

God and the World of Signs: Semiotics and Theology

with Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate, "Introduction to Part 2"; Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate, "Semiotics as a Metaphysical Framework for Christian Theology"; F. LeRon Shults, "Transforming Theological Symbols"; Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate, "Broken Symbols? Response to F. LeRon Shults"; Jeremy T. Law, "Toward a Theology of Boundary"; Philip Clayton, "Critical Afterword"

TRANSFORMING THEOLOGICAL SYMBOLS

by F. LeRon Shults

Abstract. In this essay I explore the need for transforming the Christian theological symbols of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Redemption, which arose in the context of neo-Platonic metaphysics, in light of late modern, especially Peircean, metaphysics and categories. I engage and attempt to complement the proposal by Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate (in this issue of *Zygon*) with insights from the Peircean-inspired philosophical theology of Robert Neville. I argue that their proposal can be strengthened by acknowledging the way in which theological symbols themselves have a transformative (pragmatic) effect as they are "taken" in context and "break" on the Infinite.

Keywords: emergence; Incarnation; metaphysics; C. S. Peirce; Redemption; symbols; Trinity

This essay focuses on the question at the theological core of Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate's project: Given that Christian understandings of the Incarnation, and more generally God as Trinity, were framed in an ancient metaphysical framework, can the use of a Peircean metaphysics, and an evolutionary understanding of personhood, contribute new insights

F. LeRon Shults is professor of theology and philosophy at the University of Agder, Institute of Religion, Philosophy and History, Serviceboks 422, Lundsiden, Building 13, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway, and scientific director of the interdisciplinary and interreligious "Transforming Compassion" project at Stiftelsen Arkivet, a peacebuilding institute in Norway; e-mail leron.shults@uia.no.

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that reinvigorate that framework? I share the concern of Robinson and Southgate, expressed in their article that precedes this one, about the need to reconstruct Christian theology in dialogue with contemporary philosophy and science as well as their enthusiasm about the value of appropriating the work of C. S. Peirce for this task. In this article I attempt to complement their efforts by exploring their methodological and material proposals in light of the Peircean-inspired philosophical theology of Robert Neville. I suggest that Neville's insights on the transformative dynamics of taking religious symbols in context as they break on the infinite can enhance the Robinson-Southgate theological research program and clarify the complexity and difficulty of the task.

My general concern is with *transforming* theological symbols—and this in two senses. First, one can read the core theological question in the project as an attempt to call our attention to the need to *transform* the way in which some key traditional Christian doctrines are articulated so that they can be understood and engaged in late modern culture. Their broader project is an attempt to do just this by using the resources of Peircean metaphysics and semiotics. As will become clear, I think that the ancient framework in which patristic doctrinal symbols were formulated does not simply need to be reinvigorated—it needs to be radically criticized and many of its central features (for example, dualistic metaphysics and hermeneutics) rejected as no longer live (or enlivening) options in contemporary public theology. This does not necessarily (although it may) mean letting go of the symbols themselves. It does mean that our way of engaging symbols such as Trinity and Incarnation in our various contexts will need to be transformed if they are to function generatively in late modernity.

This brings us to the second sense in which I am interested in transforming theological symbols. Peircean semiotic metaphysics is inherently pragmatic, which means that any serious appropriation of his work will lead us not only to inquire into the appropriateness of our conceptual linking of Christian symbols but also to explore the extent to which our practical engagements with reality—creaturally and divine—through such symbols is appropriately *transformative*. In other words, we also must attend to the way in which our engagement with and through theological symbols hinders or facilitates our own transformation in the concrete space, time, and community. As I understand the core theological question of the project, it includes or at least invites this sort of concern; how can we rearticulate or reconceptualize the patristic framework in such a way that the symbols are transformed so as to become transforming? Holding these two senses of “transforming” theological symbols in tension makes perfect sense for an approach that values Peirce's intuition that interpretation itself is a thoroughly pragmatic activity.

ROBINSON, SOUTHGATE, AND NEVILLE

The essay included in this issue of *Zygon*, “Semiotics as a Metaphysical Framework for Christian Theology,” is only one part of the broader Robinson/Southgate (R/S) theological project. They have explored possibilities for theologically appropriating Peircean semiotic metaphysics in several articles, to which I refer briefly below. My response, however, focuses on the current article, in which the key points of their proposal are clearly stated. As evident in the theological core question, their project focuses for the most part on the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. They also explore the implications of Peircean categories for discussing the themes of anthropology, discipleship, and mysticism. I engage these latter themes under the general heading of the symbol of “Redemption” as a way of inviting and opening up space for a more robust treatment of the Holy Spirit within the project.

Before turning to the R/S proposal I introduce three aspects of Neville’s theory of religious symbolism that I believe can complement and enhance their overall project, both methodologically and materially. The three aspects relevant for our current purposes are (1) his emphasis on the dynamics of *transformational* engagement in religious interpretation, (2) his attention to the way in which religious symbols break on the *infinite*, and (3) his clarification of the way in which such symbols are intentionally taken in particular *contexts*. Robinson and Southgate clearly are aware of these issues and touch on them more or less directly at several key places in their theological argumentation. However, their project can be strengthened—theologically, philosophically, and pragmatically—by attending more fully to these themes.

