

## **Interfaith Icons and Symbols**

Harmony Week  
Connect @ Hyde Park  
Office of Multicultural Interests  
Government of Western Australia  
Sunday 18th March 2007

Everything swings on the questions we ask, and our questions are always more important than our answers.

Perhaps that tells you more about me than about my subject!

If so, it is a risk I'm willing to take today.

When the planners of this event proposed the title "Interfaith Icons and Symbols", we had around the table a variety of reactions.

While it alarmed some of my colleagues, it rang bells for me.

Immediately, I thought of a passage I came across twenty or more years ago which has become some sort of icon for me in charting interfaith waters.

It occurs towards the end of a small book by Bishop Kenneth Cragg, one Christian who took Islam deeply seriously long before most others in the western world.

From years of living and working and studying in Jerusalem and Cairo, Kenneth Cragg says this –

“The calling of the Christian community is to be there with the Gospel as that sphere of association where the mystery is luminous. In art this means the icon, the cross, the living face, the grace-cup and the broken bread. It does not mean the rivers of calligraphy, speaking a verbal education of mankind. Nor is it the lotus-flower of mysterious union. The Christian takes other religion to a babe in a manger and a man on a cross, to a holy table where bread and wine invite to fellowship in redemption. Our ambition is to have these always present to be the text of that search for expression which lies nearest to the heart of all human living, so that to feel, to suffer and to understand become one and the same thing. Other faiths, to be sure, have their symbolism, and for these our reverence and our study. But, in the Holy Spirit, the Babe, the Cross and the Eucharist are ours, not in vulgar competition, yet articulate and present, and always as an accusation of our own disloyalty.” [i]

Kenneth Cragg seems to me to go straight to the heart of our discussion, by putting his finger precisely on Christian icons and symbols, but also in identifying some icons and symbols distinctive of other living faith traditions.

Back in 1977 when his book appeared, this was not a particularly popular approach, and

if anything it has become more unpopular since.

The preferred approach is to concentrate solely on what different religions share, all we have in common.

When we start to talk about where we differ, everyone starts to shift in their seats.

And the fact is we do have an immense amount in common, and these commonalities deserve to be widely celebrated, and proclaimed from the house tops.

There is good and bad religion, and the lines run through each one of our communities, not between different household of faith.

Religion can be peace-maker or peace-breaker, and responsibility falls equally on us all to see to it that religion contributes only to human flourishing, that it never descends into destructive violence.

I am sure each of us here today subscribe to Kenneth Cragg's dictum: "Other faiths, to be sure, have their symbolism, and for these our reverence and our study."

Indeed, I am sure we all go further, for whatever the faith, more fundamental still is that we are dealing with unique human beings searching for meaning and truth in a world of exquisite beauty and searing pain.

As another guru of mine says, when we approach one another the first thing we must do is take off our shoes; we must tread gently, lest we trample one another's dreams.

All I say today, I obviously say as a Christian priest, but I will try to say it in that spirit.

So, let me focus briefly on our distinctive Christian icons and symbols.

Avoiding too much detail, this means essentially a baby in a manger and a man on a cross, and the Eucharistic table.

Christianity, like every other religion, reverences words, sacred scriptures.

The Christian bible is made up of the Hebrew scriptures of our parent faith Judaism, together with the four gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, and a collection of apostolic letters to the young churches by Paul and some other early followers of Jesus.

It is not quite true, however, to call Christianity a religion of the book, for the book itself is not the locus for us of God's revelation or self-disclosure.

Words are important, of course, but words are never enough.

Even inspired words fall short of the reality they evoke.

By definition, the reality we call God lies way beyond all words, beyond all human capacity to understand, infinity bursting all our finite categories, shattering all our stumbling attempts at comprehension.

At the heart of Christianity, then, stands not the bible, but Christ himself.

The Christian confession is not so much belief in a set of doctrinal propositions, as it is simple trust in this person.

