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The Relevance and Significance of Symbolism in Christian Religion

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Abstract:

Reading Christian symbols is reading Christianity itself. There are various types of symbols which the Christian tradition proudly preserves. For our clarity we have marked two vast categories of symbols. Symbols of Christian religion and Symbols of Christian Theology. Symbols of Christian religion are symbols that are ritualistic, cultic, liturgical and literal. Symbols of Christian theology are deeper, metaphorical and symbolic in teaching the faith of Christianity from the ideological point of view. Our focus is on the symbols of the Christian religion. E.g., symbols that we see in tradition, liturgy, scripture, church building, art, painting. Etc. Hence this article would have attempted to enumerate the various symbols in the Christianity religion and show their significance for the viewers and believers. Symbols are aids for the receivers to see what is invisible and understand, what is mystical.

Christianity from various centuries uses symbols that are linked with nature. The symbols of palm, vine, water fish, ship plough axe, star sun, fish etc., convey the idea of humans had a profound nearness with nature. The cultural elements are found in the symbols used such as symbols based on the occupation, ship, plough, shepherd, chariot etc., Christian religion employs also the social symbols like persons, crown etc., The last consideration is the philosophical one. Symbols used in Christian religion have a philosophical consideration that is the symbols have to be understood and interpreted. In other words the meaning of symbols must be alive and active now.

1. Introduction

A Symbol is something that represents an idea, a process, or a physical entity. The purpose of a symbols is to communicate meaning. The word derives from the Greek symbol on meaning 'token' or 'watchword'. It is an amalgam of syn – 'together' + bole "a throwing, a casting, the stroke of a missile, bolt, beam." The sense evolution in Greek is from "throwing things together" to contrasting, to comparing, to token used in comparisons to determine if something is genuine. Hence, outward sign of something. The meaning 'something which stands for something else' was first recorded 1590, in Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene.

Symbols are common in everyone's life. Every day we use symbols of various kinds. The symbol of friendship is seen when we shake hands not our head or wave our hands or smile at someone. Jesus in the Gospels uses variety of symbols again and again. He always refers to symbols especially when he wanted to teach his disciples and people¹. When one walks into a Catholic Church for the first time, he or she would be struck by numbers of images and symbols which are visually appealing. Their eyes would be drawn to stained glass windows, candles, holy water fonts, sculpture and statuary, stations of the cross, crucifix, tabernacle, alter and lectern. Our Catholic Churches possess a distinct character of their own as we recognize them at once amongst other buildings. They all bear the unmistakable stamp of a Catholic Church with unique images and symbols. Looking at the images and the symbols in the church one would feel that everything has a meaning. The faith in the church was taught through the 'Bibles in stone', explaining the power of symbols.

2. The Primitive Symbols of Christian Religion and Its Significance

The primitive Christian symbols are those symbols of Judaism which always provided for the richness of the early symbols of Christianity.

2.1. The Symbol of Palm

The symbol of Palm is associated with the feast of Tabernacles when the Israelites would make the tents made of branches and stay in them for seven days. On the eighth day they make libations of water to obtain rain and conduct procession round the alter when each person carried in his/her right hand a nosegay of willow, myrtle and palm and in his left a citron. When we associate the feast of

Tabernacle with them messianic expectation we can see the appearing of Messiah like the rising sun on Mount of Olives during the feast of Tabernacles with the palm as the token of victory. Later palms symbolized not only of victory but of resurrection. It represents the hope of immortality².

2.2. *The Crown*

The crown was the symbol of eternal blessedness and it is the symbol often associated with the Hellenistic practice of giving a crown to a victor. In Jews and Christian texts, the crown is the symbol of the glory of the elect, in the biblical sense of the word, and of the imperishable life which is their lot. For Jews, this is the symbol of the hope of immortality. These symbols continued to live in Christian liturgy and given a large place in pictorial monuments and continued to become the inspiration of eschatological symbolism.



Figure 1: The Crown

2.3. *The Vine and Tree of Life*

The vine and tree of life is the another symbol used in the primitive Christian cultures. In Isaiah 5:1-7 the vine of the Yahweh symbolizing the Israelite people is a vineyard. The vines are the people which God planted and each plant represents a Christian³.

2.4. *The Symbolism of Living Water*

The symbolism of living water depends on the original, secular meaning of the term. In the Old testament it is the symbol of God as the source of life. In the New testament living water is the symbol of the Holy spirit. There is a connection between the living water and trees of life and this connection underlines a new aspects of living water. It is not simply running water as distinct from standing water. It is water which gives life, in opposition to waters that bring death.

