

THE SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

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WITH A FAIR degree of unanimity theologians would be willing to describe revelation as the action of God whereby He communicates to intelligent creatures knowledge or awareness of what normally lies beyond their ken. Generally speaking, Christians agree further that such a disclosure on God's part is a free action motivated by love. Beyond this, there is a growing consensus that God's revelation is always in some sense self-revelation. This last point, forcefully set forth by Hegel, has become dominant in Protestant theology through its acceptance by Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, H. Richard Niebuhr, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and a host of others. It is also dominant in Catholic theology, which generally regards God's manifestation of His will and plans for the world as inseparable from His self-manifestation. Vatican Council I declared that by revelation God supernaturally manifests "Himself and the eternal decrees of His will."¹ Vatican II echoed this statement in its declaration: "In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known the hidden purpose of His will. . . ."² For the purposes of this article, it will be assumed that the content of revelation is always God, not simply in Himself but in relation to our world and to ourselves.

Rather than delay over these relatively noncontroversial points, we may proceed immediately to the heart of the current theological debate. How is revelation initially communicated? How does God's self-manifestation make its entrance into the human mind? And what, if any, kind of truth may be claimed for revelation? Does it have the truth of ordinary declarative discourse or some other kind of truth more akin to that of poetry and myth? On questions such as these there is nothing resembling a consensus. Theologians generally argue to their respective positions on the basis of the particular paradigms to which they are committed, without seeking to meet on its own ground the argumentation proposed

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¹ Vatican Council I, Constitution *Dei Filius*, chap. 2 (DS 3004). On the relationship between God's self-revelation and the revelation of His decrees, see H. R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks ed., 1960) 125.

² Vatican II, Constitution *Dei verbum*, no. 2. In quotations from this Constitution the translation in W. M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) will be followed. The expression "the hidden purpose of His will" in the passage just quoted corresponds to the Latin "sacramentum voluntatis suae." The reference is to Eph 1:9, "the mystery of His will."

by those who proceed from other paradigms.

Without implying that each theologian can be neatly fitted into some one ideal type, we may conveniently classify the dominant approaches to revelation under the following five headings: the propositional, the historical, the mystical, the dialectical, and the symbolic. In connection with each of these types of theory it may be asked how revelation is mediated and what kind of truth it has. Since I wish to concentrate chiefly on the symbolic theory of revelation, I shall touch very briefly on each of the other four. After a fuller examination of the symbolic approach I shall return, for purposes of comparison, to each of the first four approaches.

I

By the propositional type I mean the theory that revelation is given in the form of ideas that can be adequately expressed in propositional speech—that is to say, in conceptual language that is amenable to syllogistic logic. For centuries it has been common to say that divine revelation consists of truths set forth in the Bible and in authoritative Church pronouncements. The Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and the First Vatican Council in the nineteenth seem to have assumed that such was the case, although their words left room for a broader understanding of revelation. Many scholastic authors, from Juan de Lugo in the seventeenth century to Christian Pesch and others in the twentieth, have insisted that supernatural revelation (as distinct from natural revelation) is communicated in the form of propositional speech. Conservative evangelical theologians, such as Gordon H. Clark, Clark Pinnock, James I. Packer, and Carl F. H. Henry, continue to assert that God has embodied His revelation in propositional language so that it can make a definite claim on our assent.³

In this theory the truth-aspect of revelation offers no special problems. Revelation is true in the same sense that scientific and factual statements are—that is to say, by correspondence between the mental representation and the reality to which it refers. But we cannot assume without discussion that the propositional theory is correct. It has been under severe attack throughout the past century and is clearly on the defensive in our time.⁴ The majority of contemporary theologians, with whom I would align myself, consider this view, taken in itself, too intellectualistic, too

³ According to C. F. H. Henry, "God's revelation is rational communication conveyed in intelligible ideas and meaningful words, that is, in conceptual-verbal form." This thesis is proposed in *God, Revelation, and Authority* 2 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976) 12, and is defended at length *ibid.* 4 (1979) 248-484.

⁴ Speaking of contemporary theology, Ray L. Hart observes: "No proposition would gain wider acceptance than the following one: the *content* of revelation is not a body of propositions to be accepted as the condition of faith" (*Unfinished Man and the Imagination* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1968] 80).

abstract, too supernaturalistic, and too rigid. But this is not to deny that the meaning of revelation can be mediated through true propositions, as we shall see below.

The second major approach to revelation in current theology is designated as historical. There are several forms of this theory, but for the present I shall advert only to the most extreme, which would hold that God reveals Himself not just by inspiring a prophetic interpretation of ambiguous events but by producing in history events with a clear meaning accessible to all reasonable observers. In the 1950's the biblical theologian George Ernest Wright maintained that revelation was originally and adequately imparted through God's deeds in history.⁵ More recently Wolfhart Pannenberg and his circle have contended that revelation is objectively given in historical events which, under the cool scrutiny of reason, can be unequivocally interpreted as having a specific meaning.⁶ It is basic to this theory that revelatory events are self-interpreting: God speaks the language of facts. In opposition to the first school, Pannenberg denies that revelation is actually given in the form of words. Words, he holds, can promise a revelation yet to be given; they can subsequently report what has been revealed through deeds; but they are not themselves revelation.

On this second theory there is, again, no particular problem in seeing how revelation can be true. The truth of the deed is that of its evident significance. When translated into propositional statements, historical revelation has the speculative kind of truth that attaches to philosophical judgments about the import of history. Pannenberg's own doctrine of revelation is in essence a comprehensive theory of the meaning and end of universal history.

Pannenberg's theses, however, are subject to serious objections. Important though history may be as a medium of revelation, it is doubtful whether an academic historian, unmotivated by religious concerns, could be convinced by the biblical accounts, contemplated in the light of universal reason, that revelation had in fact occurred. Nor does it seem that the biblical authors themselves regarded historical events, apart from any inspired interpretation or prophetic commentary, as a sufficient channel of revelation.

According to a third modern theory, much in vogue in the early part of the present century, revelation occurs essentially through an inner experience of the divine, quasi-mystical in character. Such is, in a general

⁵ G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952).

