



Mihai Himcinschi

## Faith and Symbol

### Abstract

The hermeneutics of religious symbols leads us to the discovery, and then to the silent contemplation, of the theophanic representations that the Imaginary receives as manifestations of an infinite Transcendence.

Gnosis aims to abolish the bipolarities and dualisms that mark humanity and its history. Among all religions, Gnosticism is the most frequently used symbol through which man projects himself and his destiny onto the screen of a soteriological and eschatological time. Biblical symbolism initially presents itself because it serves a monotheistic faith that is already firm or needs to be strengthened. This very particular use of symbolic language allows the Bible, despite its incomparable richness of expression, to remain intelligible throughout generations. The message of the symbol consists in



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its epiphanic character of figurative presence, yet very real, of the transcendent.

### Keywords

symbol, language, faith, confession, mission, Christology, iconology

## 1 Introduction

The world in which the Christian lives, the reality of their connection with God, is the image, icon, and symbol of things to come. Saint Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known (I Cor. 13:12).

The concrete situation of the spiritual person involves a fundamental dynamic aspect that is expressed at various levels of life: at the biological level, at the cosmic level, which provides basic symbols (water, fire, sky, etc.), at the level of interpersonal relationships, and finally at the level of religious values, which in the Christian life are summed up in the reality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ as His incarnate Son.

The spiritual-Christian life does not reside solely in the fact that it involves particular symbolic structures but in the fact that the entire spiritual world must be known—paradoxically—as both a real and symbolic world simultaneously. In this world, God truly exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In becoming incarnate, the Son used cosmic reality to confer upon it new dignity and to restore it ontologically. The presence in us of divine and deifying grace and God's continuous action—the work that involves the dynamic state of biological and spiritual life—is symbolic, made possible ecclesially through the visible matter of the Holy Mysteries—and thus symbolic—through which we receive the

unseen uncreated energy, uniting ourselves without confusion and mixture with the Godhead.

## 2 The symbolic language

In current usage, the word *symbol* is used by many to refer to a notion linked to that of a conventional sign. Thus, we can speak of mathematical, chemical, and linguistic symbols, defining the entire human language as symbolic.

From this point of view, the word *symbol* refers exclusively to the symbolic image. As such, it will be used in a privileged manner to express spiritual realities: Christ, for example, revealed Himself as the Bread of Life or the Light of the World. Likewise, in the Song of Songs, we find many symbols expressed through the words bride, wedding, garden, and perfume—all of which inspire the language of various mystics.

Symbols are part of human life; everything around them consists of natural or social images. Natural symbols are more elaborate and eloquent and are usually presented in a sophisticated context.

Christian symbolism was born in a completely particular environment. "Going beyond the events of the history of salvation, a new historical type of symbolism emerges: Abraham and the Exodus become the symbols of the entire divine calling and of complete liberation. What is called the spiritual sense of Holy Scripture is nothing other than a symbolic sense, whose most typical expression was founded on historical symbolism"<sup>1</sup>. The image leads us to another level of meaning specific to symbolic language. For example, the mountain can become a symbol of moral or spiritual effort. "The message of symbolism

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<sup>1</sup> Charles-André BERNARD, *Symboles spirituels*, en vol. *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, Les Éditions du CERF, Paris 1983, p. 1088.

resides in its epiphanic character—the presence of the represented image, but just as real, that of the transcendent"<sup>2</sup>. The symbolism of biblical language includes allegory, as a vivid translation, and the parable, both describing the various spiritual situations of those who hear the Word of God. "Theology aims to be an intelligible discourse, and therefore also a rational one, about God and biblical revelation. An intelligible discourse is characterized by great clarity and conceptual transparency, thanks to the fact that it produces a specific sense of evidence within the listener. The symbol is opaque and accessible only to the inner (interiorized) person. The face of the symbol divides the world: into those who are filled with the meaning of the symbol, and those who cannot decipher or understand it"<sup>3</sup>.

*Symbolics seeks to identify the significant symbolic structures that support the multiplicity of poetic, pictorial, architectural, and mystical images. There are proposed models—all useful—for highlighting various aspects of the world through and within images. God remains His concept. If God cannot be conceptualized and yet offers Himself to our mind to be understood, He can be symbolized. Within this framework, we can refer to biblical theophanies from a dogmatic point of view. "Theophanies are divine manifestations made to the patriarchs, the Righteous, the Prophets, or the Saints. For example, the voice heard by Adam in Paradise, the three angels received by Abraham, the Angel of Great Counsel, the Burning Bush, the Cloud, and the Dove and the Tongues of Fire in the New Testament. According to the Apologists and the Fathers, Christ without a body—ásarkos (Gr.)—reveals Himself directly and without intermediary to the righteous, sometimes in angelic form, sometimes by sharing with them His divine energy, through which they recognize the presence of their*

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<sup>2</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *L'art de l'Ícone*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1970, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Roger MEHL, *Théologie et symbole*, Strasbourg 1975, p. 3.

