

# Understanding Religious Symbols

## Comments on Eugenio Trías' paper

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Professor Trías' talk gives a summary of results of an extensive and very impressive investigation of a great variety of religions and spiritual movements. His aim has been to join into narrative form some of the revealed messages in a great diversity of religious-symbolic manifestations. The motivating idea is that there is a revealed content, in what most religions display publicly, which is not uniquely tied to this or that allegedly true religion, but rather, as professor Trías puts it, «something multiply distributed in very diverse channels flowing back and forth from a Great River (or Grand Narrative)». Professor Trías has outlined this story philosophically as a narrative journey in his book «The Age of the Spirit» (which unfortunately I have not had access to), and I take it that it is some of the stopping-places of that journey we are presented with in his paper at this conference.

He takes his starting point in Karl Marx' statement that every true religion expresses «the tears and groans of the oppressed creature», which leads us to the questions «What is it that above all oppresses man? Wherein lie the roots of this sentiment of oppression?» Limiting ourselves to the present-day situation in the world, the author is inclined to agree with Marx that it is the socio-economic system that is the root of our misfortunes and that constitutes our greatest oppressor. But he urges us to go beyond this diagnosis and to raise the question of the secret of human oppression on a deeper level; a level where the serf, the capitalist and the worker are affected alike. His answer to this deeper question is that *Death* is the power which oppresses us from the moment we are born. Our consciousness of death, our knowledge of our mor-

tal condition, is a power so great that we will never be able to subject it to our control.

I would like to add something to the author's diagnosis of our present-day situation. As far as religious and existential matters are concerned, I am not sure that it is the Capital that is our greatest oppressor in our times. There is another (deeper) feature of our times that makes us in a sense *our own* oppressors, and which is, at the same time, closely related to death as our inevitable destiny. I am thinking of what Max Weber called *the disenchantment of the world*, and by which he meant a process of intellectualisation that has gone on for centuries in the Western culture, and of which science and technology of our times are central parts and motive forces.<sup>1</sup> Science and technology have made possible numerous practices and institutions in which we are involved; we use and are dependent on a great amount of instruments and technical innovations in our everyday life, although most of us have no knowledge of their construction, function and workings (think, for instance, of our computers, the aeroplanes with which we travel or the nuclear reactors that provide us with electricity). But our attitude is that *if we only wanted to we could find out at any time*, and in the disenchanted world we tend to think that this is how it is with the conditions of our living in general. There is quite a lot in our conditions that we do not understand but could find out about if we only wanted to. There are *in principle* no mys-

<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, «Science as a Vocation», (transl. by Michael John), in Lassman, P., Velody, I. Martins, H. (eds.): *Max Weber's «Science as a vocation»*. Unwinn Hyman, London 1989, pp. 3–31.

terious, magical or incalculable higher powers at work that set a definite limit to what we can understand. Even if we hit upon some phenomenon or event that cannot be explained, we tend to think that it is only a question of time before ongoing research has seen through it and made it amenable to calculation, because *progress* is an essential feature of this *Einstellung*; progress, not just as historical facts about actual events of progress, but as a sort of a priori condition of meaningfulness; progress as a form of understanding in which everything tends to become provisional, as just a stage in a pattern of progress with no final end.

And for this very reason, *death is not a meaningful event*.

As Weber puts it, «[...] the individual life, [...] inserted into <progress> and infinity, can in terms of its own immanent meaning have no end, for there is always a step further for him, which stands in the march of progress. Nobody who dies stands at his peak, which lies at infinity.»<sup>2</sup>

Weber also points out that in ancient times it was possible to die «old and satiated with life», because life had given what it had to offer. And Weber continues «... a civilized man, who is put in the midst of the continuing enrichment of civilization with thoughts, knowledge and problems, can become <tired of life>, but not <satiated with life>. He snatches only the tiniest part of what the life of the spirit constantly produces, and then only something provisional rather than final; thus death is for him only a meaningless occurrence.»<sup>3</sup>

So perhaps Death is a greater oppressor in our times than ever before.

I do not want to say that this is the attitude to death of all or even most individuals in our times, but it is *the official attitude* that is manifest in public life, in educational programs, social policies, etc.

Professor Trías points out that there are many attitudes that one can adopt towards the fact of religion. There is first of all the attitude of the faithful believer, to whom certain religious forms appear as completely irreplaceable, and

whose relation to these religious forms is characterized by *intimacy*. At the beginning of the paper, the author suggests that this attitude alone leads to the heart of the enigma of religion's extraordinary power of persuasion. But he also mentions another possible attitude to religion: that of one who approaches religion, without any profession of faith, but primarily for the teachings it can offer him or her, and in particular the teachings it can offer within philosophical reflection on existential issues. And this is the author's attitude.

