

MODERN PSYCHOLOGY AND THE FUNCTION OF SYMBOLISM¹

BY

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IN his *Summa Theologica* (II-II, 81; 7) St Thomas Aquinas lays down a principle which is fundamental for both the theory and the practice of divine worship: 'We show reverence and honour to God not for his own sake—for he is himself full of glory, and to that glory nothing can be added by any creature: *but for our own sake*, inasmuch as by the very fact that we worship and honour God, our minds are put into subjection to him. And in this consists their own fulfilment, for everything attains its fulfilment by being subject to that which is above it: thus the body attains its fulfilment by being made alive by the soul, and the atmosphere by being lit up by the sun . . .'

The idea that religious rites and ceremonies are not for God's benefit but for our own is one that to some modern Catholics seems surprising and disturbing; nay, Protestant! *Orate Fratres* recently quoted a European Catholic writer to the effect that: 'It is important that the general principle be borne in mind that the prayers of the Church are addressed to God and that the idea of conducting services primarily for the edification of the faithful smacks of Protestantism'. Alas for St Thomas. Alas for St Paul's great guiding 'rubric' in 1 Corinthians 14, 26. Alas for every theologian who has written *On Prayer*, from Origen and St Cyprian to St Thomas and Suarez, who has been at pains to explain that we 'address God' not to 'edify' him, but precisely to 'edify' ourselves.

And indeed, a moment's thought should show that if we suppose that our prayers, our participation in the liturgy, our vestments, music, lights, incense, genuflexions and the rest, confer some benefit on God, we are in fact not honouring him, but rather degrading him and quite ridiculously flattering ourselves. We cannot tell him anything he does not know, nor can we add to the perfection and glory of him who is all Perfection and all Glory.

Are we then to say that our worship is not pleasing to him, and our failure to worship at least indifferent to him? Not so, of course; quite the contrary. But our worship is pleasing to him precisely because it is good and necessary *for us*; and our neglect to worship is bad *for us*. Our fulfilment, our completion, our bliss is in him,

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and in adjusting our minds to our true relationship of worshipful subjection to him. He is our Life and our Light. As the body is alive only in subordination to the soul, and as the air is alight only in subordination to the sun, so are we truly alive and alight only in subjection to our God. God loves us, and wills our fulfilment, completion and bliss in his Life and Light. *Therefore*—because it is good and necessary for us, not because it is good and necessary for him—our worship of him is pleasing to him and our neglect of worship displeasing.

Some have thought that this idea that all religious practices should be for man's benefit and not for God's is selfish and self-centred; or, as they may say, subjectivist and anthropocentric. Rather, however, does it make for the greatest humility—and indeed precisely for God-centredness. It is a thoroughly humbling thought that we need religion, and that the all-perfect, all-glorious God does not. St Thomas's teaching here is all of a piece, not only with his vivid and uncompromising understanding of the all-perfection and infinite bliss of God, to which nothing can be added, but also with his constant and consistent teaching which explains all that God does for us, or requires from us, in terms of his boundless love. God, he says, commands us nothing, and forbids us nothing, but for our own real good. The moral law, revelation, grace, the incarnation, the passion and resurrection, the Church and the sacraments—all are accounted for by St Thomas in terms of God's love for man, his generous and disinterested will to meet human needs.

To recognise that liturgy also, and God's command to us to worship him, is a loving concession to our needs, that in divine service we are really serving ourselves, is not 'selfishness' in the bad sense. It is indeed to love ourselves, but not selfishly: it is to co-operate with God's love for our true selves as he would have them to be. It demands a deep humility which will strip us of that pride in our own self-sufficiency: it is the humility which surrender to love always requires. Thus understood, worship and all the accompaniments and etceteras of worship may more easily become a joyous instead of a painfully dutiful thing. The worshipper who understands this is far from egocentricity, and is being cured of the 'false love unto himself' by learning to love his *whole* self with God's own kind of love. He is also proof against the criticism (from within or from without) that our Catholic liturgy—with its lights and colours and dressing-up and fire-making and water-splashing and smoke and music and bodily action—is a childish game, unworthy of a grown-up man and of no appeal to any respectable

God. It is play indeed, and that play is needful and good for a child of God; and his God wants him to play.