*Lord and God. Thus, the Glory, the Cloud, the Light, the darkness, and the Pillar of Fire are symbolic terms of the Bible that express the presence and communion of God with His people and, especially, the experience of divine grace or uncreated energy as lived by the righteous or the deified"<sup>4</sup>.*

The golden rule of Eastern patristics: *God became Man so that man might become God*<sup>5</sup>, raises Christian symbolism to its actual value. "The Incarnation is the act through which God is symbolized, through which God clothed Himself with a nature that was not His own—the created nature. He clothed Himself not as a disguise, like a mask, but appropriated it in such a way that He made its encounter with His eternity and His infinity through the Man of This historical Figure possible"<sup>6</sup>, mortal and limited—Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, God Himself restored to a historical figure the quality of participant in His divinity<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> P.S. PHOTIOS, Arhim. PHILARETE, Pr. PATRIC, *Noul catehism catolic contra credinței Sfinților Părinți- un răspuns ortodox*, translator Marilena Rusu, Editura Deisis, Sibiu 1994, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> Sfântul ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Tratat despre Întruparea Cuvântului*, Collection Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești, vol. 15, translator Dumitru STĂNILOAE, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 1987, p. 151.

<sup>6</sup> "Both in the humbled human feelings and acts and the superhuman acts of the power of Christ, the unity of His divinity with His humanity was lived in a single Person, in a single Subject, being both the one and the other of the same Person, of the same Subject. It appeared human, but at the same time also divine, both through some and others, neither His humanity nor His divinity being annulled. This made Christ an exceptional Person, yet in history and among men, a Person of exceptional power and influence, unlike any other in history." Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Chipul Evangelic al lui Iisus Hristos*, Editura Mitropoliei Sibiu, Sibiu 1991, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Roger MEHL, *op. cit.*

### 3 Old Testament Symbolism

Present throughout the Holy Scripture, symbolic representation is evident from the very first pages of Genesis. Thus, God planted the tree of life, the knowledge of good and evil right amid Eden; He made man from the dust with His own hands, created Eve from her husband's rib, and gave birth to His own Son (Ps. 2, 7); saved humanity from the floodwaters through an ark of wood; saved Jonah from the belly of the whale after three days; dwelled in the dark and luminous cloud that guided Israel through the wilderness; breathed the sweet fragrance of the sacrificed gifts; raised His arm to drive away the enemies of the chosen people; is father, mother, husband, rock, citadel, redeemer (goël, Heb.). The bride in the Song of Songs (4, 12-15) is a fenced garden, a sealed and fruitful spring. The high priest wore a garment expressive in every detail; the Levite from Ephraim sent a piece of his concubine to each of the twelve tribes (Jud. 19, 29); Isaiah walked barefoot for two years and not on the roads to Jerusalem; biblical genealogies and chronologies are also composed symbolically; numbers indeed sometimes have a symbolic meaning alongside their mathematical one<sup>8</sup>.

Some researchers in the field of the History of Religions<sup>9</sup> have attempted to connect the myth of the pagan religions neighbouring Israel and the symbolic feature found in the sacred text. Indeed, the myth<sup>10</sup>. This complex narrative unites the

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<sup>8</sup> Théophane CHARY, *Le symbol dans l'Ancien Testament*, Strasbourg 1975, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> Bo REICKE, *Mythos*, in *Biblisch-historisches Handwörter-buch*, Göttingen, 1964, col. 1266, and Mircea ELIADE, *Le symbolisme des ténèbres dans les religions archaïques*, en *Etudes carmélitaines*, 32 (1960), p. 27, *apud* Théophane Chary, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> In the 20th century, the rationalist doctrine about the Myth of Jesus took shape in the West. The mythological school, whose prominent representative was Arthur Drews, sought to promote a European-style Christianity without the divine-human entity of the Savior Christ, a

cosmic with the human plane, emanating sacralizing forms. "From the meaning of fiction, invention, it sometimes reaches the meaning of a moral symbol or the mental operation by which the primitive or undeveloped man explains the world"<sup>11</sup>.

Even though the myth presents symbolic actions, situations, and interventions attributed to the world by deities, the Old Testament is not a myth but the revelation of a personal, transcendent God who, according to the prophecies, will also become a historical person coming into direct contact with the world, using throughout the economy — the specifically biblical symbolism. This was established through correspondence between a sensible, material reality and another spiritual reality, although the symbolism of the Old Testament includes metaphor, allegory, and midrash.