2.5. *The Fish*

In ancient Christian symbolism of the fish stands for the Christians. Following the Latin Fathers, this is generally explained by the fact that fish, is the acrostic of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Saviour. But on the other hand the fish appears in the baptismal context. The presence of fish in the water signifies that the water is living water.

2.6. *The Ship*

The ship is a symbol which refers to the Church in which God is the owner, Christ is the pilot and Christian people are the members.

2.7. *The Symbol of Plough and Axe*

The early Christian writers symbolized the symbol of Plough and axe as creation. The union of wood and iron in the Plough is the symbol of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. Later the wood in the plough and the axe was also recognized as the symbol of cross.

2.8. *The Twelve Apostles*

The twelve apostles are compared to the twelve hours of the day and the twelve months of the year. This idea was found in the fourth century itself. There are twelve zodiac signs which again represent the twelve apostles. At the start the twelve gems of the twelve animals of the zodiac symbolized twelve patriarchs and finally it was transferred to the twelve apostles⁴.

From the above said primitive Christian symbols one would find a number of them actively exist in the Christian symbols today. The meaning of them has however evolved in the course of centuries.

3. Symbols Associated with the Father

3.1. *The Hand of God the Father*

The hand appearing in various forms in Christian tradition is the most outstanding symbol of God the Father. Of the many passages in the Old Testament which speak of the hand of God we could take only two types of hands for our discussion. The symbol of a hand from a cloud refers to the glory of Lord. Bible tells us that the mount Sinai was covered with a cloud for six days. Sometimes artists symbolized God by simply picturing a cloud with rays of light coming out indicating the dimness of our knowledge of God. In scripture the hand is used as a symbol for God's power⁵.



Figure 2: *The Hand of God the Father*

3.2. *The All Seeing Eye*

Another common symbol of God the father is the All-seeing eye. In scripture the eye is used as a reference to God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The eye also symbolizes God's watchfulness and favor⁶.

3.3. *The Creator's Star*

The creator's star is ancient emblem of God the Father, with the six fold attributes of the Deity- Power, Wisdom, Majesty, Love, Mercy and Justice. In six days He created heaven and earth. That He is a Triune God is symbolized by the fact that this star is made of two triangles, emblems of the Holy Trinity⁷.

3.4. *The Fire*

In the Old Testament, fire represents the presence of God in His glory. In the New Testament, fire represents the presence of God in the Holy Spirit. Fire is also used as a metaphor for cleansing and spiritual power.

3.5. *The Clouds*

Clouds represent the presence of God. When God led the Israelites through the desert, he was present with them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Clouds are also associated with Christ's ascension and his Second coming.

3.6. *The Crown*

The crown symbolizes both earthly and divine sovereignty, honor and victory. Occasionally as depicted in the illustration of the hand above, the hand of God extends out of a crown.

4. Symbols Representing God the Son

4.1. *Five Sacred Monograms*

The first monogram is the Alpha and Omega stands for Jesus Christ. It means the first and the last the beginning and the end, the same yesterday and today and forever. Another popular symbol is IHS. The symbol IHS appears at the very center of the alter cross in many churches. Thus we are reminded that the central teaching of the cross is that God's suffering love for humanity is revealed in Jesus Christ on the Cross⁸. The Chi Rho has been a symbol of Christianity since the time of Constantine. IC is a monogram made from the first and last letters of the Greek word for Jesus.

4.2. *The Lamb of God*

The most beautiful and authentic symbol of our Lord is the symbol of the Lamb of God. In the Christian tradition the Lamb of God refers to Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said of him, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Passover lamb was a type of Christ. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. He is the apocalyptic Lamb that opens the book, Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto him that sits upon the throne and unto the Lamb forever and ever.



Figure 3: The Lamb of God

4.3. The Good Shepherd

The image of the Good Shepherd is a symbol of Jesus Christ. The Good Shepherd often with a sheep on his shoulders is the most common of the symbolic representations of Christ found at the catacombs of Rome, and it is related to the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The destination of spiritual leaders as shepherds or pastors has its roots in the Old Testament. They learn the Shepherd's manner of ministry because their Lord was the great shepherd of the sheep.

4.4. Pelican

In medieval Europe, the pelican was thought to be particularly attentive to her young, to the point of providing her own blood by wounding her own breast when no other food was available. As a result, the pelican became a symbol of the Passion of Jesus and of the Eucharist since about the twelfth century.

