

**Symbols and the Meaning of Life:
On the Need for Psychic Conversion in a Post-Christian, Image-Saturated Culture**

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Introduction

For much of medieval and modern history, the Christian symbol system provided the lens through which many if not most Western people viewed the world and lived their lives. However, the march of secularization so thoroughly chronicled by Charles Taylor and others has brought an end to Christianity's cultural hegemony and with it the prominence of Christian symbols in many people's lives. Notwithstanding, while reports of the rising numbers of "Nones" might seem to suggest that formerly religious populations have abandoned Christian symbols without appropriating anything in their place, the truth is quite to the contrary. Whether acknowledged or not, Christian or secular, symbols continue to play a crucial role in how people think and live their lives.

Against the backdrop of these shifting cultural dynamics, this paper will draw upon the writings of Bernard Lonergan in order to explain the indispensable function of symbols in human living and to suggest some guidelines for the intentional appropriation of symbolic thinking, which is becoming increasingly necessary in today's post-Christian culture. The paper begins by discussing Lonergan's account of images and symbols in human cognition and living and their role in facilitating integration among all levels of the human organism. The next section highlights potential dangers of "mythical" or "naïve symbolic consciousness". Acknowledging these potential pitfalls, the paper concludes with an exploration of safeguards for symbolic thinking developed by Lonergan, Robert Doran, and the present author in addition to gesturing toward areas for future research.

Images and Symbols in Human Cognition and Living

According to Lonergan, images are indispensable in the lives of human beings. By

“image” Lonergan means the content of sensible or imaginative presentations as operative on the sensitive level.¹ Images are not necessarily visual, though most often they are. Lonergan explains that these images are necessary for normal human functioning for two reasons: first, “all exercise of human intelligence presupposes a suitable flow of sensitive and imaginative presentations,” and second, “inasmuch as intelligence and reasonableness and will issue into human words matched with deeds, they need at their disposal images so charged with affects that they succeed both in guiding and propelling action.”² Let us unpack this dense and highly significant sentence.

In the first place, Lonergan asserts that “the image is necessary for the insight.”³ This observation is in keeping with Aristotle’s claim that “the mind never thinks without an image,” a quote so significant for Lonergan that he placed it on the title page of *Insight*.⁴ Against the “naïve realist”, who assumes understanding to be an instantaneous achievement, Lonergan argues that understanding is a process, one in which images serve a crucial function. He explains that, when one has a question, one generates and manipulates images in the mind in order to work out an answer. In Lonergan’s words, “The answer is a patterned set of concepts. The image strains to approximate to the concepts...The pivot between images and concepts is the insight.”⁵ In Chapter One of *Insight*, Lonergan offers the example of asking why a cartwheel is round. Though no cartwheel is ever perfectly round and we cannot even imagine a perfectly round wheel, still the image of the cartwheel provides the clue necessary for the insight: The spokes are of equal length. From that image one is able to abstract to the intelligibility sought (in this case, defining a circle by the equal length of all its radii) and then dispense with the image itself, yet

¹ See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Volume 3*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1992), 557.

² *Ibid.*, 744.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 699-700; cf. Aristotle, “De Anima,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 431a, 16. The Greek term is “phantasmasi noei”.

⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 35.

the insight could not have been achieved without the image. The image thus provides a foothold or a pivot from the unknown into the known, from questioning to understanding.

In the second place, images make human living and personal integration possible. Human life consists not only in understanding but also in making judgments and decisions that lead to action. And, as Lonergan explains, a person's knowledge "can become effective in his concrete living only if the content of systematic insights, the direction of judgments, the dynamism of decisions can be embodied in images that release feeling and emotion and flow spontaneously into deeds no less than words."⁶ To understand something is not the same as acting upon one's understanding. Though intentional responses like understanding, judging, and deciding make sense of the images presented to consciousness, it is feeling that gives intentional consciousness its "momentum" and "power".⁷ Hence, in order for human beings to function in the world as we do, an integration needs to occur among our intellectual, affective, and bodily dimensions. As Lonergan puts it, "Organic and psychic vitality have to reveal themselves to intentional consciousness and, inversely, intentional consciousness had to secure the collaboration of organism and psyche."⁸ It is through affectively-charged images that communication occurs among these different dimensions.

