

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"

BROKEN SYMBOLS? RESPONSE TO F. LERON SHULTS

by Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate

Abstract. In the preceding article in this section, F. LeRon Shults responds to our article preceding his, "Semiotics as a Metaphysical Framework for Christian Theology." We respond here to his criticisms of our proposal. We discuss his concerns about the concept of "vestiges of the Trinity in creation" and argue that this does not undermine the absolute ontological difference between God and creation. We offer a clarification of our idea that the Incarnation may be understood, in terms of Peirce's taxonomy of signs, as a qualisign of God's being. Finally, we discuss the idea that all symbols "break on the infinite."

Keywords: creation; Incarnation; C. S. Peirce; qualisign; semiotics; symbol; Trinity; vestiges of the Trinity

In this response to the preceding article by F. LeRon Shults we wish, first, to acknowledge his very helpful criticisms of one aspect of our project; second, to clarify another aspect where we think a fuller exposition of our proposal would allay some of his concerns; and, third, to agree to disagree on one of his major criticisms of our approach.

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VESTIGES OF THE TRINITY AND INFINITE
QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCE

An aspect of the project on which Shults has consistently and constructively pressed us, in his article in this collection and in many helpful personal communications, is that of the infinite qualitative difference between God and the created order. In particular, Shults is concerned about our appropriation of the concept of “vestiges of the Trinity in creation.” The problem with this concept, he suggests, “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” (2010, 725–26). We acknowledge that the language of vestiges of the Trinity carries with it a danger of implying that God exists in a realm separate from, but in some sense ontologically parallel to, the creaturely realm such that there is a one-to-one correspondence of certain features of God (in our proposal the Peircean categories) and equivalent features in the world. Certainly our use of the vestiges concept may, at best, not have adequately guarded against such an interpretation and in fact may have been guilty of tending toward that error. Nevertheless, we suggest that the “semiotic model” of the Trinity can avoid this problem without abandoning the vestiges concept.

In the first place, our understanding of the relevance of Peirce’s category of Secondness must be emphasized. According to the semiotic model, by creating through the Word, the source of otherness within the Trinity, the created order is given an *absolute otherness* from God. The intratrinitarian distinction / otherness of the Word / Son from the Father is the ground of every instance of distinction / otherness—that is, of “everyday” kinds of otherness within the created order and of the infinite qualitative difference between God and creation. The absolute ontological difference between God and creation is thus fully affirmed. One of the problems with the language of “vestiges” is that it seems to imply that God imparts a triadic structure to the world from “outside,” which in turn may imply that God’s realm is somehow (spatially) parallel to the created order. A better way of expressing our understanding of the relation might be to say, as Shults has suggested (2009), that each of the categories in the created order is “from him, through him and to him” (Romans 11:36; see 1 Corinthians 8:6). The triadic structure of the world is as it is because God graciously “holds” it in being: “He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17 NRSV; all biblical quotations in this article are from the NRSV). The relation of the threefold structure of the world to the threeness of God is, we fully acknowledge, a relation of the finite to the infinite. Nevertheless, we wish to affirm that this is a real relation. To regard it as otherwise would be to imply, ultimately, that the revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not truly a self-revelation of God.

One particularly strong way of affirming the reality of the relation between the tri-unity of God and the self-revelation of God in the world is to imagine (in what we acknowledge is a mystical rather than merely theological step) that the distinctive (but inseparable) actions of the trinitarian Persons in creation are what impart to nature its threefold structure. To offer a Peircean reading of Paul's phrase reported in Acts 17:28, God is the one *in whom we live* (that is, participate in Thirdness—the basis of all semiotic / biosemiotic processes), *move* (participate in Secondness—the category required for changes of state, of which movement is an example), and *have our being* (participate in Firstness—the category of sheer quality of being). We refrain from labeling this view panentheistic, a term that itself bears the burden of spatial metaphors. Rather, we emphasize that we are seeking to express the reality of the relation between the finite world and its infinite Creator. As the Christian tradition has found in the past, trinitarian language appears to be necessary to this task.

CLARIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF INCARNATION AS QUALISIGN

We want to clarify our suggestion that the Incarnation may be understood in terms of the embodiment in the world of a qualisign of the being of God. Shults rightly points out that Jesus' life included many signs of various kinds. Our suggestion is that *as a whole* the life of Jesus, including all of the ways in which he pointed to his Father—iconically, indexically, and by means of symbols—may be understood as a qualisign of God. Our use of a colored piece of cloth may be misleading as an example of a qualisign if it is taken to imply that qualities are necessarily predicated of substances. The cloth example is intended to illustrate that although in a qualisign it is the quality itself that signifies, not the actuality (as opposed to nonactuality) of that quality in that particular place, the quality must be actualized (embodied) in order to signify. Nothing in this way of putting it presupposes that qualities are accidental attributes of substances.¹ All that is required is that qualities can be actualized. In the example, the cloth merely serves the purpose of illustrating that certain conditions may be necessary for the actualization of a particular quality. The quality of the colors of a rainbow would have equally served the purpose: Certain physical conditions are necessary to the production of those particular colors (light, water droplets), but there is no implication that the colors are a property of some underlying Aristotelian substance.

