Symbolism in Religious Experience

BY
S. H. MELLONE, M.A., D.Sc.

(*Printed for the McQuaker Trustees*)

THE LINDSEY PRESS
5, ESSEX STREET, STRAND, LONDON, W.C. 2
1925

NOTE

THIS pamphlet is a reprint of the last chapter of a book entitled *The Price of Progress, and other Essays* by S. H. Mellone, recently published by the Lindsey Press, London. It is now issued in separate form by arrangement with the McQuaker Trustees, and for circulation in Scotland.

Essex Hall,
Essex Street, W.C. 2.

SYMBOLISM IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

I

THE history of Religion contains nothing more significant than the transformation which Christianity wrought in all the associations of one of the most painful and degrading modes of execution under ancient Roman criminal law. The Cross, where no vital injury was inflicted on the sufferer, meant hours, sometimes days, of lingering death from pain and starvation combined. It stood for a death as shameful as it was agonizing; until the day when, through the death of one Victim upon it, it became a spiritual symbol of unique power to move the souls of men.

In order to help our imagination to realize the change, we may try to think of it as occurring in our memory and feeling for some hideous machine of lingering death contrived in the dark ages, or even some instrument of more speedy execution like the headsman's axe. If we can imagine any train of circumstances which should make of such an object a symbol of joy and spiritual dominion, so that builders would crown with its golden effigy their greatest and loftiest constructions, and art delight to weave its form into every kind of decoration, and dying eyes gaze upon it for the comfort and peace it could minister to the soul: if we can imagine that grim and bloody weapon purged of all the associations which, if we realize them, make us shudder as we look upon it, and filled with

other associations which speak of spiritual victory and joy without end: then perhaps we may come to some adequate conception of the change which has been wrought in the symbolism of the Cross.

Whenever the associations of a symbol are linked on to the great and deep and moving realities of life, it becomes a *sacred* thing and has a *sacramental value.* In speaking thus of sacramental value, we refer to a range of fact and experience wider far than the limited and technical ecclesiastical usage of the term suggests; and until we understand this wider range of experience, we shall never understand the religious appeal which the purely ecclesiastical Sacrament can make. Jesus Christ instituted no Sacrament in the ecclesiastical sense. But in repeating the act which they had witnessed in the upper room, the disciples did what was natural, human, almost inevitable. It reminded them of words which had pierced their hearts, of a love which swept like a cleansing stream through their souls, of a sacrifice which they, perhaps, only then began to understand.

It is written that Abram the Hebrew "went up out of Egypt . . . unto the place of the altar which he had made there at the first: and there he called on the name of the Lord." He came up out of Egypt dishonoured, demoralized; and almost instinctively he made his way back to an old altar where he had met and communed with his God. It would remind him of the Fellowship which he once knew, and revive the old Vision which kept him clean and strong.

Not only the profound and unutterable mysteries of experience, parenthood, love, death, have thus a sacramental value. We know that even commonplace things may come to be invested with a moving power which marks them out, for

us, from all the world beside. Mr. Harold Begbie tells of a Salvationist who fell into sudden temptation, where his resistance was broken down. In his shame he rushed home and struggled into his old red jersey. Why? The old red jersey stood for clean and uplifting emotions, peace of conscience, the joy of service. It was to that Salvationist what the old altar was to Abram. To repudiate sacramental things like these is to repudiate life.

There is something repellent in the attempt to *analyse* experiences such as those which we have described; but there can be no full appreciation without some analysis. The friend who is understood is loved the better. Indeed true love gives insight always; and the power it gives of divining what to others is invisible, is a species of analysis.

II

When we analyse the change which has transformed the meaning of the Cross, we find in it the clue to a type of symbolism which enters into many of our most ordinary experiences, and which is of far-reaching importance for the understanding of Religion itself. The symbol is like a soul in a body. The body is the instrument and expression of the soul, although it does not resemble it. We have a familiar example in *language*. Written and spoken language have been called the "two incarnations of thought." The characters formed by the pen, and the sounds uttered in speech, have no positive resemblance to the thought which they seek to express. But these letters and sounds become *signs* to those who have the key to them. They seek to express the intangible thought, and make it present and living in the minds of those who read or hear. Language illustrates such

symbolism not only in the details of its structure. A whole utterance, written or spoken, may by acquired association become itself a symbol suffused with emotional power—as in a battle-cry, or a National Anthem, or a poem like " Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled," or a Covenant.

The symbol whose power springs from acquired association illustrates the justification of the conservative element in Religion. As we trace the sources of its strength, we see more and more of the bonds that bind and consecrate change as a dependent growth, and even consecrate it with kinship. The old altar is a trysting-place where we found quietness and confidence and grace; and we go back to it again and again. In this spirit, Emerson spoke of the visible church :

> We love the venerable house
> Our fathers built to God;
> In heaven are kept their grateful vows,
> Their dust endears the sod.
>
> Here holy thoughts a light have shed
> From many a radiant face,
> And prayers of tender hope have spread
> A perfume through the place.
>
> And anxious hearts have pondered here
> The mystery of life,
> And prayed the Eternal Light to clear
> Their doubts, and aid their strife.
>
> For faith, and peace, and mighty love,
> That from the Godhead flow,
> Showed them the life of heaven above
> Springs from the life below.

