

## **SYMBOL THEORY - "THE REAL 'REALITY' SHOW"**

*Ruminations on symbol drawing on the foremost liturgical authors on the subject*

*Marcia McFee*

*www.marciamcfee.com*

**Theologians such as Louis-Marie Chauvet, David Power, Gordon Lathrop and Don Saliers have called for the development of a richer sacramentality which remembers the centrality of the tactile, the kinesthetic and the visual senses. This invitation to rediscover a more holistic approach to theology and practice has implications for all worshipping Christians, but especially for Protestant churches more recently engaged in the liturgical movement. How will this rediscovery be liturgical theology in the making? How do the theologies of scholars such as Mary Collins, Gail Ramshaw, Janet Walton and Marjorie Procter-Smith enhance and/or challenge the authors listed above?**

At the heart of this question and investigation is what I see as a monumental shift of understanding the nature of "symbol" which has transpired as a result of such theologians as Schillebeeckx, Rahner and Tillich and contemporary language theory as explicated by Ricouer, Langer and Heidegger, among others. I call this shift "monumental" for a couple of reasons. First, it opens the possibility for *shared* understanding of our liturgy by an ecumenical community and, more to the point of this question, opens the way for Protestants to embrace a more holistic theology of the encounter with God in the liturgy - indeed the liturgy as a "primary theology" - liturgy as *of God or encounter with God* rather than being primarily *about* God through primarily verbal expressions.

The "linguistic turn" at the heart of the understanding of symbol is the turn to understand the grasp of knowledge - even the grasp of "what *is real*" - through language. Indeed languages available to us as humans are the way in which can know, can *experience*. For Roman Catholics, this shift moves away from a mechanistic model of "what happens" in and through symbol and for Protestants, it moves us away from "mere symbol" to an understanding that *something does indeed "happen"* in and through symbol. As we will see as this gets further discussed, this rediscovery of the presence of God in and through the languages (verbal AND non-verbal) is "liturgical theology in the making" for Protestants as we are literally "inculturated" into the heart of our Christianity - its incarnational nature (a kind of "creative assimilation" [Chupuncgo] into a post-

Enlightenment, post-modern cultural context). The sacred revealed in and through the very “stuff” of our lives through the languages of our senses draws us to a deeper understanding of the very “bodiliness” of our faith - the holy revealed and mediated through the body in particular contextuality.

This is especially important for Protestants as we begin to deepen liturgical expression which has, according to the critique of many, become a product of the Enlightenment separation of symbol and reality. Our liturgy embodies a suspicion of the connection of the physical and the spiritual. This, James White points out, is not a part of our Reformation heritage. Luther and Calvin both espoused the belief that signs effect what they signify and are visible signs of the promises of God. We are not just “reminded” but something happens in our engagement with symbols. Protestant French author Henri Mottu speaks of the fact that in a “fear of magic” Protestants “threw out the baby with the bathwater.” It was right, he says, for the Reformers to place the meaning and power of sacraments back in the hands of the people themselves but the development of the cognitive to the exclusion of the body, the emotions, of experience has done damage to the liturgy and thus to our experience of and relationship with God. We must be faithful to a tradition of bold symbolic gesture of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and of Jesus. Our symbols have become “shy and vague” and we do not notice our signs anymore.

The work of Louis-Marie Chauvet is immanently helpful in understanding this shift. In his work, *Symbol and Sacrament*, he says that liturgy “shows” not by reason, but by symbolic action. The “sensible” is the *milieu* wherein God is revealed. He uses an interdisciplinary approach to get at a theology with anthropology as its starting point. Through an investigation of theology, philosophy, the philosophy of languages, social sciences, etc. he arrives at the body and its symbolic languages as the mediator of knowledge and experience of the divine. This body is contextual and therefore particular in its mediation because this “I-body” is comprised of three bodies: 1) natural - having to do with the desires of the body; 2) cultural - comprised of the context in which it is situated; and 3) traditional - having a history. The only way we grasp reality is through language and language is by nature symbolic. Anything can function as a symbol - any element; visual, word, tangible, etc. Symbol (*symbolein* - *to throw together*) acts to fit

