and gestures. When C. Jung inaugurated the psychoanalytical technique of *descensus ad inferos* (Eliade 1965, 10), he made available to the philosophy of religions what M. Eliade called the *religious collective unconscious of man* (Eliade 1969, 21-22). He noticed that this abyssal unconscious of man reveals to us unsuspected, immemorial treasures through myths, symbols, and images, all being of a religious nature (Eliade 1965, 10). That would mean that man's existence is purely religious, springing from the depths of his inner being, and that his religious acts are nothing but internal expressions of the soul (Velasco 1978, 92).

In the Christian Orthodox theological conception and from a phenomenological religious point of view, man, as a spiritual being, is in himself a symbolic reality. He is involved in a religious relationship with a Reality that exists beyond him, a relationship in which man can manifest religiously only through symbol. So, man, as a religious person is also symbolic, in his constitution and in his formal manifestations. Therefore, all human religious expressions, of any magnitude or intensity, are symbolic and aim to open to man the infinite perspective of the divine Mystery.

In prehistorical times, the religious man believed that consuming and worshipping the brain of the hunted animal are two essential religious acts mediating the communion with the Master of animals. This is simply a primitive cultic image, whose acts have the value of a religious symbol (Eliade 1978, 34). The religious symbol can be identified in any religious

gesture of any religious space, as the way of participating to the Divine. Various examples can be provided, starting with the symbol of primitive totemic beliefs or in complex religious systems in which the symbol is being embodied in myths and religious rites. In the case of most religions, the symbol can be found within the cult.

In this context, the fundamental difference that exists between the religious symbol in general and the Christian symbol in particular, is straightforward. The latter one is revealed and of non-human origin, and his divine-human double character is grounded in the Person of Jesus Christ. Based on this principle, the Christian theology argues that all human religious symbols and manifestations have, relative to the Christian symbols, the meaning of some iconic representations.

According to the Christian teaching, God is the Creator of symbols⁵. For instance, man, created in the "image and likeness of God" (Gen. 1, 26), discovers in himself, if he is self-conscious, a symbolic state of being. He is an icon of his Creator, subsists and expresses himself as a symbol, being composed of a visible and invisible part: visible in the body and invisible in the soul. That is the theological premise of understanding any religious and symbolic manifestation of man. Moreover, being in himself a symbol, man is directly dependent on the reality of the symbol and of the symbolised.

In this theological and symbolic framework, man is communicating directly with God. His relationship with God has a purely symbolic character. From this original state, man falls into sin by breaking the communion with the Divine Being. Thus, he corrupted himself in his nature as a symbolic reality. Man reduced himself to the immanent, to an idolatrous pseudo-symbolism (Stăniloae 1957, 431). Therefore, the 'content' of the symbol, in a religious sense, changes related to the theological status of man. The symbol is today still a distorted form of the primary theological symbol. It is an iconic structure of what the symbol was. The symbol regains its positive meaning and becomes again, in Christ, an authentic and full means for man's sanctification. Therefore, the Incarnation restored the original symbolic order of man's and the world's relationship with God. (See on this topic: St. John of Damascus 2003).

In this context, we emphasize that the Christian symbol acquires a cultic, liturgical and sacramental dimension (Stăniloae 1996, 11). The Holy Sacraments of the Church, the icons, the Church songs and all the Church services gain in/through Christ a *theandric*⁶ constitution. The deepest and highest Christian symbols correspond to the Holy Sacraments of the Church. Symbols host God Himself in the form of His energies. For example, the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, what seems to be „bread” and „wine” reveals and is for Christians Christ Himself in His Holy Body and Blood⁷. In this sense, we could identify a difference in significance among the various symbols. There is a substantial difference between the

liturgical symbols and the Holy Body and Blood of Christ. The simple liturgical symbols are forms of communication with God, the Holy Body and Blood of Christ is God Himself incarnate in His act of sanctifying man and the world. The Holy Eucharist is Christ Himself, while the liturgical sign or gesture cannot be assimilated to Christ. It could be interesting to mention that St. Cyril of Jerusalem distinguishes between the real symbol and the sensitive type or sign⁸.

As for the meaning of the participation in the Christian symbol, that of communion with the Divine, we must say that the model of this communion comes from the intra-Trinitarian relationship. From eternity, the Son is the perfect Symbol/Icon of the Father (Col. 1:15), He is the Signifier that is the same as the Signified, sharing the same divine nature, but completely different as a Person from the Symbolized One (Wisse 1963, 46). The Father, in the Son, cannot be separated from the relationship with the Holy Spirit. Relying on this paradigm of an absolute unity and communion, man was created in communion with the divinity by establishing relationships both with God and with his fellowmen, as well as with the whole world as a created symbol of the Creator: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Rom. 1:20).