Only, the play is not an end in itself. It is *for* the attainment of man's last end, his completion and fulfilment. The part man plays in the liturgy is that of his true self. For his perfection, his fulfilment, his God-given destiny, is in oneness with God, in subordination to God. His liturgical play is no make-believe, no impersonation of something he is not. Before the altar, participating in its ritual, man is much more 'real' than in anxious work and care as the lord of his own little universe—in the office, the factory or the home, or even as lord and centre of the world of his own mind. Not that these things also may not be part and parcel of his divine calling, but they are so only in the measure in which his habitual 'God-almightiness' is humbled in playful worship. For this humiliation, no merely theoretic, objective recognition of our dependence on God is enough. God requires, because our own psychological and physical make-up requires, that we sometimes actually play out our true place and function in the universe; and this with all our psychological and physical, as well as our intellectual, being. For, as in the already quoted passage, St Thomas continues:

In order to be united with God the human mind requires to be led by means of the things of sense, for 'the invisible things of God are perceived through the things that are made' (Rom. 1, 20). And so, in divine worship, it is needful to employ material things, so that by their means, as by a sort of signs, the human mind may be urged to those spiritual acts whereby it is united to God. Hence religion includes certain spiritual acts as its principal constituents, and of their own nature 'religious', but also exterior acts as secondary elements subordinated to the interior acts.

Once we understand that religious rites and symbols are for our own benefit, and are ordained precisely to meet our own psychophysical needs, we should be neither surprised nor resentful that modern psychotherapy has become increasingly occupied with the function of such rites and symbols in human life, and their effects on human character and conduct. Truly enough, the standpoint of the psychologist is more limited than that of the theologian—or even the simple Catholic. The psychologist as such cannot lay down what is the true and final purpose of human existence, in what ultimately human perfection and fulfilment consist. Such questions cannot be answered within the restricted framework of method or field of inquiry which the psychologist sets himself. But many psychologists are becoming increasingly aware of how little, even from their own therapeutic standpoint, they can wholly evade

these questions. When they maintain that religious rites and symbols have a function in human life and character, we should not want to contradict them; nor should we deny them the right to examine and inquire into the nature of those functions so far as it comes within their field. In fact—though sometimes their interpretations are coloured by prejudices with which we cannot agree—their findings may often be found of great help to ourselves in realising the purpose of the rites and symbols which we often perform unthinkingly and mechanically.

One of the most important discoveries (or perhaps we should say rediscoveries) of modern psychology has been that of the psychological function of symbolism. It is well known that Freud wrote much of the symbolism of dreams and of free association: that is to say, of the *meaning* of those images and fantasies which arise in us without our conscious control or consciously imposed intention. But Freud's interpretation of such material rested upon assumptions which further experience and reflection have made it impossible to maintain. Freud, in the main, at least tacitly assumed that all such material could be translated into intellectual, scientific concepts; and that furthermore such translation would show them all to be disguised representations of repressed experience in the lifetime of the individual. All these 'symbols' could in fact be reduced to manifold *disguises* for a very few—and usually rather squalid—*ideas*. The work of C. G. Jung, in particular, has shown the inadequacy of this theory (whose basic assumptions Freud himself came increasingly to modify, without however, modifying the conclusions he had drawn from them). For Jung it is necessary to distinguish between mere signs and what he prefers to call *symbols*.

The concept of a symbol should, in my view, be strictly differentiated from that of a mere *sign*. *Symbolic* and *semiotic* [i.e. in the manner of a sign] interpretations are entirely different things.

. . . For instance, the old custom of handing over a sod of turf at the sale of a piece of land, might be described as 'symbolic' in the vulgar sense of the word; but actually it is purely semiotic in character. The piece of turf is a *sign*, or token, representing the whole estate. The winged wheel worn by railway employes [on the European Continent] is not a symbol of the railway but a sign that distinguishes the personnel of the railway. But the symbol always presupposes that the chosen expression is the best possible description or formula of a relatively unknown fact; a fact, however, which is none the less recognised or postulated as existing. Thus, when the winged-wheel badge of the railway employé is explained as a symbol it is tantamount to saying that the man has to do with an unknown entity whose nature cannot be differently explained than by a winged wheel. . . . In so far

as a symbol is a living thing it is the expression of a thing not to be characterised in any other or better way. The symbol is alive only in so far as it is pregnant with meaning. . . . The way in which St Paul and the early mystical speculators handle the symbol of the Cross shows that for them it was a living symbol which represented the inexpressible in an unsurpassable way. (C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, pp. 601-2.)

Jung was led to this idea not by any preconceived religious convictions (he had none at the time) nor by any philosophical theory: he discovered it in his work as a scientist and a doctor. It was forced upon his notice in his analytical work with the people who came to him for healing in their mental and emotional troubles. Time and time again he found that even—nay, rather, especially—the most ‘agnostic’ and ‘irreligious’ of them presented him with dreams and phantasies of an unmistakably ‘religious’ character: ideas, symbols, rituals and stories which mankind in the past had always associated with his religion. This is indeed a common experience of analysts (though not all are able or willing to recognise it, or to take the phenomena at their face value) who reach with their patients beyond a certain level of everyday human awareness. The old Fathers of the Church knew this fact very well: Tertullian, in his *De Testimonio Animae*, based a whole apologetic for the fundamentals of Christianity upon this witness of the *anima naturaliter christiana* (the naturally Christian soul). This work begged the educated and sophisticated pagans of his time to observe frankly and honestly the spontaneous, untutored manifestations of their own souls—of the ‘unconscious’, as we should say today: there they would find recognition of God and devils, immortality, heaven, hell, sin, guilt and redemption-needing conflict.