⁶ W. Pannenberg and others, *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) esp. 132-33. In order to bring out what is distinctive in Pannenberg's position, I have inevitably simplified it, especially in view of his own subsequent explanations, e.g., in *Basic Questions in Theology 2* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 28-64.

way, the position of distinguished spiritual writers and philosophers such as Baron Friedrich von Hügel, Dean William R. Inge, Evelyn Underhill, and William Ernest Hocking. Writers such as these commonly assert that God Himself, immediately experienced by the religious consciousness, is the real content of revelation, and that the credal statements and doctrinal tenets of any specific community are merely human interpretations. As Evelyn Underhill has it, "The particular mental image which the mystic forms of his objective, the traditional theory he accepts, is not essential. Since it is never adequate, the degree of its inadequacy is of secondary importance. . . . We cannot honestly say that there is any wide difference between the Brahman, Sūfi, or Christian mystic at their best."⁷

This approach, with its nonconceptual view of religious truth, paves the way for an easy reconciliation among the world's religions and even between religion and humanistic psychology, as the work of Abraham Maslow bears witness.⁸ The theory, however, rather summarily dismisses the specific witness of particular religious traditions. Furthermore, it may be doubted whether psychological peak experiences, even of a very intense kind, deserve to be called revelation; for, as William James pointed out, such experiences have no clear content. They admit of a wide variety of interpretations, theistic, pantheistic, polytheistic, and even atheistic.⁹

A fourth typical theory of revelation, too subtle and complicated for coherent analysis in these schematic remarks, is the dialectical.¹⁰ Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and several associates, writing in the wake of World War I, vehemently rejected the optimistic liberalism which lay at the root of the theories of Auguste Sabatier and many Modernists. At the same time they refused to return to the orthodoxy of traditional dogmatism. Revelation, they maintained, is God's free act in Jesus Christ, to which the Bible and Christian proclamation bear witness. Written and spoken words, being creatures, could never be revelation in themselves, but they can become revelation when it pleases God to speak through them. God's word, being identical with God Himself, cannot be contained in history, even though it may touch history at a dimensionless point, as a tangent touches a circle. Nor can religious experience be rightly called revelation, for God is knowable only through faith in His word. The truth of revelation, for this school, is of a unique kind having no analogy in other spheres. Revelation is a dark and mysterious meeting

⁷ E. Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1960) 4.

⁸ A. H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Univ., 1964) 19-20, 28.

⁹ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958) 326, 387.

¹⁰ For a good summary with ample references, see the section "Revelation in Dialectical Theology" in G. O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology* (Chicago: Loyola Univ., 1971) 31-44.

with God in faith. The revealed God, said Barth, is also the hidden God. He is revealed precisely as the hidden one.

Dialectical theology aroused considerable enthusiasm in the period between the two World Wars and brought about a remarkable revival of interest in revelation as God's address to man. But many critics found that the theory was too polemically oriented against other schools, that it lacked internal coherence, and that it failed to answer the critical questions arising out of ordinary experience. While its vivid contrasts between faith and reason, between God's word and human words, and between revelation and religion were rhetorically effective, these contrasts were difficult to carry through in a systematic way. The unknown God of dialectical theology was all too similar to the "dead God" of "Christian atheism." For these and other reasons dialectical theology steadily declined in popularity after World War II and has few supporters today. Yet, as we shall see, many of the insights of the dialectical theologians have abiding value.

II

The poets have long been familiar with the connection between symbol and revelation. Samuel Taylor Coleridge affirmed very simply: "It is by Symbols alone that we can acquire intellectual knowledge of the Divine."¹¹ A century later William Butler Yeats declared: "A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement."¹²

In twentieth-century theology the idea of revelation as symbolic disclosure has achieved wide popularity. This position is represented, with important nuances and variations, by such esteemed thinkers as Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Mircea Eliade, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey, Ray Hart, John Macquarrie, Louis Dupré, and Gregory Baum. I shall seek to present the theory in my own way, without binding myself to the precise epistemology or terminology of any of the preceding authors.

According to this approach, revelation never occurs in a purely internal experience or as an unmediated encounter with God. It is always mediated through an experience in the world. More specifically, it is mediated through symbol—that is to say, through an externally perceived sign that

¹¹ Quoted from Stephen Happel, "Response to William Van Roo," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 32 (1977) 119.

¹² W. B. Yeats, "William Blake and His Illustrations to the Divine Comedy," *Collected Works* 6 (Stratford-on-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1908) 138. The fact that Yeats is speaking as a literary critic does not deprive his words of their theological value.

works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define. Revelatory symbols are those which express and mediate God's self-communication.

The notion of symbol utilized in this theory calls for some elucidation. According to many modern authors, symbol is a special type of sign to be distinguished from a mere indicator (like a guide's finger) or a conventional sign (such as a word or ideogram). The symbol is a sign pregnant with a depth of meaning which is evoked rather than explicitly stated. Ricoeur uses the example of defilement, which in religious literature serves as a symbol for the effects of sin and guilt.¹³ The literary critic Philip Wheelwright speaks in this connection of "tensive symbols"—that is to say, symbols which "draw life from a multiplicity of associations, subtly and for the most part subconsciously interrelated," and which thereby derive the power to tap a vast potential of semantic energy.¹⁴ Wheelwright contrasts these "tensive symbols" with what he calls "steno-symbols," which are practically the same as what other authors call mere signs. Steno-symbols, for Wheelwright, have an exact identity of reference, thanks to their abstract quality or simply as a matter of human stipulation. When I speak of symbols in the following pages, I shall be following the more common terminology, and thus I shall be referring to what Wheelwright would call "tensive symbols."

The symbols pertinent to divine revelation, according to theologians of our fifth school, may be almost infinitely various. They may be cosmic objects or natural occurrences, such as the sun, the moon, the wind, and the waves. Or they may be particular personages or historical events, such as Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt or Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Or again, the symbols may be artifacts such as a temple or an icon. Further, they may be words or writings, such as the figurative language of the prophets and apostles or the sacred writings of a religious tradition. A true story, a myth, a parable—any of these can become a vehicle for the divine self-communication. Strictly speaking, there is nothing which could not, under favorable circumstances, become a symbol of the divine.

The exact relationships between symbol, myth, and metaphor are much discussed in recent literature.¹⁵ The terminology is as yet unsettled, and there is no need in this article to insist on any particular set of definitions. In speaking of revelation as symbolic disclosure, theologians

¹³ P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969); see especially the Introduction and the Conclusion. Also P. Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1962) 191-218.