The visible Church becomes a religious symbol when it is itself permeated, in the mind of the worshipper, with the faith and feeling which *is* his religion. For this reason it has been said that nearly all the religious symbolism which becomes really powerful in an individual's experi-

ence comes into his life in childhood. This is true wherever symbolic value is due to acquired association. It is seldom after those formative years that the close association between object and emotion can be wrought which is essential to religious symbolism. It requires moreover, as a rule, the whole force of the child's social surroundings—the suggestive influence of parents, teachers, older playmates, and of the people in general in whose actions he is interested—to suffuse the material object or the spoken word or the external act with the religious feeling that shall make it truly and deeply symbolic. This explains why *it is impossible for the community to make for itself a new religious symbol except by long years of gradual habituation or through the force of some emotional crisis.*

Sometimes a deliberately organized and concentrated effort of human co-operation does seem actually to have the power to create a new religious symbol in the sense of investing an object, let us say a building, with a power which otherwise could only be created by the acquired associations of centuries. While these words are being written,[1] there is taking place in a northern city just such a concentrated act of the group-spirit, in which a building—itself the offspring of one man's genius, following with some significant modifications the pattern of the mediaeval cathedrals, a building new and in fact unfinished—is being invested with an influence and a meaning which might seem to require long years of gradual habituation to create. I leave on one side the question of whether the ecclesiastical dignitaries who believe themselves to be consecrating that building really believe that a supernatural change is being wrought within it. Certain it is that the vast multitude who have gathered there are being made to feel that these

[1] Consecration of Liverpool Cathedral, July, 1924.

walls are, as it were, being filled with the manifold influences and associations of the Christian tradition of two thousand years, and that the real power of the ceremony lay in the fact that this change was achieved in a day. Whatever the ecclesiastics may or may not believe, this is the real consecration.

III

We have seen that symbolism *in the meaning of it which is now under discussion* involves no necessary resemblance between the symbol and the thing symbolized. For this very reason it illustrates the primacy of Spirit. Its symbolic power is acquired and in fact created by actual experience, and dominates the object itself as science would study it. Some deep-seated instinct, some dominant interest, some passionate personal desire, some moving experience of the inner life, has gripped this thing: it may be one thing for you, another thing for me; but whatever it is, it becomes a symbol, with a meaning and power of its own. Symbolism, far more than science, illustrates the victory and dominion of spirit. Science reveals nature as such; symbolism makes natural objects into glorified images of the inner life.

No difficulty need be made over the fact, that in so far as symbolic value is based on acquired association, it may vary with personal temperament and personal experience. As "the heart knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger may not intermeddle with its joy," so in every single life, in every family, in every one of the multitude of groups into which social experience divides men, there proceeds a continual creation of symbolic values shared by none, or few, beside. These individual and group variations, which include variations in religious feeling, are an inevitable

result of the conditions of our experience and of the individual and social differences among human beings.

Nevertheless there are symbols whose value is the product of experience over a larger range than any of those which we have just indicated. Their symbolic power is acquired gradually through the accumulated experiences of many generations. It is acquired because in these experiences there are broad, far-reaching similarities or uniformities; and the creative reactions of the human spirit upon them are found to work along broadly similar lines. Along such lines Art, Morality, and Religion make of Nature a constant symbol of the inner life of man's spirit and its normal development. Natural things are found to be capable of a constant transfiguration and transformation by spiritual activities to express spiritual purposes. How is this possible? It is possible if there is not merely an inner correspondence but a fundamental unity of the laws of Nature and the laws of mental life. Art, Morality, and Religion are revelations of what is hidden at once in Nature and in Spirit—revelations of the Absolute Energy which is manifested alike in the unfolding of the natural and of the spiritual universe.

We must make an assumption which may be expressed as Herbert Spencer expressed it in a striking passage at the close of what is otherwise one of the weakest of his books: [1] "Among mysteries which become more mysterious the more they are thought about, there will remain the one absolute certainty that we are ever in the presence of an Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed." We are not here concerned with the technicalities of Spencer's theoretic agnosticism. The reaction of the human spirit on the experience

[1] Spencer, *Ecclesiastical Institutions.*

which he has described, is the basis of Religion. Religion is always concerned with our relation to great world-forces. It brings human life into contact with something tremendous that transcends or envelops human life; it is a striving towards some sort of harmony of man with his whole unseen environment; and in the end it aspires to that great prize, the being at peace with God. Its historic forms depend on the evolution of man's mental and spiritual faculties and on prophetic personalities. It follows that no religious symbol is wholly illusory: if it conceals, it also reveals. And a great part of the history of Religion depends on the struggle to replace inferior or unworthy symbols by higher and better ones.

IV

There is another kind of symbolism, created by an experience which is indeed vitally related to the experience which creates symbols by the power of association; but it is not the same; and if we are unable or unwilling to understand it, then the meaning, not of Religion only, but of all the deeper moving influences in human life, is seven times sealed to us.

