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**Engaging Our Symbols, Sharing Our World:
Forming Young People Around Symbols for Participation in the Public Sphere**

Abstract: This paper highlights the potential of symbols, specifically those David Tracy calls “religious classics,” to anchor both dialogue among people of differing beliefs and the formation of young people by their religious communities. Symbols present a particularly propitious focal point for such dialogue because of (1) the congruence of symbolic expression with the dynamics of human cognition and (2) the suitability of this mode of expression to the present cultural context. A dramatic example illustrates the process of shared reflection upon classic religious symbols *through which* and *for which* religious communities should form their youth for responsible participation in public spaces.

Introduction

Events like 9/11, the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, and the continued religious violence in Nigeria have forced upon us all—even one time advocates of the secularization theory—the realization that religion is still a major force in the lives of human beings. To ignore this force in our society is folly; to fail to prepare our youth to address it, negligence. Having admitted to ourselves that religion seems here to stay, we are confronted anew with the question of how to address religious differences. On one hand, some, particularly here in the U.S., tout tolerance as the highest virtue. “You do your thing, I’ll do mine,” they say. However, such “lazy pluralism” deprives us of the many rewards to be gained from dialogue and more widespread collaboration while ignoring the very real problems that stem from religious and ideological disagreement.¹ On the other hand, the rise of fundamentalism around the globe indicates that many people are responding by entrenching themselves more firmly in their own traditions. Such exclusivism holds little promise in a time when rapid advances in transportation and technology are bringing us into more frequent contact with the “other,” not only on our TV’s, computers, and mobile devices, but even at our very doorsteps. We cannot deny it—the other is here, and he is very different from me. If we harbor any hopes for peace around the world and in our local communities, we need to learn to talk to one another.

Between these extremes of lazy pluralism and exclusivism, we must find a more adequate middle ground, a common ground where the people of coming generations may meet and interact. One possibility is that pointed to by the likes of David Tracy and Thomas Groome of rooting ourselves in the particular while remaining open to the universal.² Though this is a nice sentiment, the question arises how exactly religious communities go about forming their young people to live out such a paradoxical existence. In this paper, I highlight one aspect of religious formation that holds particular promise for preparing young people to participate in the public sphere of our pluralistic, postmodern world, namely, helping them to appropriate intentionally and meaningfully the core symbols of their religious tradition and, subsequently, to engage in genuine conversation with members of other traditions about their own symbols.³ In this proposal I draw primarily upon the work of David Tracy, who advocates concentration on “classics” as one hope for moving theology forward into publicness. I begin by describing what sorts of symbols are capable of supporting this kind of formation and conversation and then explaining why it is that formation around symbols holds such promise. In the latter part of the paper, I analyze the process of shared reflection upon symbols *through which* and *for which* youth should be formed, offering as a dramatic example Jesus’ encounter with the woman at well.

The Promise of Symbols

To begin generally, a symbol is an image that elicits an affective as well as a cognitive response. Symbols are distinct from signs in that signs unambiguously signify a single referent (e.g., a stop sign) where symbols evince two or more meanings—the thing itself (e.g., water) and the thing it symbolizes (e.g., purification and/or chaos). Many thoughts, concepts, and

¹ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 6.

² Groome articulates his position thus: “I summarize the catechetical challenge amidst religious diversity as follows: ‘to ground people in the particular with openness to the universal’” (Thomas H. Groome, “Catechesis Amidst Religious Pluralism,” *Catechetical Leader* 19, no. 1 (January/February 2009), U3).

³ For the sake of directly addressing the conference prompt, I speak herein about the formation of young people specifically. However, this approach is important and appropriate for audiences of all ages and demographics.

associations can be wound up within a single symbol.⁴ That is to say that symbols bear an “excess of meaning.”⁵