Based on the above principles, we argue that from a Christian Orthodox point of view, the religious symbols are incomplete forms of relating to God. The religious man, having lost the real dimension of the existence and the authentic landmarks of his relationship with God, has tried to find Him through acts and deeds of symbolic value, but marked by the effects of the Adamic fall. Whether simple sacred symbolic acts which provide the consciousness of the reality of the Divine, or complex religious symbolic forms, these acts will carry both the ability and the inability of man to enter in communion with God.

An example: Christian Mysteries vs. religious myths - symbols for sanctification

Regarding the religious phenomena, what drives, in particular, our attention are the similarities between the *religious myth*, seen, following Mircea Eliade, as „sacred histories” (Eliade 1967, 171-183) and the Mysteries of the Christian Church. However, the difference in content and significance between the two is significant. The religious myths are considered in Christian tradition, partial representations of the Sacraments of the Church of Christ, something dimmed in relation to them.

Unlike myths, which are - in general - human answers⁹ to God's call, the Mysteries of the Church are divine, established and instituted by Christ

Himself for our benefit and sanctification. Their divine character prevails beyond their sensible character or their visible side. Moreover, it is the consciousness of the Church which certifies it, based on the divine Revelation of its absolute divine Exponent - Jesus Christ. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that, compared to religious myths, for Christians, Church Mysteries mediate through Jesus Christ the union and the communion of a God in Trinity, Personal, Living and True.

Let us set forth below some similarities and distinctions regarding the religious myth compared to the Christian Sacraments.

On the one hand, a first essential aspect that allows a clear distinction between the two of them is the *theandric* character that can be traced back in both cases, with the specification that, in the case of Church Mysteries, the Divine is personally present in Mysteries by the Incarnate Logos-Christ, whereas in non-Christian religions the deity manifests impersonally on the basis of a general grace given to all people.

In the Orthodox Christian thinking the Person of Christ is the cornerstone of any relationship with God. Comparative with the religious myth that could manifest the power of God, the Holy Sacraments provide in Jesus Christ as God *the union* with the Creator. Related with the Holy Mysteries, the myths could be considered a human endeavour to *become* mystery and to unite in his depths the created with the uncreated (Stăniloae 2012, first two sections). The Christian conception on this topic is that God assists and sustains these human trials. This is because the gifts with which man was endowed since creation are indelible, and those gifts transpire in his religious acts and gestures naturally.

Given the indissoluble unity between man and cosmos in which man was “conceived” as governor, gestures with cosmological (Eliade 1969, 82) value can be introduced in man’s religious rituals. The myth is a reconstruction of the world, a repeated cosmogony. In this new cosmogony, man is at the center. Man realizes this task because his life, as related in myths, is inscribed in a larger creative process. In this process man is the link between all created things, though the most important actor in the myth, and, thus, he considers his entire religious life in relation to *existence* in its entirety. In the religious phenomenological perspective, man mythically participates in realities concerning his origin and to redressing the cosmic tragedy of the paradisiacal fall of Adam, as it is understood in Christian tradition.

Based on the Eastern Christian Orthodox tradition, religious myths, at least as signs, resemble to the Christian Mysteries. However, the latter differ essentially from religious myths in the fact that the restoration (reconstruction) of the world is accomplished in Christ starting with His Incarnation. Moreover, the Holy Mysteries in the Eastern Christian theology are divine works with cosmic importance and impact, as

continuous creations of God in the life of man and the world. Man is now able to struggle for the world's restoration and, implicitly of his restoration too, since there is a created symbol of the Son of Man and God, Jesus Christ.

From a religious point of view, myths have a deep soteriological character. Eliade pleads in this sense that the myths are means of participating of 'another world': "Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining *consciousness* of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of absolute realities. It is the *experience of the sacred* — that is, an *encounter* with a trans-human reality — which gives birth to the idea that something really exists, hence, there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence" (Eliade, 1963. 139).

Part of this conception is professed in the Eastern Christian faith, with the main difference that the Holy Mysteries transmit a divine grace not only for reaching in a 'transcendent' plane of existence, but rather for the salvation from death and the perfection of man's life in Christ. Jesus Christ as a divine and human Person is present and is working through the Holy Mysteries of the Church. The salvation is not only a form of overcoming evil, or release from the limits of this world and the experience of another, as it could be in the case of religious myths, but rather it is an act of personal communion with Jesus Christ, as the only Savior of man. We are saved and perfected in Christ, the first Resurrected one.

Therefore, the whole Eastern Christian mystagogy and the Holy Sacraments in particular, as opposed to religious rites and myths, are instituted by Christ the God-Man. They are based on the Revelation of God and are not simply „sacred histories". There are Mysteries of union with God expressed externally by different symbols. Through the Christian Sacraments we acknowledge that God¹⁰ acts toward us for our restoration and sanctification. They can transmit to man, through different liturgical gestures and symbols, divine works that act toward the therapy and perfection of man.

