

**SYMBOL - EXPERIENCE, METAPHORICAL EXPRESSION
AND CULTURAL REVELATION**

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(A) *Symbol-Experience*

We shall first attempt to discover how every reality becomes meaningful when mediated through a symbol-experience. But we need to clarify what exactly is a symbol, Perhaps this can be better understood if we make a fundamental distinction between symbol and sign.

A symbol is distinguished from a sign in that while the latter is simply a pointer to reality, chosen conventionally, (in a one-to-one relationship), the former is a representative of a reality, (that is, it makes it somehow 'present'), somehow partakes of its nature, in a one-to-many relationship with a great intellectual, evaluative and emotional power.¹

Just an example or two to clarify the distinction we are trying to make: A traffic sign while it serves to point out the road or direction, it does not become the very road or direction it points to; whereas, when the president of a country is on an official visit somewhere, he does not merely point to his country, but he is somehow his country, he is therefore a symbol of his country. He carries the country, as it were. In other words, the symbol carries within itself its own revelation. A symbol is symbol precisely because it symbolises that which is symbolized. And reality is not somewhere else-not beyond or behind or hidden somewhere-so that the symbol could become a mere sign.²

Let us pursue this further with the example of human body as symbol. The body reveals, manifests, discloses and evokes its soul, its personhood. A body can be seen either as an object or it can be seen as a

symbol. In the first case, it is merely a "corpse" without a soul as it were. One may treat a person then at the object-level, and so overlook the person-dimension. But instead a symbol-experience is present when the symbol reveals its 'soul'. When this happens the externals function as pointers to the soul. In fact, there is no such thing as body and soul. We have one reality which has a body-aspect and a soul-aspect. When we experience this total reality holistically, as it really is, then the soul-aspect is revealed through the body-aspect. The body points to the soul, and more so it becomes so transparent that it manifests its soul. In a word, a symbol-experience is an experience of the body-aspect as pointing to the soul aspect.³

But it can happen that symbols do not function as symbols; this is because they could be reduced to mere objects, objects of information, utility and profit, objects of pleasure. This is the level of possession and possessiveness. In such a case, they do not evoke. The symbol-aspect becomes dormant, apparently dead. This reduction of symbols to object is "reification of symbols". This reification has tremendous negative consequences in our times. The whole ecological predicament of our present times can very well be traced to this reification, where the Earth has been fully objectified, totally reduced to a mere lifeless object which can be manipulated for our own utility, profit and pleasure, discarding thus its symbolic, evocative and mystery dimension. A note must be added here. Symbols really do not die; it is we who become blind to the symbolic aspect of reality. Symbols, like light, always evoke; but no amount of light can make a thing visible to a blind person. Or again, the experience of evocation is not to be identified with an emotional experience, though emotion may (and usually does) accompany it. In evocation the depth of our being comes in contact with the depth of another being. Since there are degrees of depth, the degree of evocation depends on the depth that has been touched. The deeper one has been touched and transformed the more intensive and extensive the evocation. Such an experience profoundly affects our attitudes and values, our perspectives and prejudices.

(B) *Metaphorical Expression*

A depth-experience like this expresses itself in language. This is metaphor. A metaphor is in fact a linguistic concretization of an evocative experience.⁴ Signs may be explained, verbalized or fully objectified through concepts. These concepts are an outcome of processes based primarily on the *Ratio* where evidence and proof are important ingredients. That is, an ordinary concept, for example, may be associated with many things, and this association can ultimately be de - *term*-ined', for, terms have a fixed and constant meaning. But this is simply not the case with symbolic expressions (that is, metaphors). These are evocative of a deeper realm and these evocations can never be fully explained or verbalized. But in any case, symbols cannot really do away with concepts. At the basis of symbolic or metaphorical expressions, there are concepts and it is in and through concepts that evocation takes place. The concept looks at the 'body', as it were, of that which is understood but symbolic expression has to do with its 'soul'. Consequently we can say that function of metaphorical expressions is to *reveal the soul-aspect through the body-aspect*. This means that metaphorical expressions presuppose concepts but they cannot be fully reduced to concepts since they express not just the body-aspect but the soul-aspect as well.⁵

In this sense the metaphorical expressions aim not to describe a state of affairs but to transform the person by evoking in him a *depth-experience*. Transformation is concerned not with the meaning of a thing but with its significance (i.e. meaningfulness). Meaningfulness is the experience of the depth-dimension of a thing or person.