together both the element serving as symbol and the context in which it resides. An element is not a symbol without context. It is this fitting together that makes it symbol (or in the linguistic term, metaphor). Secondly, symbol functions to “crystallize.” It contains within it the whole reality of that to which it points. It makes the abstract “most real” in its tangibility. For instance, water used in the rite of baptism is the element of water “thrown together” with the context in which the water resides - that of both the “first meaning” (Ricouer’s “double meaning”) of its being the water which we experience as sustenance, bath, pond, river, drink, purifier in our “natural and cultural” lives and in its deeper or “second meaning” which derives and can only be known through the first - that of its connection to tradition and *mythos* - the water of liberation through the Red Sea, the water of birth, death and resurrection, the water of the baptism of Jesus, the water of history of Christian baptism, the water which connects the community of saints of the church living and past. The water crystallizes and contains within it this broad range of meanings and makes tangible and accessible (mediates) such a mysterious concept as the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way, this power is “present” - not in a scholastic mechanistic model, but in the framework of the way in which language is the way we conceive of “reality.” Thirdly, symbol functions as an identifier. It “places” those associated with it in a framework of meaning. To use another example, the tattoos which I got on my 40th birthday are, in the first meaning, signs (informational) of the words “peace” and “passion” written in the Chinese language. But as symbols, they throw together with that the context of a rite of passage - the passage of time, my own understanding of the temporal nature of my own life and the relationship I have with my Chinese stepmother who created the designs with me. The tattoo itself becomes an accessible and tangible “presence” of those larger-than-life things which as ideas, not actions, do not live as concretely before me. And the symbol “places” me - identifies me on several levels - as a person who would even get a tattoo, as one who has passed through a stage of life, as one who is mortal, as one who is a step-daughter, and as one who literally desires peace and passion as “inscription on the body” (a phrase that Chauvet uses but probably not as literal as a tattoo!). Lastly, symbols function under the agreement of a “communal other.” Whether this is the common understanding of what Chinese characters mean on the first level of meaning, or whether it is God who is the

communal “Other” which makes the meaning of the water of baptism on the second level possible, symbols rely on a context of meaning held by a community in order for them to “make sense.” And making “sense” to its participants is the only way symbol can mediate a particular reality. The fact that we are diverse bodies which diverse contexts in the natural, cultural and traditional sense is the reason why symbols, by their nature, are also multivocal (even in the midst of a communal sense of other) - indeed they hold many meanings - even for one body.

The implications of this for Protestant worship are embodied in the work of Don Saliers, a Protestant liturgical theologian. Saliers advocates for worship “come to its senses” because the human languages mediated by the senses are the only languages which we have to experience God. To be attuned to the senses is to be attuned to God. To enter the liturgical experiences with a full engagement of all of the human languages of the senses is to enter more fully into the prayer-action and thus to be more fully formed by that liturgy. God’s “ethos” (the grace of God through the sights, sounds, objects, actions of the liturgy) waits for human “pathos” - our experience. It is in this dialogue of God’s grace and our lives that we are formed as people of God. Saliers calls for liturgy with a “deep soul.” This liturgy will be “complex, multilayered and partly hidden.” It is this liturgy with deep soul that will combat three problems Saliers sees inherent in Protestant practice. The first is the problem of “Word alone” - an over exaggeration of the legacy of the Reformers to the exclusion of the vast array of human languages. The complexity needed is like “great chains of imagery” with links of words, images, sounds, tactile, kinesthetic, linked with our experience. But, ironically, we also have the problem of “not enough Word.” Biblical minimalism experienced in churches with a paltry scriptural practice means that the “chain links” are fewer as imagery connected to the action of the church is limited. Communion becomes a singular focus on forgiveness of sins and baptism is relegated to a kind of “christening” without the deep and rich biblical imagery of water and new life. This diminishes the “multilayered” capacity of symbol. And thirdly, Protestant practice ails from “too many words.” And how! The didactic explanation leaves very little room for the religious imagination, for the “inscription” of our own “first meanings” upon the deeper “second meanings.” Words take up so much room that there is little time and space left for the mysterious

nature of symbols to draw us back to them time and again to discover the “more” to be found there. I am convinced that the attachment to the reception of communion in a “private moment with Jesus” is because this is one of the only times in which we are not barraged with words and we can experience encounter with God which is not overly didactic. Liturgy with “deep soul” will be liturgy which uses the full palette of languages to draw us ever deeper into the presence of the Divine.

Formation and even more so, *transformation*, is the desire for David Power who, like Chauvet, digs deep into an interdisciplinary investigation of symbol in his evocatively-titled book, *Unsearchable Riches*. Transformation is the goal for a church who must side with the oppressed. Liturgical renewal needs symbolic renewal, he says, because we live in a “time of crisis” - a crisis of vision and of hope. This crisis must be addressed in a renewal of the power of symbolic language. Symbol is the intersection of our experience with the sensorial, the ritual action, the verbal images and *mythos* and our doxology. At this intersection is where the process of transformation takes place. Symbols do indeed “effect” something. For example, the experience of illness is intersected with the symbolic action of a rite of anointing. In this, the oil is the sensorial and in and of itself (Ricouer’s “first meaning”) has soothing properties. But it is met there also by the ritual anointing action in the context of community and a layer of meaning is added which points to the care and attention of the community. The verbal images and *mythos* of the stories of Jesus’ healing, the anointing of kings and martyrs, Jesus as the “anointed” one, as well as others intermingle to place the sick person in the context of the narrative of healing and strength. The doxological words of the anointing, the blessing of the oil further places a layer of the power of God through the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus onto the ritual action. It is in the meeting of these things that the process of transformation begins. This process is a four-fold shift: 1) from facts to meaning (from a state of illness to the meaning of being raised up in faith); 2) from utility to value (not an “instrumental” mechanistic healing *per se* but a shift to the value of strength beyond weakness and compassionate witness in that weakness); 3) from outer to inner (from the power of illness over the body to the indwelling of Spirit in strength); and 4) from image to imagining (from the image of the narrative of healing to the empowered imagining of one’s own place in the promises of God). This process needs the complexity of word,