Can we describe it, in a few words? It is the experience of one who is haunted by the presence of an invisible and abiding world behind the visible and transient world, and sustaining both this and himself. But it is more. It is the presence of an unseen and eternal Life within the visible and temporal world—a Life which he may inwardly share, and with which, for moments, he may become one. It implies appreciation, even love, of the visible and temporal, but passing as it were in a perennial stream into love of the invisible and eternal. If this continuity is broken, then we

have two dead things that fall apart. Let it remain unbroken, and we have *the symbol whose power springs from the Real Presence of the object symbolized.* "Jacob lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took one of the stones of that place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. . . . And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not. . . . This is none other but the house of God, and this the gate of heaven."

The symbolism of the Real Presence is the inspiration of the higher literature in every age of which human records survive. We might appeal to Plato: not to the Plato of the *Parmenides* or the *Theaetetus*,—Plato the dialectician, the mathematical genius; but to the Plato of the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, the *Timaeus*,—Plato the man of vision and faith. It will serve our present purpose better to appeal to two great English poets. Compare these utterances of Coleridge. The first is from *Dejection*: —

> All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
> Have I been gazing on the western sky,
> And its peculiar tint of yellow green;
> And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
> And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars;
> Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
> Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen;
> Yon crescent moon as fixed as if it grew
> In its own cloudless, starless, lake of blue;
> I see them all so excellently fair,
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

This is a vision of colour and form, but they are not symbols. They are seen as by one who gazes

upon the outside of things. Yet he sometimes saw with a deeper sense, as this passage from *The Æolian Harp* can testify :—

> O the one Life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere—
> Methinks it should have been impossible
> Not to love all things in a world so filled.
>
> * * * * * *
>
> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic harps diversely framed,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the Soul of each and God of all?

Or this, from lines addressed to Charles Lamb :

> Slowly sink
> Behind the western ridge, thou glorious sun!
> Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
> Ye purple heath-flowers! Richlier burn, ye clouds,
> Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves,
> And kindle, thou blue ocean! So my friend
> Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
> Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
> On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
> Less gross than bodily, and of such hues
> As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes
> Spirits perceive his Presence.

The Real Presence, thus intermittently revealed to Coleridge in the loveliness of external Nature, was to Wordsworth an object of habitual realization : sometimes indeed in " gleams like the flashing of a shield," but for the most part apprehended quietly in the actual scenes and occurrences, often quite ordinary scenes and occurrences, of external Nature and of human life, directly observed, accurately remembered, and plainly described; and of this experience *The Prelude* is the classic authoritative statement. The message pervades

the whole poetry of Wordsworth, and as a concentrated statement of it we may recall once more the familiar lines (from *The Wye above Tintern*) :—

> I have felt
> A Presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man :
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

The variety of ways in which this faith is expressed is sufficient to prove—what should have been evident beforehand—that finding or experiencing God in Nature is not a purely immediate feeling or intuition of the Reality (and, so far, infallible); every statement of it involves intellectual interpretation and even comment (and is, so far, fallible). The greatest poets are those to whom, as to Wordsworth, this revelation of God in Nature becomes an habitual faith which dominates their lives; so that in the end they see all things *sub specie aeternitatis* as symbols of the Real Presence.

This statement suggests an equally far-reaching question. How far can we avoid subjectivity in these personal experiences? What of the Real Presence found or experienced, by many, in the elements of the Sacrament? If they experience it there, can we consistently deny it? We cannot deny the reality of any direct and personal experience or feeling; but the trustworthiness of the interpretation put upon it is an entirely different question. The heathen is conscious of the Real Presence of a deity of some sort in his idol. He

does *not* " bow down to wood and stone " *as such.* And there does not seem to be any essential difference of principle between belief in the Real Presence in wood and stone and belief in it in bread and wine. Is there any standard of objectivity and sanity in this field? The only general answer which we can give is this. The test of the value of a religious symbol is that it *works :* in other words, that *life* as we know it, or as in our best moments we should wish it to be, can be built upon it.

V

We have now to face the question of what this doctrine of religious symbolism—the symbolism of the Real Presence—means in reference to humanity.

It means first of all that this world never did anywhere or at any time, contain more of essential divinity, or of eternal value, than is embodied in what is seen every day. There, is life, and there, a step away, is death. There, is the only kind of beauty there ever was. There, is the old human struggle and its fruits together. There, is the text and the sermon, the real and the ideal, in one. Of the fibre of which these things consist is the material woven of all the finest meanings that ever were, or ever shall be, in this world. " While the earth remaineth," it is written, " summer and winter, heat and cold, seed-time and harvest, life and death, shall not cease." And while Humanity remaineth, in this world or in any other, there will be the elemental endeavours and elemental trusts which are the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen—the material of Eternal Religion, the content of the Everlasting Gospel.

It is possible to state this very simply. We are

continually condemning humanity in its present condition; and when we examine the matter we find that our condemnation is made by reference to a standard, a vision, of what humanity ought to be. And that standard, we find, is one that humanity itself has furnished to us. It is shown to us in the life and spirit of men and women who have made pure and strong the waters of life. It is the sense of what the world would be if it were controlled by the spirit of such men as Jesus and Saint Francis, Socrates and Buddha.

