

Safeguarding the Symbols of Urantian Faith

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David Kantor

Based upon Paul Tillich's book, Dynamics of Faith

1. The Meaning of Symbol

The authors of The Urantia Book comment at 100:6.1 (p 1100) that, "Religion is not a specific function of life; rather is it a mode of living. True religion is a wholehearted devotion to some reality which the religionist deems to be of supreme value to himself and for all mankind." In his theological writing, Paul Tillich uses the term "ultimate concern" to symbolize what The Urantia Book is referring to as "wholehearted devotion."

Tillich contends that our "ultimate concern" must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate, which we can experientially know (through worship) as being far beyond word or description. This statement demands explanation in several respects. In spite of the manifold research about the meaning and function of symbols which is going on in contemporary philosophy, every writer who uses the term "symbol" must explain his understanding of it.

Consider the comment made by the revelators at 112:2.7 (p 1228): "As mind pursues reality to its ultimate analysis, matter vanishes to the material senses but may still remain real to mind. When spiritual insight pursues that reality which remains after the disappearance of matter and pursues it to an ultimate analysis, it vanishes to mind, but the insight of spirit can still perceive cosmic realities and supreme values of a spiritual nature. Accordingly does science give way to philosophy, while philosophy must surrender to the conclusions inherent in genuine spiritual experience? Thinking surrenders to wisdom, and wisdom is lost in enlightened and reflective worship."

The symbol may be understood as that which occupies mind as it begins to make the transit from thought to worship. In various cultures these sacred symbols may take an almost endless variety of forms from ritual dancing to passages contained in a sacred text. The symbol mediates the presence of the divine to the mortal mind, but the symbol is transcended once consciousness embraces the reality to which the symbol points.

Symbols have one characteristic in common with signs in that they point beyond themselves to something else. The red light at the street corner points to the order to stop the movements of cars at certain intervals. A red light and the stopping of cars have essentially no relation to each other, but in common usage they may be united as long as such a convention is maintained by participating persons. The same is true of letters and numbers and sometimes even of words — they point beyond themselves to sounds and meanings. They are given this special function by convention within a nation or by international conventions, such as agreement regarding mathematical signs. Sometimes such signs are called symbols; but this is unfortunate because it makes the distinction between signs and symbols more difficult. Decisive is the fact that signs do not participate in the reality of that to which they point (stop signs), while symbols do (a mandala or the cross of Christianity). Therefore, signs can be replaced for reasons of expediency or convention, while symbols cannot. The second characteristic of the symbol then, is that it participates in that to which it points by evoking a response from deeper levels of mind, as contrasted with a sign which merely asks us to recognize a socially contrived convention.

The third characteristic of a symbol is that it opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us. All arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way. Music, a painting or a poem may reveal elements of reality which cannot be approached scientifically or through logical deduction. In the creative work of art we encounter reality in a dimension which is closed for us without such works.

The symbol's fourth characteristic not only opens up dimensions and elements of reality which otherwise would remain unapproachable, but also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality. A great play gives us not only a new vision of the human scene, but opens up hidden depths of our own being. Thus we are able to receive what the play reveals to us in reality. There are within us dimensions of which we cannot become aware except through symbols, such as those which are brought into consciousness by certain melodies and rhythms in music.

The fifth characteristic of sacred symbols is that they cannot be produced intentionally. They grow out of the individual or collective unconscious and cannot function without being accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being. Symbols which have an especially social function, as political and religious symbols, are created or at least accepted by the collective unconscious of the group in which they appear.

The sixth and last characteristic of the symbol is a consequence of the fact that symbols cannot be invented. Like living beings, they grow and they die. They grow when the situation is ripe for them, and they die when the situation changes. The symbol of the “king” grew in a special period of history, and it died in most parts of the world in our period. Symbols do not grow because people are longing for them, and they do not die because of scientific or practical criticism. They die because they lose the power to produce a particular response in the group in which they originally found expression.

These are the main characteristics of every symbol. Genuine symbols are created in several spheres of man’s cultural creativity. We have mentioned already the artistic realm. We could add history, politics, religion and, in the case of Urantians, symbols given as a gift by revelation.

2. Religious Symbols and Spiritual Life

We have discussed the meaning of symbols generally because, as we said, man’s ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically! One may ask: Why can it not be expressed directly and properly? If money, success or the nation is someone’s ultimate concern, can this not be said in a direct way without symbolic language? Is it not only in those cases in which the content of the ultimate concern is called “God” that we are in the realm of symbols? The answer is that anything which is a matter of unconditional concern becomes a god in the life of the person whose life is oriented toward that particular concern. If the nation is someone’s ultimate concern, the name of the nation becomes a sacred name and the nation receives divine qualities which far surpass the reality of the being and functioning of the nation. The nation then stands for and symbolizes the true ultimate for that person, but in an idolatrous way.

In this context it should be kept in mind that one’s ultimate concern is, by definition, that central concern relative to which all other values and meanings of both the personal and social life are made subordinate. The extent to which one’s ultimate concern is the preservation of a social role, a belief system, an ideology, or a even a community is the extent to which one’s faith has become idolatrous — simply because that which should be the transcendent nature of one’s ultimate concern has become embodied in something finite.

These insights of Tillich’s are expressed in *The Urantia Book* at 100:6.2 (p 1100) where the revelators comment that, “The accepted supreme value of the religionist may be base or even false, but it is nevertheless religious. A religion is genuine to just the extent that the value which is held to be supreme is truly a cosmic reality of genuine spiritual worth.”

