

Cambridge Theological Federation

MA in Pastoral Theology

**M915 Christian Worship & Human Community**

**REPORT ASSIGNMENT**

Ian Mobsby, Jan 04.

“How does symbol open up the imagination  
transformatively through worship?” (2000Words).

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As Buren has said “*Some people are struck by the ordinary...Seeing the ordinary as extraordinary, as a cause of wonderment*”. (1968:170-1).<sup>1</sup> This report aims to explore how the use of symbols in Christian worship enables participants to encounter God. The meaning and significance of the terms ‘worship, sign, symbol and imagination’ will be defined, and followed by a brief exploration of how symbolism enables world making and ‘enchristing’ through cognitive dissonance and plausibility structures to enable transformative worship. Finally, this report will explore the inherent dangers of symbolic worship.

‘Worship’ is understood to be ‘the gathering, encounter, transformation and mission’ of the Christian community as the body of Christ with and to God.<sup>2</sup> Christian worship is not how we seek to contact God; it is a celebration of how God has touched us, has united us to himself and is ever present to us.<sup>3</sup> By so doing, the Christian Community are responding to God and being ‘enchristed’. God is being made present through the Holy Spirit, enabling people to participate in the eternal-made-present Christ, through changed lives and action.<sup>4</sup> Worship defines an alternative universe of reality for people adrift in our present context of an unrelenting secular stream of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Enchisting is then ‘understanding God’ through encounter, rather than ‘learning about God’. This understanding can come through ritual, biblical storytelling and other forms of symbolic worship.<sup>6</sup>

The concepts of sign and symbol have been studied from many perspectives. A sign is defined as ‘bringing definitive information and accumulate fact. Signs do not operate large new vistas of knowledge or experience. They invite simple recognition and response.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Buren as quoted in J.V. Taylor *The Go Between God*, (London: SCM, 1975), 12.

<sup>2</sup> I.H. Marshall *Worship* in I H Marshall, A R Millard, J I Packer, D J Wiseman *New Bible Dictionary*, (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 1250.

<sup>3</sup> R. Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, (Collegeville, USA: Liturgical Press, 1993),340-1.

<sup>4</sup> R. Taft , *The Liturgy*, 26, 334-45.

<sup>5</sup> L.A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, (Woodstock, USA: Skylight Path Publishing, 1999),13.

<sup>6</sup> *The Go*, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> N. Mitchell, *Sign, Symbol* as recorded in P.F. Bradshaw (ed.) *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy And Worship*, (London: SCM, 2002), 438-40.

A symbol is defined as 'an experience or action that discloses new and unexpected meaning. A Symbol is strongly associated with experience in three forms; as an experience of inexhaustible meaning; as initiated by a source beyond the participant's power or control; as doing and giving what it embodies.'<sup>7</sup> Such symbols are immediately apprehended and seem self-evident, so people hold on to them with considerable emotional tenacity. Verbal description of a symbol's significance is by definition superfluous and inadequate as it is dealing with mystery. In a ritual that deals with group experience, the symbol's significance must be shared by the members of the group.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars talk of the importance of using 'official symbols'. These are symbols that reflect orthodox sign meaning or value such as bread and wine.<sup>9 10 11</sup> Additionally there are incidental symbols, which became symbols associated with an event or experience by accident. They may be group symbols but are not public ones. Symbols used in traditional public acts of Christian worship tend to be official.<sup>11</sup> All symbols are by their nature elusive but take hold of experience and give it form and expression in such a way that it becomes accessible to thought. Symbols are an abstraction and liberate thought from the purely immediate present physical world.<sup>12 13</sup>

In Christian worship both sign and symbol are signifiers to God and Christ as the signified. These signifiers can be anything but usually objects, art, liturgy, biblical story or song. The concept of the 'numinous' comes from the Latin 'to nod or beckon'.<sup>14</sup> Truly numinous experience of the symbolic creates a sense of awe, of seeing surplus meaning that can enable individuals and worshipping communities to encounter God and be challenged by the unexpected.<sup>15</sup> What ever else they do, the sense of making Christ present through collective experience is vital.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Art*, 39-41.

<sup>9</sup> G Cray *The Eucharist and the Post-modern* in P. Ward (ed.) *Mass Culture*, (Oxford: BRF, 1999), 74-94.

<sup>10</sup> J Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, (London: DLT, 2000), 28-9, 96-101, 154-7.

<sup>11</sup> *The Art*, 41-2. K Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), 34-41.

<sup>12</sup> L. Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 8.

<sup>13</sup> D. Powell, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy*, (Collegeville USA :Liturgical Press, 1989), 68-9.