4.5. Alpha and Omega

Christ said "I am the alpha and omega, the beginning and end. Alpha and omega are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet which denote Jesus who is the beginning and the end of all things.

4.6. The Lion

The Lion is one of the Christ's messianic titles. The lion holding the cross was an image used during the medieval times. The lion represents royal domination. The lion also symbolizes strength and courage and thus was adopted as the insignia of the roman legions around the time of Christ. The lion can also symbolize negative figures like the Antichrist and Satan.

4.7. The Fish

A fish is a mystic symbol of the first Christians. It is a play on the letters of the Greek word which forms the initials of five Greek names of our Lord; Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour. With regard to this symbol and few others we must remember, that the first Christian to guard the truths of religion against pagan mockery, expressed their faith only by secret signs and figures and moreover, that symbolic expressions were quite in the spirit of the times. The single fish represents the savior, several fishes represents faithful Christians. A fish as a symbol does not appear often today. But whenever we see it, we think of heroic time when Christians underwent persecutions and trails for their faith and succeeded in spreading the gospel despite many obstacles.

4.8. The Sun

The psalmist describes God as a sun and shield-the source of favor, honor and all good things. Later Malachi announces The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. This is a prophecy of the salutary effect of Christs coming – the triumph of good over evil⁹.

5. Symbols of the Holy Spirit

5.1. The Dove

The descending dove is the most usual symbol of the Holy Spirit, with a three rayed nimbus around its head. The dove became a symbol of the Holy Spirit and in general it occurs frequently in connection with early representations of baptism. It signifies also the Christian soul, not the Human soul as such, but as indwell by the Holy Spirit; especially therefore as freed from the toils of the flesh and entered into rest and glory. However the more ancient explanation of the dove as Christian symbol refers to the symbol of Christ.

5.2. The Tongues of Fire

Occasionally one will see a flame or seven flames representing the Holy spirit on the day of Pentecost when 'tongues of fire' rested upon the followers of Christ and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Fire is a symbol associated with both the Holy spirit and God. In the Old Testament, Fire represents the presence of God in his glory. In the New Testament Fire is a symbol of the presence of God the Holy Spirit. The tongues of Fire that came down on the Apostles at Pentecost symbolize their being filled with the Holy Spirit.

5.3. Gifts of the Holy Spirit

In religious Art the saviour is sometimes surrounded with seven doves, which represent the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Might, Knowledge, Piety and Fear of the Lord. The same of these traditional gifts are mentioned in Isaiah 11:2. Piety was added later. Sometimes each doves holds a scroll in her beak with a virtue inscribed in Latin upon it. The seven gifts of the Holy spirit are sometimes portrayed by a seven-fold flame, and again by a seven pointed star with the initial of each gift within each point of the star. The seven blooms of the columbine symbolize the seven gifts of the spirit of the Lord. Columbine means 'like a dove' because its flowers were taught to resemble doves in flight. Because of this association, it became a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who descended in the form of a dove.

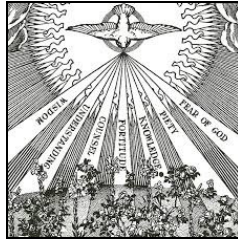


Figure 4: The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

5.4. The Wind

Using a metaphor full of mystery, Jesus likened his Spirit to the wind, which blows where it pleases according to the plan of God. Christ brings new life to everyone born of the Spirit¹⁰.

6. Other Religious Symbols

6.1. The Symbols of Objects

6.1.1. The Anchor

Christians adopted the anchor as a symbol of hope, later the anchor was regarded as a symbol of safety. In general the anchor can symbolize the hope, steadfastness, calmness and composure¹¹.

6.1.2. The Open Book

An Open Book, often pictured on religious publication and stained glass windows in our churches, refers to the Holy Bible, the Word of God.

6.1.3. The Two Tablets

The Two Tablets often pictured in Church windows symbolize the Ten commandments which constitute the fundamental moral law for both Jews and Christians. The Ten Commandments are also called as the Decalogue or the Ten words.

6.1.4. The Lamp

For the ancients a lamp was not merely a light for darkness but also a symbol of intelligence and learning. Even today the lamp stands for wisdom and knowledge; likewise, the torch is a symbol of enlightenment and religious fervour¹².

6.1.5. The Ark

From the earliest centuries of Christianity, the ark of Noah has been a symbol of the Church. In the ark all living creatures found refuge from the flood. The ark and the rainbow remind us of the covenant which, God made with Noah and the new covenant which God made with the Church. The symbolism of the ark is implied in churches where a dove with a twig in its beak is pictured in a window.