#### 4 Jesus Christ is the source and centre of all symbolism

In the Old Testament, the symbols were directed toward Zion. God reveals Himself throughout Revelation through the temple, royalty, and the capital. In the New Testament, the source and centre of all symbolism is Jesus Christ; He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in Him, all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Col. 1:15-17). "In the New Testament, man receives the revelation of the coming Kingdom of God, which is communicated to him through the word and through the image—that is, through the incarnate Son of God

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Christian religion without its generating cause (editor's note), see Sofron VLAD, *Școala mitologică - studiu istoric-critic*, Sibiu 1943.

<sup>11</sup> Victor KERNBACH, *Dicționar de mitologie generală*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București 1989, p. 346, col. A.

Himself. The apostles saw with their bodily eyes what in the Old Testament was only prefigured using symbols<sup>12</sup>.

The symbol, in Orthodoxy, unites the type with the prototype, the signifier with the signified, the immanent with the transcendent, by the expression of the Christological dogma from the Fourth Ecumenical Council: unconfused, unchanged, indivisible, inseparable<sup>13</sup>.

Excluding one part, or mixing the two frames of the symbol, can lead in turn to idolatry—if one remains exclusively with what is imagined by the human mind, that is, matter; or to pantheism—if the Archetype absorbs the visible part of the symbol. For example, the Savior chose bread and wine (John 6:48; Matthew 26:26) as the symbol of His divine-human person, making Himself the example and foundation of all future symbols. In His person, He defined the symbol as an image, sign, gesture, or event whose significance exceeds that of purely phenomenal

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<sup>12</sup> Leonid USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, Editura Anastasia, Bucureşti 1994, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> The real, and at the same time symbolic-imaginary, presence of Christ (as a divine-human Person, with both natures) in the liturgical life of the Church, as well as the issue of Eucharistic symbolism and realism, was extensively addressed in the writings of Saint Maximus the Confessor. He presents four arguments that can be invoked in favour of a symbolic understanding of the Eucharist: 1. In the *Mystagogy* concerning the anaphora, he views it in a symbolic conception (Myst., XXIV, P.G. 91, 716 C); 2. in the same work, he gives a symbolic interpretation of the more important parts of the Liturgy (idem); 3. In *Quaestiones et dubia*, he attributes a symbolic character to the Eucharist: the Body and Blood of Christ offered through the Church are designated as symbols (σύμβολα) and images (άπεικονίσματα) (Quaest., 13, C.C.S.G. 10, p. 10-11); 4. The three forms of access or communion to the Logos (which correspond with his triple incarnation: in the logoi of beings, in the logoi of Scripture, and man) are considered, among other things, by Maximus as Eucharistic symbols equal in value to the symbols of Scripture, in Jean-Claude LARCHÉT, *La divination de l'homme selon Saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Éditions du CERF, Paris 1996, p. 426-427.

existence. "In His humanity, through His being and His work, Jesus is the epiphany of God" (Titus 2:11-15)<sup>14</sup> The narrator recounts that only the Father is the One we are to contemplate (John 1:18) and that He (the Son) is the Fulfiller of His works (John 5:17; 9:4; 10:37). In Christ, the Firstborn of all creation, all other creatures obtain their ultimate purpose and their power of significance in the order of faith.

Through the aspect of creation's elements — light, bread, wine, etc. — they contribute to understanding who Jesus Christ is, thanks to their expressive power. On the other hand, these elements, assimilated through Christ, figuratively convey and represent His divinizing action; they become Mysteries for the dogma and spirituality of the Church. Thus, He is present in the water of Baptism<sup>15</sup>, and in the Bread of the Eucharist or the oil of Chrismation<sup>16</sup>. The Wine and the Bread are the internal means through which man receives life and power; thus, the symbol gains life, the homogeneity of the signifier and the signified through the inner dynamic of grace - divine, deifying, and organizing<sup>17</sup>.

The theology of the symbol and the theological symbol require rigorous verification, which should be carried out through a specialized theological discipline dedicated to this purpose: the

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<sup>14</sup> Text and dogmatic basis of the fact that God, in His Revelation through Jesus Christ, taught us to live with righteousness and piety, awaiting eternal reward (editor's note).

<sup>15</sup> "According to Eastern spirituality, the Christian became a *christophorus*, a bearer of Christ through the mystery of Baptism. Indeed, Christians are and must be living icons (images, faces) of the Savior in the world, witnesses of Christ not only through words but especially through the very transparency of their lives." Ion BRIA, *Image, icône, iconographie*, en *Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie*, Éditions du CERF, Paris, 2001, p. 160-161.