To these affect-laden images Lonergan applies the name "symbols". A symbol by his definition is "an image of a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling."⁹ A symbol is distinct from a "sign", another category of images, in that a sign links an image with "some interpretation that offers to indicate the import of the image" while the symbol

⁶ Ibid., *Insight* 570.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology: Volume 14*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

⁸ Ibid., 66-7.

⁹ Ibid., 64.

evokes general associations or intimations rather than a clear interpretation.¹⁰ Because symbols have the unique capacity to both stimulate intelligent thought and evoke feeling, they are able to facilitate the communication among organic, psychic, and intellectual levels of the human organism, enabling the person to translate thought into action and to respond intelligently, reasonably, and responsibly to one's experiences.

Beyond simply bridging thought and action, symbols aid human efforts to make meaning of experience. Human desires go beyond that of mere animals. We desire not only to eat and mate but also to make sense of the world. We do not merely live; we fashion a life. In fashioning a life, it is not only the sum of one's insights, judgments, and decisions but also the history of one's affective development (or aberration) that forms one's "orientation in life."¹¹ Hence, intentional consciousness and feeling are equally important in the business of meaningful living. For this reason, the wellbeing of the human person depends on attention to and integration of both dimensions, an integration that Robert Doran has argued is lacking in our day. It is in the hope of addressing this exigency that Doran has developed the notion of "psychic conversion,"¹² which, as I will soon explain in greater detail, requires addressing the symbols that provide the material for existential self-appropriation.

We have now seen why images are indispensable not only for human understanding but also for the work of living. Lonergan states the matter bluntly: "it is on the symbolic level that we live."¹³ This is the case whether we attend to our symbols or not. It is thus highly problematic

¹⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*, 557.

¹¹ Lonergan, *Method*, 65.

¹² See Robert Doran, *Subject and Psyche: Ricoeur, Jung, and the Search for the Foundations* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977).

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education: The Cincinnati Lectures of 1959 on the Philosophy of Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1988), 221. This is true even for the most highly differentiated of us. "The achievement, then, of full understanding and the attainment even of the totality of correct judgments would not free man from the necessity of dynamic images that partly are symbols and partly are signs" (Lonergan, *Insight*, 571).

that many people in our image-saturated culture in fact do not attend to the role of symbols in their experience, much less to whether or not the symbols they live by are beneficial or pernicious. To this problem we now turn.

The Danger of Symbols

As we have just seen, symbols satisfy the human need for internal communication, and “in that communication,” Lonergan says, “symbols have their proper meaning.”¹⁴ His point here is a significant one. Symbols make an essential contribution to the wellbeing of the human person when employed to communicate the needs of organic and psychic vitality to intentional consciousness and to translate thought into action. However, just as common sense overreaches when we extend legitimate concern for the practical into disregard for the theoretical, so too do we overextend symbols when we employ them in an explanatory manner. “To explain the symbol,” writes Lonergan, “is to go beyond the symbol.”¹⁵ Symbols are legitimate heuristic tools or anticipations in the striving of the mind towards understanding. Lonergan explains that this anticipation is fruitful “in the measure that it leads eventually through partial insights and further questions to an adequate grasp of the speculative or practical issues in hand.” However, he adds the warning that “the anticipation, instead of being fruitful, may be the source of illusions.”¹⁶

Such illusions—what Lonergan categorizes under the term “myth”—arise when one mistakes heuristic anticipations like symbols for true understanding, or, as Edward Braxton puts it, when the desire to know races ahead of itself.¹⁷ Mythic consciousness arises from a lack of adequate self-knowledge, specifically a failure to grasp the fact that knowing is not a matter of

¹⁴ Lonergan, *Method*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 565.