To reach an understanding of the sort of symbols capable of sustaining religious formation we must specify further, for not just any symbol will do. When I speak of symbols in this context, I mean a subset of what David Tracy calls “religious classics,”⁶ and, like Tracy, my proposal rises and falls on the contention that these “classics” actually exist.⁷ When Tracy speaks of “classics” in general, he means expressions of the human spirit produced in response to a moment of profound experience and understanding of “the truth of existence.”⁸ These expressions at once conceal and disclose a truth about our lives so compelling “that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status.”⁹ They provoke and challenge us in such a way that, when we encounter them, we sense that our very existence is at stake in how we respond.¹⁰ Though these classics are the products of a particular time and place, they exert this “claim to attention” for all times, people, and places.¹¹ So-called “classic works of literature” offer one example, but classics in Tracy’s sense can also be images, rituals, events, persons, and symbols. Not all symbols are classics, however. For example, while the Pepsi logo certainly qualifies as a symbol, encountering this symbol is unlikely to evince the feeling that one’s existence is at stake therein, as is indicative of a classic.

Within this general category of classics Tracy specifies certain expressions as “religious classics.” He distinguishes, “Unlike the classics of art, morality, science and politics,” which disclose some truth about *one aspect* of reality, “explicitly religious classic expressions will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality *by the power of the whole*—as, in some sense, a radical and finally gracious mystery.”¹² Furthermore, in contradistinction to people’s response to other sorts of classics, their response to a religious classic comes with the conviction “that their values, their style of life, their ethos are in fact grounded in the inherent structure of reality itself.”¹³ As an example, Tracy speaking out of his own tradition suggests, “For the Christian the present experience of the spirit of the Risen Lord who is the crucified Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Christian religious classic event,”¹⁴ and, consequently, “The classic images for the Christian are those related to that event and that

⁴ Immanuel Kant, for example, explains that such presentations of the imagination “arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words” (*Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §49; cf. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 140, n.36).

⁵ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 102. Theologian Robert Doran also puts it well: “The manifest meaning of a symbol, according to one style of interpretation, points beyond itself to a second, latent meaning or to a series of such meanings, by a type of analogy which cannot be dominated intellectually” (*Subject and Psyche: Ricoeur, Jung, and the Search for Foundations*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977), 139).

⁶ This notion of symbol also closely resembles what Edward Farley terms “deep symbols.” (*Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 3.) Farley in turn points to Philip Reiff, Daniel Boorstin, and Susan Langer as others who share his meaning.

⁷ See Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, xii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126. Tracy refers to such a moment as the moment of “intensification.”

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰ Tracy describes, “If, even once, a person has experienced a text, a gesture, an image, an event, a person with the force of recognition: ‘This is important! This does make and will demand a difference!’ then one has experienced a candidate for classic status” (*Analogical Imagination*, 115-6).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 102. Think, for example, of a “classic” work of literature, which yields new insights with each reading and retains its profundity generation after generation.

¹² *Ibid.*, 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

person: the dialectics of the symbols of cross-resurrection-incarnation.”¹⁵ It is such religious classics, specifically those taking the form of symbols—what I refer to hereafter as “classic religious symbols”—that I believe to hold unique promise for religious formation today.

I offer two reasons for my optimism regarding the potential of symbols to this end¹⁶: (1) the congruence of symbolic expression with the dynamics of human cognition and meaning-construction¹⁷ and (2) the suitability of symbolic expression for communication in the present cultural context.

Concerning the first, two millennia of investigating the mind in philosophy and more recently in psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science have upheld what Aristotle wrote long ago: “the mind never thinks without an image.”¹⁸ On a basic level, images are necessary for the mental process of arriving at new understandings.¹⁹ To understand experience is to conceptualize it, i.e., to make intelligent connections and explanations for what we experience. However, such conceptualization depends upon discovering in an image some clue to our implicit or explicit questions about experience. We notice, remember, or imagine some key element of an experience that allows us to pivot from the concrete instance to the abstract concept that constitutes understanding of a thing.²⁰

On a deeper level, it is primarily through symbols that we make sense of the world and orient ourselves within it. Human beings are not automatons that operate by ingesting information and calculating a logical response. In addition to following the dictates of reason, we are influenced by our feelings and values.²¹ Furthermore, while it would be ideal to reason through all life’s questions before beginning the actual work of living, life does not afford us this luxury. We are “thrown” into a world already in progress and assume responsibility for our lives only after they are well underway.²² In consequence, we must synthesize meaning on the fly and orient ourselves in the world as best we can given what we find there. Classic symbols are among the artifacts we find scattered in the world, and, according to Tracy, it is through and in these symbols rather than through our own achievements that we find ourselves and our way in

¹⁵ Ibid., 249.

