

SACRAMENTAL ENCOUNTER AMONG RELIGIONS

Religious pluralism, always accepted as a datum, is now experienced as a value, and students of religion are faced with the task of discovering new ways to reflect upon what happens when living religious traditions meet. The growing body of literature indicates an interest in the endeavour. R. E. Whitson writes as a theologian of the "coming convergence of world religions"; W. C. Smith locates the study of religious traditions in the "faith of other men"; John Dunne advances the concept of "passing over" to share the religious experience of the other; and Charles Davis works in the area of religious symbol and the possibilities of transcultural understanding.

This twentieth-century discussion has catapulted Christian religionists into what H. R. Schlette calls *dogmatisches Neuland*¹—a vast uncharted territory where traditional ways for understanding the variety of religious experiences do not operate. Convergence of religions, described by Whitson as an experience of significant unity within variety,² is being proposed as a fact. What is lacking is an approach for understanding encounter experiences.

Creation, Revelation and Jesus

The theory of sacramental encounter among religions attempts to provide this approach for the Christian student of religions. It proceeds on the strength of three proposition:

1. That God wills the salvation of all peoples. It would, therefore, be unthinkable for Him to will universal salvation without revealing Himself to all peoples in intelligible, visible, tangible and culturally appropriate signs through their traditions;

1. H.R. Schlette, *Die Religionen Als Thema Der Theologie*, *Questiones Disputatae* 22 (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), p. 19.

2. Robley Edward Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of World Religions* (New York: Newman Press, 1971), pp. 26-31.

2. That when religious people recognize and affirm divine revelation offered to them in this way, faith is born and the visible signs become for them religious symbols which not only call to mind the transcendent God, but also invite experience of His real presence. God thus saves all peoples through their unique symbols of faith;

3. That while Christians are compelled to acknowledge Jesus as the fullness of divine revelation, the most visible and tangible sacrament of God's self-disclosure, they ought not conclude that Biblical revelation alone is "supernatural" revelation and that all other revelation in the religions is "natural". Such a claim would in fact place limitations upon God and suggest that he bespeaks Himself solely in the dialect of Judeo-Christian religion. It is but a short step from this claim to the infamous axiom, "*extra ecclesiam nulla est salus.*"

Why God chose a Jewish person and His Church to be the most visible signs of the divine nature and purpose for mankind remains a mystery. As the poet put it, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." One might also add, how odd of God to choose creation. The fact remains, however, that from the first moment of creation, God *has* chosen to unfold Himself through the mediation of His creatures, their histories and the world which they were subduing. Biblical revelation and Jesus Himself testify to this mystery. Sacramental encounter theory, accordingly, begins with the premise that all revelation is in fact natural, and that God's imaging Himself in the cultures and in the religions is the ordinary means of grace. The Church of Jesus Christ is an extraordinary means. Thus, the proclamation of Christians ought to be the proclamation Jesus made: God wills the salvation of all peoples.

The Dialect of Divine Revelation

Sacramental encounter among religions is a way to help Christians understand the saving Word of God spoken to humankind in the religions. This project, however, entails more than a theological exchange among representatives of the religions. Religions do not understand other religions. It might even be suggested, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith

has pointed out, that people do not understand religions.³ The hermeneutical premise should rather be that people understand other people and that the genesis of this understanding rests in a theory of the human person. No one can be so bold as to suggest that he or she has discovered a universal transcultural key to the intelligibility of the human. In fact, there seems to be a multiplicity of models which contribute to an awareness of the human as a multi-faceted and everdeepening mystery. One such model which is given prominence in sacramental encounter theory is that man is *animal symbolicum*.⁴ This theory rests upon an understanding of man in general and religious man in particular that recognizes the human need to create, live with and think with symbols. Thus the focus of sacramental encounter is not only mankind's religions, but also the person of faith. We begin with a definition of the human person developed in Ernst Cassirer's *Essay on man*:

. . . Instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*. By so doing we can designate his specific difference, and we can understand a new way open to man—the way to civilization.⁵

The distinctive mark of human life, that which distinguishes it from other life forms, Cassirer describes as the symbolic system, an acquisition which "transforms the whole of human life."⁶ Cassirer concludes: "As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new *dimension* of reality."⁷ If human life and experience in the world are as dependent upon symbolization as Cassirer suggests, then the religionist who strives to understand the faith response of another person from a tradition other than his own would do well to approach the inquiry through the religious symbols of believers rather than through theological discourse which presumes to reflect upon the experience of these

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and end of religion* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 16.