¹⁷ Edward K. Braxton, *Images of Mystery: A Study of the Place of Myth and Symbol in the Theological Method of Bernard Lonergan* (Louvain: Catholic University of Louvain, 1975), 514.

simply “taking a good look” but rather of questioning, intelligent understanding, and rational judgment. As a result of this deficiency, Lonergan explains, people operating out of a mythic consciousness lack effective criteria for passing judgments on their heuristic anticipations and consequently ascribe reality to any “object of a sufficiently integrated and a sufficiently intense flow of sensitive representations, feelings, words, and actions.”¹⁸ A myriad of errors result—projecting personal opinions and hang-ups onto others, the scapegoating mechanism described by Rene Girard,¹⁹ and idolatry, to name a few. Divorced from the reality that is affirmed through rational judgment, those immersed in mythic consciousness deprive symbol and ritual of their proper meaning, rendering them mere idol and magic.²⁰

Though we might scoff at the foolishness of the Israelites who worshipped the golden calf, the truth is that we fall prey to the same errors today. Just as the Hebrews mistakenly attributed their liberation from Egypt to a man-made image, so do we place our faith in idols of their own making—pop culture icons, designer labels, and Facebook. Lacking proper criteria for judging the heuristic anticipations we form in response to a constant flood of images and slogans, we fall prey to slick marketing and mistake the things that make us feel alive or cool or sexy for the real and the true. This sort of mythic, naïve symbolic consciousness is what gives the gnostic and the magician, the scientist and the industrialist, the Richard Dawkinses and the Mark Zuckerbergs power over the masses. Mistaking the appearance of knowing for the real thing, we follow these manipulators to our own psychic, moral, and intellectual demise.

Safeguards for the Use of Symbols

¹⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 561.

¹⁹ See Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

²⁰ Cf. Lonergan, *Method*, 111.

As we have now seen, images and symbols can lead us into error just as well as they can into truth. However, the solution is not to abandon symbols. Indeed, this is neither possible for human beings nor desirable, for besides myth there is also “mystery”. “Mysteries”, for Lonergan, are “dynamic images that partly are symbols and partly are signs.”²¹ Like myths, mysteries pertain to the “known unknown,” the sphere of “the ulterior unknown, of the unexplored and strange, of the undefined surplus of significance and momentousness.”²² Mysteries should not be conflated with myths, however. Where myth recedes and may vanish entirely with the advance of self-knowledge, mystery remains a permanent feature of human existence. For even as one grows in self-knowledge and develops adequate criteria for judging heuristic anticipations (i.e., symbols), one still has need of mysteries to guide one’s explorations into the “known unknown” and to make that increasing self-knowledge effective in one’s living. The question, therefore, is not how to rid ourselves of symbolic thinking but rather how to intentionally appropriate it. Put otherwise, How do we ensure that the symbols we appropriate are mysteries that will lead us into truth rather than myths that expose us to manipulation and delusion?

As a first measure, we must consume images prudently. Some images are more salutary, some more pernicious.²³ For example, where a symbol like the crucified Christ tends to orient one toward forgiveness and self-giving love, a symbol like Snooki from the Jersey Shore tends to orient one toward self-indulgence and superficiality. Depending on which symbol one fixates upon, one is likely to be oriented into two very different ways of life. However, to even recognize this influence of symbols on our lives and therefore the need to discriminate in their use requires a certain degree of differentiation in one’s symbolic consciousness. This sort of

²¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 571.

²² *Ibid.*, 556.

²³ In Chapter 20 of *Insight*, Lonergan includes symbols as one element in the heuristic structure of the solution to the problem of evil (p.744).

differentiation is the fruit of the process of self-appropriation that Lonergan lays out in *Insight*.

Through the process of self-appropriation, one develops greater awareness of the needs of one's psyche (that is, the sensitive level of the human being) but also of one's capacity as a self-transcending subject to integrate the functioning of the sensitive level in accord with the contents and directives of the intellectual level. Because one understands the psychic and intellectual dynamics at play within oneself, one is then able to analyze and direct them. Beyond simply generating or consuming an image, one cultures the habit of making reasonable judgments about how it orients one into reality as well as responsible decisions as to how to employ it. "[A]nd so," Lonergan says, "[one's] advance in self-knowledge implies an increasing consciousness and deliberateness and effectiveness in his choice and use of dynamic images, of mottos and slogans."²⁴ Hence, a first key to responsible consumption and use of symbols is the intellectual conversion achieved through self-appropriation.