¹⁶ Though I might offer many more, I limit myself to two due to space constraints.

¹⁷ According to Barbara Maria Stafford, “Such symbolic configurations become physically impressed upon the mind because they are already congruent with the formal template of ‘mental’ representation” (*Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 65).

¹⁸ Aristotle, “De Anima,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 431a, 16. In philosophy see, for example, Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologica,” trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *New Advent*, 2008, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, I, q.79, a.4, r.3; and Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 348. For an exploration of research in these newer fields, see Stafford, *Echo Objects*, 2007. In psychotherapy, there is, of course, the classic work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. For a social behaviorist perspective, see Arthur W. Staats and Jeffrey M. Lohr, “Images, Language, Emotions, and Personality: Social Behaviorism’s Theory,” *Journal of Mental Imagery* 3, no. 1–2 (1979): 85–106.

¹⁹ As Bernard Lonergan puts it, “the image is necessary for the insight” (*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), 33). Lonergan’s standard example is Archimedes striking upon a solution to the dilemma of how to determine if the king’s new crown was pure gold when water was displaced from the bath as he lowered himself in (see *Insight*, 27–28).

²⁰ See Lonergan, *Insight*, 27–35 for a more detailed analysis of the process of understanding.

²¹ These are the two modes of being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) that Martin Heidegger refers to by the terms *Verstehen* (understanding) and *Befindlichkeit* (mood). (*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and John Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 172, 182.)

²² Ibid., 223.

the world.²³ These symbols are the means by which our predecessors oriented themselves amidst the fundamental questions and concerns of human existence. As we inherit the tradition they bequeath to us, these classic symbols become inseparable from our own thinking about the same fundamental questions.

Because symbols serve this inceptive function in human cognition and meaning-construction—prior to explicit understanding and rational justification—they provide a unique touchstone for dialogue among people of different traditions and worldviews.²⁴ Genuine dialogue is most likely to occur when communicating at the level of our most fundamental concerns, e.g., the question of our origins, our drive to live meaningful lives, our fear of death.²⁵ More so than doctrines, which are laden with added layers of interpretation and ideology, symbols draw us into these fundamental questions. The Buddha's struggle with suffering, the Israelites' experience of exile, the apostles' post-resurrection experience of redemption—all these experiences, rooted as they are in some particular classic religious symbol, nevertheless have the power to evince some truth that resonates with every human being, regardless of tradition or creed. They beckon us from the safe distance of our formulated beliefs into the immediacy and messiness of human experience. From this standpoint amidst the ambiguity of experience, we are more likely to recognize the frailness of our own expressions of belief and therefore to sympathize with those who express their beliefs differently.²⁶

The second argument for forming youth around classic religious symbols builds upon the first. The world we live in today has been described as the “civilization of the image.”²⁷ We are constantly flooded with images from billboards, televisions, computers, electronic tablets, and smart phones. The result is that we consume and exchange exponentially more images and symbols than any generation before us.²⁸ What is the impact of this deluge of manufactured images on minds hardwired to construct meaning through symbols? Researchers are only just beginning to investigate the matter, but we may surmise that it poses a significant challenge to religious communities striving to form their members in a particular symbol system and with a coherent sense of identity.²⁹ In consequence, faith communities will have to remember how to speak compellingly out of their own symbols if they are to have any hope of their members

²³ See Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 307.

²⁴ As Paul Ricoeur has argued, it is in symbols that our thoughts and feelings first come to linguistic expression.

²⁵ Tracy writes, “For there the most serious questions on the meaning of existence as participating in, yet distanced, sometimes estranged from, the reality of the whole are posed” (*Analogical Imagination*, 155). Paul Knitter similarly reflects, “Before dialogue can be communication about doctrines and beliefs, it must be a communion which comes about when the partners ‘...penetrate the ultimate ground of their beliefs’” (Paul Knitter, “Religious Imagination and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Pedagogy of God's Image: Essays on Symbol and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Robert Masson (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 106).