¹⁴ P. H. Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1962) 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 66-69; also P. Ricoeur, "Parole et symbole," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 49 (1975) 142-61.

are generally using "symbol" in an inclusive sense that would include not only visible or tangible objects but also the "charged" language of more-than-literal speech.

Public revelation, in the sense of a divine manifestation directed to a community of faith, is scarcely conceivable apart from social symbols which permit the sharing of the spiritual experience that defines such a community. The event of revelation in the mind of the founder or prophet mediates itself through symbolism, both real and literary. The burning bush seen by Moses or the sacred stone on which Jacob slept become carriers of a transcendent significance. Ritual, myth, and icon, as symbolic bearers of a revelation already given in time past, "effect a permanent solidarity between man and the sacred." They "extend the process of hierophanization."¹⁶

The recent popularity of the symbolic approach is connected with a variety of factors in the current religious and cultural situation. Rather commonly our contemporaries are oriented toward present experience and toward that which can be vividly seen and felt. They tend to distrust the adequacy of conceptual thought, at least in the sphere of religion, and are skeptical about the factual accuracy of biblical history. They hunger for a deeply personal encounter with God; they long for religious community, and they yearn to transcend the sterile conflicts among rival faiths. Revelation, understood as symbolic, appears to have immediate relevancy to the believer; it seems capable of satisfying not just the mind but the whole person; it has palpable present effects and is capable of being adapted to various cultural situations. Further, the symbolic approach offers promise of contributing to a more sympathetic understanding of the faiths of other peoples. Could not many impasses be transcended, it is asked, if adherents of different religious traditions made an effort to appreciate one another's symbol systems?

The symbolic approach to revelation has already borne excellent fruits. It has facilitated the reinterpretation of the Jewish and Christian religious heritage for contemporary believers. It has helped to revive interest in the vivid imagery of the Bible and to sustain the renewal of Christian liturgy. This approach, moreover, has led to a new encounter between theology and several other disciplines, such as the philosophy of knowledge (E. Cassirer, S. Langer), sociology (E. Durkheim, R. Bellah), psychology (C. G. Jung, R. May), comparative religion (L. Lévy-Bruhl, M. Eliade), and literary criticism (P. Wheelwright, K. Burke). These vivifying exchanges have helped to overcome the mutually impoverishing isolation between theology on the one hand and the human and behavioral sciences on the other.

¹⁶ M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958) 447-48.

Yet there are problems keenly felt by churchmen. In the Modernist crisis at the turn of the century, the Roman magisterium discountenanced the view that all representations of the divine were merely symbolic.¹⁷ In the early 1950's the Protestant world was torn by the "demythologizing" controversy connected with the name of Rudolf Bultmann.¹⁸ Similar issues were raised anew with the publication, in 1977, of a British collection of essays entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*, in which Jesus was held to be Son of God not literally or metaphysically but in a mythical or metaphorical sense.¹⁹ In each of these controversies it was asked with some anguish whether the mediation of revelation through myth and symbol would not compromise the essential truth-claims of Christian faith.

Whatever the consequences for doctrinal truth may be, it is difficult to deny that the occurrence of revelation, as attested by the Bible, is highly symbolic.²⁰ The great revelations of which we read in the Bible are replete with symbolic ingredients: for example, in the Old Testament, the burning bush, the miracles of the Exodus, the theophanies of Sinai, the "still small voice" heard by Elijah, the inaugural visions of the major prophets, and the visions of the apocalyptic seers. In the New Testament the life of Jesus is introduced by the highly symbolic circumstances of his conception and birth. His public life is inaugurated by numinous phenomena such as the heavenly voice and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. His ministry is marked by sign events such as the Transfiguration and the healings, and is closed by the symbolic act of his death upon the Cross. The glorious life of Jesus and the history of the Church are initiated, once again, by symbolic events such as the Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit. The presence of these symbolic elements at the major turning points of salvation history lends support to the thesis, sometimes proposed, that salvation history consists of a series of "disclosure situations."²¹ The sign-events comprising this history have

¹⁷ Pius X, Encyclical *Pascendi* (DS 3487). For an example of the kind of religious symbolism against which this condemnation was directed, see the creed of Marcel Hébert quoted by E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, reissue 1968) 255-56. Hébert dissolves every article of the creed into a symbolic statement about things experienced in the present life. The condemnation is not directed against the kind of "symbolic realism" advocated by theologians such as Rahner.

¹⁸ See Bultmann's focal essay and his reply to his critics in H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

¹⁹ J. Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), especially the contributions of John Hick and Maurice Wiles.

²⁰ For a more developed statement of the argument from Scripture, see John E. Smith, *Reason and God* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1961) 227-47. Smith draws here on the earlier work of Wilber M. Urban and others.

²¹ A. Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 223-27.

been impressively depicted "as symbols fraught with meaning and as the point of entry through which salvation emerges into language."²²

Not only the events of biblical history but the central themes in the teaching of the prophets, of Jesus, and of the apostles are likewise symbolic in form. This point can be illustrated by an examination of nearly any of the key themes of the Old and New Testaments, such as that of the "kingdom of God." As Norman Perrin points out, the "kingdom of God" in the preaching of Jesus is not a clear concept or idea with a single, univocal significance. Rather, it is a symbol that "can represent or evoke a whole range or series of conceptions or ideas"²³ and thus bring the hearer into the very reality borne by the preaching of Jesus. Perrin profusely illustrates the symbolic nature of this language as found in the proverbial sayings of Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, and especially in the Gospel parables. The constant factor in these diverse materials, he maintains, is the symbol of the kingdom of God, which had for Jewish audiences the power to evoke the faith-experience of God's dramatic action on behalf of His people and to elicit an appropriate response. To seek to pin down some one definite meaning of the term "kingdom of God," according to Perrin, would be to overlook the polysemic character of symbolic communication.

Even in those cases where the Bible depicts revelation without dwelling on the symbolic element, the latter seems to be present. For instance, the call of Abraham, as described in Genesis 12:1, is set forth in simple and matter-of-fact language without allusion to any extraordinary phenomena. Yet even here, it would seem, the symbolic is not absent; for in Scripture Abraham, as the father of God's people, is himself a highly symbolic figure, and the promises given to him in the following two verses (Gen 12:2-3) have a suggestive power far exceeding their literal meaning.