Why Neville? More than any other scholar I know, Neville has teased out the implications of Peircean metaphysics and semiotics for the task of reconstructing theology. This appreciation and appropriation of Peirce is also evident in his philosophical work, especially the three-volume *Axiology of Thinking*.¹ In *The Highroad Around Modernism* (1992b) Neville argued that Peirce avoids the problems of both Enlightenment (especially Cartesian) modernism and pernicious and relativist forms of postmodernism. Neville himself has developed constructive proposals for engaging the Christian symbols of Incarnation and Trinity, especially in *Symbols of Jesus* (2001) and *A Theology Primer* (1991). However, my focus here is on his more explicit use of Peirce in his general theory of religious symbols. This theory is set out in most detail in *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (1996). Concise summaries and clarifications appear in chapters within *Religion in Late Modernity* (2002) and *On the Scope and Truth of Theology* (2006).

Robinson, Southgate, and Neville—and I—share much in common. We all believe that the ancient metaphysical framework within which traditional Christian symbols were formulated is problematic today for both

conceptual and pragmatic reasons. We all believe that such symbols should be transformed so that they can be transformative. We all believe that Peirce is an important resource for reconstructing theology in a late modern context, especially in the dialogue with contemporary science. Exactly how to use this resource, however, is a question we are all still exploring. I should acknowledge that my choice of themes—transformation, infinity, and contextuality—serves another, more selfish, purpose. These themes have played a significant role in my own work (Shults 2005; 2008; Shults and Hollingsworth 2006), and organizing my integrative engagement of my colleagues' proposals around them gives me the opportunity to explore and articulate them afresh.

It is important to acknowledge that most theologians of the patristic period also were concerned with these themes, even if they would not have used the same terminology. In their own contexts they attempted to make sense of and articulate the Christian experience of encountering the divine infinite in and through Christ and the Spirit in ways that were sensitive to the ongoing transformation of the Christian communities of the first few centuries. Our task is to follow their example of creatively and courageously engaging and even shaping contemporary thought-forms, not to follow their particular formulations or even ways of forming theology. Materially, this means recognizing the depth to which patristic symbols were immersed within and dependent upon the categories of Platonic dualism and Aristotelian predication theory, both of which have been seriously challenged by late modern philosophy in general and Peirce in particular. Methodologically, it means recognizing the extent to which the tendency within the Christian tradition to construe and present its symbols as static and universal, rather than dynamically changing within particular pragmatic contexts, has constrained the possibilities for transformation.

In this article I suggest some ways in which we can push forward in this task by complementing the R/S project of revitalizing the Christian symbols of Trinity and Incarnation (and Redemption) with critical insights from Neville's Peircean-inspired theory of religious symbolism.

In their essay in the June 2010 issue of *Zygon*, Southgate and Robinson set out and defended their general definition of interpretation, which was critically engaged by several philosophers and scientists who were part of the interdisciplinary research team. For them, interpretation is a kind of response:

A response, *R*, of an entity is an interpretant of some *X* as a sign of some object *O* if and only if:

1. The entity has a property, *Q*, of undergoing change of state *S* in response to some *X*, where *R* is any actual instance of such a response;
2. (a) *R* tends to increase the probability of an effect of a certain general type, *P*;

- (b) This tendency of *R* depends on a relation between *X* and *O*, where the occurrence of *X* does not necessarily imply the occurrence of *O*;
3. The property *Q* has been selected for the tendency of instances of *R* to actualize effects of general type *P*. (Southgate and Robinson 2010, 347)

They use a “hungry” amoeba as their example, but the definition is meant to hold across life-forms and perhaps even for protolife forms. I am optimistic about the project’s strategy of engaging scientific theories of emergence and biosemiotics. My interest here, however, is not in the details of this debate but in theologically interpreting the broader philosophical shift that it illustrates.

For our purposes, the key point is the presence within their definition of such terms as *response*, *change*, *selecting*, and *actualizing effects*. As the authors make clear, this way of conceptualizing interpretation is inspired by Peirce’s *triadic* and *pragmatic* semiotics. Any actual interpretation has an irreducibly triadic structure: In addition to a sign and an object, any concrete interpretant also includes a practical (or “purposeful”) response by the interpreting entity. This approach to semiotics is explicitly a rejection of dyadic theories that focused primarily on the sign and the thing signified, along with the tendency of such theories to construe interpretation as something that happens in the (immaterial) mind, reflecting but not necessarily having an effect in the (material) world. Peirce’s pragmatism was intended as an alternative to both hermeneutical and metaphysical dualism.

In their theological essay in the current issue of *Zygon*, Robinson and Southgate move directly from Peirce to Christian doctrine, often in provocative and promising ways. I believe that their appropriation of Peirce can be critically refined and constructively enhanced by adding a mediating step in this process: reflection on the nature and function of *religious* symbolism. This is where Neville’s analysis of what makes symbols, objects, and interpretations *religious* can complement the R/S project. For Neville, truly religious symbols are those through which persons transformatively engage the reality of finite/infinite contrasts in ways that are appropriate to their particular contexts. In this essay I do not explain the complexity or even identify all of the key elements of Neville’s theory, but I do hope to clarify some of its general contours sufficiently to indicate its potential fruitfulness for our shared interdisciplinary endeavors.

WHAT RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS DO

In the first chapter of *The Truth of Broken Symbols* Neville observes that religious symbols² have both a hermeneutical and a practical function. They are supposed to help us interpret some experienced reality meaningfully, and they are supposed to be transformative; they typically are used to facilitate the transformation of personal, social, or cultural character. Many kinds of symbols transform people, but religious symbols can—and ought

to—effect particularly intense transformations such as salvation, enlightenment, or basic attunement. As discussed below, religious symbols also are distinguished by the objects to which they intend to refer (finite/infinite contrasts) and by the way they are intentionally taken in particular contexts (devotional, cultic, and theological). In this section our interest is in the way in which Neville spells out the dynamics of religious symbol-taking as involving both the ongoing transformation of persons as well as semiotic codes.