<sup>14</sup> *The Go*, 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> D. Torevell, *Loosing the Sacred: Ritual, Modernity and Liturgical Reform*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 173.

The human imagination has a key part to play in transcendent encounter through symbolism. The inexpressible nature of the transcendent perplexes the mind in its search for adequate symbols.<sup>16</sup> Traditionally philosophers have connected religious symbols with the imagination.<sup>17</sup> Holding a worldview is about a collective consciousness founded on the human imagination. Scholars have talked of two ways of knowing, the first by attention to seeing, creative exploring, meditation and reflection, or the more scientific critical questioning.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> The former approach to knowing utilises the imagination. We do not live in a world but a picture of it, and therefore as human beings we look all the time for imaginative symbolic ways of expressing meaning in the worldviews we hold.<sup>20</sup> These world-views or 'symbol systems' represent the structure of reality and are therefore models of reality.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Christian worship uses symbolism to enable participants to encounter God through the human imagination, promoting a Christ-centred worldview or mediated reality. To understand how imagination and symbolism build worldviews we must turn briefly to cognitive psychology.

Religious belief occupies a position of dominance in the cognitive system of the believer. In worshipping God, in giving up their life to follow Christ, the Christian is expressing their worldview.<sup>22</sup> Symbols, when incorporated into worship can bring deep levels of unexpected meaning. These challenge the world-views of those participating in worship, which can lead to cognitive dissonance, which brings a tension between the experience and the knowledge of the participants.<sup>23</sup> Cognitive dissonance makes those involved feel uncomfortable until they have interpreted this new depth of meaning. In the context of Christian worship such dissonance causes, allows or discloses new aspects of the concept of God and spiritual enquiry, whilst challenging fixed assumptions through experience.<sup>24</sup> For example, there are connections between the way Jesus used parables and cognitive dissonance. In these stories Jesus describes ordinary situations and objects but then draws connections with eternal or spiritual meaning which reveal

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<sup>16</sup> *Symbols of the Sacred*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Symbols of the Sacred*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *The Go*, 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> M. J. Dawn. *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 92-143.

<sup>20</sup> W. Stevens quotes in J. Dury *Symbol* as recorded in R.J. Cogging, J.L. Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), 655-7.

<sup>21</sup> G. Furniss, *Sociology for Pastoral Care*, (London: SPCK, 1995), 33-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Reaching Out*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Reaching Out*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> *Reaching Out*, 97-100.

shocking multi-layered meaning. By doing so Jesus was enabling people to experience eternal truths using symbol and cognitive dissonance through the human imagination.<sup>25</sup>

However, Symbolism, imagination and cognitive dissonance on their own do not create transformative worship and here we need to consider the importance of interpretative communities, ritual action and praxis.

As has been indicated, those attending worship services are not passive viewers. Firstly, they are 'interpretive communities' in the sense that they ensure that symbols maintain their official and orthodox sign value.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, when new levels of meaning are found by individuals, the other participants play a key part in the interpretation of these new sign values and their authenticity. This function has been described as a 'plausibility structure' which reinforces world-views of symbolic meaning by bringing stability and viability. These plausibility structures are social constructions. In this context it is the local 'body of Christ' or Church that plays a key part in 'reality maintenance' whose approving or disapproving reactions maintain what is true, untrue, real and plausible.<sup>27</sup>

Further to this, it has been shown that signs do not bring transformation through their fixed definitions. Such change requires deep symbolic experiences to occur for individuals and communities.<sup>28</sup> In this way symbols can connect with people who change their habits as a result. Christians speak of conversion moments, when the spiritual truth suddenly becomes patently clear.<sup>28</sup> Such symbolic-led transformation occurs when Symbols are less defined and more mysterious.

Such change depends on the relationship between symbols endowed with great personal significance and accompanying ritual moments.<sup>29</sup> Ritual moments reinforce this acquired meaning through action, where meaning and values can be created and communicated as words, objects, gestures and actions.<sup>30</sup> In this way, ritual action within worship

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<sup>25</sup> L. Green, *Power to the Powerless*, (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987), 18-36.

<sup>26</sup> P. Janowiak, *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly*, (Collegeville, USA: Liturgical Press, 2000), 151.

<sup>27</sup> *Sociology*, 33-5.