The meaning of a thing can be expressed or articulated in such a manner that it can either be verified or falsified. But its meaningfulness can be understood in an indefinitely number of ways. It can be ascertained only through its effects. Has the promised transformation taken place? If yes, then the transformation function of a metaphor has been realized. If no, then it has not succeeded. This is so because significance is not a new meaning, but it refers to the depth-dimension. Significance comes about

when one develops a depth-relationship with an object or a person. Such a relationship is not reducible to nor is it exhausted by any number of meanings. In a word, metaphorical expressions arise out of a specific experience and if alive, they can take us back to such a similar experience.

(C) Cultural Revelation :

Metaphors belong to a family of metaphors; they are not unrelated and individualistic. All genuine metaphors belong to a family and so have a family semblance. The home of a family of metaphors is the "**Mythos**", the background of all our understanding. All understanding takes place with the help of a background which by definition remains in the background and hence is not known or seen. The difficulty is that unless we become familiar with (i.e. belong to the family of) the background we shall fail to understand what is being said.⁶ That is why to understand tradition we have to 'stand under' it. The metaphor of *Purusa* for example, or *Karma* is at home in the Hindu *Mythos* and is intelligible there alone; it will not make much sense in the Christian world-view and vice-versa.

By a world-view we understand the totality of attitudes, values and meanings that make up the living tradition of a people. When we discourse we do not make up our own meanings; we employ words that we have learnt from tradition. These are simply 'given'. In these given meanings are contained a specific way of looking at reality and a definite complex of attitudes and values.

A religious tradition brings forth its beliefs in a specific world-view; the beliefs manifest this world-view. It is through these beliefs that we find access to the tradition. So too the myths (i.e. stories about the origin and end of the world, about gods and cosmic powers functioning at the cosmic level) manifest the *Mythos* of a culture. Metaphors and myths, therefore, reveal the *Mythos* of their origin. It is through them that we can come in contact with the *Mythos*. The dominant metaphors of a culture (*Yajña*, *puruṣa karma*, *punarjanma*, in Indian tradition, for example), manifest their *Mythos*. Hence a genuine hermeneutic should

involve a committed study of the dominant metaphors of different traditions keeping in mind their background. Or again, like symbols, metaphors too can cease to evoke. When that happens, then only a new experience can re-interpret it and bring its evocativeness back to us. Interpretations should make clear not what a metaphor is but what it means and how it can become "meaningful" to our times.

Are not according to this understanding all interpretations results of mere subjective experience? Does this not lead to subjectivism? All interpretations belong to the realm of the knowing subject, hence they are subjective but this does not imply that they are *subjectivistic*. Subjectivistic means fanciful and arbitrary. Because interpretations are subjective, that is, they belong to the realm of the knowing subject, they can be understood relevantly and thus made know relevantly. Indeed the knowing subject is a person, not a mere individual and a person is constituted by his relationship to other knowing subjects as such. In this sense subjective is a positive, not a pejorative quality.⁷

Yet, admittedly our theoretical distinction does not solve the problem of arbitrariness of interpretations. Subjective interpretations are characterized by their lack of openness in a dual way; one, they tend to exclude other interpretations by absolutizing their own and two, they build their interests on narrow interests of cliques, clans, castes and religion. But there can also be interpretations that are ahead of their times and so have to be discovered as relevant only much later. Generally speaking, however, interpretations are "children of their age" and so tend to be evocative in the period of their birth.

NOTES

1. Cf. Salvino Azzopardi, *Epistemology* (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1983), p.53.
2. Cf. R. Panikkar, "Symbols and Reality", *Monchanin*, Vol. VIII nos 3-5, Cahier 50, p.18.

3. Cf. Francis X. D'sa, *Survey of Indian Religions and Philosophy* (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1986),p.2.
4. Cf. *Ibid.*, p.3
5. Cf. Francis X. D'sa *The Right to be Human and the Duty to be Cosmic* (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, n.d.),p.2.
6. Cf.R.Panikkar, *Myth. Faith and Hermeneutics* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation), 1983), pp 8-9.
7. Cf. Francis X.D'sa, *Survey of Indian Religions and Philosophy, op. cit.*, p.4.