The argument from Scripture, to be sure, does not prove that revelation must by its very nature be symbolic. To establish this, one would have to construct a theoretical argument based on the nature of revelation itself, considered in relationship to the human person as recipient. The validity of such an argument would not be admitted by all, for the reasoning would appeal to certain theological and anthropological assumptions which are not self-evident. While acknowledging these inevitable limitations, I shall seek to propose a line of argument which has a certain persuasive force.

To be human, according to many contemporary thinkers, is to be a body-person, an incarnate spirit. To come into one's own as a person is, under one aspect, to become related, through the body, to a surrounding world. Religious awareness, paradoxically, requires a turning *to* the world;

²² L. Monden, *Faith: Can Man Still Believe?* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970) 81.

²³ N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 33.

for only in a spiritual movement toward finite realities can one actuate the sense of the transcendent as that which goes *beyond* the world. God cannot manifest Himself to us except by making signs that are perceptible in the created order. We see God not as He is in Himself but as reflected in the things that are made (Rom 1:20). For this reason St. Paul was able to say of all our knowledge of God in this life, "Now we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12).

Assuming, then, that God must manifest Himself through creatures, how can He impart concrete, interpersonal knowledge and not simply the kind of abstractive, inferential knowledge that is given in natural theology? If God were to communicate by signs with clearly defined meanings, He could not tell us more than we could conceive and express within the categories derived from our day-to-day experience of the world. He could not give us an intimate, familiar knowledge of Himself, an awareness that transforms our lives and makes us sharers in God's own perspective on the world. Still less could such discursive, inferential knowledge take us beyond all the categories of conceptual thought and impart a share in the blessed mystery of God's own life. And yet revelation, as understood in Catholic Christianity, must accomplish all this.

Our problem, then, is to reconcile the worldly mediation of revelation with its power to bring us into the sphere of the divine. The key to the solution, in my opinion, lies in a distinction (not a separation) between two general kinds of knowing. On the one hand, there is objective knowledge, obtained by observation and abstraction from the world we see about us. Thanks to this type of knowledge, there can be mathematical and exact sciences, which achieve clarity and exactitude at the price of leaving out something of the richness and complexity of the real. The more self-possessed the reality we are investigating and the greater its interiority, the less helpful are the techniques of measurement, mathematical deduction, and empirical verification. Objective scientific knowledge is particularly unsuited to give intimate knowledge of living subjects insofar as they are individual, free, and personal. Our strictly personal knowledge of other human beings must proceed by another route. It is achieved through interpretation of the signs—the words and gestures—by which people express themselves. By a kind of synthetic discernment, one can intuit the state of soul which lies at the root of a certain set of manifestations, even though one cannot prove by formal argument the validity of the intuition. We rely on subtle techniques of interpretation.

An interpretative process of this kind is involved in those acts by which we know something as our own. We know our own body not by looking at it (though obviously we can look at some parts of our body as we look at surrounding objects) but rather by dwelling in it, by using it, by relying on it. We know it, as Polanyi says, not by attending *to* it but by attending

from it.²⁴ Because we know the body in this subjective manner, it is cognitively identified with the knowing self. Analogously, we know by indwelling when we apprehend anything at all specifically as ours—for example, our home, our country, our family, our church, our culture, our traditions. None of these realities can be properly understood from without, through sheer spectator knowledge, but only from within, insofar as we appropriate and rely upon them—that is to say, by participatory knowledge.

In the light of these observations on participatory knowledge, let us return to the question of symbol. A symbol is never a sheer object. It speaks to us only insofar as it lures us to recognize ourselves within the universe of meaning and value which it opens up to us. As Nathan Mitchell says, “A symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory, but an environment to be inhabited. Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover the possibilities that life offers.” “To put the matter succinctly,” he continues, “every symbol deals with a new discovery and every symbol is an open-ended action, not a closed-off object. By engaging in symbols, by inhabiting their environment, people discover new horizons for life, new values and motivation.”²⁵

This participatory quality is most obviously verified in liturgical symbols, such as the elements of bread and wine and the acts of ceremonial worship, but it is also true that Christ and the Church, by their very existence, invite us to share in the life that is theirs. This invitation they make through the symbolic modality of their being in the world. Christ’s whole life of generous obedience is a pre-eminent symbol of his Sonship which it invites others to share. The Church, as a “sign raised up among the nations,”²⁶ is the community of those who have been drawn, and who wish to draw others, into Christ’s own way of life.

Symbol, then, gives not objective but participatory knowledge. From this basic principle follow several other qualities of symbolic knowledge of great importance for our present theme.²⁷

²⁴ M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967) chap. 1.

²⁵ N. Mitchell, “Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects,” *Living Worship* 13/2 (Feb. 1977) 1–2.

²⁶ Vatican Council I, Constitution *Dei Filius*, chap. 3 (DS 3014).

²⁷ The three properties of symbol discussed in the following paragraphs may be compared with the six examined by M. Eliade in his “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism” in M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa, eds., *The History of Religions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1959) 98–103. According to Eliade, religious symbols (1) disclose modalities of the real not evident in ordinary experience, (2) refer to real structures of the world, (3) are multivalent, (4) reveal perspectives in which heterogeneous realities can be articulated into a whole, (5) make it possible to express paradoxical situations otherwise inexpressible, (6) address situations in which human existence is engaged.

First, participatory knowledge, insofar as it involves the knower as person, generally has a transforming effect upon the knower. The transforming effects of symbolism are most dramatically illustrated in psychotherapy, which makes use of symbolism to bring patients back to mental health. Victor White, O.P., a theologian disciple of Carl Jung, writes as follows:

A symbol, as we say, "does something to us," it moves us, shifts our center of awareness, changes our values. Whether it is just looked at or heard, acted out, painted out, or danced out, it arouses not only thought, but delight, fear, awe, horror, and the rest. . . . Jung saw . . . that it was the very instrument which, just because it was polyvalent, transformed consciousness itself and thereby the sick personality. This is what Jung means when he calls the symbol the psychological machine which transforms energy into work, much as a turbine transforms the untamed, useless energy of a torrent into power that can be controlled and applied.²⁸

Second, symbolism has a powerful influence on commitments and behavior. It works on people like an incantation. It stirs the imagination, releases hidden energies in the soul, gives strength and stability to the personality, and arouses the will to consistent and committed action. For this reason all important social and political movements have felt the need to equip themselves with appropriate symbols. A national flag or anthem, for example, has symbolic power to instill sentiments of patriotism and motivate citizens to heroic deeds on behalf of their country.²⁹

Third, symbol introduces us into realms of knowledge that are inaccessible to discursive thought. As Tillich puts it, a symbol "opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us . . . and also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality."³⁰ This process always involves an ingredient of mystery. Thomas Carlyle rightly observed: "In the symbol there is concealment and yet revelation."³¹ The symbol discloses not by presenting its meaning for inspection but by picking us up into its own movement and (to borrow Polanyi's phrase) by carrying us out of ourselves.³² The meaning of the symbol, therefore, cannot be precisely nailed down in terms of categorical thought and language. Yet the symbol is not without value for the serious quest for truth. It "gives rise to thought," as Ricoeur expresses it.³³ It has a heuristic or triggering effect and is pregnant with an inexhaustible

²⁸ *God and the Unconscious* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1952) 233-34.