Stand forth, O soul [Tertullian writes], stand forth and give thy witness. But I call thee not as when, fashioned in schools, trained in libraries, fed up in Attic academies and porticoes, thou belchest forth thy ‘wisdom’. I address thee, simple and rude, uncultured and untaught, such as they have thee who have thee only. I want thine inexperience, since in thy small experience no one feels any confidence. I demand of thee the things thou bringest with thee into man. . . . There is one soul and many tongues, one spirit and various sounds: every country has its own speech, but the subjects of speech are common to all. God is everywhere, and the goodness of God is everywhere; demons are everywhere and the cursing of them is everywhere . . . for all the world over is the witness of the soul.

The pagan mockers and persecutors of the Christians are enjoined to observe that the happenings in their own souls, if not interfered with and allowed full play, ‘proclaim the very things that we

Christians are not permitted to speak above our breath'.

A very interesting example of the impact which the discovery of this fact in her own soul made upon an enlightened modern psychologist may be read in Joanna Field's brave account in *A Life of One's Own*². Case histories published by Dr Jung and his school (and still more so the many more that cannot be published) have shown repeatedly how, after long mental and spiritual struggles, healing has come through contact with these 'religious' symbols which eventually emerge in the analytical process, and which 'represent the inexpressible in an unsurpassable way'. The details differ widely in different cases, but the general pattern is usually much the same. The tortured neurotic finds in these symbols—at very least—the disclosing of a world which transcends his understanding and control; and in recognising this world and his own place within it, and its place within him, begins to find freedom from the prison-house of his own sick conscious mind.

Jung knows that what, after long and sometimes painful and humiliating search, may be found buried in man's mind, is more consciously expressed and enacted in public worship; and that public worship fulfils a similar function for the growth and health of the human soul. The theologian approaches the same subject from a different point of view, but, though on other grounds, he reaches similar conclusions. A Thomist cannot read Jung's account, which we have quoted, of the nature of a symbol without being reminded of St Thomas's treatment of the need for symbolism in the first Question of the *Summa*. In the ninth article of this Question he asks 'Whether the Holy Teaching should employ metaphorical or symbolical expressions'. (This is St Thomas's own formulation as it will be found at the beginning of the Question.) In answering it, we find St Thomas again appealing to the principle that God deals with each of his creatures in accordance with the requirements of their several natures. It is in accordance with man's nature to attain to the spiritual only in and through corporeal creation. Therefore it is needful that the Divine Teaching of revelation should be conveyed in and through corporeal figures.

But it is in the replies to the objections that we find a conception of religious symbolism closely akin to that of Jung, though reached for other reasons. The first objection is that symbolism and metaphor belong essentially to poetry; and poetry is notoriously unsuitable as a vehicle for accurate, scientific truth: it is '*infima inter omnes doctrinas*' ('the lowest among all forms of teaching'). St Thomas replies that:

² Published by Chatto and Windus in 1934.

Poetry employs metaphor for the sake of re-presentation: for re-presentation is naturally pleasing to man. But the Holy Teaching employs metaphor from necessity and for its usefulness.

This has been quoted as evidence for St Thomas's low esteem of poetry; but this is quite to misunderstand his meaning. For him a poem is essentially a thing *made* (that is what the word means), a product of man's mind and skill. As such it is an end in itself; its perfection is, as for all works of art, in itself, the *finis operis*. It is its own being and its own truth; the poet selects, combines, separates, co-relates images for the sake of the inherent delightfulness of his re-creations. He may indeed use poetry to convey factual truth extrinsic to his art, but that is unessential to the quality of a poem; and in fact poetry as a form for teaching is very unsatisfactory, '*infima*'. But God's revelation employs symbol and metaphor, not just for fun, not just because they are pleasing in themselves, but because it *has* to, and for a useful purpose beyond themselves. And it has to do so, we learn from the reply to the third objection, not only because our nature is such that we can learn of God only through the things of sense, but also because of God's infinite transcendence of our understanding. It is essential to the symbolic understanding of any symbol (or, for that matter, of any sign) that it be understood, not just as it is in itself, but as a vehicle which makes us aware of something that lies beyond it.