4 Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 26.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.* p. 430.

7. *Ibid.*

symbols. Since religious symbols mediate experience of the divine for the person of faith and the religious community, they offer an avenue for understanding faith traditions.

But which symbols should one isolate as primary or master symbols? And if one can isolate them, is it possible for a student from one culture to understand the meaning symbolized, by these religious symbols for a person of faith from another heritage? Here we are up against what has been the perennial impasse for Christian theologians of encounter and dialogue. It is one thing to admit that all religious people experience transcendence through the mediation of their unique sacred symbols. It is quite another thing to suggest that the God and Father of Jesus Christ has chosen to bespeak Himself to them and to humankind through these symbols, and that He beckons Christians to explore the divine mystery through reverential encounter with devotees of other religious traditions and their symbols of faith.

Langdon Gilkey's Three Levels of Symbolic Mediation

In dealing with these questions and issues, I have found Langdon Gilkey's approach to religious symbols and their function as sacraments of encounter with the divine useful. While religious symbols, according to Gilkey, refer to ultimate meaning, this meaning cannot be experienced except "in definite, particular—socially and historically conditioned—forms of experience, and through definite historical symbolic media peculiar to that community."⁸ The intelligibility of the Infinite is not ordinarily available except through finite media, through the religious symbols of a tradition which have become the bearers of meaning gleaned through an experience of the human condition in a particular cultural milieu. Gilkey's understanding makes it possible to use the word revelation when speaking of "religious symbols of all sorts, whether in explicit religious traditions or in secular life generally."⁹ His theory celebrates the presence of the divine in ordinary existence. *A fortiori* he is suggesting that the Holy can be encountered through the mediation of religious symbols from other faith traditions. The importance of Gilkey's insight for the theory of sacramental encounter becomes clearer in his three levels of symbolic mediation. He writes:

8. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), p. 427.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

Let us note, as we develop these three levels, that each implies what can legitimately be called a sacramental theory of religious symbolism namely, one in which the divine is mediated to us through its presence within the finite.¹⁰

First Level of Symbolic Mediation

Gilkey defines religious symbol as a "finite medium, or creature, in which the divine power is active and transformative, and so which manifests or reveals through its own intrinsic being or activity the creative presence of that divine power."¹¹ Any creature is potentially symbolic of the divine creator, and what is more, Gilkey asserts, "it is itself only *as* a symbol."¹² All creation, including mankind and its history, manifests the God that called it into being. Humanity is what it is created to be when and to the extent that it images its creator. This Gilkey calls the sacramental principle,¹³ according to which, in the spirit of contemporary Catholic theology, "nature . . . can never be, either in reality or in conception, separated from grace; each creature in its essential or natural being, as *itself*, is a 'symbol' of the presence of the holy."¹⁴ Creation itself is the primary meaning of the word symbol and the first level of symbolic mediation. Gilkey thus gives to ordinary life theological importance and he cautions against conceiving the secular and the profane as strangers to grace.

The theory of sacramental encounter among religions further develops Gilkey's insight by affirming that divine revelation ordinarily proceeds through the mediation of symbols in Gilkey's first sense. This is as true in the case of Biblical revelation as it is in Eastern traditions. The distinction between natural and supernatural revelation fails to account for the universality of God's gracious gift of Himself. Accordingly, the Christian student who approaches a heterodox tradition and inquires, "What supernatural revelation can I recognize here?" begins with the wrong question and is bound to fail in his attempt to understand either the believer or the Word God has

10. Langdon Gilkey, "Symbols, Meaning and the Divine Presence," *Theological Studies* 35 (June 1974), 255.

11. *Ibid.* p. 256.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

spoken to humankind in that tradition. More fruitful inquiry might begin with the request, "Tell me, if you would, your beautiful Names for God."