One way in which Neville underscores these dynamics is by describing human interpretation in terms of engagement. He explains that the metaphor of *engagement* is “intended to stand in contrast to metaphors such as *decoding* common in some Continental philosophy and *mirroring* in much analytic philosophy” (Neville 1996, 59). Both of the latter metaphors too easily collapse into a dyadic semiotics in which interpretation is understood primarily in terms of the relation between the symbol (or sign) and “reality” (thing signified). The metaphors associated with “engagement” help flesh out an understanding of human life as activity and enjoyment (Neville 2002, 184). Peirce’s triadic semiotics insists that the concrete (pragmatic) act of taking a sign to refer to an object is a constitutive element of interpretation. This means that questions about the meaning, reference, and even truth of an interpretation cannot be abstracted from the interpreter’s actual purposive engagement in context.

Like Robinson and Southgate, Neville appreciates Peirce’s beginning with nature rather than texts as the paradigm case for interpretation. In the pragmatic tradition, all knowing is interpreting; for Neville, all interpreting is engaging reality (which includes some texts). He acknowledges that *all* organisms “engage” their particular environment in order to sustain themselves; this is not simply “causal bouncing” but includes active valuation of some kind. For Neville, the distinctive human mode of engagement is the synthetic activity of *imagination*. Humans have the capacity to experience the world through images; imagination integrates stimuli so that reality can be experienced as a world. This semiotic behavior is continuous with nature, not a “mental” process that is separate from “material” nature. Neville’s theory is naturalistic in that he believes “it is the nature of mental stuff—imagination—to make the world appear” (Neville 1996, 51). The interpretation of religious (or any other) symbols is never purely mental because even the most abstract reflection is “implicated in interpretive networks that engage the interpreter’s environment” (Neville 2006, 31).

Precisely this world-making quality of imagination is what makes it particularly relevant for a theory of *religious* symbolism. Insofar as imagination plays a role in constructing the experiential world, it is already and always “religious” in the sense that it involves engagement with what inter-

preters take to be the ultimate boundary conditions for experience itself. “Imagination cannot frame its experiential elements in a human way without the orienting importance of certain pervasively or seasonally appearing images that function as boundary conditions for worldliness. Religion is the name of the cultural enterprise that shepherds the symbols of the boundary conditions” (Neville 1996, 55). In the next section we spell out the sense in which this idea of world-constructing boundaries is connected to Neville’s concept of finite/infinite contrasts. The point here is his argument that religion is a natural and essential feature of human imaginative engagement.

For Neville, one principal function of religious symbols, including doctrines, is to engage people with religious realities. What makes religious engagement unique is that it is intended as a response to a “transformative power” that comes from (what is taken to be) an “ultimate source” (Neville 2002, 132). Of course, not all religious interpretations actually engage interpreters with this transformative power. Neville notes that symbols may not refer truly (that is, not engage people with the sacred or divine) for a variety of reasons. The intended referent may not exist, or the way of referring may be idolatrous (limited). Often, however, the symbol is simply “dead” for the interpreter—it is not a live option for religious engagement.

Such a failure cannot be accounted for only by attending to the symbols themselves or even their interconnectedness within a broader system. Neville distinguishes between the *extensional* structure of the semiotic code, which is relatively stable, and the *intentional* interpretation that “treats the symbols as tools for engagement and changes them as the situation warrants” (2002, 58). The possible interpretations are constrained by the extended semiotic code, but actual interpretation is always intentional—a concrete attempt to engage reality with signs. On this model, the evaluation of an interpretation of a religious symbol (including a doctrinal symbol such as Trinity or Incarnation) must not only explore the extensive theological semiotic code; it also must attend to the pragmatic (transformative) effect of the interpretant. The “meaning” of religious symbols can be understood only by taking into account the concrete, existential, and intentional context of the interpretation in question.

Interpreting religious symbols is not just about the transformation of people. Symbols themselves also must be transformed or they decay into triviality. As Neville observes, Peirce was fascinated with the genesis, shifts, and expansions of the meaning of symbols as well as their slow breakdown and eventual disappearance from living semiotic codes. His triadic theory of semiotics was less focused on the analysis of static, syntactic “structures” (though it did focus on this) than on the actual transformations of symbols that occurred through human engagement in the world. Neville intensifies this focus:

The growth and changes in semiotic codes come about as they are used by people to engage the world. Pragmatic reasons explain the sharpening of some symbols and the diffusing of others, the invention of new symbols and production of analogical variation. Some symbols cease to have use, and others arise because the need for new discriminations is felt when people engage reality under the shaping direction of the code. (Neville 2002, 50; compare Neville 1996, 30).

Below we explore the implications of this theory of religious symbols for interpreting Christian doctrines. First, however, we need to clarify two other features of Neville's approach that may enhance the R/S proposal.

SYMBOLS BREAK ON THE INFINITE

A distinctive feature of Neville's theory of religious symbols is his proposal that they have double referents. Their primary reference is to the boundary conditions contrasting the finite and the infinite. Their secondary reference is to the character or shape of the interpreters in their particular context (individually or communally). Both together are combined in his understanding of what religious symbols do and how they are both transformed and transforming.