What is certain is that man remains, regardless of his religious framework, in the creative and salvific plan established forever by God; hence, there are only formal similarities between man's religious expressions and their counterparts in the Christian manifestations. Man cannot deny his constitution and the existence he has received, nor the framework in which he has been given to exist. From a Christian perspective, there are constant ontological religious principles in all religious manifestations, which are in a close connection with Christian Revelation. The Christian life does not depart from these principles, the main difference being that it partakes *fully*

of the divine Revelation. Any Christian faithful may advance on his path to perfection unconditionally in union with the God made Man - Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The above analysis allows us to consider some theological principles and ideas regarding the religious and Christian reality of the symbol. From an Orthodox Christian perspective man is a symbolic/iconic being. He strives to exist by seeking to fulfill his vocation to be in the likeness of God, beyond the limits of his nature. As a result, he manifests and symbolically shares the divine Reality, aiming to reach direct communion “face to Face” with God¹¹. In this process, he is assisted by the One who first accomplished this - Jesus Christ. Being the *Symbol* and *Icon* of the Father, as well as the *Symbol* of Himself and all humanity, He succeeded in bringing man directly in front of God

The Christian consciousness is that apart from Jesus Christ there is no other way of unification of man and God. Despite of this revealed truth, any religious man seeks to achieve the same desideratum, the direct union of man with God. This is an inner tendency of every human being. He, thus, reaches out, in accordance with his constitution, to different rational-symbolic forms (religious myths-rites) through which he can enter in communion with God. He is, in this sense, helped by himself and by the cosmos, by offering concrete symbols towards the discovery of God. From Orthodox Christian perspective man's religious expressions are not absolutely revealed, they carry in them the corrupt nature of man and of the world. Therefore, although based on absolute existential principles (such as creation in the „image and likeness of God”), the man's religious manifestations, whether more elaborate or simple, have, for Christians, the meaning of iconic structures, which reveal the greatness of creation and, implicitly, of its Creator.

Thus, the difference between the broader, phenomenological understanding of symbol in the other religions and the specific view of the Eastern Christianity on this matter can be summed up as the difference between a simple representational role and an ontological, personal and concrete role attributed to symbol in the experience of the Orthodox Tradition.

Further differences between the rite and the liturgy or between myth and the Mysteries of the Church could be derived from it, as well as their consequences on the meaning of religious manifestations.

Notes

¹ Symbols are determined on their constitution in two ways: created and uncreated. Christ is both uncreated and created as Symbol of the Father and of Himself as Man. Man is, on the other hand, a created symbol of the Father and of Holy Trinity. See, in this sense, the comprehensive study of Dumitru Stăniloae set as an introduction for the Romanian edition of Dionysius the Areopagite. For example: “The most accentuated degree of symbol of God and the basis of the raising of the whole creation... is the body assumed by the Son of God” (my transl.).

² „Εἶδει γὰρ αὐτόν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἀτρέπτως κτισθῆναι δι’ ἄμετρον φιλανθρωπίαν καταδεξάμενον ἑαυτοῦ γενέσθαι τύπον καὶ σύμβολον, καὶ παραδειῖξαι ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ συμβολικῶς ἑαυτόν [...]” (PG 91, 1165D).

³ Based on these divine paradigms discovered to man by symbol, the entire human and cosmic existence is presented as a continuous ontological *epigenesis*. Man is called in this ontological *epigenesis* that is, becoming a being, to gradually assimilate the divine paradigms according to which he and all creation were created. (Stăniloae 1957, 450-451).

⁴ ”The situation is essentially different with religious symbols. They must express an object that by its very nature transcends everything in the world that is split into subjectivity and objectivity. A real symbol points to an object which never can become an object. Religious symbols represent the transcendent but do not make the transcendent immanent. They do not make God a part of the empirical world” (Tillich 1958, 5).

⁵ St. Dionysius the Areopagite, as Father D. Stăniloae remarks, calls God *Creator of symbols*. See St. Dionysius the Areopagite 1996, Introduction, footnote 72.

⁶ *Theandric* is related to the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ.

⁷ See the perspective of A. Schmemmann in Schmemmann 1987.

⁸ See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical catecheses IV*, 191-203.

⁹ For the ancient Greek writer Theonas, myth is the false word that iconizes truth.

¹⁰ We do not partake of God's works in an abstract and empty way, but through the symbol and a symbolic hierarchy that Christ establishes during his earthly-economic mission (PG 4, 121B).

¹¹ „For now we see in a mirror, in the guessing, and then, face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I was known” (I Cor. 13: 12).

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Abbreviation: P.G. - *Patrologia Graeca*. Edited by J.P. Migne. Paris. 1857-1864.

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