²⁶ This is not to say that sharing one's symbols will magically open the doors to mutual understanding and respect. Misunderstanding is always a possible outcome, even the most likely one, it might seem. Yet if the symbols we share with one another are genuine classics, they will provoke some sense of familiarity in the other, however distant or vague. There is something inviting about this sense of familiarity, which is typically lacking when people of different faiths or no explicit faith at all come together to discuss differences of beliefs.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, “Lesson in Writing,” in *Image Music Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 175.

²⁸ Leonard Sweet, for example, describes our current culture as “image-driven” and “visualholic.” (*Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century Church*, 1st ed. (Nashville: B&H Books, 2000) 86, 92.)

²⁹ Even before the technological explosion of the internet, social media, and mobile communication devices, Raymond Firth acknowledged, “public symbols have been regarded as having power to regulate individual behavior, to express personal sentiments, and to dictate forms in which private symbols present themselves” (*Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 212).

drawing upon that religious tradition as their primary source of meaning rather than whatever happens to be trending on Twitter.³⁰ Indeed, in an era marked by deep-seated distrust of traditional institutions, authority, and doctrine, symbols may very well be religious communities' best hope of reaching not only a wider audience but even their own members.³¹

The Process of Engaging Classic Religious Symbols

Having argued for the particular potential of classic religious symbols for promoting dialogue in the public sphere and preparing youth to participate therein, I will now describe what such a conversation looks like in practice. In so doing, I will be simultaneously presenting a blueprint for the formation process since regular participation in conversation around such symbols is itself the best formation. The importance of actual conversation in this process cannot be emphasized enough.³² Symbols are not magic talismans; they are products of human meaning-construction. Consequently, their meaning needs to be unpacked in the context of conversation in order for them to exercise their power to open up people from different traditions to one another. To illustrate this power of symbols I take as my model a story from my own Christian tradition, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1-42). The story is a familiar one: Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well and asks for a drink. Understandably, the woman is surprised that this Jewish man would even speak to her, much less drink from the same ladle as herself. She is wary of the Jews, against whom her own people are opposed by an embittered history and conflicting beliefs. Yet, despite her hesitation, Jesus' offer of "living water" (v.10) draws her in. Struggling to grasp the meaning of Jesus' symbolic speech at first, by the end it is clear that she has been transformed in the conversation. She runs back into town and becomes the mediator of a life-changing event for many there.³³

Analyzing the moments in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, we can discern a model for engaging others in today's pluralistic public spaces.³⁴ The process begins when we share a classic religious symbol from our own tradition in which we find personal meaning.³⁵ In

³⁰ For two discussions of the atrophy of traditional symbols see Farley, *Deep Symbols*, 13-28 and Edward K. Braxton, "Bernard Lonergan's Hermeneutics of the Symbol," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* no. 3 (1976): 197.

³¹ In the words of Lonergan, "Never has the need to speak effectively to undifferentiated [i.e., symbolic] consciousness been greater" (*Method in Theology: Volume 14*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 99).

³² For Tracy, the event of understanding in conversation serves as the paradigm for all true understanding. (See *Analogical Imagination*, 101-2.)

³³ Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus repeatedly engage others in this way with symbols, especially his parables. Though I might have chosen any number of other stories to illustrate my point, this one is particularly appropriate since Jesus is engaging a person from another faith tradition and because this story is more revealing than most of the evolving thoughts of Jesus' interlocutor. The reader should not infer from my selection of this story that the purpose of conversation around symbols is conversion of one's interlocutor to one's own religion. Though the conversation in this particular story is rather one-sided, others like Jesus' exchange with the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28) demonstrate that even Jesus was open to personal change in these encounters.

³⁴ I describe the following as discrete moments in the conversation, but in reality they may overlap chronologically or occur simultaneously.