Neville proposes the term *finite/infinite contrast* for the primary referent of religious symbols, for the reality that they intend to engage. The object of religious symbols is "borderline or worldmaking things," things that have to do "with the very worldliness of the world, thus referring always jointly to the finite border and to the infinite within which the border is constituted" (Neville 2006, 11). In *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, he provides this summary:

The interpretation of religious objects that has been offered here is that they are finite things that have some world-constructing importance, either in a cosmological sense or a sense having to do with the ground, meaning and goal of human life. Because of this importance, the real object is not the finite thing as such but the finite thing in contrast with the infinite, with its supra-finite context, with the situation that would obtain if the finite thing did not exist or have its world-constructing importance. In short the contrast has to do with the importance of the finite thing for the contingent existence of the world, in some respect, or the world of human meaningfulness. (1996, 70)

Religious symbols are meant to refer (primarily) to that which constitutes the boundary conditions of the cosmos itself, that in relation to which all finitude is contingent.

Neville himself is happy to use terms such as *the sacred*, *the divine*, or *God* for this referent, but he prefers the vague category of *finite/infinite contrast* for the sake of public dialogue across religions and disciplines. He argues that all religions attempt to engage such a referent. This is not surprising because he believes that human imagination itself presupposes such a "religious" or world-making dynamic. Different cultures have developed various symbolic schemata and symbolic networks for indicating the ultimate boundary conditions of worldliness. Acknowledging that these are

generalizations, Neville observes, “For *West Asian* experience, the boundaries are at the edges of the physical cosmos. For *South Asian* experience the boundaries seem to have more to do with the sources of identity and value. For *East Asian* experience the boundaries have to do with discord and attunement” (1996, 74). According to him, even putatively nonreligious cosmological proposals such as Stephen Hawking’s ideal of a unified theory of physics would qualify as world-defining and “religious” in this sense (2006, 65).

The borderline contingency conditions focus on some *finite* thing that marks the boundary, but these conditions “suppose a contrast with what would be the case without the boundary condition. . . . Precisely in being symbolized as contingent, as the focal points of contingency, as those things on which all other worldly orientation hangs, the boundary conditions are imaged as finite/infinite contrasts.” However, religious symbols are also intended to refer to “that which is not wholly finite,” which for Neville means “that which transcends determinate identity” (1996, 58). The real object is not simply a finite thing of world-constructing importance but the finite thing in contrast with the *infinite*, that upon which worldliness itself in all its other finite determinations depends.

Why do symbols break on the infinite? Symbols are finite signs taken by finite interpreters to refer to finite objects in some finite respect. They are determinate and determining. For Neville “the infinite” is that which is essentially indeterminate, and so no (finite) terms can be used to determine it. As he observes, most religious symbols have iconic, indexical, and conventional reference all at once, although in different ways. However, the indexical quality of symbols is particularly relevant for understanding why they break on the infinite. Insofar as they refer to (indicate, point to) that which transcends the finite, they must have an apophatic quality; we must acknowledge that “the divine is more than is said, or not quite what is said” (Neville 1996, 41). This is not a radically new claim. Even, or especially, patristic theologians insisted that human language cannot grasp (or comprehend) God. Neville simply articulates this apophatic intuition in semiotic terms. Finite signs cannot contain the infinite. This does not necessarily mean that the infinite cannot contain (or be present in) the finite, but that is another story.

Some theologians may worry that such apophaticism means that religious symbols can never be “true” or cannot ever “truly” refer. If one accepts an Aristotelian concept of truth as the carryover of form from the object to the mind, this would be a valid concern. In fact, it was the heretic Eunomios’s embrace of the Aristotelian notion of the form/matter relation and predication theory that led him to conclude that God must be finite, to the consternation of Gregory of Nyssa and other theologians who concluded that the Christian doctrine of God is inappropriately constrained by such categories (Shults 2005, chs. 2, 5).

The important point for our current purposes is that this is not the Peircean way of understanding “truth.” In Neville’s adaptation of his pragmatic semiotic metaphysics, truth has to do with the carryover of *value* from the object to the interpreter in some respect, not (as for Aristotle) the carryover of the *form* of the object into the mind of the interpreter. Given this understanding of truth, only “broken” religious symbols can be true. Interpreting a finite religious symbol as representing the infinite in an unbroken sense is idolatrous because it wrongly takes some determinate thing as the indeterminate. However, broken symbols (under certain conditions) can truly engage interpreters with finite/infinite contrasts in a way that carries over the real value of those ultimate boundary conditions to the interpreter in a particular act of interpretation. Neville argues that such interpretive acts are (can be) a real engagement with the divine, mediated through religious symbols.

We do not deal here with the broader question of the validity of such a model of “truth” or the wider discussion among theologians about “infinity.” Neville’s metaphysical treatment of infinity (and eternity) is complex and worked out in a variety of books such as *God the Creator* (1992a) and *Eternity and Time’s Flow* (1993). My own way of articulating the theological idea of true or intensive infinity differs in significant ways from Neville’s (see Shults 2005). The key point for the purposes of this article is not dependent on the outcome of these arguments. Even if one does not agree with Neville’s way of discussing infinity or explaining why religious symbols break, accepting (along with the apophatic tradition) that they do and in fact must break, insofar as they refer to the truly infinite ground of all determinate symbolization, has significant implications for one’s openness to the possibility of transforming the Christian symbols of Trinity, Incarnation, and Redemption in dialogue with Peircean semiotics and late modern evolutionary science.

TAKING SYMBOLS IN CONTEXT

As mentioned earlier, Neville argues that religious symbols have double referents. Their primary reference is to finite/infinite contrasts, which are taken to be world-constructing and which indicate the boundary conditions for experienced worldliness. However, religious symbols also have a secondary reference—to the concrete structure of the interpreter’s pragmatic experience in a particular context. If we accept Peirce’s model of the irreducibly triadic nature of semiotic engagement then any understanding of religious (or other) symbols cannot be limited to analysis of the extensional code of signs (such as doctrines) or even the relation of those signs to objects in the world. We must incorporate the intentionality of the actual *taking* of the sign to refer to an object by an interpreter in an actual context into account.