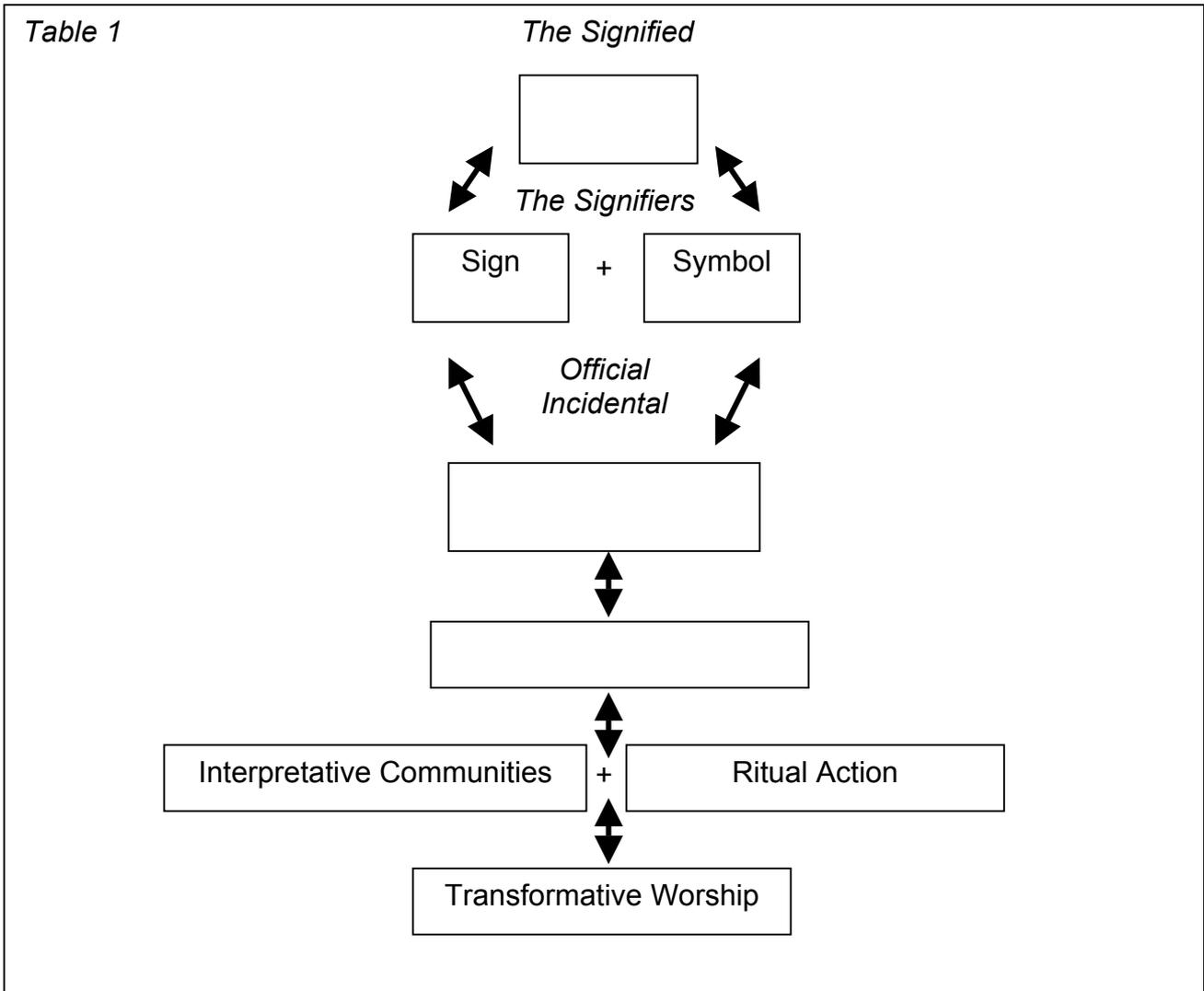
<sup>28</sup> *The Art*, 47-8.

<sup>29</sup> *The Art*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> M.M. Kelleher, *The Liturgical Body: Symbol and Ritual* in B.T. Morrill (ed.) *Bodies of Worship : explorations in theory and practice*, (Collegeville USA: Liturgical Press, 1999), 54-5.

provides the means of transformation by its performance of a pattern for changed understanding and behaviour, and through its invitation to the participants to act and live lives according to the values encountered in the rite.<sup>31</sup>

Such profound symbol-led, plausible and ritually reinforced transformation through worship should then lead the church to praxis – right action in the world. See Table 1, a summary of the construct of how Symbol in worship leads to transformative worship.



<sup>31</sup> *Losing the Sacred*, 187.

We now turn to the potential dangers of using imaginative symbolic worship, which could prevent such worship from being transformative.