²⁹ Cf. A. Dulles, "Symbol in Revelation," *NCE* 13 (1967) 861-63.

³⁰ P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957) 42.

³¹ T. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, Part 3, chap. 3; quoted by Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* 95-96.

³² M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1975) 66-71.

³³ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* 348.

brood of potential meanings.

This multivalent quality of symbolic knowledge is closely connected with the healing power previously referred to. Symbols, according to Eliade, are able to "identify, assimilate, and unify diverse levels and realities that are to all appearances incompatible."³⁴ Or, as he says in another place, "The symbol is thus able to reveal a perspective in which heterogeneous realities are susceptible of articulation into a whole," thus enabling human life to be integrated into the totality of being.³⁵

These three qualities of symbolic knowledge make it apparent how symbol can serve as a uniquely apt medium of revelation; for the qualities of revelation correspond, on the transcendent level, to those we have noted in symbolic knowledge. In the first place, revelation is transformative, for it initiates us into a saving relationship with God. If revelation were merely information or conceptual knowledge, it could not have this transforming effect. But because it comes in symbols, it offers us a new and richer identity. It introduces us into a new spiritual world, shifts our horizons, our perspectives, our point of view. We come to perceive ourselves as personally related to God—that is to say, as His friends, as adopted members of His family and household, called to repentance, forgiveness, and newness of life.

As a consequence of its participatory character, revelation, secondly, has an impact on the commitments and activities of those who receive it. If it came simply as abstract propositional truth or historical information, the act of faith by which it was accepted could be a merely theoretical assent. But if revelation is symbolic truth, the act by which it is accepted must be existential and participatory. Faith, in that case, must be an obedience by which, as Vatican II puts it, a person "entrusts his whole self freely to God."³⁶ Through faith we enter into a community of believers and become bound to it, as well as to its Lord, by ties of loyalty and trust.

Finally, thanks to its symbolic character, revelation gives us insight into mysteries that reason can in no way fathom. For Jews and Christians, Eliade points out, "Yahweh is both kind and wrathful; the God of the Christian mystics and theologians is terrible and gentle at once, and it is this *coincidentia oppositorum* which is the starting point for the boldest speculations of such men as pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhardt, and Nicholas of Cusa."³⁷ Revelation itself, inasmuch as it involves the loving approach of the transcendent God, is an inscrutable mystery. The First Vatican Council pointed out the mysterious character of revelation when it declared: "Divine mysteries of their very nature so excel the created

³⁴ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 455.

³⁵ Eliade, "Methodological Remarks" 99–100.

³⁶ *Dei verbum*, no. 5.

³⁷ *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 419.

intellect that even when they have been given in revelation and accepted in faith, that very faith still keeps them veiled in a sort of obscurity, as long as 'we are exiled from the Lord' in this mortal life, 'for we walk by faith and not by sight' (2 Cor 5:6-7)."³⁸ This description of revelation is in perfect agreement with what contemporary symbolic theology has to say, as may be gathered from the following words of Tillich: "In being revealed [the transcendent] does not cease to remain concealed, since its secrecy pertains to its very essence; and when therefore it is revealed it is so precisely as that which is hidden."³⁹

To recapitulate, therefore, we may say that the healing and transformative power of symbol renders it uniquely apt to mediate revelation and thus to initiate sinners into a saving relationship with God. The existential and integrative power of revelatory symbolism may best be illustrated by an example. One of the most central Christian symbols, by all accounts, is that of the Cross.⁴⁰ As a natural symbol, the Cross conveys the ideas of encounter, crisis, and choice, as when we speak of "cross roads." It also signifies collision and opposition, with the connotation of "being crossed." As a wooden object, the Cross is a burden to be borne, as appears in the phrase "to carry one's cross." It signifies meekness, obedience, and endurance under hardship. As an instrument of punishment, the Cross is a symbol of condemnation, pain, and death. In the case of Jesus, it signifies heroic submission to the Father's will and the limitlessness of Jesus' love for sinners such as ourselves. It represents also the Father's love in giving His own Son to be our ransom. From another point of view it symbolizes the enormity of human sin, the climax of the history of human rebellion against God. As stained by the blood of Jesus, the Cross signifies the agency whereby we are reconciled to God and to one another. Representations of the empty Cross, or of the Cross from which Christ reigns, communicate the triumph of the Resurrection. To Constantine and the Crusaders the Cross became an emblem of victory. For the baptized Christian, the sign of the Cross expresses the commitment of discipleship.

In sum, the Cross may be said to possess an indefinite range of potential significations, many of them deeply ingrained in the archetypal forms of human consciousness. It would be futile to look for some one lesson or

³⁸ *Dei Filius*, chap. 4 (DS 3016).

³⁹ P. Tillich, "Die Idee der Offenbarung," *ZTK* 8 (1927) 406; cf. L. Dupré, *The Other Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 293.

⁴⁰ On the multivalence of the symbol of the Cross, see S. K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1942) 284-85; also T. Fawcett, *The Symbolic Language of Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) 21-25. In "Christ on the Cross: A Study in Image," *Liturgy* 23/5 (Sept. 1978) 26-29, Diane Apostolos Cappadona shows how different aspects of the Crucifixion have come to the fore at different stages of the history of Christian iconography.

articulate meaning. Because of its capacity to integrate a multitude of lofty speculations and half-felt sentiments, it has an integrative and reconciling power far greater than any articulate statement.