Our best hope for the world is that *the inner springs of personal life* may be made more fresh and pure and deep. What force working to this end can be more natural and spiritual than transmitted influence from soul to soul? And when your inner life, whence flow your daily thoughts and actions, is purified and strengthened by the influence of other lives more luminous than your own, and when so you are made conscious of a larger life encompassing yours and theirs alike; when something which was at first only a dream of future possibility becomes more than this, and reveals a Real Presence, higher still, ready to strengthen you as you try to make that Ideal a part of yourself, then the age-long prayer is answered—we have seen the Father. If in any human soul a living ideal is present, a moving thought in that soul of some good to be realized in life, then the beginning of the vision that we ask for is already there. And out of the heart of human goodness the Divine voice is ever speaking —" Have I been so long time with you, and hast thou not known me? "

No one is entirely without this consciousness of God; but, like all our consciousness, it is an *experience interpreted.* It may be expressed in a more true or a more mistaken form, and may also

itself vary in extent, depth, or worth. It is possible to be a fellow-worker with the Divine Labour and Life, and to feel it and know it also; it is possible to feel as well as know that the Eternal is our resting-place and underneath us are the everlasting arms—that the Power Divine is quickening the spirit and inspiring strength within. The moments when such experiences are vividly felt and clearly interpreted are indeed rare; one aspect or the other, the strength of the experience or the interpretation of it, only too often fails. But only wilful blindness can deny its reality for some and its possibility for all; and this, when it really happens, is the highest moment in worship, the most precious moment in our whole life.

This view of the foundation of Religion may fittingly be described as Symbolism. In this special sense the name is offered as the proper designation for a fundamental doctrine of what the basis of religious belief really is and must be. There is no part of human *experience*, in the widest sense of the word, which may not come to be both felt and known as a direct manifestation of the Divine Life and therefore as a *Symbol of God*. I say "felt and known," because these two sides of the experience are inseparable. God is manifested thus, not merely as a matter of inference or speculative thought, but of *feeling*, this being the least unsatisfactory term which our language provides. Any experience may become a religious experience. Not that all experiences are of equal value for this purpose: the presence of God may be discerned, in the manifold experiences of life, in different degrees and with diverse values. The final test of the value of a religious symbol must therefore be, as we have already suggested, that it *works*: in other words, that *life* as we know it, or as in our best moments we should wish it to be, can be built

upon it. And for this reason we have interpreted Symbolism in terms of the Ideals which humanity forms, in advance of all its past experience and attainment.

Nothing follows from the mere fact that this or that man, or most men, do not recognize in their Ideals anything which they are inclined to call the presence and self-revelation of the Divine. It is fatal blindness to deny that in such Ideals there is an experience which can only so be described. There is a conscious self-surrender in man's earnest scientific work—in his sincerest and profoundest philosophic thinking, in his devotion to that which has real and abiding beauty—above all, in his yielding to the promptings of humanity and love. Herein he is not merely realizing himself in the light of an *idea* of what is highest and best; he is also consciously surrendering himself to what is the Everlasting Real. The human race is constantly beset by such experience; aroused, it may be, by thinking over the achievements of intellectual, moral, and spiritual genius, or by the personal appeals of such, or by the mysterious yet very real influences of the beautiful and sublime in Nature or in human life. Hence the Symbolist need not be, and ought not to be, an individualist in religion. He can tell us what he has experienced, and how he has tried to interpret his experience, of the everlasting realities of God; and his witness may be valid for other men, because the sources of his experience lie in the universal characteristics of humanity, whose deeper meaning all men are *capable* of feeling and knowing as he feels and knows them.

We do not know the being of God in the sense in which, for example, we know that the earth and planets move round the sun. Why not? Because this and similar results are based on

definitely measurable facts constantly and universally recurring in the experience of our senses. Indeed we may go so far as to admit that the experience of God cannot be described in terms which can be clearly stated to all rational beings and definitely verified by all properly equipped observers. This is because belief in God is always based on the higher possibilities of human nature as revealed in moral and spiritual experience. On the other hand if these experiences cannot be formulated with mathematical precision, and if they necessarily lack scientific definiteness, none the less all the historic records and expressions of man's inner life and experience do show a real convergence of evidence, lacking precision in detail, yet on the whole uniformly pointing in one direction, and that is towards the spiritual interpretation of the Infinite Power on which all the worlds depend.

VI

The need of such symbols is evident. We are familiar to-day with the doctrine of Divine Immanence. If it implies only a gospel of the Real Presence of God "in general" then it is not enough. Mere universalism leads us only to generalities and abstractions.

A recent writer, in putting forward a crude criticism of a well-known philosophical theory regarding the nature of Time, asked: "Where is the *specimen* on which this allegation is founded?" The question has a certain suggestiveness for our present purpose. If human literature is inspired, there must be some literature representative and typical of this inspiration in those moral and spiritual things which are necessary for our salvation. If all days are ever to become holy and all places sacred, there must be some definite day

and hour, some place accessible to all, for such regulated and orderly meditation on divine things as may make them become a growing force in actual life. If the ideal of "natural supernaturalism" is ever to be realized among men, there must be some material things capable of sacramental value, capable, though natural, of suggesting the supernatural: though material, of suggesting the spiritual. The question thus raised relates to institutional religion as organized and localized: in a word to the Church or the Churches. How can institutional religion help us to realize God symbolically?