³⁵ From a very early age, human beings employ cognitive behaviors for the sake of "equilibration," or protecting the stability of one's meaning. (See, e.g., R. De Lisi and S.L. Golbeck, "Implications of Piagetian Theory for Peer Learning," in *Cognitive Perspectives on Peer Learning*, ed. A.M. O'Donnell and A. King (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999), 3-37; Z. Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 18 (1990): 480-498; P.K. Murphy and L. Mason, "Changing Knowledge and Beliefs," in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, ed. P.A. Alexander and P.H. Winne, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006), 305-324.) For many people, over time these healthy cognitive behaviors ossify into a close-mindedness to views that conflict with their own. However, these

the story above Jesus symbolizes himself with the image of “living water.” (Christians would offer a Christocentric symbol like the cross or the resurrection since we are not a religious classic as Jesus is.) So long as the symbol is a genuine classic, our conversation partner will be enticed by the sense of familiarity and the aura of truth evinced by that symbol, as the Samaritan woman is in this story.³⁶ The moment that then follows is crucial: We must allow ourselves to be drawn out and enveloped by the familiar yet strange subject matter of the symbol.³⁷ It is clear when this moment occurs in our story. The woman’s initial suspicion of Jesus falls away, her challenges to his integrity cease, and she unabashedly expresses her desire for the living water Jesus has promised. We have all had such an experience of a real conversation where both parties are engrossed in the subject matter, carried along, as it were, by a power not our own. Likewise, we have all had the experience of its opposite. When one person or both begin by speaking out of self-consciousness or a predetermined agenda, the conversation never gets off the ground.

In the next moment we share our honest response to what the symbol is speaking to us—what resonates with us, what unsettles us, what becomes clear, what remains obscure. Again, this response cannot not be a rehearsal of stock arguments or party lines. It must be an honest response to the fundamental questions provoked by the symbol.³⁸ As each speaks one’s heart and mind, the other must listen and earnestly attempt to understand that person’s meaning, to enter into the “world” of the other, as Hans-Georg Gadamer says.³⁹ This requires a momentary suspension of judgment as we open ourselves to the personal truth the other is attempting to convey. In our scripture story, Jesus speaks to the woman’s heart, and she in turn listens earnestly to his responses to her questions. Her questions are not veiled attempts to trip him up or accusations disguised as questions, as was often the case in the Pharisees’ exchanges with Jesus. She sincerely wants to know what is in his heart and mind. Admittedly, any understanding of another will always be imperfect, forged of whatever mental materials we bring to the conversation. Still, even an imperfect, analogous understanding of the other has the potential to be life-changing.⁴⁰

This brings us to the final moment in the process. Genuine listening inevitably involves

defensive cognitive behaviors mask an equally basic drive to share our meaning with one another. (See, e.g., Laurie Santos, “The Human Mind-Meld” (presented at the The Nantucket Project: Collective Intelligence: The Miracle of Human Progress, Nantucket, MA, October 7, 2012), <http://bigthink.com/collective-intelligence/humans-are-hardwired-to-share-knowledge>, especially her point regarding “proto-demonstrative pointing.”)

³⁶ Which is not to say that the interlocutor will necessarily respond positively to the symbol’s demand for attention. There is always the possibility that one will resist this demand and refuse to engage.

³⁷ In Tracy’s words, “conversation occurs *only* where the conversation partners allow the subject matter to take over” (*Analogical Imagination*, 101, 452).

³⁸ For a model of serious engagement with the symbols of different religions, see John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, 1st ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

³⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 446. Gadamer explains, “In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us” (Ibid., 361). Indeed, recognizing the otherness of another person can be an opportunity for self-discovery. As Nicholas Lash says, “Once the assumption that the stranger is inferior is shattered, then he is experienced *as* a stranger. And once you admit that you do not understand *him*, you are gradually forced to admit that you do not understand yourself” (Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 71).

⁴⁰ For Tracy, any understanding of another is always analogical, and yet that understanding by analogy is not insignificant: “Who you are I know only by knowing what event, what focal meaning, you actually live by. And that I know only if I too have sensed some analogous guide in my own life. If we converse, it is likely we will both be changed as we focus upon the subject matter itself—the fundamental questions and the classical responses in our traditions” (*Analogical Imagination*, 454-5).

the risk of being changed.⁴¹ If we really listen, the other may say something that challenges our beliefs and disrupts our worldview. If we are intellectually honest, we may realize that we need to change in order to conform our life to this new truth. This is a difficult risk for anyone to take.⁴² It is far easier to remain fortified within the familiar confines of our creeds and doctrines. For the Samaritan woman, taking this risk means acknowledging her dubious moral situation, revising her religious beliefs, and exposing herself to rejection by her community. Yet she accepts the new truth revealed to her, and it transforms her and her community. The same is possible for us today if we dare to remind ourselves that our doctrines as articulated are not pure truth but only relatively adequate heuristic expressions made necessary by the practical concern of living a life in response to our experience of the transcendent.⁴³ If the other presents us with an expression that is more adequate, then integrity compels us to follow where it leads. And it is not only once that we undertake this risk. Rather, it is a risk we take each time we enter into the public square and come face to face with an “other.”