III

In view of the remarkable correspondences between the attributes of revelation and those of symbolic knowledge, we are warranted in concluding at this point that the symbolic theory of revelation has many attractive features. But it is also subject to serious objections, urged by partisans of the other four approaches. In order to determine whether the model is viable, we must see whether it can respond to these objections. I shall contend that the symbolic approach, properly understood, can incorporate what is sound in the other approaches and at the same time correct what is misleading in them. The other approaches, in turn, can guard against the oversimplifications that would result from the attempt to work out a theory of revelation by reference to the sole category of symbol.

To theologians who view revelation as propositional, the symbolic approach seems to imperil the truth of revelation. The danger is not altogether imaginary. There are positivistic reductionists who, still following in the traces of Auguste Comte, maintain that symbol is nothing but a disguised way of talking about realities that can be accurately known through objective, conceptual discourse. There are empirically-minded instrumentalists, such as Richard Braithwaite, who contend that the symbolic language of religion is nothing but a useful fiction intended to evoke distinctive ethical attitudes. The serious pursuit of truth, on either of these theories, would demand an abandonment of symbolic language in favor of direct speech concerning the realities to which the symbols refer.

Many proponents of the propositional approach hold against the symbolic school one of the chief points that Eliade and Langer have urged in its favor, namely, the polysemy (or multivalence) of symbols. Revelation, according to the propositionalists, must impart some definite truth, or else it could not be believed. The powerful symbolism of the Bible, in their view, is to be interpreted in terms of the literal statements in revelation; otherwise the book could convey no definite meaning. Gordon Clark, a conservative evangelical theologian, uses the very example given above, namely, the Cross. He writes:

Suppose the cross be selected as a Christian symbol, and suppose some flowery speaker should say, Let us live in the shadow of the cross. What can he mean? What does the cross symbolize? Does it symbolize the love of God? Or does it symbolize the wrath of God? Does it symbolize human suffering? Or does it symbolize the influence of the church? If there are no literal statements to give

information as to what the cross symbolizes, these questions are unanswerable.⁴¹

The objection just stated, although it makes a valid point, underestimates the cognitive dimension of symbolic communication. By eliciting participation, symbol can convey a richer and more personal apprehension of reality in its deeper dimensions than nonsymbolic language can do. Its distinctive mark is not the absence of meaning but the surplus of meaning. Could one without recourse to symbolism convey the wonders of a baby's birth, the horrors of a barbaric invasion, the serenity of a quiet sunset, or the majesty of an imperial court? Are not these qualities as real as those which can be reduced to measurements and numbers? If our world is richer than statistics and bloodless abstractions, we need a language with power of suggestion.⁴² Even more is this true if we would speak of the transcendent, which is the proper theme of revelation. God is utterly beyond description and definition, but He is eminently real. Symbolic language can mediate, albeit deficiently, something of God's reality.

To Braithwaite and the instrumentalists we may concede that the symbolic language of religion recommends a way of life, that it endorses distinctive commitments, and that it evokes gratitude, a sense of final dependence, and an attitude of worship. But anyone who accepts these practical directives implicitly affirms that reality is of such a nature that such attitudes are warranted. The religious symbols, therefore, imply something about the real order of things. In the words of Ian Barbour, "It would be unreasonable to adopt or recommend a way of life unless one believes that the universe is of such a character that this way of life is appropriate. 'Useful fictions' are no longer useful if they are recognized as fictions or treated as 'parables' whose truth or falsity is taken to be irrelevant."⁴³

Because of the cognitive content implicit in the originative symbols, revelation can, as Ricoeur puts it, give rise to thought. In reflection we can speak in definite and even in literal terms of the implications themselves. For example, the Cross reveals that God is truly loving (not unloving), and the Resurrection, that He is truly powerful (not weak). The doctrinal statements of Scripture and Christian tradition are closely

⁴¹ G. D. Clark, "Special Divine Revelation as Rational," in C. F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958) 39-40.

⁴² To illustrate this point, it may help to quote from the review of William L. Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in *Time*, Oct. 17, 1960: "The story of Adolf Hitler and his works is curiously resistant to the historian's approach. Such massive evil can scarcely be conveyed by facts, figures, and chronology. What is needed is another Dante with a genius for portraying hell, or a new Wagner who can translate horror into myth and spell out the dread meanings in a *Götterdämmerung* finale. Surrealist imagination, not research, may one day tell the definitive story; in the meantime, there are books."

⁴³ I. G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 58.

tied to the cognitive impact of the seminal symbols. Classical Christology grows out of the metaphorical titles conferred upon Jesus, and classical ecclesiology meditates on the biblical images of the Church.

Since religious symbols refer to divine mysteries of which we have no independent or direct knowledge, we cannot empirically verify the doctrines derived from the symbols. Nor are they obtained through strict deduction. But it does not follow that all interpretations are mere hypotheses. The Church, through its grasp of the total symbolic system, through its long experience of the Christian life, through its scholarly disciplines, its ecclesiastical structures, and the ongoing assistance of the Holy Spirit, has methods of effectively differentiating between truth and error. To analyze the process by which doctrines are reliably distilled from the primary religious symbols would be too complex a task to be undertaken at this point. It may suffice here to make the point that revelation, though originally given through symbol, can to some extent be translated into objective doctrinal statements. These statements, too, are in their way symbolic, since they refer back to, and continue to live off, the symbols out of which they arise.

The analogous language of theology would be misunderstood if interpreted as a mere comparison among antecedently known objects—say, between God and a human father. In Christian theology analogous discourse derives its power and security from the participation of the speaker in the reality to which the symbols refer—in the example just given, from participation in a filial grace-relationship with God. When we speak of God as Lord, Redeemer, and the like, our concepts are molded by a real, existential relationship which can be conceptually articulated with the help of the symbols given in revelation. To say that revelation is symbolically mediated, therefore, is quite compatible with a firm assurance about the truth of conceptual statements.

Let us now ask how the symbolic approach to revelation stands related to the historical. It would be possible to view these two approaches as opposed. The symbols, it might be thought, refer to the timeless and universal aspects of religion and thus are not essentially bound up with any particular historical events. Their evocative power, one might suspect, rests upon their correspondence to archetypes rooted deeply in nature itself. Some proponents of the symbolic approach, concerned primarily with the literary analysis of the symbols, attach little importance to the facts of salvation history. They speak as though Christian faith had as its object not the God who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth but rather the biblical image of Jesus as the Christ.