6.1.6. The Cross

The cross the most significant symbol of Christianity, recalls the redemption of humankind through Christ's sacrificial death. There are approximately four hundred variations on the basic shape of the cross. The cross is seen as a sign of completed resolution between the vertical life force and the horizontal death or rest force. Perhaps most importantly it represents life's polarities; the spiritual or otherworldly and the physical or worldly¹³.



Figure 5: The Cross

6.2. The Symbolic Colours

Black is a colour symbolizing mourning or grief. It is also associated with solemnity, negation, sickness and death. Black is inherently ominous in that it represents the unknown, a feature it shares with death. In the apocalyptic literature of Scripture the black horse represents the ravages of hunger. Blue colour represents many things: heaven, infinity, spiritual love, truth, constancy and fidelity. The Virgin Mary is often depicted wearing a blue robe, although the liturgical colour was fixed as white in the sixteenth century. Cerulean blue, the colour of the sky on the sunny day has a natural symbolic connection to heaven. Brown and Gray are lifeless colours, the colours of ashes. They are commonly used in religious habits to signify mortification, mourning and humility. The colours are also used by many mendicant orders to signify poverty. Gold and yellow colours almost universally symbolize the sun as well as divine illumination, purity, immortality and wisdom. In the Christian tradition, they are used primarily to represent purity, divinity and kinship. In Eastern orthodoxy gold represents perfection and the light of heaven, as demonstrated by medieval panels and icons¹⁴.

6.3. The Symbolic Numbers in Liturgy

One is a symbol of unity. It is used to describe God in Deuteronomy. Two is a symbolic number of pairs or the double nature of something. Two of every kind of creature were saved in the Ark, and Christ has a twofold nature. Three is the most frequently used of Christian symbolic numbers. It is primarily a reference to the Trinity. Four is the primary number of earth, referring to the corners of the globe and the four elements (earth air, fire and water). Five is a significant symbolic number relating to the Passion of Christ. It refers to the five wounds Christ suffered at his crucifixion. Six was regarded as the perfect number because it can be represented as the sum of its parts and as their product. Six stands for the perfect attributes of God, power majesty, wisdom, love mercy, and justice- and for the six acts of mercy. Seven in Biblical numerology is the most significant of sacred numbers. It is the number of completeness, fullness and perfection.

Eight is a spiraling shape ever in motion; thus it is the number of regeneration. Baptismal fonts are often octagonal, representing the seven days of creation and the eighth day after of regeneration. Eighth also represents Christ's resurrection because on the eighth day after his entry into Jerusalem he arose from the grave. The number nine is an amplification of the sacred number three, the number of completion and eternity. In antiquity the number ten was considered a perfect number because it contains within itself all numbers between one and nine. The Pythagoreans considered ten a holy number, the embodiment of perfection and harmony, because it is the sum of the numbers one, two, three and four. This perfection is exemplified in the Ten Commandments.

Twelve is one of the most important numbers in Biblical times. Its significance stems from the numbers importance in the culture of the ancient Near East, where there were twelve months in the calendar year, and twelve was important in the numbering system. The significance of twelve carries over into the New Testament with Jesus' appointment of the twelve apostles and continues through the book of Revelation. Forty is the symbolic number denoting a period of endurance, testing and probation. Seventy as the product of 7×10 , seventy is an amplification of the Holy number of seven. It appears numerous times in scripture¹⁵.

7. Conclusion

Among the humans communication happens through a medium. A medium is very essential for the one who communicates and for the one who receives it, without which there exists no communication at all. When the medium is powerful the communication is clear and comprehensible. A symbol is a powerful medium. Hence, communication becomes effectual in and through symbols. When the reality is abstract its lucidness is achievable greatly through symbols. When the human beings wanted to understand and hook up themselves with abstract reality the symbols are perfect connectors. The power of symbols is real, metaphysical, theological, philosophical etc., Religious symbols are an expression of something that is perhaps not at first sight visible but only in the last analysis fundamentally real. Christian religion wishes to have its believers to realize and understand the truth about faith in the triune God and the Church and respond creatively to them. Therefore, in the modern world, religious faith is not that importantly considered a necessity. And very surprisingly, symbols of a religion, is out-of fashion these days. At this point of time Every individual to know the significance of symbols in Christian Religion is very much needed to the modern world.

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