

Symbols and Symbolism in the Liturgy Revisited: A Ricoeurian Critique of Schmemmann's Symbology

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Abstract

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This paper probes the discrepancy Alexander Schmemmann posited between the true meaning of the symbolism of the liturgy, as disclosed in and by the rites themselves, and that which obtains in the classic genre of liturgical commentary. Informed by Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of symbol and metaphor, the author argues that Schmemmann's wider *oeuvre* can be marshalled in favour of an interpretative pluralism, over and against the univocity to which the latter appeals in his provocative article, "Symbols and Symbolism in the Liturgy: Liturgical Symbols and Their Theological Interpretation." Roundly critiquing therein the patristic commentators and their illustrative and mystagogical tendencies, Schmemmann boldly charges them with "apply[ing] to the liturgy their particular vision rather than seek[ing] in the liturgy the vision implied in its own *ordo*, in its own structures and texts, in short, in its own symbolism" – arguably a capital instance of what Paul Ricoeur has called the "conflict of interpretations." In response to this, the author finds a potential mediation in the triadic categories of *For the Life of the World*. The ensuing hermeneutical model is applied to a select instance of symbolic polemic within the Byzantine liturgical context, in order to vindicate the Ricoeurian "surplus of meaning" implicit in Schmemmann's original intuition, as explicated in his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, of a "Byzantine synthesis."

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Introduction

Greek theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis has recently issued a clarion call to Orthodox theologians to engage in dialogue with contemporary philosophy, conceding that such an enterprise has, in recent times, been generally held in disfavour in the Christian East – a perhaps unintended result, he suggests, of the twentieth century neo-patristic synthesis promoted by Georges Florovsky. To this end Kalaitzidis, in “From the ‘Return to the Fathers to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,’” cites approvingly the following, poignant exhortation of Alexander Schmemmann:

Orthodox theology must keep its patristic foundations, but it must also go “beyond” the Fathers if it is to respond to a new situation created by centuries of philosophical development. And in this new synthesis or reconstruction, *the western philosophical tradition* (source and mother of the Russian “religious philosophy” of the 19th and 20th centuries) *rather than the Hellenistic*, must supply theology with its conceptual framework. An attempt is thus made to “transpose” theology into a new “key,” and this transposition is considered as the specific task and vocation of Russian theology.¹

Now *pace* Schmemmann, such a transposition may be rather incumbent especially upon *Eastern Catholics* – whether Russian, Ukrainian or otherwise – as those who claim to believe in, and live in an iconic, even eschatological way, *pars pro toto*, that complementarity of which John Zizioulas has spoken, in his insistence upon “the necessity of a theological synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions, without which there is no real catholicity.”² It will hopefully be no usurpation, then,

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, cited in Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” *Saint Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010): 14.

² *Ibid.*, 6n4. Antinomial theology (a theology of “both-and”) is, in my opinion, particularly the burden of Eastern *Catholic* theology since by nature

for me to offer a consideration of how we might go “beyond Schmemmann” through recourse to one of the twentieth century’s foremost philosophers, the late Paul Ricoeur; ultimately, as I will show, Schmemmann himself provides resources within his own rich *oeuvre* to fund the conceptual extension that Ricoeur will help bring to light.

Permit me, first, to review the argument of Schmemmann’s “Symbols and Symbolism in the Liturgy: Liturgical Symbols and Their Theological Interpretation”³ and bring into relief the dichotomy that obtains therein, vis-à-vis his classic *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*.⁴ Second, I will demonstrate how Ricoeur’s understanding of the “surplus of meaning” can open up a *tertium quid*. Finally, I canvass that epitome of Schmemmann’s liturgical theology, *For the Life of the World*,⁵ to see how the Ricoeurian surplus might apply in practice. Through a series of triadic analogies, we see that Schmemmann’s original intuition concerning a “Byzantine synthesis” was more coherent than he ultimately was willing to admit; its plurivocity an asset rather than a liability.

“*The Problem of the Ordo*”

It is a commonplace that in the Orthodox tradition the text and performative context of liturgy exist in symbiosis. Hence the notion of *liturgical* theology, whose elaboration was, of course, the goal of Schmemmann’s life work. It is no exaggeration to say that for him the liturgy itself, rather than Scripture, is *the* fundamental object of interpretation: for the *Gestalt* of the liturgy enables the very perception of Scripture as the

and vocation it is called to discern and discourse on the latent complementarity within putative theological difference.

³ Alexander Schmemmann, “Symbols and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy: Liturgical Symbols and Their Theological Interpretation,” in Thomas J. Fisch, ed. *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 115–28.

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse (Bangor, ME: Faith Press, 1970).

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002).