Unlike these symbolists, I would insist on the profound affinity between the symbolic and the historical approaches to revelation. The symbols of biblical and Christian faith, while they build on certain cosmic archetypes,

are enriched and further specified through the historical memories of ancient Israel. Persons standing within this tradition have solid reasons for doubting that God reveals Himself with equal fulness to those who are unfamiliar with that history. Why should God not have expressed Himself most distinctly through a given strand of human events? To hold on principle that God must be equally accessible through the experience of every people, or through the common symbolism of nature and consciousness, would be as groundless as to hold that the mind of an artist must be equally manifest in everything that this artist produces, or that a total stranger can know a person as well as a close friend or relative can. According to the biblical and Christian view, God is best known through those deeds of love by which He has manifested Himself in the history of Israel and in the career of Jesus. Inasmuch as Jesus is the Incarnate Word, his humanity is something more than a representative symbol. Rather, it is a *presentative* symbol—one in which the God who is symbolized is present and operative, somewhat as a human person is present in the body and its gestures.⁴⁴ To hold a strongly realistic view of God's presence in the humanity of Jesus, as did the New Testament authors, is quite compatible with the symbolic approach to revelation we have been examining. If love manifests itself principally by deeds, the actual occurrence of God's redemptive acts enhances their power as symbols. We know God far better through the significant actions He has performed than we could by fictitious symbols expressing what He might have done.

The revelatory superiority of symbolic realities over symbolic fictions, to be sure, does not authorize us to conclude that everything narrated in the Bible took place exactly as described. The Bible contains fiction as well as fact, metaphor as well as literal truth. The fictions and the metaphors are in their own manner symbolic and revelatory, even though they cannot affect us in the same way as God's actual deeds of love. To discover the line of demarcation between the literary symbolism of the Bible and the symbolic realities in Israelite history is an arduous task, calling for concerted efforts on the part of theologians versed in the literary forms of the Bible, enlightened by tradition, and instructed by the Church's living sense of faith.

How, then, does the symbolic theory differ from the historical, as outlined above? The historical approach, in the form which I have summarized, holds that revelation is given through history alone and that it can be certainly known by rational argument from the nature of the

⁴⁴ My term "presentative symbol" corresponds approximately to what Karl Rahner has called "symbolic reality" (*Realsymbol*) as distinct from "symbolic representation" (*Vertretungssymbol*). See his important essay "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 221-52.

events themselves. The symbolic approach, on the contrary, denies both that revelation is confined to factual history and that the deeds of salvation history can count as revelation unless they are apprehended as symbols. To perceive them as symbols does not depend on an arbitrary attitude (such as R. M. Hare's celebrated "blik"). Rather, it is the appropriate response to the events themselves which by their symbolic power grasp and mold the consciousness of the religiously oriented interpreter. Since many proponents of salvation history acknowledge that the revelatory deeds of God have a certain ambiguity and are in need of a "prophetic" interpretation, no sharp line of demarcation can be drawn between the historical and the symbolic approaches.

Turning now to our third model, we may compare the symbolic approach with the mystical. The difference between the two seems obvious. The symbolic theory holds that there is no revelation apart from created signs by which it is mediated. The mystical approach, on the contrary, affirms the possibility of an unmediated perception of God or of the transcendent through interior, spiritual union. If symbols are important for this school of thinkers, it could only be because they prepare for, or express, an ecstatic peak experience that has no content except the ineffable Presence.

The mystical theory in this extreme form has few supporters. The great tradition of Christian mysticism, as represented by John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, is very cautious in referring to an unmediated perception of God in this life. These saints, it would appear, are best interpreted as affirming that God makes Himself known by producing signs and effects of His presence in the soul. No doubt it is possible for the mystic to be so drawn to God in love that the symbols of His presence, so to speak, melt away. They may not be attended to, but are they really absent? When the spiritual writers speak of the touch and taste of God in the depths or substance of the soul, and of the charity which goes out to God as He is in Himself, they imply that the "immediacy" of God could not be known if there were not also created effects of His presence. Even the highest mystical experience, which dispenses with normal mediations through concepts and images, still rests upon inner effects of grace which somehow mediate the encounter itself.⁴⁵

Authors such as Rahner, in their theology of revelation, speak paradoxically of a "mediated immediacy." This term aptly conveys the dualism of the explicit and the implicit, the thematic and the unthematic, the datum and the horizon in all revelatory experience. What is imme-

⁴⁵ On the sense in which mysticism does and does not involve an immediate experience of God there has been extended controversy. For an opinion that seems to do justice to the various aspects, see J. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York: Scribner's, 1959) 261, n. 3.

diate, for Rahner, is the self-communication of the divine, the experience of grace. But the inner presence of God cannot be known and cannot achieve itself except insofar as it becomes mediated, or mediates itself, in created symbols. The symbols, however, do arouse a genuine awareness of the divine itself—an awareness that always surpasses all that we can say about it.

The mystical tradition, by calling attention to the inner dimensions of the spiritual experience, complements and enriches the symbolic theory of revelation. The experientialists are right in insisting that revelation necessarily involves a real union between the human spirit and the God who bestows Himself in grace. Further, they are correct in affirming that this union is always somehow conscious. In recognition of these points, we must now affirm that the symbol itself, in its full dimensions, includes the experience of grace; for this experience provides the horizon necessary for any external symbol to be discerned as a divine communication. On the other hand, the experience of grace cannot be rightly interpreted, or recognized for what it is, without the help of symbols derived from the world known through sensory experience. Without such symbolic explication, the rarified ecstasies of the mystic would not be sufficiently articulate to merit the name of revelation. In Rahnerian terminology, transcendental revelation and categorical revelation are not two separable entities but two dimensions of a single, complex reality.⁴⁶ Like form and matter, like soul and body, they are mutually dependent and mutually causative; they exist only in their coalescence. *Causae ad invicem sunt causae.*

The mystical component is particularly important for bringing out the negative factor in all thematizations of revelation. The mystic, aware of God as immediately present, is keenly sensitive to the inadequacy of all created images and analogies. More conscious than others that we know God only as one who escapes categorization, the mystic celebrates the fact that we are conjoined with Him in the utter darkness of faith. For those who fail to recognize the infinite distance between the revelatory symbols and the divine, the tension that gives life to the symbols collapses and the symbols lose their eloquence.