<sup>16</sup> Robert LACK, *Jésus-Christ, source et centre de toute la symbolique*, in vol. *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, CERF, Paris 1983, p. 1095.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert DURAND, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, 1963, apud Roger Mehl, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

hermeneutics of religious symbols. This discipline aims to establish particular relationships between persons capable of recognizing, through a sign, a hidden identity of meaning—who see in this sign the transfiguration of a concrete reality that they interpret as bearing a mysterious sign. Scripture supports the meaning of Judaic and early Christian symbols.

Let us briefly analyze the fact that the older interpretive method, hermeneutics, which has been imposed from the beginning, must be cultural and consists of repositioning various religious symbols within the historical framework that determines them and through their connections with the mystical tradition that grants them a specific significance. Each religious system claims a particular exclusive type of interpretation<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, we can view the hermeneutics of religious symbols through the lens of Revelation, then through contemplation and hesychia (inner stillness), as well as through all the theophanic representations received imaginatively and as economic manifestations of One Infinite Personal Transcendence.

We cannot fail to mention here the episode of God the Most Holy Trinity's hospitality to Abraham near the Oak of Mamre, which is part of the theophanies of the Old Testament, especially of Yahweh in His Three Hypostases.

The Judaic tradition, and later the Church Fathers, interpreted Abraham's hospitality as an economic and symbolic manifestation of God. The Old Testament theophanies were preferentially interpreted as theophanies of the divine Word, but if we name the icon of Abraham's Hospitality<sup>19</sup>, The Icon of the Trinity can only be understood in a secondary, symbolic, and typological sense. Commentators on this icon are divided

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<sup>18</sup> Michel MESLIN, *Herméneutique des symboles religieux*, Strasbourg, 1975, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> This refers to the painted depiction of the icon by Saint Andrei Rublev (editor's note).

regarding the interpretation of the three figures. From the perspective of the historical development of the subject, as well as the symbolism of the forms and colours, it appears that the Angel in the centre—who is adorned with the attributes of the Second Person, the incarnate Word—is represented by the red of the garments (symbolizing blood and royalty), and the hand extended toward the chalice, the Tree of Life<sup>20</sup> etc.

Saint Maximus the Confessor shows how God uses the visible things of the created world to reveal His uncreated divine works. “Those who, out of fear of the Jews, sit in a room in Galilee with locked doors—that is, those who, out of fear of the spirits of wickedness, dwell in the realm of divine revelations on the heights of divine visions (contemplations), locking their senses like doors for safety—receive the Word of God in an incomprehensible way, who comes to them and appears without the work of the senses. And when He comes, He grants them the state of impassibility, saying to them, ‘Peace be with you,’ and breathing upon them the divisions of the Holy Spirit; likewise, He gives them power over evil spirits and reveals to them the symbols of His mysteries”<sup>21</sup>.

Eastern patristics perfectly intertwined symbol, image, and gnosis, leaving an apophatic mark on this mode of knowing the Divinity. “The divine nature,” says Patriarch Nikephoros the Confessor, “as it is in itself, can neither be comprehended by the mind nor expressed by words, for it is incomprehensible, ineffable, and untouched, beyond all limits, surpassing all knowledge and understanding. All intellectual power ceases before it, and any advance in knowledge stops. For it is neither word, nor knowledge, nor opinion; it is above all that exists and

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<sup>20</sup> Boris BOBRINSKOY, *Le Mystère de la Trinité*, Éditions du CERF, Paris 1996, p. 143-145.

<sup>21</sup> Sfântul MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Cele două sute de capete teologice*, Filocalia românească, vol. 2, translator Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Harisma, Bucureşti 1993, p. 195.

established in a super-essential way, beyond all that is. Silence better represents that which no word can reach (for it is impossible to rise above the word) than speech. However, we know it only from around it (insofar as it is), manifesting through certain obscure echoes — and these only to those who have purified their mind”<sup>22</sup>.

## Conclusions

In this theological sense, the symbol awakens and sustains the human spirit's relation to transcendence. From a dogmatic perspective, the symbol is solely and entirely about transcendence. Transcendence can be contemplated through it, and the believer becomes a liturgical person. That *otherness* to which the Mosaic and Christian religious symbols point is transcendence<sup>23</sup>. Iconography and liturgical symbolism, through their extraordinary realism, can have a particular influence on the struggle of those concerned with defending the psychic and material environment. Matter becomes a sacred place. Through their holiness, the symbol, the image, and the icon refuse to create a rupture between God, man, and creation. They recapitulate the signs of God's presence - the theophanies - in creation. They are arches in the sky, a burning bush<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Fundamental ontologic al simbolului*, in *Studii Teologice*, no. 7-8/1957, p. 443.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Simbolul ca anticipare și temei al posibilității icoanei*, in *Studii Teologice*, no. 7-8/1957, p. 431.

<sup>24</sup> Ion BRIA, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

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