The human need of realizing the "particular" presence of God does not require any metaphysical quality of uniqueness or finality in the realization. Indeed this follows from the nature of a religious symbol. If we may adopt the definition of Sacrament given in the Anglican Catechism, it is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." It reveals the spiritual fact *directly* but *partially*, and not with absolute finality and completeness. Such finality and completeness are no more necessary to the vitality of Religion than they are to the vitality of Art. Art is a conscious and consecrated endeavour to embody the spiritual in the material. Hence the appropriateness of the word ποίησις, poesy, creation. The works of great artists are really alive. They have a soul, which the material form at once *conceals and reveals*. From architecture to music, there is not an art which is not symbolic. The artist gives to the material thing a power born in his own soul, to appeal to the inner life and feeling of those who contemplate it. It produces in us the feeling, the faith, the enthusiasm which the poet himself experienced in creating it. And if this is true of art, it is yet more true of Morality and Religion.

These central activities of the human spirit can only express themselves by means of symbols—by seeking some outward and visible form and dominating it to express their own meanings and purposes, really and directly but never exhaustively.

Nevertheless it is just this quality of finality and completeness which the Church has insisted upon as vital. What this means may be seen clearly (i) in the claim of the Roman Catholic Church for her ritual; (ii) in the claim of the Protestant Church for her Bible; (iii) in the assertion, made by both Churches, of the absolute Deity of Christ.

(i) The influence of Roman Catholic ritual does not consist merely in its sensuous appeal. In this ritual everything *means* something; and the greatest part of the ritual not only means something, but it is believed to be able to *do* something. It is a real cause of supernatural spiritual effects. The stupendous miracle of transubstantiation, in which the God-Man is declared to be present, truly, really, and substantially, under the form of visible and tangible things, is no mean claim; for, if it were true at all, it would be beyond comparison the most important fact in all the world. With all its impossibilities, its meaning can be defined and has been defined with a definiteness which we seek in vain in the shifting statements of Lutheran Catechisms or of Anglican Articles.

(ii) The other great historic type of authority in religion affirms the supremacy of a Book containing the literature of a race and of a movement which are spiritually unique. Nevertheless, in attempting to make "the Bible and the Bible only" into a supreme Court of Appeal, historic Protestantism has attempted the impossible. "The Bible and the Bible only" is not and never was

the religion of orthodox Protestantism. The use of the Bible has been guided by the creeds of the ancient Church, and the priesthood of the individual believer has never been taken seriously.

(iii) The decisive illustration of what the claim means may be found in the declaration of the Creed of Chalcedon :—

> Our Lord Jesus Christ, at once perfect and complete in Godhead and perfect and complete in manhood, truly God, and truly man of a rational soul and body; one in essence with the Father as regards his Godhead . . . and at the same time one in Essence with us as regards his manhood . . . Proclaimed in two natures without confusion, without division or separation; the difference of the two natures being in no way destroyed on account of the union, but rather the specific characteristics of each nature being preserved in one Person.

The Eternal and Infinite God was completely and exhaustively embodied at one particular period in history. This theory of the nature of Jesus Christ goes beyond Symbolism. It is the final statement given by the Church of the dogma familiarly expressed in the proposition that " Jesus is God." The difficulties involved are sufficiently shown in the controversies of the century following the Council of Chalcedon : and in the subsequent revival of the *Kenosis* doctrine, that the Deity divested Himself of certain divine attributes in becoming incarnate.

When we come to see what the Deity of Christ means practically for multitudes of devout Christians, we find that this belief is not assimilated as a theological or philosophical proposition, but in Ritschlian fashion as a " judgement of value " expressing the way in which the central Figure of the gospels appeals to many hearts. They hold on to the traditional doctrine of the Deity of Christ because this grasp enables them to visualize

God better; and they feel that in some way they must visualize God. Others are prepared to say frankly that they only know God through Christ: apart from Christ, God is to them only an unknown, an *x*.

In contrast to all this covert agnosticism, let us hear Martineau :—

> The whole world is held together by forces of natural reverence, grouping men in ten thousand clusters round centres diviner and more luminous than themselves. And if every family, every tribe, every sect may have its head and representative, excelling in the essential attributes that constitute the group, what hinders this law from spreading to a larger compass, and giving to *mankind* their highest realization, superlative in whatever is imitable and binding?

And again :—

> The Incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of man universally, and of God everlastingly. He bends into the human, to dwell there: and humanity is the susceptible organ of the Divine. And the spiritual light in us, which forms our higher life is *of one substance* with his own Righteousness—its manifestation, with unaltered essence and authority, on the theatre of our nature. Of this grand and universal truth Christ became the revealer, not by being an exceptional personage (who could be a rule for nothing), but by being a signal instance of it, so intense and impressive as to set fire to every veil that would longer hide it.

Thus may those who deny that "Jesus is God" find in Jesus the supreme Symbol of God.

VII

If we reject the claim of the Church that God is present or reveals himself with absolute completeness or finality in a special form of Ritual, or in a Book, or in a historic Personality, it remains true that the religious need which the Church endeavoured to provide for in these ways, must be

satisfied. If we deny that any religious institution has divinely conferred authority to hold a ritual of miraculous efficacy, the question remains—How can the Church, by means of its own distinctive symbolism, help us to realize the presence of God?

