

Symbols

We are symbols, and inhabit symbols
Ralph Waldo Emerson

We often hear the word "symbol", as in "oh, it's only symbolic". But have we stopped to think about what it means? Symbols surround us wherever we go. The red STOP sign at the end of the road is a symbol. A baby's face represented on a jar of baby food is also a symbol.

A symbol is something that points to something else. More specifically, a symbol is something simple that represents something complicated. This representation can be immediate and direct: the baby's face is such a one. Even the childless will walk past the baby food section in a supermarket and recognise and inwardly respond to the baby's toothless grin (a fact which the advertising and packaging industries are perfectly aware of). But the STOP sign? There is nothing in a red octagonal surface with white lettering that intrinsically means "bring your vehicle to a halt". This kind of symbol needs to be *learnt*. It is an abstract, indirect symbol.

Symbols can be multi-layered. In Catholic churches you will often find a crucifix; a fairly realistic representation of the crucified Jesus. It is not the actual Jesus hanging there, but a symbol of him cast in bronze. But in most Protestant churches, this has been further abstracted into just a cross. The cross is a symbol of the crucifix, a symbol of a symbol. This multilayering finds its ultimate expression in language: the word "cross" on this page no longer even looks like a physical cross. All the woodiness of the beams, the hardness of the spikes, all the blood and tears and suffering have been removed from it. But this word is still a symbol, pointing to the same thing as the realistic crucifix and the abstract cross.

Humans are largely defined by their use of language, for we are symbol-using animals like no other species besides us. Apes may be taught sign language, but in their native habitat they have shown little need to develop it for themselves. We humans, on the other hand, constantly invent new ways of speaking, new symbolic universes that end up appearing more real than the things they point to. Words on paper, symbols, are taken as truth itself, whether it is Holy Scripture or the daily newspaper. This happens even when they contradict our daily experience. The symbolic world becomes more real than the grass beneath our feet. And let us be clear on this: it is not only weak-willed soap opera addicts who get caught up in a symbolic world far removed from reality. We all live like this. The symbols become our new reality, and when they in turn become too complex to handle we invent new symbols that point to *them*.

No wonder, then, that mystics from all religious traditions urge us to return to the simple, direct experience of what lies directly before us. But ultimately, their efforts are self-contradictory. The mystic may experience God directly, but the moment he opens his mouth to inform the rest of the world of his achievement, he has no choice but to re-enter the symbolic universe in which we live. He can try, and many have, to short-circuit the process: instead of talking about his experience he can point to the sky. But even the act of pointing has a long symbolic history. We cannot escape from symbols: at best, we can take a brief holiday from them, and when we do, we go alone.

Religions are among the most prolific symbol users, and throughout history they have been eager borrowers of symbols from their predecessors. Why should this be so? For one thing, the ideas that religion presents to us are often complex ones. Entire doctoral theses have been written just about the Christian theory of the Trinity, for instance, and there seems to be no end to new ideas about this. Hinduism presents us with the counter-intuitive idea that my little self is identical to the Great Self of the All-that-is. Buddhism goes further and denies that any self exists, that at the centre of all things we find only a deep, profound silence and emptiness.

These are all deep and complex teachings, and few of us have the time and energy to explore even one of them in depth. Yet all these religions believe that these are vital teachings that need to be brought to the people somehow. Symbols turned out to be the best way to do this. The calm face of the Buddha-statue shows us the peace of Nirvana. The visual representation of the sound OM refers us to the background hum of continuing creative activity that unites the universe.

But in fact it is not easy to think out new symbols that are meaningful enough that they will "stick"- ask any advertising agency. And once an old symbol has taken root, it tends to be tenacious. And so religion's usual way of dealing with symbols has not been "divide and conquer", but rather "embrace and extend". An old symbol could be adopted, if only its meaning could be changed.

Symbols and their meanings *can* be changed, though not easily. The best example is probably the swastika. This is a very old symbol, and one that was found widely throughout Europe and Asia in both clockwise and counter-clockwise forms. One of many ways to symbolically represent the sun, it can be found inscribed on the chest of Buddha-statues in the Far East, in Celtic gravesites in Britain, and even in its rounded, swirling variations, in Neolithic settlements in Turkey. It was a symbol of light and warmth. Of course Hitler's use of it as the prime symbol of his genocidal Nazi movement changed all that. Today, when we see a swastika, we see darkness and destruction, not light and goodness. Perhaps one day the swastika will come back in its original role, but that would probably take a measure of good as enormous as the amount of evil that has sullied it.