action, touch, senses, movement, community and the complexity of meanings through narrative and through the sensorial. Liturgy suffers, Power insists, when meaning is tied down or when an interplay of images is refused. It also suffers equally, when we stay in the realm only of the sensorial and do not shift into the meaning, value, and imagination of a deeper experience.

A focus on the “central things” of our Christian faith in liturgy and the power and possibility of being formed and transformed by those *when they are given clarity* is the passion of theologian Gordon Lathrop in *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. The tragedy, for Lathrop, is that the *ordo* (the central things of word, bath and meal) has shriveled in our liturgical practice. The central things are not central, they do not matter, they are not bold, large or clear enough. In order for us to be formed (“patterned”) by our liturgy, we must be “inserted into the primary theology” of the liturgy. But when the *ordo* is not clear, it will not draw us into that primary theology. The holy things must be “broken” - or what he calls “juxtaposed” to one another in mutually interpretive patterns. Word is set next to table as sacrament becomes a “visible word” (Augustine) and word reveals God (sacramental). Teaching must lead to bath which leads back to teaching. Thanksgiving and lament must be juxtaposed in our prayers so lament gives depth to joy and “*eucharistia*” gives hope in lament. Sunday must be set next to the week as an “eighth day” which is both end and beginning of a new time, of God’s time. And *Pascha* must be set next to the year - again as both the culmination of time and the beginning of time anew. Depth of meaning arises from this “throwing together” of the symbols themselves. All holy things (people, objects, time, space, words) must point toward the *ordo*. Equal prominence must be given to pulpit, font and table. Space must be arranged so that the holy things of the *ordo* are central, are seen, are clear. Leaders must find their role as those who facilitate the clarity of the central symbols. Our identity as Christians is at stake as well as the patterning of our lives. Symbols - the objects, actions, the things we see and hear - are the pathway for us into an experience of God. Will we notice? Are these things provocative/evocative, central enough?

Precisely *because* the languages of symbolic expression is the powerful container of theological understanding and experience of God, it is the desire of many feminist liturgical theologians to look closely at these languages and consequently to push,

challenge and offer additions and/or correctives for theologians who might not investigate deeply or may not have the particular viewpoint that women do. For Mary Collins, liturgical theology has as its primary purpose the critique of liturgy. We must always ask, she says, whether our liturgical expressions reflect our faith adequately? The concept of the “mediation” of symbols is helpfully described by Collins as a kind of “transformer” such as an electrical transformer which takes vast unusable energy and transforms it into usable current for our appliances. Symbols are “something between us and God” - but a necessary “something.” The inexhaustible, intangible, power of God is made accessible, made tangible, made concrete and “real” to us through symbol.

Because symbol functions in this mediating role, it is highly important to make sure those symbolic expressions adequately reflect what we purport to proclaim about that power of God and God’s purposes. Do individual tasteless wafers really mediate an expression of our communion adequately? (In light of her examples I cannot help but wonder what our Protestant practice tendency to leave the “leftover” bread in the back room to mold until someone finally throws it away is saying about the connection of Eucharist and our call to feed a hungry world.) She mentions the first time that lay persons were used as readers and were able to step into the sanctuary (or “chancel”), this action became a more truthful symbol of the equality of baptism and the priesthood of all believers. What we “say” in liturgy through symbol is more likely what we will experience of the truth of God. It is not enough to say that we need the “central things to be central” (Lathrop) but we must insist that these things speak truthfully. Are the “currents” sent to us through the symbolic transformer empowering and strong or are they weak and unintelligible (or strongly proclaiming an opposite message). Further, it is not just then array of “languages” (Saliers) which we must utilize but we must also pay attention to their performance. Much is communicated in tone, intent, rhythm, body languages, etc. The way that liturgy is performed communicates much. While she and Lathrop have different agendas (Lathrop is a Protestant with an ecumenical agenda who wants us to see how much we have in common, namely the *ordo*, and Collins is a Roman Catholic who wants her tradition to notice and honor the differences in practices), Collins attention to what the people themselves know is a helpful critique of Lathrop’s production of a theology based on an “ideally practiced liturgy.” There is no such thing, Collins insists. In fact, it

is also the role of theologians to discover what the people themselves already know of God. Experience of God begins to be explored ritually and then it begins to enter into the theological discourse. We must be careful not to propose liturgical “norms” not based also on the primary theologians themselves - the worshipers.