The Church, as an organization through which the past achievements of humanity in the spiritual life, and the discoveries made by religious genius, and the prophets' revelations of Reality, are interpreted and carried forward, is essential to the vitality of Religion. All the great spiritual pioneers and discoverers have felt that religion demands expression through established tradition and custom. The watchwords of the Church should be, *Continuity of life and spirit, with freedom to grow; leadership through a body of ministers or its equivalent; unity of belief in essential principles; and loyalty to the organization and its ideals.*

We cannot, however, accept the traditional Protestant substitute for the Roman Catholic Priesthood and Mass, by falling back on a confidently literal understanding of Christ's saying, "Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them," and holding that what is called "the living Christ"—one with the historic Jesus who was then God's Incarnation on the earth—is present in the souls of the believers. When this claim is taken seriously, it is found to mean that a special form of ritual—in this case an assemblage of evangelical Christians for prayer and praise—brings about a supernatural result,—a real presence of Christ which does not occur under any other conditions.

Throughout this essay we have been concerned to illustrate and defend a great extension—a recognized and deliberate extension—of the doctrine of the Real Presence of God as a self-revealing

Life and Spirit, whom no historic life can ever fully express, but who may be shown forth by symbols in nature, in the great souls of history, in the Bible, and above all in the Master, Jesus. All vital religious symbols are therefore essentially spiritual forces making their appeal to our spiritual nature, as is set forth once for all in the Great Charter of Religion: "God is Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth." This defines the central duty of the Church, whose appeal must be above all to an inner sense.

But the Church is so only in name, and not in reality, unless *the best possibilities of the group-life and the group-spirit are called to help the central spiritual purpose.* Group-life is never formless life; and above all, as called to the service of the aim of the Church, it demands an organized method of procedure—in one word *a ritual.* The very absence of ritual of a certain kind may itself be ceremonial and even effectively symbolic. The absence of pictures and statuary from most Protestant Churches is symbolic of the conviction that God is Spirit. The religious service of the Society of Friends, with its occasional long silences, is a most dramatic and eloquent ceremonial. In fact the Churches which began their history with a lively protest against contemporary ritual, have always tended to adopt definite forms of worship. The members of the group think it strange when the regular order of service is not followed; they expect the singing of hymns, the prayer, the anthem by the choir, the announcements, the sermon, and whatever else there may be, to follow the customary order. The meaning of the word "ritual" therefore must not be limited to religious ceremonial of what is called "the Catholic type."

The Protestants of the past were helped by

their worship, to live nearer to God; it expressed their highest ideals and enabled them to move multitudes. The question is whether the ordinary way of worship in evangelical Free Churches, in the English-speaking world, answers to the real religious needs of men to-day. Yet, however this question may be answered, the *freedom* has a consequence of inestimable importance: it makes experiment possible; and at the present day experiment is needed. The Free Church minister to-day, just to the extent of his freedom, is able *if he can carry his people with him* to draw upon a large variety of different methods. He has indeed at his disposal all the ritual, ceremonial, and music of the world, if he chooses to use it; and, if he had sufficient judgement in this very important matter, would be able to produce the finest type of service in Christendom. If the way to this ideal is discovered in the future, it will be because experiment has been made the master-key.

Even in its present condition, the worship of a really Free Church can achieve what is impossible in forms of a more rigid type. Its leader is not obliged to behave as if his congregation belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, or to Elizabethan England, or to nowhere in particular. He can prevent the divorce of religion from life. He can present religion fresh and true to the generation around him. He can emphasize, in prayer and otherwise, the religious meaning of the urgent movements of his time. When it is desirable he can centre the worship of a whole Sunday round a particular aspect of Christian truth.

The importance of the Sermon consists in the opportunity it offers for this living presentation of the religious issues of contemporary life; and the congregation to whom the appeal is made,

though they limit the preacher's range of experiment, do by their real democracy give his words a representative and corporate power. Ideally, both the sermon and the congregation ought to be living symbols—the sermon as showing forth *the moral omnipresence of God*, and the congregation as a concentration of the Spirit.

Our purpose, however, is not to discuss in any detail the structure of an ideal form of Protestant religious service. Our purpose is more limited, but perhaps even more fundamental: to define, if possible, the main conditions which must be satisfied if any ritual or ceremonial in a really Free Church is to be effectively symbolic.

We shall find the clue to a solution of the problem, when we consider the significance of the Marriage Service from the Protestant point of view. The "Solemnization of Matrimony," so understood, is not the miraculous creation of a bond between two persons, through an Institution endowed by the Almighty with supernatural power. Neither is it merely a dramatic performance illustrating in fantastic fashion some general principle of monogamy or some actual event which took place elsewhere. The persons who assume the rôle of bride and bridegroom in the marriage ceremony are actually thereby becoming wife and husband. Participation in the ceremonial is a personal commitment or pledge, and therefore is an act in the moral and social history of the participants. And among the others present, there will be some, connected by kinship, friendship, or personal interest in the participants, who are present not merely as onlookers. They are not passive; their presence implies an actual recognition of, and even consent to, what is being done.