But the history of religions gives us many examples of symbols that have been adopted, reinterpreted and put to positive use. The easter egg is an old pagan symbol of the fertility that emerges from the earth in spring. Apart from the incongruity of celebrating a spring festival in the Southern Hemisphere's autumn, it remains among us, now serving as a reminder of the special nature of the Christian Easter festival period. Buddhism adopted even the gods of early Hinduism, but demoted them. In Buddhism, even the gods are not immortal - they too are subject to change and decay. Then, when Buddhism moved into new areas, it incorporated the existing deities of those regions as heavenly protectors of the Buddha's teachings. Even Islam, the least symbol-using of the major religions, retained the custom of pilgrimage to Mecca and all its symbolic meaning, though it was now Allah who was worshipped at the Kaaba, not the earlier Arabian deities. For the main part, however, Islam preferred to skip directly to the highly abstract level of textual symbolism, with a minimum of intermediate, realistic symbols. So, by and large, did Judaism: "thou shalt not make a graven image".

The question arises: if we all live in these symbolic worlds, out of touch with the reality to which they point, does it matter which one? Or is there one religion, one philosophy, one way of life that is somehow slightly less out of touch?

But this is in fact an unanswerable question. Once we have admitted that we live in a symbolic universe, there is no way of measuring its correspondence to reality. The only way to do that would be to compare it to reality itself. As we have seen above, this is the way of the mystic. But even the mystic, when he compares the reality he has encountered to the various symbol systems, has no choice but to express it in the terms allowed by the symbol systems themselves. It is the symbols, not the reality, that dictate what can and cannot be said. And so the comparison becomes an exercise in comparing the symbol systems among themselves, not one of comparing them to reality. It is like asking which of the following words best describes the essence of the oak tree in the lane:

English: tree
Afrikaans: boom
Spanish: árbol

The only appropriate answer is "none of the above". None of these words contain the woodiness of the tree's trunk, the fresh greenery of its leaves, the spring in the step of the squirrels on its branches. This may seem obvious. What is less obvious, but even more important to realise, is that even when I see the tree, touch the tree, smell the tree, I am still reacting to it as part of the symbolic structure of tree-ness. I am seeing, touching, smelling it as it compares to all the trees I have seen, touched and smelled before. Beyond that there is everything I have heard or read about trees, which boils down to all the trees that other people have seen, touched and smelled before me, and what they thought about that. An entire world of symbolic meanings instantly slides in between me and the tree. This is a prison, in one sense, a web of symbols from which I cannot escape. But within that web, I am relatively free to move around; to make sense of my existence, and the tree's. And I am also free to learn how to move around inside another web.

So even if we cannot say that there is one religious symbol system that comes closest to reality "out there", we can still say that we can find meaning, even deep meaning, inside one of them. The crucial question is not which one of them is right, but which one of them is right for me, which one allows me to move around until I find a place of comfort. For many, perhaps most, of us this will mean the system we learnt as children. Sheer familiarity with a given symbolic system is a powerful factor: it gives us the symbolic tools with which to "move around". For a few, it will mean searching among the systems for one that "fits" better.

And so, the next time you hear someone say that something is "only symbolic", you may be forgiven for smiling a little smile, and for saying "Yes, but what isn't?" Symbols inform our life: indeed, they are our life. Symbols are the indispensable way in which we make our way through reality. They make up our reality, they create us even while we are creating them.

At this point, the idealist philosopher would ask whether there is any reality to which the symbols refer, or whether there are just symbols pointing towards each other in an endless cycle. Religion, relying on the unanimous assertions of the mystics among the various systems, insists that there is a reality. How that is described, however, will depend on the symbols used. Some will say "fullness", others "emptiness". Neither is completely correct, for both are using symbols to point to something beyond symbols. But also, neither is completely incorrect. In West Africa, itinerant story-tellers travel from village to village. Their traditional way to start telling their tales goes something like this: "This story is a lie. But not everything in it is false." A wise way of seeing the world, indeed.

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