“The Christian takes other religion to a babe in a manger and a man on a cross, to a holy table where bread and wine invite to fellowship in redemption. Our ambition is to have these always present to be the text of that search for expression which lies nearest to the heart of all human living, so that to feel, to suffer and to understand become one and the same thing.”

In this formula, the baby in the manger and the man on the cross means we believe that God comes to the world in love and as love.

Neither the baby in the manger nor the man on the cross can speak.

If a word is addressed to us here, it has to be the baby and the man himself.

So, Christians believe Jesus is the human face of God turned toward us.

In making this quintessential Christian claim, on the first page of his gospel Saint John deliberately echoes the first page of the Hebrew bible, before taking one step further: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” [ii]

At the heart of Christian faith is this conviction about God’s incarnation: the invisible God choosing to become visible, embodied, en-fleshed at a particular time and place in a human life and death.

In Christian theology, we actually call this “the scandal of particularity”, yet we see this particular history as essentially emblematic of God’s dealings with us always and everywhere.

Perhaps what is understood here is better expressed at the cross than the crib, at Easter rather more than at Christmas.

After all, it is inevitable that a baby should be helpless and at risk.

We don't expect or welcome helplessness and risk in a young man in his prime, so what of the crucifix, undoubtedly Christianity's central icon and enduring symbol?

This is obviously a much bigger question than we have time or energy for today, but what Christians believe is that the cross is our insight into God's love, our window into the heart of love where passion and pain go hand in hand, where patience and suffering stand together, showing us new truths about God we would never in a million years have dreamt possible.

At the cross, we believe, we discover God's humility and gentleness, where all we had before were crude human ideas about power and control.

As the great 20th century explorer, John V. Taylor says, "We human beings are physically puny in a world of brute force. From our childhood we long for greater power and more perfect control. We admire the strongest, the victor, the one who outsmarts the others. So, with our gift for fantasy, we project those images of domination out into the skies and call it God. God is imaged as the super-potentate among the emperors, the master-mind over all the clever controllers. God (unlike us) can do exactly as God wants at any moment. Get him on your side and you can't lose. And what human psychology brought to pass, the philosophers were quick to rationalize."

"If Jesus is Lord in that sense then the thirty years of Incarnation were like an exceptional assignment he had to undertake involving a disguise and some temporary hardship and humiliation. And the victim on the cross was enduring merely the last bad patch before the climax when he could throw off his disguise, mission accomplished, and get back on the throne of the universe. The helplessness and pain tell us nothing new about God. But that is not the only way of saying 'Jesus is Lord.' It can be announced as a reversal of all our assumptions and expectations. Jesus is Lord. His unconditional acceptance of all and sundry is the ultimate power. His patient suffering, non-assertive love will have the last word. His inexhaustible endurance will outlast every defeat. That is what the ruler of the universe is like. 'The only omnipotence known to God is the Almighty Power of suffering love.' [iii]

If it is true that God cannot do anything God likes, that God can only be true to the divine nature, that God's hands are tied by love, it follows that the same is true of Christians.

Week by week, we gather around a table with bread and wine.

In every Christian church it is this table which is the principal icon or symbol of Christ.

In other words, church is a gathering place, a place of genuine hospitality.

Here we are all seekers together, asking questions, sharing food for the journey.

If I have focused on what is distinctive of Christianity, it is not to be exclusive.

Faith explorations are only real when they are inclusive, when no one is left out in the cold, when everyone is welcome.

“Other faiths, to be sure, have their symbolism, and for these our reverence and our study. But, in the Holy Spirit, the Babe, the Cross and the Eucharist are ours, not in vulgar competition, yet articulate and present, and always as an accusation of our own disloyalty.”

The Reverend Dr David Wood  
Parish Priest  
Grace Church Joondalup  
Anglican Chaplain to Edith Cowan University

[i] Kenneth Cragg, *The Christian and Other Religion* (London: Mowbrays 1977) pp. 111-113.

[ii] John 1:1-4; 14.

[iii] J.V. Taylor, *Weep Not for Me: Meditations on the Cross and Resurrection* (Geneva: WCC Risk 1986) pp.7-8.