The religious symbol must therefore possess something more than a certain depth of emotional

meaning, whether based on acquired association or on an appeal to the sense of beauty. It must be regarded by the worshippers as a token of *a real event actually taking place here and now* in relation to the persons who share in the ritual, and who by sharing in it co-operate in bringing about the result. At the Roman Catholic Mass, the worshipper believes, and therefore feels, that something is really being done beyond the mental impression made on himself. The worshipper in the Protestant Church must be made likewise to feel that something is really being done, and also (what the Roman Catholic cannot feel) that *he himself has a personal share in doing it.* The want of this condition accounts for the prevalent experience to-day: worship has become a passive affair; the people no longer pray, but listen to the minister as he prays; the congregation has become an audience, a body of listeners, waiting for a mental impression to be made on themselves. Those who feel in this way towards the Church sooner or later cease to go to Church at all. Protestantism, in its dread of idolatry, has concentrated its appeal to one of our senses only—the sense of hearing; and has fallen back on a static and sedentary form of service which has a fatal tendency to create the merely passive attitude. We fully admit that no single method is possible to the exclusion of all others. The variations in human temperament and taste are so great, that diversity of ritual among Christian Churches—even among those who *believe* alike—will remain desirable and necessary. But God is known to men as Activity: and man's natural response to God is in the action of good works and in the action of worship, which involves the whole man and not merely one of his senses.

The principal force for counteracting the ten-

dency to passivity in the Protestant service is Prayer. The worshipper may be made to feel, as he does not to-day, that in prayer something really happens. Not that trust in specific answers to special petitions should be taught from the pulpit; but that genuine prayer, even petitionary prayer, is the most trustworthy means of putting ourselves in touch with the Unseen. There is such a thing as the atmosphere of prayer, which awakens our sense of the Real Presence of the Divine. We find a clue to understanding the kind of experience which arouses this feeling in the one kind of religious service, which almost everybody attends occasionally, no matter how sceptical he be, and which seldom fails to produce upon all present a deep effect. It has been said that for an increasing number of people, the only form of religious service is an occasional funeral; and with very rare exceptions, a funeral is always a religious ceremony. Many functions formerly discharged by the Church are now taken over by the State, but the disposal of the dead almost everywhere still remains in the hands of religion, and it is evident that the religious value of this service is very considerable. At the lowest estimate, it belongs to that borderland where feelings based on ordinary human relationship pass into religious feelings; and the greater number of those who take part in it, even by their mere presence, are not merely onlookers or spectators. We feel that we are really doing something, and also that something real is being done upon us. We testify to certain thoughts and feelings about the deceased; but also, even if in spite of ourselves, we are brought face to face with vast and silent forces that lie beyond our control,—the Infinite and Eternal Power from Whom all things proceed, our conscious relation to Whom lies at the basis

of religion. We are brought to the very edge of the Mystery, and we return to our ordinary lives at least with a renewed sense of its reality.

Now whether Death is regarded as a deliverance and release, or as a culminating human tragedy, it ought not to be left for this experience alone to startle us out of our ordinary matter-of-fact practical attitude and reveal to us the reality of the Eternal. It is this intimation of a Power which goes beyond all that science can discover, this realization of our own dependence on that Power, this questioning of the why, the whence, and the whither—it is this that the Funeral Service brings, and to this it owes its uniquely religious value. But we ought to be able to arouse this feeling through many experiences beside that of Death; and this reveals to us the possibility of a kind of worship which is as truly possible for the thoughtful man of to-day as it was in the ancient world. It is that instinctive sense of the Real Presence, and our reaction upon it, which has created all the religious symbols of history. Worship will not be outgrown. Its forms will change with changing symbols; but the thing itself is as lasting as is man's need. The task of the Church is to find the ways by which this fundamental human need may be stimulated and directed, and to discover and use the actual concrete symbols which are available and valuable for that great purpose in a particular generation and age.

M. Loisy, the excommunicated Catholic, declared that the most important thing which Jesus Christ did was to found a Church. An authoritative Church Jesus did not found, and there is no evidence in any authentic statement of his that he ever contemplated such a thing. But as a matter of fact he did gather round him a body of disciples—learners, pupils—who were

not merely disciples but helpers in that task of preaching the good news, the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, to which he devoted his own life on earth. Just as a pure mountain spring may be the source of a broadly flowing, tumultuous, and troubled river, fed by tributaries from many lands, so the little society which Christ did actually found has grown and developed into the Christian Church.

When the historian examines the actual means by which the Catholic Church made its way in the world and became the great organized institution which it actually did become, he finds that these means were very different from what the authorities of the Church affirmed and intended them to be. After shedding the husk of Messianism, which protected its earliest infancy, the Church adopted a mythology, an organization, and a mode of worship from the Graeco-Roman world which it was to conquer. Its dogmas, promulgated as absolute and final truths, became means by which the religious idea, embodied in the Church, entered into the social life of the peoples, who adopted readily a system of myths, ceremonies, and sacraments not essentially different from those with which they were already familiar. The dogma and ritual of the Church actually *worked*, and for two principal reasons. In the first place, so far as men's experience went, it brought their minds into right relations with the Divine; and in the second place, it was fully abreast of, and able to assimilate, the best knowledge of the time. This was true in the fourth and fifth centuries and again in the thirteenth century. Is there any reason why it should not be true in the twentieth century?