Second Level of Symbolic Mediation

Though on the one hand the human condition reflects the presence of the divine in creation and history, it does, on the other hand, also indicate, at least periodically, a condition of alienation and a sense of lost purpose and wholeness. As Gilkey has put it: "Men and women remain rooted in deity but forgetful and unconscious of this rootage; he and she remain centred in love for others, yet forgetful of this love in self and so on."¹⁵ The human person must be twice-born in order to restore awareness of the presence of the divine. Symbols which accomplish this restoration operate at the second level of symbolic mediation,

. . . namely, those special and unique finite media through which a particular revelation of the ultimate and the sacred, universally present but universally obscured as well, is now manifested in a particular form to a historical community, and so through which a group becomes newly aware of its own status as symbol (in the first sense) as existing in and through the power of the divine.¹⁶

It is important to note that the central symbol at this level for the Christian community is not a thing, but a person, Jesus, who, following Gilkey's morphology, must be considered the sacrament of God through whom those professing faith in Jesus come to rediscover the symbolic, the sacramental, value of their own existence.

At this level the Christian is compelled to proclaim the wonderful works of God manifested to humankind through Jesus Christ. He or she, in faithfulness to the Christian tradition, does not yield to the temptation of agreeing that all symbols of divine revelation are the same. They clearly are not. Krishna is not Jesus in Hindu guise. The Buddha is not Jesus. Yet, while maintaining that God has most visibly revealed Himself in the Christ, and that He is the fullness of divine self-disclosure, the Christian can also admit that God is free to choose

15. *Ibid.* p. 258.

16. *Ibid.*

other witnesses of Himself in cultures far removed geographically, culturally and historically from the locus of Biblical religion. We should, therefore, approach the symbols of other faiths, not with an attitude of judgment, but with respect, wonder and even reverence for the ground on which we stand at this point is holy.

Third Level of Symbolic Meditation

The special revelatory events and persons responsible for making a given community twice-born are communicated to generations of believers through a people's religious history by symbols in a third sense. Finite entities become the media which recall and realize the presence of the divine in the revelatory symbols which created a given faith tradition. It is on this level that the student of religions recognizes a vast multiplicity of religious symbols. Gilkey suggests that the master tertiary symbols of the Christian tradition are "communal acts and elements (sacraments) on the one hand, and spoken and reflected words on the other (*kerygma*, *didache*, and . . . theological symbols)."¹⁷

The thrust of Gilkey's position is this : tertiary religious symbols have as their sole purpose, reawakening in the person of faith his or her own role as symbol of the divine activity. Gilkey further establishes that the special revelation or the secondary level of symbolic mediation does not refashion mankind's natural state by adding to it something extrinsic. That state, though alienated, remains graced. It remains a potential symbol of its divine creator. Rather, the special revelation, when experienced, serves to correct distortion, to re-focus one's vision, to provide an experience of rebirth. In this sense one can speak of salvation through faith in one's religious symbols.

The Sacramentality of the Faith-Person

Gilkey's understanding of religious symbols provides a theology of sacrament and symbol for sacramental encounter theory. It is an understanding thoroughly grounded in the nature of the human symbol-maker and as such reflects the Roman Catholic emphasis on the continuity between grace and nature. Further, Gilkey gives the prominence to religious symbol that Langer, Cassirer and Ricoeur have given to symbols in their studies. The latter authors make the case for the priority of symbolization over discursive logic in understanding humanity

17. *Ibid.* p. 259.

and its accomplishments. Gilkey makes the same case for religious symbols *vis-à-vis* dogmatic proclamations. The implication is clear. One can recognize in Catholic theology a basis, from *within* the sacramental tradition, for dialogue with the secular world and with the religions of the world. Once the Church has "learned to relinquish its Catholic absolutism,"¹⁸ what remains intact is a Catholicism capable as perhaps no other Christian tradition is of relating God's activity in history through the media of living men and women, to the entire spectrum of human life, religious or otherwise.

It is interesting to note that each of the three levels of symbolic mediation employs the master symbol of the body-person. At the first level, that of creation, the person himself is the clearest expression of divine life. On the second level of particular reminders of God's activity, the man Jesus expresses God's life most visibly. At the third level of finite entities which communicate God's life to future generations of believers, word and sacrament are the clearest expressions of God's presence. All three levels: created person; Jesus the incarnation of divine life; and the word and work of Jesus embodied in the believing community, presuppose the centrality of the person of faith as primary symbol of the holy. This leads to the following conclusions, crucial to the theory of sacramental encounter among religions :

1. That the individual in his or her bodiliness is symbol of divine presence and activity in the world;
2. That Roman Catholic sacramental theology assumes the primacy of the body-person as Christian symbol of God;
3. That, therefore, by focusing upon how this particular symbol functions within the Christian tradition, the specificity of the Christian way is maintained and even strengthened on the one hand, and on the other hand, a way is opened to share the religious experience of body-people from other traditions.