This follows from Neville's rigorously pragmatic understanding of interpretation, which is not simply the abstract taking of a symbol for an object but includes the concrete impact or effect of the "taking" in the real experience of the interpreter. Because symbols operate within concrete intentional interpretations, they also refer (secondarily) to the effective difference that is made in the practical experience of the interpreter through the symbolic engagement. In actual interpretations, we can distinguish, but not separate, meaning-content from meaning-context. The "meaning" of a religious symbol is determined by both its reference to an extensional semiotic code and its reference to the intentional context of the interpreter. This secondary reference cannot be ignored because it is intrinsic to the act of interpretation and so shapes the effective meaning of the symbol as taken in a particular context.

In *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, Neville distinguishes between academic theological contexts, the contexts of public, cultic, ordinary, and extraordinary life, and devotional contexts. His summaries of the theory in *The Scope and Truth of Theology* and *Religion in Late Modernity* simplify this into three contexts: theological, communal, and devotional. The taking of symbols in each of these contexts has different purposes. Theology aims primarily for cognitive or representational interpretations of religious referents. Representation is also a concern in "cultic" contexts, but here the interpretants are also intended to form the social practices of the community. The devotional use of symbols is primarily about the spiritual formation of the interpreter's life in relation to the divine. Let us briefly explore each of these.

In an (academic) *theological* context, which in Neville's view ought to include engagement in wider public and scientific discourse about truth, religious symbols are taken representationally. He does not mean "represent" in the sense of mirroring reality in the mind; in his pragmatic theory representations (or cognitive signs) are "habits of construing things in a certain way" so as to "shape human enjoyments, responses, purposes and actions" (2002, 98). Neville uses the term *theology* in its broadest sense, developed by Plato, where it literally means the study of gods or divinity. It is the study of divine matters, even if the conclusion of that study is that there are no gods or that the divine is a projection. In this context, symbols are taken as hypotheses about the divine, and the goal is expressing the truth about divine matters by presenting a coherent set of symbols. However, insofar as theology is an actual interpretation, it must engage the divine (or the religious reality of finite/infinite contrasts) in order to understand it. Balancing the tension between scholarly participation and distanciation in this context requires both a self-awareness of how one's interpretations of boundary conditions have pragmatic bearing on one's own sense of being limited as well as a willingness to submit one's hypotheses to broad critical scrutiny.

When symbols are “taken” in the context of cultic life, they are oriented toward organizing the religious life of the *community*. Neville argues that this usually involves doubled interpretants—that is, the religious symbol is interpreted both representationally and practically. The implications of the symbolized religious object are drawn out for the practice or activities of the community. In such contexts, symbols are primarily referred to their objects *performatively*; their representational reference is important but secondary. Take the religious symbol of God as a “rock” (Psalm 62). One of the main purposes of interpretation in academic theology is cognitive clarity and coherence, and taking this symbol in this context (as “representing” the divine) obviously would be inappropriate. In a communal context, however, the symbol may very well function to organize the lives of those who experience the divine as a secure, protective presence.

The *devotional* use of symbols is like the communal usage in the sense that it focuses on the practical consequences of engaging the divine. However, here symbols often are stretched not only beyond “safe theological representationalism” but also beyond “responsible practical application” because the purpose of interpretation is the powerful transforming of the soul. “The transformations at stake are radical, such as dissolving the soul completely, filling it with the infinite, transporting it across the finite/infinite boundary.” Moreover, the way in which the symbols function will be shaped by the particular state or developmental stage of the religious devotee. In devotional contexts, a religious symbol is “used as much to address and engage the devotee’s soul as it is to engage the divine” (Neville 1996, 153). A despairing drunk and a meditating mystic may “take” the religious symbol of God as a rock in very different ways with very different consequences. Symbols may need to evoke sometimes terror, sometimes comfort, in order to effect transformation of the soul in relation to the divine, and their cognitive clarity or consistency is not always relevant on such occasions.

What do religious symbols do? Neville argues that they are “supposed to help save people, shape communities, and tell the truth about what they represent” (1996, 1). They do this when their being taken in an actual interpretation effects the carryover of the value of religious realities, ultimately connected to some finite/infinite contrast, to the interpreter in his or her particular context. In so doing, religious symbols transform people and are transformed by people. Neville acknowledges that there is no finite set of algorithms by which to test engagement with the infinite, to determine the truth of religious symbols.³ Especially in the context of academic theology, it is important to recognize that finite symbols break on the infinite. But having broken symbols does us no good if they are dead. Living religious symbols are those that can be taken by living interpreters in particular contexts of actual interpretation. A symbol may be a live option for one person but dead for another, live in one context, dead in another.

What does all of this mean for the R/S theological research project? Like Neville, Robinson and Southgate are interested in transforming symbols, in their case the Christian symbols of Trinity and Incarnation. They also are interested in the transformative power of symbols. This is already clear in the essay included in this issue, when they discuss discipleship, practice, and mysticism, but it becomes even more evident in some of their other articles where transformation comes to the fore (Robinson and Southgate forthcoming). But observing similarities is not as much fun, or potentially productive, as noting tensions between theories. Attending to the differences may lead to creative insights that will broaden and deepen our treatment of these important issues. The relevant differences have to do with infinity and contextuality. Whether or not one agrees with Neville's formulations on these points, engaging his theory of religious symbolism can sharpen our awareness of elements within the R/S project that call for further clarification and development.