Our soundest and best knowledge, in the twentieth century, is very different from what was

soundest and best in the fourth or the fifth or the thirteenth century. Its superiority is indeed only relative; future ages will regard our science as we regard that of Origen or Aquinas. But it is idle for the Church to-day to sound the note of the Absolute and the Eternal through her dogmas, her ordinances, her ritual. Her claim can no longer be a command, whose sanction is eternal. It is an appeal whose sanction lies in its working power.

Let the Churches make us feel that they are able and willing to assimilate the historical and scientific knowledge which our age has won, and that they have the courage to do so. Let the Churches make us feel that they embody a religious principle which is capable of entering into the social life of the peoples to-day, because it is kindred to their own deep human instincts and aspirations but capable of raising these to a higher level. Let the Churches make us feel that their ministrations and their ritual can so symbolize spiritual and vital realities as to bring us into truer and more fruitful relations with God. This threefold task is at once the awful burden of the Church and her glorious privilege. It points to an ideal, but not an ideal out of relation with the actual world. The Fathers spoke of the "invisible" and the "visible" Church, and inquired into their relationship. The ideal Church is neither visible nor invisible. In the striking language of the Westminster Confession, it is *more or less visible*. Hence we are obliged to speak of *the Church* as well as of *the Churches*. Every one of the organized visible concrete corporations, called Churches, is a very imperfect realization of the true ideal of the Church; but the more any actual Church realizes this ideal, the more it is a branch of the true Church, which is the city of God.

An ancient legend tells of a city overwhelmed and cast down into the depths of the sea. And as the waves rolled far above its topmost towers, currents and motions would find their way down in the deep and ring the city's bells. And through the sound of the storm on the surface of the sea might be heard the stifled ringing of the buried bells. Even so, buried in the depths of our human life, lies the true city of God, whose Temple we are. And through all the discordant clash of competing claims in the world of to-day, and the confusion caused by the changing bases of belief, we sometimes seem to hear the far-away, low, penetrating music of the bells beneath—the bells of the city of God. And because we hear them we know that a time shall come when that city shall rise and be seen by the eyes of men. Thus do all our nobler impulses and inspirations join as it were in a world-wide harmony in prophetic anticipation of the day when the spiritual oneness of man shall be a real experience of life, in God the Eternal Home.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

symbolism not only in the details of its structure. A whole utterance, written or spoken, may by acquired association become itself a symbol suffused with emotional power—as in a battle-cry, or a National Anthem, or a poem like " Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled," or a Covenant.

The symbol whose power springs from acquired association illustrates the justification of the conservative element in Religion. As we trace the sources of its strength, we see more and more of the bonds that bind and consecrate change as a dependent growth, and even consecrate it with kinship. The old altar is a trysting-place where we found quietness and confidence and grace; and we go back to it again and again. In this spirit, Emerson spoke of the visible church :

> We love the venerable house
> Our fathers built to God;
> In heaven are kept their grateful vows,
> Their dust endears the sod.
>
> Here holy thoughts a light have shed
> From many a radiant face,
> And prayers of tender hope have spread
> A perfume through the place.
>
> And anxious hearts have pondered here
> The mystery of life,
> And prayed the Eternal Light to clear
> Their doubts, and aid their strife.
>
> For faith, and peace, and mighty love,
> That from the Godhead flow,
> Showed them the life of heaven above
> Springs from the life below.

The visible Church becomes a religious symbol when it is itself permeated, in the mind of the worshipper, with the faith and feeling which *is* his religion. For this reason it has been said that nearly all the religious symbolism which becomes really powerful in an individual's experience comes into his life in childhood. This is true wherever symbolic value is due to acquired association. It is seldom after those formative years that the close association between object and emotion can be wrought which is essential to religious symbolism. It requires moreover, as a rule, the whole force of the child's social surroundings—the suggestive influence of parents, teachers, older playmates, and of the people in general in whose actions he is interested—to suffuse the material object or the spoken word or the external act with the religious feeling that shall make it truly and deeply symbolic. This explains why *it is impossible for the community to make for itself a new religious symbol except by long years of gradual habituation or through the force of some emotional crisis.*

Sometimes a deliberately organized and concentrated effort of human co-operation does seem actually to have the power to create a new religious symbol in the sense of investing an object, let us say a building, with a power which otherwise could only be created by the acquired associations of centuries. While these words are being written,[1] there is taking place in a northern city just such a concentrated act of the group-spirit, in which a building—itself the offspring of one man's genius, following with some significant modifications the pattern of the mediaeval cathedrals, a building new and in fact unfinished—is being invested with an influence and a meaning which might seem to require long years of gradual habituation to create. I leave on one side the question of whether the ecclesiastical dignitaries who believe themselves to be consecrating that building really believe that a supernatural change is being wrought within it. Certain it is that the vast multitude who have gathered there are being made to feel that these

[1] Consecration of Liverpool Cathedral, July, 1924.