Conflicting dogmas and creeds of other religious traditions are not ruled out in this approach. They are simply relegated in the encounter to their proper order of priority. People of faith become the primary modes of inquiry and subject of concern.

18. *Ibid.* p. 264.

Foundations for Criteria of Sacramental Encounter

All people of faith can be media of divine revelation regardless of confessional affiliations. The relationship which Christians may enjoy with those faith-filled peoples necessarily involves reciprocity. Christians may establish an interpersonal and, therefore, reciprocal relationship with peoples of other faiths. To encounter a person of faith in this way is to initiate a friendship in the hope that this particular kind of relationship can, at least potentially, be sacramental for both parties. It is to invite sacramental encounter.

More precisely, sacramental encounter is, in the first instance, a personal relationship among believers who, through shared experiences and activities, witness to one another their understand of the holy as revealed to them. On this level each believer is a sign to the other of the saving power of God as experienced by him.

Sacramental encounter, however, implies something more; namely, that each believer can become for the other an efficacious sign of God's presence, best typified in the Christian tradition by the encounter with God termed sacrament. Each party in this exchange, as body-person, bespeaks to the other the unique revelation of the divine professed by his or her tradition. The one person functions as sacramental symbol of his or her faith for the other person. Insofar as the encountered parties succeed in communicating their personal presence to one another, they share something of their unique experience of the divine. They in fact appropriate to themselves a new experience of God who never ceases to disclose himself through the sacraments of living persons. Neither party finds it necessary in this exchange to abandon the unique dialect of what Gilkey calls the secondary and tertiary symbols of his or her own religious tradition. Both come away from such a meeting with a feeling of having met the divine anew. The truth each has experienced in the life of the other frees each to receive even more fully the life God offers to share with them both.

Criteria for Sacramental Encounter

There are four prime criteria for sacramental encounter which are to be understood as levels of exchange within an actual encounter experience. It must be noted that sacramental encounter occurs in a life context, and that this model is not feasible for the student in the

classroom or even the consultant in dialogue. It is, however, suitable for the field researcher, the missionary, the in-service volunteer and even the diplomat.

First Criterion: Recognition of Faith

Sacramental encounter is initiated when persons of faith recognize and express reverence for the faith of one another. It is proposed that because each party comes to the encounter from a faith context, a relationship already exists between them. When they acknowledge the possibility of mutual exchange based upon this kinship, and agree to explore how kinship can lead each to deeper faith, sufficient grounds for sacramental encounter have been established.

At this level, participants recognize that though they profess affiliation to different religious traditions, they are both persons of faith. By virtue of the act of faith itself, they discover they can overcome difference due to what Gilkey calls the secondary and tertiary symbols of religious traditions. No attempt is made by either party to dismiss the personal importance of these specific symbols in their lives. It is because they admit their importance that they choose to allow them to continue to operate during the exchange. From the outset, then, the parties recognize in one another something of the person of faith that they embody in themselves. The kinship, based upon the faith responses both have made, develops and the possibility of further exchange is strengthened because each person begins to view the other as the primary symbol of his faith tradition. In and through the instrumentality of his or her body, as a living person of faith, each symbolizes and communicates to the other the meaning of his or her own faith commitment.

Second Criterion: Personal Friendship and Task Sharing

Sacramental encounter further develops when the parties become friends, collaborating for some common good. It is proposed that their respective faith commitments, coupled with the personal commitment of friendship to one another, lead them to discover ways through which they can address human needs together. Their shared task becomes a means for each to express faith and deepen not only mutual respect and understanding, but also an appreciation of the human condition.