INTERPRETING TRINITY

For most of its history the Christian tradition has used the symbol of the Trinity to articulate an understanding of the boundary conditions of the experience of worldliness. The infinite Triune God is the Creator of finite creation. As Robinson and Southgate observe, intra-Christian debates over theological interpretations of the divine as Trinity have been shaped in part by the conceptual problems encountered in attempts to avoid the "heresies" of tri-theism, subordinationism, and modalism. They suggest that these conceptual problems may be more easily resolved within a Peircean metaphysical framework than they were in the context of ancient (especially neo-Platonic) metaphysics. In an earlier issue of *Zygon*, Robinson spelled out in more detail the way in which Peircean triadic semiotics could be correlated to trinitarian theology (Robinson 2004), but the basic features of their approach are clear in their article here. In what follows, I point out ways in which further attention to infinity and contextuality may contribute to their project of transforming this Christian symbol.

Their argument is based on the intriguing parallels between Peirce's three classes of relations or "categories"—Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness—and the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These parallels lead them to propose an analogy between the triadic dynamics of creaturely interpretation and the inner triune relations of the Christian God. Although they use a variety of terms ("model," "imprint," and so forth) to describe the relation between the two terms of the analogy, they prefer the Augustinian concept of "vestiges." One problem with this kind of language that has been pointed out by many late modern theologians, including Wolfhart Pannenberg and Colin Gunton (who are cited as resources for the S/R project of revitalizing trinitarian doctrine), is that it too

easily leads to a *formal* construal of the divine (the infinite) and the creaturely (the finite) as two terms opposed and bound to each other within a broader logical (*ana-logos*) category that comprehends them both. The fact that human linguistic categories by definition have the function of limiting (classifying finite things) is why the apophatic tradition has always resisted the temptation to apply them directly to the infinite. Moreover, when such dualistic construals define the infinite as simply one side of a pair of negative dialectical concepts, they illustrate what philosophers call a spurious view of infinity; the in-finite is not truly un-limited if it is limited by the finite.

A second problem is the *material* content of the proportional analogy Augustine uses to subtend the finite and the infinite. Gunton and Pannenberg are among those who have criticized the conceptual (and pragmatic) problems inherent in the so-called psychological model of the Trinity, which has dominated Western theology and contributed to the very conceptual problems the S/R project aims to overcome. Augustine understood the human mind, the mind's knowing itself, and the mind's loving itself as three substances so mutually related that they are one essence—equally substantial with each other. He saw this as a “vestige” of the Trinity in creation. The projection of this neo-Platonic anthropological construction onto the divine made it difficult for those who followed Augustine to speak in any robust sense of three “persons” of the Trinity, as experienced in the economy of salvation. This helped solidify the dichotomy between what has come to be called the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, which in turn shaped the kind of question that has plagued Western theology ever since: Is the inner nature of God really the same as the external revelation of God in the world?

Robinson and Southgate are committed to using Peircean philosophy in order to challenge theology's reliance on the categories of ancient metaphysical schemes and the ways of asking theological questions that were forged within those schemes. However, in this case they appear not to have wholly escaped some of the most problematic elements of that ancient metaphysics. Formally and materially, their analogy is similar to Augustine's. Creaturely interpretation is triadically structured (three in one), and this is a vestige of the three-in-one nature of God. This seems to be another version of the psychological model of the Trinity. Spinning out the analogy would lead to some of the same problems facing the Augustinian tradition: Is God, conditionally or essentially, an interpreter (of the world and/or of Godself)? Do the persons of the Trinity interpret one another (*ad intra*, within the immanent divine life, and/or *ad extra*, in the economy of salvation)?

Up to this point, Robinson and Southgate have resisted the idea that symbols break on the infinite (Robinson and Southgate forthcoming). How-

ever, even Augustine acknowledged that human knowledge fails to comprehend the divine and that language does not work on the infinite as it does on the finite. He was most explicit on this point in his mystical writings (such as the *Confessions*) but clear enough even in his more catechetical and doctrinal works, including *De Trinitate* itself. The question is how to maintain this apophatic intuition—resisting the temptation to project finite metaphysical categories onto the infinite—without giving up altogether on the task of interpreting our experience of God (or: how to engage the divine truly with broken symbols, as Neville would put it). The allusion to the degrees of clarity in various places within Augustine’s writing reminds us of the other insight that Neville’s theory of religious symbolism offers to our shared task: Symbols are always taken in actual contexts of real interpretation.

Augustine’s intentionality shaped his interpretations of the Trinity. He “took” the symbols of the extensional semiotic code available to him at that time and used them to engage the divine for various purposes—devotional, communal, and theological. The question for us is how to “take” his (and other) religious symbols in our own late modern context(s). The answer will depend on our purposes, which are always pragmatic, even when we are engaged in the most abstract and conceptual tasks. The use of the symbols *Father* and *Son*, for example, are *taken* differently in various contexts and by different interpreters. They played a special role in the network of meaning that characterized the patriarchal culture of the patristic period. Their function in contemporary culture has been the subject of much feminist critique.

One key question is how these male symbols function in context. We can imagine devotional contexts in which they still can mediate spiritual formation, and cultic contexts in which they still may shape communities in ways that valuably relate human life to the divine. In an academic theological context, however, it is important to emphasize that these symbols also break on the infinite—and to acknowledge that for many they are not only broken but dead. Exploring possibilities for enlivening the symbols of the doctrine of the Trinity is at the core of the theological dimension of the R/S project. Success in this venture may require taking Peircean semiotic metaphysics even more seriously, constantly reminding ourselves that Christian symbols (like any others) are not static but dynamic. The extensional semiotic code itself does not exist in an immutable Platonic realm; the meaning of symbols is always being changed in each and every intentional engagement with them. Peirce’s pragmatism may have a much more radical effect on the transformation of Christian symbols than we have yet recognized.