I agree with the author that the latter attitude is a possible and legitimate way of approaching religion, but then only so long as one is aware of its limitations. I would like to raise some questions that concern such limitations. The two attitudes seem to me to involve certain methodological difficulties that I would like the author to comment on.

Isn't there a tension between these attitudes, a tension that comes close to incompatibility in certain respects? My main question could be stated as follows: What teaching, what philosophical wisdom, can the non-believer hope to acquire from religious symbols and expressions if the true content of these symbols is intimately connected to the individual's religious experience?

It has often been said by faithful religious believers that the true spiritual content of certain symbols and religious myths is revealed only to those who believe or to those who have had certain religious experiences. To others they are dead, without force and they can even appear foolish. For most inhabitants in the disenchanting world of our times, several religious symbols and myths that were once held sacred, appear dead and obsolete and have for that reason been withdrawn from public life. How can the dead symbolic expressions, the mere stuff from which the symbols and similes are made, nevertheless reveal some existential message? And can someone be open to that message even as a «radical and naked agnostic», as the author suggests?

Is the author's idea perhaps that there is a common religious tendency in all of us, and that some of the religious symbols — such as the ones that the author describes in the paper — were created and have their force as authentic

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, *ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *ibid.* p. 14.

manifestations of this common religious tendency of man?

It is of course possible to enjoy, appreciate and respect religious symbols and myths even if you are a non-believer. It is quite common today that people strongly appreciate and find aesthetic value in religious music, poetry and ceremonies without that being an expression of faith. Maybe I am mistaken, but it seems to me that the author could be said to approach religious symbols and myths, as though they were existential art and poetry rather than religious symbols. One thing that bothers me with that approach is something that was pointed out by C. S. Lewis, who was a professor of medieval literature at Cambridge but also a believing Christian. He remarked that the aesthetic enjoyment and value that a non-believer takes in religious symbols is essentially different from that of a believer, and the main reason he gives is that *the gravity and finality of the actual is itself an essential feature of the believer's attitude to the symbols*: The gravity and finality of the actual is itself an aesthetic stimulus for the believer. As Lewis puts it: «A believed idea *feels* different from an idea that is not believed.» He also points out that, conversely, you can spoil a myth or fairy-tale for imaginative and poetic purposes by believing in it.<sup>4</sup>

It appears to me that philosophical reflection approaching religious symbols as existential art in an attitude of disbelief, may differ in a similar way, from the faithful religious attitude towards the symbols. I would be inclined to say that the latter, the faithful attitude, is not just like the former with the addition of faith as a kind of supplement. It is a different attitude altogether, and that shows itself in faithful believers' ways of living, in what they are prepared to do and to risk for their faith. So to what extent will the religious symbols and myths betray their secrets in a disbelieving attitude of philosophical reflection?

The problems I have touched here also concern the notion symbol and symbolic. The author stresses several times the symbolic nature of religious expression, referring to Kant's conception of symbolic expression as indirect and ana-

logical. And it has often been stressed in our times by theologians and philosophers of religion, that religious language is symbolic. But I must confess that I have certain worries about this *philosophical (and theological)* use of the notion of <symbolic>. It should be remembered, for instance, that Kant uses this as well as other notions of his in the enlightenment spirit where the endeavour is to de-theologize philosophy.

I am, though, in complete agreement with the author that there is something special about religious forms of expression; it is an extraordinary use of expressions connected with extraordinary human experiences, but usually the symbolic nature of religious expression is emphasized in order to contrast it with ordinary language, and even more with scientific language (which is supposed to be <literal>). It is sometimes stressed that religious symbols are not concepts, they are not arbitrary signs that could be exchanged with other signs, religious statements are not true or false and cannot be verified, etc. But such characterisations of religious language lean too heavily, it seems to me, on a schematic and oversimplified picture of non-religious language, and in particular of scientific language. And furthermore, it is a picture of language impressed by religious disbelief. So can we give a fair account of religious expression by means of a notion formed against that background?

If it is a defining feature of symbolic expression that it is indirect and analogical then it seems to me to be very difficult to use that notion to draw a boundary between religious and non-religious expression, because indirect and analogical expression is quite common even in scientific prose. Many scientific concepts have originated in pure fictions based on certain analogies. Conversely, I am quite sure that you could find faithful religious individuals who would deny the indirectness of certain religious symbols and expressions, and instead claim that they are the direct and literal expressions of certain decisive religious experiences (even if that makes no sense to non-believers).

So my question to the author is whether the Kantian notion of the symbolic really is important for what the author has to say in this paper? I cannot see that it is.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, «Is Theology Poetry?», in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces*. Fontana Books, London and Glasgow 1965, p. 45–46.