Firstly is the nature of symbols and signs. When presenting a symbol in a worship context, there is no guarantee that the participants will be able to access the symbol and may interpret it as a sign.<sup>32</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that the attentive sensing described above is a creative skill or a 'discipline' that people need to learn. Secondly, participants may have these attention skills but are only able to access official sign meaning and not find multi-layered meaning. They may also find incidental symbol meanings which are not orthodox.<sup>33</sup> If symbols are not defined, (by their nature their meaning is ambiguous), then there is real danger that participants can attributed sign meaning to symbols that meet their own views and values, rather than receiving some form of orthodox revelation. Some writers have emphasised that such worship has in the past enabled heresies such as Gnosticism and some forms of pantheism to creep into Christian Worship.<sup>34 35</sup> In today's 'pick-and-mix' spiritual context, there is real danger that symbols could be interpreted from such a paradigm of a fusion of gnosticism, pantheism and humanistic philosophy.<sup>34</sup> Such worship would cease to be Christian let alone transformative. We have also assumed that people experience symbolism in Christian as positive. Unfortunately some people associate negative value and meaning to symbolism in Christian Worship due to bad past experiences, which were over dependent on signs.<sup>36</sup>

We need to consider the relationship between symbols and cultural context. Some writers have emphasised that religious symbols can become 'tired' over time or anachronistic.<sup>37</sup> Here originally powerful and significant symbols can over time or because of certain social circumstances loose their relevance and become empty and in some cases, become profoundly unhelpful: For example, symbols that emphasise God as warrior in today's context. However, such symbols can also re-find their significance. A good example of this is Rublev's icon of the Trinity. Originally a profound spiritual symbol, which was disregarded as superstition during the Russian revolution, but today as a meaningful symbol for many, of the nature of the Trinity. There has been an increasing

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<sup>32</sup> *The Art*, 47-8.

<sup>33</sup> *The Art*, 42-45.

<sup>34</sup> *The Eucharist*, 74-94.

<sup>35</sup> *The McDonalization*, 154-7.

<sup>36</sup> *The Art*, 56-7.

awareness of the need for the creation of new symbols that resonate with contemporary culture for Christian worship, which comes with the tensions of how you ensure that these are authentic and can be embedded into ritual actions of worship.<sup>38</sup>

Lastly concerning symbols, are the problems of over-sanctification and idolatry. The Church to this day remains divided on these issues that arose out of the reformation. Over-sanctification is the result of making a symbol 'overly holy' or important. This results in making the meaning fixed and controls the official sign value.<sup>39</sup> This has in church history been used to control both people and doctrine<sup>39</sup> and can be dangerously manipulative and destructive. Such over-sanctification is a destructive illusion, a false sanctification, which is idolatry.<sup>39</sup> All symbolism needs to be authentic and earthed and not at odds with the received tradition and scripture if it is to facilitate true Christian imaginative and transformative worship. Rightly in my view a healthy level of critical awareness regarding religious symbolism prevents such over-sanctification and potential idolatry.

A final problem that results from contemporary culture is a consumer approach to participation in worship. Many people go to worship services as some form of performance or entertainment and are unwilling to be changed by it.<sup>40 41 42</sup> This will not facilitate transformative worship and can prevent the local church from being true 'interpretative communities', preventing any revelation 'too challenging' and solidifying an image of God. Such abuse of the plausibility structures can distance people from God.

In our post-modern social context where many are searching for God who largely disregard metanarratives.<sup>34</sup> The use of symbolism in Christian worship gives us a real opportunity to enable people to experience, encounter and know God in culturally accessible ways where there are few alternatives.

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<sup>37</sup> B. Draper, K. Draper, *Refreshing Worship*, (Oxford: BRF, 2000), 76-80.

<sup>38</sup> *Loosing the Sacred*, 173-4.

<sup>39</sup> R. Kappaport, *Ritual & Religion*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 440-56.

<sup>40</sup> *Refreshing*, 76-81.

<sup>41</sup> E. Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their postmodern effacement and reclamation*, (Valley Forge, USA: Trinity Press, 1996), 1-12.

<sup>42</sup> *Sociology*, 32.

To conclude: this report has defined worship and explored the meaning and function of sign, symbol and the imagination. The relevance and connection to the formation of a shared worldview as models of reality were made. Cognitive Psychology was explored to understand what happens when a symbol challenges a worldview through cognitive dissonance, which discloses new aspects of God through worship. The importance of interpretive communities was identified as plausibility structures, or a 'reality check', to reinforce the importance of what is orthodox. Lastly, that transformative worship depends on the provision of symbols in worship rather than signs was identified, and the importance noted, of associated ritual moments, if praxis was to be realised by the worshipping community.

In the final section, the potential dangers of symbolic worship were explored including the problems of accessing symbolism, potential unorthodox and idolatrous interpretations, and issues that arise out of cultural change. However, the use of symbolism in Christian worship in a post-modern context was identified as essential to enable people to encounter and know God.

In this way, symbolism in worship through the imagination enables transformation, as Christ is made present and real through the Holy Spirit.

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