INTERPRETING INCARNATION

The doctrinal symbol of Incarnation, which emerged and was shaped in relation to trinitarian symbols, also has to do with the human encounter with the infinite. As Neville puts it, the symbols of Jesus “relate him to God as the founding finite/infinite contrast for Christians” (1996, 256; see also *Symbols of Jesus* [2001]). The task of Christology traditionally has been construed as explaining how the (infinite divine) Word became (finite human) flesh. As in their treatment of the Trinity, Robinson and Southgate acknowledge that the conceptual problems plaguing patristic christological debates resulted in large part from theological reliance on ancient metaphysical categories. They argue that Peircean categories, especially his taxonomy of signs, offer a potentially fruitful way of reframing christological questions and symbolic formulations. Their approach is more developed in other places, to which I briefly refer below, but the essay in this issue contains all of the salient points of their proposal. Here too I embrace their critique and their general strategy, but I wonder whether their attempts at transformation could be strengthened by more detailed attention to infinity and contextuality.

The core of their argument in this case is that Jesus is the “iconic qualisign” of the transformative presence of God. My questions about this proposal have to do, first, with the validity and value of taking Jesus *as* iconic qualisign and, second, with the meaning and mode in which Jesus is *taken* as iconic qualisign. To begin with, it is not clear why the symbol Incarnation is placed only within the iconic qualisign box (their Figure 2). If Jesus’ whole life is meant to embody the presence of God, as they rightly and consistently stress, and Jesus’ life included moments that should be interpreted iconically but not as qualisigns, such as the temple action (sinsign) and the last supper (legisign), not to mention the many moments that should be interpreted as referring indexically or symbolically to the divine presence, why should the doctrine of Incarnation be limited to iconic qualisign? This would work only if the latter could be broadly enough conceived to incorporate or significantly integrate all of the other sign-vehicle and sign-object relations, a move that the use of the analogy of the colored cloth seems to preclude (or at least problematize).

The notion that Jesus’ whole life simply *is* an iconic qualisign of God’s presence is problematic for other reasons as well. Robinson and Southgate claim that Jesus’ life embodied “*the very quality of the being of God*” and that his life is a sign “by virtue of being *nothing other than* the quality that it embodied” (2010, 699; emphasis added). Like the color in a particular cloth signifies that very color in the cloth, Jesus signifies that very quality that is embodied in his life—the being of God. This way of speaking runs the risk of denying the distinction between the infinite (and eternal) presence of God as Creator and the fleshly coming-to-be of this finite man from Nazareth. Are we not faced with the same kind of issue that worried

the Council of Chalcedon about the extreme Alexandrian tendencies of Eutyches, which led him to fuse the divine and human natures? If the being of God *is* that quality that is embodied in the life of Jesus, and his life is nothing other than that quality, the divine being seems “immanently” fused with this finite being, denying what traditionally has been affirmed as the transcendence of God in relation to creation. The solution is not swinging toward the Antiochene (Nestorian) extreme in reaction but rather escaping the metaphysical categories that force christological discourse to operate within this dialectic (Shults 2008, ch. 2).

It is not clear how the R/S proposal accounts for the eschatological dimension of Jesus’ mediation of the divine presence. Claiming that Jesus’ life *was* the embodiment of the transforming presence could be taken to mean that the iconic qualisign that was his life is complete. However, Jesus’ original followers anticipated (and contemporary disciples continue to anticipate) a further fulfillment of divine transformation. That is, the saving divine presence of God in Christ was, and is, experienced by believers as already and not-yet. This temporal dynamic is obscured by the cloth analogy. The S/R project aims to get beyond the “puzzle” approach of the “two natures” (divine and human), but it is not clear how their own use of the language of divine “being” escapes the structural problem inherent in any application of Aristotelian predication theory (substance versus quality, or being versus attributes) to God. It makes God one substance among many, qualified in some ways among others, rather than the ultimate origin, condition, and goal of all finite qualifying and substantiating. A more radical embrace of Peircean relational semiotics, which was meant as an alternative to Aristotelian substance-quality semiotics, may be necessary to overcome some of these christological antinomies.

My second concern has to do with the way in which Jesus is *taken* as an iconic qualisign of the quality of the being of God. I think that the R/S project could be enhanced by focusing more carefully on the transformative dynamics at work as symbols are taken in various contexts by actual interpreters. To say that the Incarnation *is* the iconic qualisign of the divine presence seems too static, as though this sign is (was) finished, complete, available on an external display for possible mental interpretation. It implies that the particular quality that is God’s presence was “there” in Jesus, leaving it unclear whether that quality could also be embodied in other signs or how that quality can be present here and now for us. As Peirce insists, and Robinson and Southgate often emphasize, signs are not static entities; they are always and already being taken, being dynamically engaged and corrected through ongoing pragmatic interaction. The notion of the Incarnation as iconic qualisign seems too limited and limiting in this regard. Contemporary persons might “take” the sign of Jesus’ life as iconically, indexically, or symbolically (or all at once) referring to the transformative divine presence.

Much of the traditional imagery surrounding the Incarnation, such as the virgin birth of a holy child in a stable, or the descent of the Son of God from heaven, may have its place in the devotional and even communal contexts of some Christians. However, in the context of academic theology, and especially in the context of interdisciplinary dialogue with contemporary biology and cosmology, taking such symbols representationally is implausible. We must allow our theological hypotheses regarding Christian symbols to be made vulnerable to critique, always open to correction and clarification. In my opinion, the most plausible hypotheses in our current context are those that resist any vestiges of a dualistic patristic metaphysical framework that constructs the questions of Christology in terms of distinctions such as divine and human substance or even from above and from below.