On this level of co-operation and task-sharing the parties discover a principle of unity deeper than the kinship and respect developed at the first level of encounter. They begin to realize a converging view of the human condition through a common concern. As friends, their life-projects converge for a time. They improve their knowledge of one another's language, personal habits, tastes in food, art and leisure pastimes. The friendship mediated by their bodiliness becomes a way and they move behind the variety of religious and cultural differences, which still separate them, to a moment of mutual understanding and the accomplishment of a task which serves real human needs. The second level of encounter is the level of shared humanity. It is sacramental in the sense that it is a bilateral relationship in which the sign of friendship becomes efficacious for deepening personal exchanges. The parties more fully appreciate that they are religious symbols in Gilkey's first sense. They become students and servants of one another within the context of a common concern. In this sense they come to perceive that God is working in and through them in order to "complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace."¹⁹

Third Criterion: Understanding Through Dialogue

The interpersonal encounter and task-sharing of the previous level initiates an exchange of information about the conceptual framework of each person's faith tradition. Sacramental encounter proposes that this dialogue between friends and co-workers introduces the parties to the symbol systems of their respective traditions in a more personal context and thereby promotes discovery of what is meant by these symbols. Sacramental encounter further proposes that at this point in the exchange the one person begins to explore the possibility that the meaning of the other's symbols might have meaning for his or her faith as well.

This third level of encounter is dialogue understood as an exercise in comparative religion which addresses itself to the issues of the secondary and tertiary symbols of the faith traditions of each party. Following Wilfred Cantwell Smith's suggestion,²⁰ the parties begin to

19. From the Roman Liturgy, Eucharistic Prayer IV.

20. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?" *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 33. See also W.C. Smith, *The Faith of other Men* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 82.

discover that what the other beliefs has meaning for them both within the particular context of the experience they are sharing. The exploration of conceptual frameworks that occurs at this level develops over a period of time. It does not refer to a weakened colloquium or consultation, often called dialogue, in which propositional statements about religion are exchanged. Dialogue within sacramental encounter follows no set agenda. Rather it arises naturally out of shared experiences. Respect for one another and mutual interest in addressing themselves to human needs generate questions about the religious meaning of their mutual experiences.

At this level of encounter, then, the parties gain access to the symbol systems of one another's religious traditions. It is a crucial moment in sacramental encounter, for it is at this time that the possibility emerges of the one person's religious experience affecting the other's beliefs and practices. Because of their friendship, the parties are vulnerable to one another. Their friendship has blunted traditional apologetic defences. Yet loyalty to their specific revelatory experiences is not abandoned. If the model of encounter is truly sacramental, it is at this point that the parties stand aside to allow the spirit of God, speaking to them both through their respective traditions, to lead them to an understanding of what the religious symbols of their counterpart's tradition may mean for them. They are at the point of what John S. Dunne has called 'passing over to the standpoint of another'.²¹ Once this point is reached, participation, the fourth level of sacramental encounter, is made possible.

Fourth Criterion: Religious Experience through the Symbols of another Religious Tradition

Sacramental encounter reaches its highest level of reciprocal relationship and understanding when the one person begins to experience faith through the religious symbols of the other. It is proposed that because of the interpersonal structure of the exchange, sacramental encounter actually initiates the participants into one another's symbol systems. It results in a deeper commitment to and knowledge of God without requiring either person to abandon his or her original faith commitment. The persons of faith in the exchange become sacraments for one another.

21. John S. Dunne, *The Way of all the Earth* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972), p. 53.

Those involved in this exchange freely pass over into religious experience, once considered proper only to one or the other of their respective religious traditions. Yet they freely return to their own standpoint enlightened and strengthened in that standpoint. Each grows in faith because of the other. This is the achievement of sacramental encounter. Through such an exchange peoples of different traditions advance into the unknown mystery of God together. Sacramental encounter is, in fact, itself a new religious experience of that mystery for the parties. It is not a new religion. The growth and maturity they achieve from this experience can in turn be shared through a subsequent reinterpretation of the secondary and tertiary religious symbols of their respective traditions. What is more, sacramental encounter locates the primary symbol of God's presence and activity in the man or woman of faith. It is because the partners know one another in this context that they come to know God better. The fruit of the encounter validates the experience.

Contribution and Challenge

The model of sacramental encounter among religions, established upon the Biblical faith that Jesus is the sacrament of universal salvation, attempts to overcome the tendency of narrow exclusivism in Christianity by demonstrating that faithfulness to Jesus Christ can provide the motivation for encounter with other religious traditions. It derives from a search for an experiential model that can enjoy both world-wide appeal on the one hand, and on the other, respond to the variety of human and cultural values demonstrated in the religions of mankind.

Thus, religious lives of any faith profession do not divide humanity, but unify it. Religious people, in a fuller manner, ought to encounter one another in this way.