Having walked through the moments of a conversation centered around classic religious symbols, we might now ask, What is to be gained from this process? In the first place, we might hope for a broadening of our understanding of ourselves, our traditions, and our relation to ultimate meaning.⁴⁴ Reflection upon symbols, with their power to provoke and vivify, is more likely to stimulate such personal growth for the average person than disputing doctrine or theory. Second, we might reasonably hope for a greater understanding of and respect for the persons with whom we engage in such conversation. Going beneath the hardened ideology and polemics, we come to see the other as a person like ourselves concerned with questions of ultimate meaning. Focusing conversation at this level, we can better appreciate why others express their beliefs as they do and recognize the similarities with our own. Finally, we may even dare to hope for some tentative agreement. Through the risk of truly listening to another person’s reflections on a classic religious symbol, we might come to see past the superficial differences to the deeper, underlying meaning, a meaning that we may very well share. In short, by stepping through the portal of the symbol into another’s “world,” we take the first step toward establishing peaceful relations in the wider world we all share.

Conclusion

Religion and religious difference cannot be ignored in today’s pluralistic and increasingly interconnected world. Therefore, religious communities who seek to prepare their young people for participation in the public sphere must teach their youth to engage the questions and

⁴¹ In the words of Gadamer, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (*Truth and Method*, 379). It involves a momentary letting go, stepping out from the illusory security of our creeds and doctrines into the uncertainty of the encounter with raw mystery. John Dunne puts it beautifully: “The union of minds and hearts based upon the sharing of insights...implies a compassionate understanding of the ambivalence of human feeling and a real conversion from the pursuit of certainty to the pursuit of understanding” (*The Way of All the Earth*, 61).

⁴² For a psychological perspective on human resistance to challenging new information, especially information that pertains to central aspects of the self, see Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown, “Illusion and Well-being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health,” *Psychological Bulletin* 103, no. 2 (1988): 193–210.

⁴³ That is to say, insofar as those doctrines are framed in particular, historically-bound language as they inevitably are. They may express a genuine truth, but they may express that truth in language that not all people recognize as disclosive of truth.

⁴⁴ As Richard Kearney has remarked, “The shortest route from the self to itself is through the images of others” (*Poetics of Imagining: Husserl to Lyotard* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 141, paraphrasing Ricoeur).

meanings that underlie particular expressions and to dialogue with others about them. I have argued that formation around classic religious symbols provides one promising means of promoting such conversation.⁴⁵ Undertaking this kind of reflective experience with young people will not only give them a model for how to engage in dialogue but also better dispose them to do so by habituating them to wrestling with issues of fundamental human concern. There is much more to be said about symbols in the formation process, for example, the danger of distorted symbolic thinking and the many potential pitfalls inherent in teaching with symbols.⁴⁶ However, for the present I merely propose that religious communities can better prepare their youth for participation in the public sphere by more intentionally forming them *for* and *through* deep reflection on classic religious symbols.

⁴⁵ This is by no means a proposal to abolish doctrine. As Tracy points out, doctrine is a necessary safeguard for ensuring the adequacy of a particular expression to the norms of a particular tradition. Still, doctrine is not the place to start the conversation. Because doctrine comes late in the process of interpretation, the doctrines of each tradition are less likely than their symbols to provoke a sense of familiarity in persons outside that tradition.

⁴⁶ Regarding the danger of distorted symbolic thinking, see Bernard Lonergan, "Religious Knowledge," in *Lonergan Workshop*, ed. Fred Lawrence, vol. 1 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978), 312; and Paul Ricoeur, "The Symbol: Food for Thought," *Philosophy Today* 4 (September 1, 1960): 203.

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