In that precisely lies its symbolic meaning, its *significance*. The sod of turf, the traffic signals at the corner of the street, *mean* something else: they are a mere token or shorthand for the whole field, or for 'Stop' and 'Go'. But that 'something else' is, in those examples, something that lies well within the possibilities of our understanding: it could be differently, even better, expressed. We could dispense with these signs altogether, and still understand what they say. But with God it is otherwise: he altogether surpasses our understanding. He is inexpressible: and until we see him face to face, the symbol 'expresses him' in an unsurpassable way. He is revealed in and through material symbols; we cannot dispense with them, nor learn of his gracious ways with men apart from them. 'It is more clear to us what he is not than what he is.' For that reason, St Thomas here adds, it is particularly fitting that God should speak to us through 'vile' rather than more noble and beautiful images. 'For the likenesses of those things which are most distant from God convey to us a truer estimate of him: that he transcends all that we can think or say of him.'

To make of the symbol an end in itself is to make it *only* a poem, a work of man's head and hands. 'The ray of divine revelation',

says St Thomas in the reply to the second objection of this article, 'is not destroyed by the corporeal figures which veil it, but it remains in its own reality; for the minds to which revelation is made are not allowed to remain in the images, but it raises them to an awareness of spiritual realities'. The choice of 'vile', as distinct from noble and beautiful, images precisely safeguards us from the idolatry of worshipping the 'poem'. If noble and beautiful images alone were employed, 'there could be some doubt whether it were divine things that were being represented, especially in the minds of those who have never learned of anything nobler than beautiful bodies'.

But the symbol is not only *cognitional*: not only does it make us aware of 'the inexpressible in an unsurpassable way'. Another of the great achievements of modern psychology (especially in the Jungian school has) been the rediscovery of the immense *power* of the symbol in moulding human character, in constellating, dissipating and directing human attitudes, and so as a formative influence in human conduct. The symbol, it is said, *transforms* psychic energy; and especially the specifically religious symbol, which of its nature is concerned with man's attitude to his place in the universe and to powers which transcend his conscious volition and control. It would take us too far afield to co-relate this modern psychological conception with St Thomas's profound and subtle analysis of the efficaciousness of sacred rites and symbols. Reduced to its simplest terms, it may however be said that the *ex opere operantis* efficaciousness of symbols lies in their power to move and change us, not indeed physically, but as *objects* which attract, unite and change our will and affection (*per modum causae finalis*). Of themselves they are unproductive of grace, but they induce us to respond to them in God-given grace-saving Faith in the saving truths which they represent. In these terms St Thomas explains the efficaciousness of the ritual and sacraments of the Old Law, of pre-Mosaic times, and the sacramentals of the Christian Church. It is the *opus operantis*, our own response, that renders them efficacious. The Christian sacraments have over and above (not over and against) this power to move our hearts and wills, the indwelling power of the dead and risen Christ. Because of this, they have *also* the intrinsic power to confer God's grace upon us, *ex opere operato*—by the very fact of their being performed.

But here, likewise, is divine Love in the service of human needs. As it is idolatry to make of the symbol an end in itself, so it is (in fact if not in intention) a blasphemous superstition to make of it a favour conferred by us on a needy God. '*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*'

is a magnificent slogan; but it must not be misunderstood as meaning that we can somehow increase his own glory and excellence. It is in creation, and supremely in our own selves, that we are to show forth the glory of the God who indwells us.

'Shall I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of he-goats?' What is the meaning of this divine irony in Psalm 49; and similarly of the many passages in which God complains of his weariness of sacrifice and incense and ritual? Not (St Thomas explains in the reply to the second objection of the article which we quoted at the beginning of this paper), that God condemns the external worship which he himself had sanctioned and ordained, but precisely because it was supposed that he—rather than we—had need of these things. Neither, St Thomas will say in his Third Part, does God need the incarnation or death of his Son, nor yet the holy Eucharist. But we do.

We may think we are too enlightened to deserve such irony, or to be subject to such reproof. But when we hear the '*Ite, missa est*' we are sometimes inclined to feel that we have now rendered our 'service' to God, 'fulfilled our obligation' to him. Such a feeling all too easily hardens into a perfunctory performance, which entails nothing further of us. This precisely is the divine complaint through the mouths of the prophets to the Chosen People of old. But the truth of the matter is that it is God who has rendered a service to us, and filled a stupendous deed of self-giving love to us—to which he was under no obligation other than that to which he had freely committed himself in his own gracious promises. We have played the part of our true selves, subject and receptive to divine Power and Love. At the '*Ite, missa est*' our obligation does not end; now, more exactly, it begins.



ERRORS ABOUT NATURE AND GRACE

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WE claim to take for granted in the purposes of this essay the central facts of Christ, his reality in history, his verifiable effect, and the chief truths of his life, as they were preserved at least till a generation ago among the divided sects in the break-up of Christendom, and as they are now, and for ever will be preserved, only by the Catholic Church. Thus the divinity of Christ is