

Religious symbolism and Scouting

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The term “symbol” is a term quite difficult to define. In ordinary usage, it enjoys a wide variety of meanings. In science it can even be thought to be a base-term in fields as diverse as linguistics, philosophy, theology and mathematics (to mention just a few), but, again, it is questionable whether one may find a single comprehensive pattern to explain and order this diversity. It certainly is often the case that two people or groups may use the same term and nonetheless refer to something entirely different. In many such cases no effort should be made to find a conceptual scheme that justifies the diversity of use. Quite simply, it is not true that the original conceptual core of a term has inherently so many stock-meanings by means of which one can trace back and account for every-day articulations that may even be entirely contradictory.

I believe that this is certainly not the case with the term symbol. It may seem that the use of the term “symbol” in mathematics and religion is so remote that no common pattern can be sought, but in fact, it can. To put it generally, *to make a symbol is to express or refer to something by means of something else*. In mathematics, one uses artificial notations, i.e. symbols, in place of words for the sake of brevity and perspicuity¹. In Christian religion one may use the cross to express some deeply rooted tenets of faith. If we are right in our thus identifying the nature of a symbol, we find ourselves perplexed by the variety of things that can be said to be symbols. Almost everything is possibly a symbol, or, to state things more distinctly, almost everything can be made a symbol. Human imagination finds ways to express anything by means of anything.

Symbols differ in numerous ways (for instance content, style, rules of use etc.). But there is a certain structural aspect by means of which one may divide all symbols in two categories: arbitrary and non-arbitrary symbols. Arbitrary does not mean surreal nor does it mean paradoxical. In this context it means “unexplainable”.

¹ Cf. R. Carnap, *Introduction to Symbolic Logic and its Applications*, New York: Dover, 1958, p. 2.

An arbitrary symbol is a symbol for which we can find no reason why it has been specifically made the means to express or refer to the thing symbolized. The most telling example of a generally arbitrary system of symbols is human language². (Human language can be said to be the root of all symbols in general. If there weren't language no other symbols would be possible). As anyone may confirm, the word "dog" by means of which English-speaking people refer to a certain animal has no natural bond with the animal 'dog' itself. What English speakers call "dog", French speakers call "chien", German speakers call "Hund" and Greek speakers call "skylos". In all cases it is exactly the same thing that is being symbolized and not only there is no reason to consider, for instance, the word "chien" more appropriate than the word "Hund" to refer to a 'dog', but moreover, all choices are arbitrary: the sound "dog" has nothing to do with the animal 'dog'. It is only its name. There is nothing inherent to the name "dog" to make it suitable to name a 'dog' and nothing inherent in a 'dog' to be named by exactly the name "dog".

Non-arbitrary symbols are in fact what most people have come to call symbols. We make something a symbol, precisely because it relates somehow, most often in a way familiar, to the thing symbolized. The heart is made the symbol of love because it is the heart we feel beating fast when we are in love with somebody. The cross is a symbol for Christian faith because it is in the cross that Jesus died, etc.

Religious faith has always been expressed by the use of non-arbitrary symbols, symbolizing both the object (God) as well as basic tenets (dogma) of faith. However, monotheistic theology (mainly) affirms that symbolic expression of God is largely arbitrary. All three monotheistic religions hold that language may only incompletely express the truth about God. The use of Divine Names in a sense fails to refer to the 'thing' symbolized. No one has ever "seen" or fully "understood" God. God's nature surpasses our understanding. Thus our talking about God is in a two-fold sense arbitrary. There is no guarantee that the words we use to express (our faith in) God are the correct ones. No natural bond can be attested between 'God' and our words for Him. And it may also be the case that no symbols whatsoever can express God.

This note may seem too apophatic to account for the richness of "positive" symbols with which even monotheistic faith has expressed itself. Not knowing God does not necessarily mean that we know nothing about Him. Almost all religions have

² Cf. F. De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Athens: Papazisis, 1979, pp. 101 ff.

a positive dogma about God(s) and His or their relation to humanity. Thus it is only natural that people will use symbols to express this faith.

The use of symbols in religion is too complex to be analyzed in this brief essay. However, we could note an important observation about religious symbolism. A dogma may sometimes be too complex or too abstract to express our affections. God is not just an object of our fragile understanding but, mainly, of our affection. We believe in God, we trust God, we love God. People need intimate symbols to express about God existential states that pervade their life, and this cannot be fully attained by any dogma. Dogma is always needed to provide the core of our faith. But faith itself embraces every aspect of our life. We need symbols that relate God to our everyday life. This is the source of all religious art and all religious sayings and gestures. A Christian house usually has an icon of God; a Muslim cannot spend a day without praying to God. People build temples, make up chants and hymns, and sculpt statues. Religious symbolism is found anywhere and everywhere.

It is this “existential” aspect of religious symbolism that I find more related to education and scouting. Although I do not think that knowledge and ethics can be clearly separated, it is certainly the case that what children can *know* about God and the world surrounding them, does not automatically render them capable of developing *feelings* and *ethical inclinations* towards them. Religious symbolism can in effect accomplish this. By the use of non-arbitrary symbols, children can develop feelings towards God and the world. It is through symbols that they will relate religious teachings to their life and everyday activity.

Scouting expresses itself by means of symbols. Scouts wear a uniform each part of which symbolizes something concrete for Scouting ethics and activity. It is full of meaningful gestures and rituals, bit by bit relating what we could Scouting “philosophy” to Scouting activity. I take it thus to be a very natural step for Scouting to promote children’s education through religious symbolism as well.

Of course, scouting should keep clear of the temptation to educate the youth in a religious way. Scouts do not do dogmatics nor do they engage in theology. What I have in mind is a two-fold connection between Scouting and Religious symbolism. In a first sense, Scouting could be enormously boosted by the use of religious symbolism that has a similar use and content with scouting symbolism. If some symbols Scouts use have a similar impact and object with some symbols of religious expression, then both should be appreciated and be interweaved. But if this were the only connection

to be sought after, it would diminish what is essential to Scouting and what is essential to religion, to something that just both of them share. I thus believe, that what Scouting education should promote is religious symbolism in itself and not in so far it occasionally complies with scouting education. Scouting is a perfect means to promote spiritual development. We value spiritual development because we deem it a necessary condition to ethical activity as a whole. Scouting is not a world-view, it does not seek to explain everything, but it can certainly pave the way for children to embrace a world-view and an orientation in life. If it is correct that religious symbolism can ease the way to children's spiritual development and if it is correct that Scouting should promote spiritual development, it is certainly correct that Scouting should promote religious expression and symbolism.

I would like to repeat once more that this in no way means that Scout leaders should become Theologians or Teachers of Dogma. I simply mean to say that when children search to find a religious understanding and living of the world by means of symbols, Scout leaders should not be absent from this undertaking. They should encourage and guide it, not reject it.