Moreover, taking christological symbols in the context of interdisciplinary and interreligious discourse will work best if we also can resist the temptation to project any finite metaphysical system, even a Peircean semiotics, onto the infinite. This, of course, leaves open the possibility that such symbols, appropriately broken on the infinite, can actually be taken in ways that engage interpreters with that which is ultimately valuable—the presence of that which constitutes the boundary conditions of finite creation, engendering the emergence of the pragmatic creaturely desire for redemptive life.

INTERPRETING REDEMPTION

Robinson and Southgate do not focus on the doctrine of Redemption explicitly, but the last part of their article deals with issues that bear on the interpretation of this Christian symbol, such as the practices of discipleship and the experience of participation through the Spirit in the life of God. The R/S project clearly has a place for the Spirit in its metaphysical proposal (Thirdness, meditation), but pneumatology does not play a dominant or generative role. This may be another vestige of following Augustine's psychological analogy, which has been so often criticized for its subordination of the Spirit (see Shults and Hollingsworth 2008). The main points I want to make here, however, are related to the themes of infinity and contextuality as they bear on the task of transforming theological symbols.

In their current article and elsewhere (Robinson 2004, 132), Robinson and Southgate suggest that Peircean categories appear more consonant with the Eastern Orthodox model of redemption as *theosis*, which emphasizes “participating” in the divine life. If the goal is a more dynamic concept of redemption as sharing in the life (or conversation) of the trinitarian God, it seems counterproductive to rely so heavily on the Augustinian categories that have canalized Western soteriology. Perhaps the point they take from Terrence Tilley should be pressed more consistently: If the practices of

discipleship are most fruitfully understood as oriented toward mysticism, as they argue, the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation may need to be more radically transformed. The Orthodox approach has its own conceptual problems, and the solution is not simply embracing the framework of that tradition, which was forged (in different ways) in dialogue with neo-Platonism. Several times in the article they make use of the idea of God as the “ground” of creaturely interpretation, a term that in my view holds more promise than “vestiges.” This dimension of the project could also be enhanced by additional reflection on the relation between the concepts of infinity and Spirit as they shape our interpretation of finite spiritual formation.

Attending to contextuality and intentionality are important in this case as well. The way in which redemptive engagement with the divine is interpreted will be shaped by the context within which Christian symbols are taken. When discussing the devotional context, Neville distinguishes between four “levels” of spiritual growth: the student, the boundary crosser, the embodiment, and the seeker for union. My work on spiritual formation and soteriology focuses more on the dynamics of transformation than on stages (Shults and Sandage 2005, ch. 2). In both cases the point is that the symbols of redemption (including, for example, the meaning of theosis or discipleship) will be taken differently depending on the unique context of every interpreter. We change the symbols every time we engage them. In the context of academic theology, Peirce’s pragmatic, dynamic, and relational categories can indeed help us clarify these symbols and our use of them. In particular his attempt to overcome the dualism between spirit and matter (synechism) has much to contribute to the symbolic engagement between the Christian doctrine of Redemption and the sciences of emergent complexity.

However, in such dialogues theology should be clear about its own task, which includes attending to the dynamics of human attempts to engage ultimate reality (the infinite, the divine, God, nothingness, and so forth) in ways that are transformative. Using Peirce’s terminology, we may say that theology’s First is the impression of limitation itself, the sense of being-finite. The (existential) reaction to this ultimate being-limited constitutes theology’s Second. Considerations of such Firsts as Seconds are theology’s Thirds—that is, religious symbols that have brought, are bringing, and might bring about interpretants through which persons engage their “object,” considered not as one finite thing among many but as that which grounds the contingency conditions of all finite things. Theological imagination cannot escape its limitation by and in relation to the infinite in order to determine whether finite symbols “represent” the infinite because the infinite is not a determinate reality but that which ultimately grounds any and all finite considerations (Thirds) of Firsts as Seconds. For those operating on the assumptions of a dualist metaphysics (or a dyadic

semiotics), this will appear to make God an “object” wholly unthinkable by human subjects. In our late modern context Peirce is an important resource for developing new ways of thinking about thinking, new ways of interpreting interpretation, that can humbly acknowledge the limits of human knowledge *and* confidently engage the ultimate reality in which we live and move and have our being-transformed.

NOTES

1. The trilogy consists of *The Reconstruction of Thinking* (1981), *Recovery of the Measure* (1989), and *Normative Cultures* (1995). The first volume introduces the historical and philosophical issues surrounding the debates over “thinking,” axiology, and cosmology and sets out a general theory of imagination as the human form of engagement in the world. The second volume develops a theory of interpretation, including a definition of truth as the carryover of value rather than form. The third volume spells out the implications of his conception of value for synoptic theorizing and responsible practice.

2. Peirce usually reserved the term *symbol* for the third way in which signs can refer—conventional, as distinguished from iconic or indexical reference. Neville recognizes this distinction, but because of the way the term is used in his own context (comparative religious ideas), he typically uses *symbol* in its broader sense as incorporating all kinds of religious “signs” (icons, texts, doctrines, rituals, and objects).

3. It is important to note that Neville’s theory of truth is not *merely* pragmatic; judging truth is not based solely on consequences or effectiveness as in the case of William James, from whom Peirce distanced himself later. The criteria for determining truth in Neville’s theory include a sense of coherence as well as correspondence.

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