Beyond the self-appropriation laid out in *Insight*, Robert Doran insists upon the need for "the self-appropriation which begins when one attentively, intelligently, reasonably, and responsibly learns to negotiate the symbolic configurations of dispositional immediacy."²⁵ This is the process of self-appropriation that leads to "psychic conversion". Since the Greeks decisively opted for *logos* over *psyche* millennia ago,²⁶ Western culture has suffered a neglect of the sensitive psyche, which, says Doran, over time "has transformed the potential operator of human integration into a defective operator of human disintegration."²⁷ In consequence, a full re-integration of the human person will require developing "the capacity to disengage and interpret correctly the elemental symbols of one's being and to form or transform one's existential and

²⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 572.

²⁵ Robert Doran, "Psychic Conversion," *The Thomist* 41 (April 1977), 230-1.

²⁶ Robert M. Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations: Toward a Reorientation of the Human Sciences* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 130.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

cognitive praxis on the basis of such a recovery of the story of one's search for direction in the movement of life."²⁸ Doran describes the consciousness of the psychically converted person as a "mediated symbolic consciousness" as opposed to the naïve symbolic consciousness of the person who has not yet achieved adequate self-knowledge.²⁹ For the person with a mediated symbolic consciousness, "individual, cultural, and religious symbols are treated...as *exploratory* of existential subjectivity and as referring to interiority, time, the generic, and the realm of transcendence rather than as *explanatory* or aetiological and as referring to exteriority, space, the specific, and the human."³⁰

Doran has suggested several means of promoting psychic conversion and the mediated symbolic consciousness that attends it. The first is psychotherapy. With the help of a trained professional, one develops the ability to confront feelings and symbols (especially dream symbols) that may be pointing to an inner distress or fragmentation. Once one has confronted these expressions of psychic distress, one can analyze their meaning and address the underlying cause. In so doing, says Doran, one is able to "retrieve a story that was going forward but could not be told."³¹ Another option, one which might be more plausible for people who cannot afford a therapist, is the "Focusing" method developed by psychologist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin. Through these exercises, which are available in Gendlin's book, on his website, and through classes and personal trainers, one learns to attend to the felt quality or "felt sense" of one's current experiencing; to articulate that felt sense through new expressions, words, and images; and thereby to come to a deeper understanding of one's psychic needs.³² Whether through one-on-one sessions or self-directed exercises, therapy is only the starting point of

²⁸ Doran, *Psychic Conversion*, 142.

²⁹ Doran, "Psychic Conversion," 231.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230-1.

³¹ Doran, *Psychic Conversion*, 160.

³² See Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1981) and focusing.org.

psychic self-appropriation. As Doran notes, “soul-making does not take place in the therapist’s conference room. Rather, it occurs in the dramatic events of life itself.”³³

For my own part, I believe there is much teachers can do within a classroom context to promote their students’ intentional appropriation of symbolic consciousness. In particular, where psychotherapy is the most appropriate setting for engaging the elemental symbols one encounters in dreams, the classroom might be better suited to engaging the symbols one encounters in religious traditions and the wider culture. One possibility for addressing students’ use of symbols is to employ Gendlin’s Focusing exercises in the classroom. Another means of promoting differentiation in students’ symbolic consciousness is teachers sharing stories of how particular symbols (e.g., those of the Christian faith) have contributed to a sense of meaning, fulfillment, and integration in their lives and the lives of others as well as how other symbols (e.g., Snooki) have had the opposite effect. Such storytelling both raises consciousness that symbols need to be appropriated intentionally and provides learners with a model of how such an appropriation is done.³⁴

Conclusion

It has been my aim in this brief time to explain the necessity of self-appropriation of symbolic consciousness and to offer some initial suggestions for how to go about it. In proposing a psychic analysis to complement Lonergan’s intentionality analysis, Robert Doran has supplied a foundation for this work, the exigency of which heightens as our culture is daily inundated with images. Moving forward, theologians stand to contribute to this project by articulating more precisely how Christian symbols in particular promote human wellbeing, as Lonergan has

³³ Doran, *Psychic Conversion*, 159.

³⁴ This point picks up on a cue from Doran, who writes, “The appropriation of existential consciousness expresses itself when one tells one’s story” (*Psychic Conversion*, 169).

suggested.³⁵ In clinical and educational contexts, practitioners can contribute by developing and refining methods for facilitating psychic self-appropriation.

³⁵ See Lonergan, *Insight*, 744-5.

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