Marjorie Procter-Smith is a feminist liturgical theologian, an Episcopalian, whose book *In Her Own Rite* was one of the first widely-read feminist liturgical theologies. She underscores the role of languages but she asks “what of those languages?” For Procter-Smith, languages must be “emancipatory” to be faithful expressions of the divine. Liturgy has the potential, she believes, to be emancipatory, to draw us into a “depth of dialogue” which is the heart of worship and the key to transformation. One cannot engage in deep and truthful dialogue with God and with others without being changed. But our dialogue - our languages - must go deep. Emancipatory verbal language is not just about “feminizing” language, but is thoroughly eschatological. It adequately speaks to the pain of the world and offers a powerful word of healing and hope. It will be language which reflects women’s experience - indeed any experience which has typically been invisible or assumed within a false “universal” experience. Visual languages must be emancipatory in the careful choosing of images which offer liberating images for all people (she draws on the work of Margaret Miles here). They must adequately express the reality of the world and call us into adequate lament. Physical languages must be based on reciprocity rather than dominant-submissive or active-passive relationships. When one person stands while all others kneel or sit, when only a few bless, touch, anoint, serve while all others are passive recipients, our physical language is not emancipatory or empowering or indicative of the radical equality of our baptism. Space must be arranged so that level only accommodates visibility, not speak of hierarchy. Garments must speak of office and role, not status and rank. Careful attention must be paid to the way in which language and symbol *does* communicate powerfully and what messages are sent in those expressions. It is not enough to speak of a liturgy which sides with the oppressed (Power) but this must be embodied in the liturgy itself.

Telling truth powerfully is a common theme for all of these feminist authors and especially in the work of Roman Catholic feminist, Janet Walton, *Feminist Liturgy: A Matter of Justice*. The telling of truth will take a kind of “choir” of truth-tellers for no



one story can contain the diversity and richness of the experience of the divine. And no one viewpoint or vantage point is adequate to express the “truth.” This points to the participation of the people in much more inclusive ways. One may proclaim the “people are the primary thing” (Lathrop) but are they really when we look closely at how the people are involved in their own “work” (*leitourgia*)? True participation requires reciprocity, accountability and relationality, according to Walton. Reciprocity demands that no one group of people hold or mediate divine power alone and our liturgies must embody this. Accountability is a process in which the people themselves are involved in the creation, leadership and, further, the critique of liturgy. What does not speak truth, speak of God, is not repeated, is reformed. It is the community who struggle together for adequate expression. The process will be relational. Participation will point toward justice, the inclusion of all people, and relationships which are empowering and lend to the agency of the body.

Finally, a brief word about Gail Ramshaw, Lutheran theologian and specialist in the verbal languages used in worship. Although our question focuses primarily on remembering the tactile, kinesthetic and visual senses, Ramshaw reminds us that our verbal imagery has implications far beyond just what we name God. In *God Beyond Gender*, she warns that our anthropomorphic names and images for God may actually produce a God made in our own image. To contain God is to have no God - and to be left with only a glorified image of ourselves. Her voice is an important addition to Chauvet’s concept of the “Presence of the Absence” in which respect for the absence of the divine (the ineffable character of God, the literal absence of the human Jesus and the mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit ) is indeed the only way we can recognize the holy in the symbolic. As Ramshaw says, God is “like” many things but we cannot pin down, nor should we, an image of God. We must in fact re-deify God in an age of humanism. Names for God must reflect the active, living nature of God-with-us (“The Living One”) and the exclusive use of images such as “King” will affect the images we have of our own agency (we are not just passive subjects who lay the world at the king’s feet).

The work of these authors offers a renewed theology for all Christians, but in the context of my own tradition, Protestantism, it is call for celebration. The expansion of languages as revealers of the work and “presence” (yes, it is OK to say that Christ is

“present” in a “real” way .... it doesn’t make us Catholic, it makes us Christians) to include the entirety of the bodily senses is a call back to our very bodies. The implications of that are a whole other question as is an entire vocabulary of renewal that could come about as a result of this shift. This richer sacramentality is not something which is devoid in Protestant practice. In fact, my very asking of the question comes from an experience of seeing the thirst for meaning expressed and quenched in worship which has already blossomed as a result of the Protestant engagement in liturgical renewal. Folks may not be able to articulate why they crave and are deeply touched by the expansion of ritual action which incorporates such practices as remembrance of baptism, services of anointing, Ash Wednesday services, walking the labyrinth, the silence and chant of Taize, to name just a few. But they do know they want more of it.

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