Economic, political or institutional success as ultimate concern is not the natural desire of Adjuster-indwelt personalities. Rather does such an ultimate concern demonstrate mortal readiness to sacrifice all other values of life for the sake of a position of power and social predominance? The anxiety about not being an economic or professional success is an idolatrous form of the anxiety about divine condemnation. Success becomes viewed as grace; lack of success, ultimate judgment. In this way concepts designating ordinary realities become idolatrous symbols of ultimate concern.

It is important to appreciate that the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely. Therefore, no finite reality can express it directly and properly. The language of faith is the language of symbols. God is the fundamental symbol for that which concerns us ultimately.

In the idea of God we must distinguish two elements: the element of ultimacy, which is a matter of immediate spiritual experience and not symbolic in itself, and the element which is taken from our ordinary experience and symbolically used to represent this experience in thought and conversation. The person whose ultimate concern is a sacred tree has both the ultimacy of concern and the concreteness of the tree which he uses to symbolize his relation to the ultimate. The person who glorifies Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, has both an ultimate concern and a concrete image of what concerns him ultimately. For many Urantians, *The Urantia Book* itself has become such a symbol, representing an ultimate concern even for individuals who do not grasp very much of its content as well as mediating access to the divine for many who take the time to explore its conceptual landscape. But *The Urantia Book* can also become the focus of idolatry when values demanded by loyalty to deity are sacrificed to temporal objectives related to the book as a source of material, social and religious power.

God is the primary symbol of faith, but not the only one. All the qualities we attribute to him — power, love, justice — are taken from finite experiences and applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude and infinity. If faith calls God “almighty,” it uses the human experience of power in order to symbolize the content of its ultimate concern. So it is with all the other qualities and with all the actions, past, present and future, which we attribute to God. They are conceptual symbols taken from our daily experience, and not necessarily information about what God did once upon a time or will do sometime in the future. Faith is not the belief that such stories are literally true; rather is faith the acceptance of such stories as symbolic expressions of our ultimate concern in terms of divine actions.

Another group of symbols of faith are manifestations of the divine in things and events, in persons and communities, in words, documents and books. This whole realm of sacred objects is a treasure of symbols. Holy things are not holy in themselves, but holy in a human sense because they point beyond themselves to the source of all holiness, that which is of ultimate concern.

3. Symbols and Myths

The symbols of faith do not appear in isolation. They are united in “stories of the gods,” which is the meaning of the Greek word “mythos” — myth. In Greek mythology the gods are individualized figures, analogous to human personalities, sexually differentiated, descending from each other, related to each other in love and struggle, producing world and humanity, acting in time and space. They participate in human greatness and misery, in creative and destructive works. They give to man cultural and religious traditions, and defend these sacred rites. They help and threaten the human race, especially some families, tribes or nations. They appear in epiphanies and incarnations, establish sacred places, rites and persons, and thus create a cult. But they themselves are under the command and threat of a fate which is beyond everything that is. This is mythology as developed most impressively in ancient Greece. It is the world of the myth, great and strange, always changing but fundamentally the same: Man’s ultimate concern symbolized in divine figures and actions. Myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters.

It is interesting to note in this regard that The Urantia Book, in its presentation of a theology of interpersonal relationships, develops its mythology around the relationships between the gods and the activities repercussing in the time/space domains as a result of those interpersonal relationships. In our mythology, these relationships between the gods become archetypal elements within the minds of those mortals actively pursuing the goal of cosmic citizenship through service relationships with their fellows.

Thus the concentric circles symbol provided by the Urantia revelation is integrated with and expressive of the core content of the revelation. It is a symbol which allows us to integrate our understanding of Michael’s bestowal, his universe government, and the overcontrol of the Paradise Trinity in the processes of Supremacy—our growing relationships with each other and with God.

4. Urantian Symbols

If we accept the idea that one of the primary purposes of the fifth epochal revelation is to revitalize spiritual life and religious living on our planet, we can look at the revelation and ask, “What tools have the revelators provided in order to help us realize this purpose?” Given what we know about the mythological and symbolic content of religious expression, there are three gifts contained within the revelation which can support Urantian religion. These are: 1) The remembrance supper; 2) The prayers in Paper 144; and 3) The concentric circles symbol.

In visiting groups of readers all over North America and in a number of foreign countries, these three elements of the revelation always seem to emerge naturally in readership communities as symbolic touchstones of shared commitment to the teachings of the revelation. The remembrance supper is engaged in as a “symbolic rendezvous with Michael.” The prayers in section 5 of Paper 144 are often used for liturgical purposes. The concentric circles symbol is invariably used in the form of a banner or large poster at the front of rooms in which meetings are held. It is also used in a manner similar to the fish symbol of early Christianity to guide people to places where meetings are being held – on signposts in parking lots or along walkways.

The preservation of these religious treasures which have been given as gifts to us from the revelators is honored when we use them for the religious purposes for which they were provided. They are desecrated when used for secular purposes, such as the attempted use of the concentric circles symbol to designate commercial goods and services or a business plan.

Because of the religious nature of these symbols, the responsibility for their protection cannot lie anywhere else than with the readership — a readership which has the choice of using these symbols to represent the realities to which they relate in the revelation, or to allow their spiritual and symbolic power to be destroyed by using them as mere commercial signs. The spiritual power of these symbolic tools with which future generations of Urantians might facilitate the appearance of a new age of religion on our world depends upon choices which each of us make in our daily lives — choices as to how we will use and understand the sacred symbols of the fifth epochal revelation and the degree to which we are willing to tolerate their misuse.

