

## EDITORIAL

The place of symbols and monograms in religion is beyond dispute. Religion necessarily involves faith in supernatural factors. Even in the so-called natural religions there is the recognition of realities which are beyond human reasoning, and as such they are accepted not as logical conclusions but as revelations from above demanding man to believe. This implies that every religion invariably points to certain factors which are beyond the human comprehension and expression; or rather in religious life man necessarily comes to a point beyond which his reason and language cannot go, although his experience becomes *religious* in the strict sense only when it touches on realities beyond that point. Consequently revelation and faith, however differently they may be defined, are basic elements in all religions, and this compels the use of symbols in religious rituals and discourses: objects of revelation and faith being incomprehensible in human concepts, and inexpressible in human terms, one is forced to employ symbols to explain and express them. Thus, symbols become necessary tools for man to understand and communicate truths that are *per se* religious.

Religious symbols can take a number of forms. They can be words, narratives, stories, deeds or things. Words or phrases used not in their ordinary sense, but to represent these otherwise ineffable religious truths may be considered symbols of faith. Such terms defy the rules of grammar and logic. "Trinitarian-God," "Incarnation of God," "Virgin-Birth" etc. are such symbolic expressions in Christian theology. They are "symbolic" not in the sense that are less real, but because they are actually more real than they appear to be. To an unbeliever those expressions are unintelligible and even inconsistent, grammatically as well as logically. He cannot understand how God can be at the same time one and three, nor how God, who is by definition beyond all limits, can clothe himself in flesh, nor how one can become a mother while remaining a virgin! It will be no surprise if he considers those expressions to be meaningless. They indeed make no sense by the standards of ordinary human language and logic. But to a believer they are the most meaningful expressions standing for eternally infallible truths. It is not that he intellectually comprehends the realities behind those expressions, nor that he

explains them with full consistency. From the human point of view he also is aware of the grammatical and logical inconsistencies of those expressions, and in fact he does not have any clear "idea" or "concept" of which those words are representations and he well knows that literally they are only approximations of the realities. Even so, he is perfectly happy and at ease with those expressions, simply because they are symbols of realities revealed to him, and accepted by him in faith. Hence for him they are much richer in content in the context of religion than they are in ordinary linguistic contexts.

Naturally, therefore, narratives and stories containing symbolic expressions, too, can be classified as symbolic. This means that those narratives and stories are not to be understood in terms of the ordinary rules of language and logic, but in the light of faith. In this sense any religious narrative will necessarily involve a considerable body of symbolic expressions, and, therefore, will be itself symbolic at least to some extent. So, too, are religious stories, which may be, then, called myths. They are symbols because they are human attempts to express the inexpressible. Here, then, "a myth" does not mean a fairy tale, but a literary form which conveys through symbolic expressions the otherwise ineffable points of faith. Consequently, it may be admitted that any discourse about matters of faith may be called a myth. All that is required here is that religious language should be treated as a different literary form with its own rules and norms.

Religion, especially its practice, abounds in symbolic deeds. They are mostly gestures used in the context of worship. Such deeds, too, become necessary as the worshipper tries to give expression to his religious sentiments which surpass the limits of human concepts and words. Such are his feelings of faith, hope and love. He tries to express them through symbolic gestures which may or may not be accompanied by symbolic words. The gestures may differ from person to person, and from people to people. It can be a dance, or a piece of music or a painting or a sculpture, depending on the mood and temperament of the worshipper. That is, by symbolic deeds we mean here any visual act, no matter how simple or complicated it may be. It may be as simple as a sign of the cross, or as complicated as a sophisticated architectural structure.

Symbolic things are mostly those which are employed in religious rituals. Fire, water, oil etc. are among the common things symbolically used in the rituals of almost all the religions. When they are so used, their natural functions are given supernatural meanings. For example, fire is made to mean the divine light, pouring of water to mean the cleansing of one's conscience, and anointing with oil to mean one's consecration to God. In such contexts the natural elements become symbols of divine realities.

Religious monograms, too, may be classed along with religious symbols. They are usually a few letters combined to form a word, which has no meaning by itself, but is given a religious meaning. Examples of religious monograms are *Yahweh* in Judaism, and *Om* in Hinduism, which stand for the Absolute in the respective religions. Although they are devoid of conceptual content and linguistic meaning, they are powerful enough to evoke in the speaker as well as in the listener a sense of the Absolute. In some cases they function also as the condensed creed of the respective religions. The monograms are also used as *mantras* either by themselves or with the addition of more words. For example *Om mani-padme hung* is a *mantra* in Tibetan Buddhism, which is uttered in praise of the Buddha. Such *mantras* also lend themselves to interpretations which are more symbolic than literal.

In the present issue we present a few articles dealing with religious symbols and monograms. Dr S. L. Schwartz examines the relationship between symbolic imagery and the realm of *psyche*; Dr Pereira writes on the place of water symbolism in the religious life of man; Dr J. B. Chethimattam discusses some of the religious monograms and *mantras*; J. Pandyappillil analyzes the Hindu religious symbol *Om*; Dr L. Nereparampil explains the biblical symbolism of the temple; and my own contribution is a survey of the Buddhist symbols and imageries.

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