For this reason we do not think that the qualisign approach to the Incarnation has the unwanted christological implications that Shults is concerned about. We do not suggest that the person of Jesus of Nazareth is composed of a Eutychian fusion of two different substances, human and divine. Rather, we suggest (as an affirmation in the "depth" dimension of

Christology) that the created order is such as to be capable (in certain very specific circumstances) of actualizing the very quality of the being of God. The Christian tradition has wished to say of this actualization of God's quality that it is the Incarnation of the Word (John 1:14); that in the human person of Jesus "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19). The transcendence of God (the absolute difference between Creator and creation) is not thereby threatened, though certainly the relation of the world to God is seen in a new light—as surely it must be in any adequate Christology.

HOW SYMBOLS "BREAK ON THE INFINITE"

The issue on which we may need to agree to disagree with Shults is the sense in which, in Robert Neville's phrase, symbols "break on the infinite." Shults is worried that we are insufficiently apophatic in our account of the relation between creaturely semiosis and knowledge of God. Where we seek to reinvigorate contemporary thinking about the Incarnation and Trinity, Shults urges that the ancient framework in which these doctrinal symbols were formulated needs to be more radically criticized. In fact, the need for radical rethinking of the metaphysical underpinnings of that framework is a point of agreement between us and Shults. What Shults doubts is whether we understand how radical that criticism needs to be.

The issue of when and how symbols "break on the infinite" is central to this disagreement. We can explain this by asking in what sense different kinds of sign may "break." First, it is important to note that all creaturely interpretations are fallible (see Southgate and Robinson 2010). An aspect of this fallibility is that a sign that may be appropriately taken to mean something in one context may be misinterpreted if it is responded to in the same way in a different context. In that sense we have no disagreement with Shults regarding the fragility of signs. However, interpretations may "break" in other ways. Consider the word *God*, which is a symbol in the Peircean sense—its relation to its object is given by a convention. Shults would wish to point out, and we would agree, that God is not an object like other objects in the world (hence the Hebrew reticence about uttering the name of God). In that sense the symbol *God* breaks on the infinite. An indexical sign may similarly break on the infinite. "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). The existence of the world points indexically to its creator, though again we would agree that the creator of the world is not to be thought of as simply equivalent to a human artificer.

Matters are slightly different when we come to consider how icons break, in that, unlike symbols and indexes, there is a sense in which icons break on the finite as much as on the infinite. If I say "God is my rock" (Psalm 18:2) I am using a metaphor—hence an icon—to describe my relation to

God. In doing so I accept that God is in some ways like a rock and in other ways unlike a rock. However, this tension between the *is* and the *is not* in the metaphor (icon) is true of most iconic representations, whether the object of the sign is finite or infinite (McFague 1983, 13). A portrait is in some ways like its subject (the appearance is recognizable as the person it represents) and in others unlike it (the portrait is two-dimensional, the subject three-dimensional). The infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creation adds a further way in which icons break on the infinite—equivalent to that noted above with respect to the application of indexes and symbols to the infinite. However, that kind of fragility of icons when used to represent the infinite is in addition to the *is* and *is not* aspect of iconic representations.

Here lies the crux of our argument: There is a type of icon, the qualisign, that carries only an *is*, with no *is not*. When a quality is actualized it may act as a sign of that quality. As such, it stands for nothing other than that quality; it *is* that quality, and it is not unlike it in any respect. That is what we mean when we suggest that to speak of Jesus as the “reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his very being” (Hebrews 1:3), “in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19), is to identify Jesus as a qualisign of God. The further sense in which this finite (iconic) qualisign “breaks” on the infinite because of the absolute difference between finite and infinite is not thereby dissolved; that (the finite) Jesus can be the full embodiment of (the infinite) God’s glory is precisely the mystery—in our terms, an aspect of the depth dimension of Christology—that the concept of Incarnation labels.

Shults seems to speak as if the “symbols” of Trinity and Incarnation operate on the same kind of plane as the “symbol” of, say, God as a rock. Admittedly there is a sense in which we are saying that God “is like” the threefold patterns of semiosis in the world. More fundamentally, however, we are suggesting (in continuity with the tradition of Christian theological reflection) that the transcendental condition of any speech about God (or about kind of representation of anything) is that God, in God’s self, is the ground of all meaning and signification (“In the beginning was the Word,” John 1:1).

NOTE

1. Although Peirce initially included “Substance” in his “New List” of categories (Peirce 1992, 6), his eventual threefold scheme of categories excluded the category of Substance (and that of Being) from the list (Hausman 1993, 107–8).

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