For the dialectical theologians, to whom we now turn before concluding, revelation is not given in symbol but in the word of God. Solicitous to safeguard the divine transcendence, Barth was wary of anything that might seem to involve God in the ambiguities of nature and history, anything that might suggest an avenue from man to God, anything, in fine, that would give scope to human creativity in the constitution of revelation, or obscure the total sufficiency of the Bible, or imply a real continuity between Christianity and the religions of the world. For Barth,

⁴⁶ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 171

then, revelation is God's word, and "we have no reason for not taking the concept 'Word of God' in its primary and literal sense. 'God's Word' means, God speaks. 'Speaks' is not a symbol" as Tillich contends.⁴⁷ God's word, in the fullest sense, is Jesus Christ, who transcends time and history.

The limitations of the dialectical position have been noted above. At this point we may reflect rather on the enormous value of dialectical theology, especially in its Barthian form, for criticizing certain inept presentations of the symbolic approach and for enriching the latter with an acute analysis of verbal communication.

Writing in the full tide of "modernistic neo-Protestantism" (as he called it), Barth was understandably fearful that the category of symbol, applied to revelation, might compromise the divine transcendence and obscure the uniqueness of God's objective revelation in Christ. Tillich's doctrine of symbol, in particular, seemed to Barth to concede too much to Feuerbach. It could easily be taken to suggest that the symbols of revelation, emanating by necessity from the human consciousness under the impact of particular historical situations, might be mere projections of human need. In this framework God's word in Christ could easily be portrayed as "one symbol amid a host of others."⁴⁸ In calling attention to these dangers, Barth assisted subsequent proponents of the symbolic approach, including many of those mentioned in the present article, to guard against any modernistic reductionism.

The theology of the word of God, as set forth by the Barthians, has many points in common with the kind of symbolic approach which has been here proposed. Against Absolute Idealism, the two schools agree that revelation, whether by word or symbol, must be a free and loving self-manifestation of God. Against mystical extravagance, they agree that revelation must be mediated by signs given in history. Against the propositional school, they hold in common that the mediation must bring the believer into a living, personal contact with the divine. The two approaches agree, finally, against historicism that revelation cannot be objectively demonstrated from facts accessible to academic history. As something discerned by a spiritually attuned consciousness, revelation never truly exists outside of faith.

The word of God, as described by dialectical theologians, has a structure similar to that which we have attributed to symbol.⁴⁹ As the self-expression of the revealing God who addresses His creature by means of

⁴⁷ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) 150.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 69.

⁴⁹ William P. Loewe acutely remarks that although Barth "ignores the mediating role of religious symbol . . . it turns out that the criterion really operative in his appeal to 'facts' lies in the felt meaningfulness of religious symbol" ("The Cross: Barth and Moltmann," *Thomist* 41 [1977] 527).

it, the word works mysteriously on human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can describe or define. It points beyond itself to the mystery which it makes present. The twisted imagery of the seer, the denunciation of the prophet, and the joyful tidings of the apostle are alike imbued with a mysterious power to produce, as symbols do, the new life of which they speak. As the inspired words enter into a stable tradition and become rooted, so to speak, in the collective consciousness of a believing people, they become still more obviously symbolic.

The revelatory word, indeed, may be described as a symbol which by its tenuousness and versatility almost escapes the conditions of materiality. Of all symbols it is the most spiritual and the most akin to the divine. As several authors have noted, the word has a special aptitude to represent that which cannot be attained except through negation.⁵⁰ The quasi-mystical experience of the divine, as already noted, manifests the inadequacy of all created analogies and therefore calls for negative statement. Consider, for instance, Paul's expression "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Is 64:4). Is it not noteworthy, as Rudolf Otto remarks, that the expressions here are almost totally negative? Yet when we read them we often fail to notice their negative character, for the symbolic force of the language evokes a positive reality too rich for direct statement.⁵¹

The word, as the sign which articulates meaning, is a necessary complement to revelation through any other kind of symbol. The grosser symbolism of nature, deed, or artifact, potent though it may be, is too ambiguous to be the sole mediator of revealed religion. The symbol becomes revelation only when interpreted, and interpretation never occurs without a linguistic component. For public revelation, moreover, there must be external words, capable of being heard or seen. Such attesting words are necessarily symbolic, for otherwise they could not be conducive to immediate union with the divine. Revealed religion does not simply take over the linguistic patterns that it finds. Rather, it creatively enriches and renews the speech that it adopts.

The attesting word of revelation is never a piece of abstract theory nor is it a mere report about empirical facts. Rather, it is the self-expression of a person caught up in the dynamism of God's saving action. It dominates, and is not dominated by, the person who utters it. Just as sacraments are said to contain the grace which they signify, so the word of revelation embodies and makes mysteriously present the reality to which it refers—the reality of God communicating Himself in love. "Living and active" (Heb 4:12), such a word transforms the speaker into

⁵⁰ E.g., K. Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 154–55.

⁵¹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1958) 34.

a radiant symbol of the message of salvation. As an event in the history of salvation, the proclamation of God's word is both a demand and a grace. Like a sacramental action, the word of God effects what it signifies.

The symbolic or sacramental structure of revelation is impressively, though very concisely, indicated in Vatican II's Constitution *Dei verbum*. Revelation is seen as a loving approach whereby God mysteriously emerges from His silence and invites His beloved creatures to enter into fellowship with Himself. "This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them."⁵² The fulness of revelation is not a vocal or written word, but Christ himself, who "is both the Mediator and at the same time the fulness of all revelation."⁵³ God makes Himself known through the sign of a human existence which refers itself totally to the divine person who possesses it as His very own. Thus revelation, as imparted through Jesus Christ, has a symbolic structure. It may suitably be described as symbolic disclosure.

In Christ himself, as the Word made flesh, the five aspects of revelation treated in these pages may be said to coalesce into a kind of unity. The propositional dimension is present, for Jesus speaks, and is spoken of, in intelligible human statements. The revelation is historical, for Christ's human existence unfolds within the framework of universal history. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, at work in the hearts of believers, Christ bursts the bonds of confinement in the past and mystically touches the human spirit that reaches out to him. And yet he remains the hidden God, only paradoxically identified with the tokens of his own presence. These four aspects of revelation—the propositional, the historical, the experiential, and the dialectical—are reconciled and held in unity through the fifth aspect on which we have chiefly concentrated in these pages. Because revelation occurs as symbol, it can be both propositional and historical, both mystical and dialectical, without detriment to the proper attributes implied by each of these designations.

⁵² *Dei verbum*, no. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*