

IN QUEST OF A SPIRITUALITY BEYOND RELIGION

The Inauguration of the Simdo Haksa

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In March 2013, six members of the staff of the Nanzan Institute visited the newly-inaugurated spiritual center, Simdo Haksa, on the Ganghwa Island in South Korea. Its founder and director, Keel Hee-Sung, has been an old friend of the Institute, where he held the Roche Chair for Interreligious Research from 2006 to 2007. The following is a translation of the commemorative address delivered at the formal opening of the center in June 2011.

THE STORY IS told of a Sufi Muslim that on his first visit to the Kaaba in Mecca, where the Black Stone is enshrined, he did not see Allah but only the Kaaba. On his next visit, he saw both Allah and the Kaaba, and on his third and final visit the Kaaba had vanished and he saw only Allah.* The story applies not only to Islam but to the living faith of all religions and may be said to represent the orientation of the religious history of humanity as such. In this inaugural lecture of the Simdo Haksa (尋道學舍), I would like to extend the reach of that story beyond the three stages of spirituality and the living faith confessed by the Sufi pilgrim.

The worship at the Kaaba of which the Sufis speak is the heart of the pilgrimage to Mecca and is one of the religious duties to which all Muslims aspire during their life. It is a visible symbol that may be said to represent the whole of the Islamic tradition, but not the only one. The Quran and the fast of Ramadan also fulfill that role, which we see in other religions in such things as the Eucharist, the persons of Jesus and Buddha, the Bible, and the Buddhist canon. It is one of countless external elements in the religious life that promote human spirituality and the encounter with a transcendent presence. Without such concrete mediation, the religious life would not be possible. Our spiritual experience does not take place in a vacuum. It requires the prompting and mediation of specific ele-

* Cited from Frederick Copleston, *Religion and the One* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 107.

ments associated with particular individuals and groups at particular times and places. We refer to these mediating elements as religious symbols.

When the Sufi first visited Mecca he did not see Allah but only the Kaaba. All he could see was the external form of religion in the Islamic symbol of the Kaaba and not the transcendent presence it mediates. That is, he could not experience an encounter with Allah, the *raison d'être* of the symbol. In the language of Zen Buddhism, he saw only the finger and returned home without glimpsing the moon that it points to. In fact, many religious believers face the same problem as that Sufi Muslim in having their religious life stop at this preparatory stage. They encounter specific external symbols of religion, study them, and practice the customary rituals, supposing that this is what the life of faith means.

All religions have symbols, visible things that mediate the invisible. The various elements that make up a religious tradition—myths, doctrines, rituals, scriptures, icons, saints, ministers—are all mediating symbols that point to a transcendent presence. Unfortunately, believers are often not aware of the fact but carry out the life of faith under the illusion that the symbols themselves are the reality. In so doing, they turn the symbols into absolutes, fossilizing them, reifying them, idolizing them. Even though the whole reason for a symbol is to mediate the encounter with a transcendent presence, the symbol is thus turned into an absolute to be worshipped and clung to. And these actions are mistaken for faith. I consider this a form of human alienation brought about by religion. That is, by transforming symbols into idols, people become slaves of the symbols they have fashioned, slaves of tradition, slaves of religion. This is religious idolatry, every bit as dangerous as the idolatry of worshiping secular values.

The writings of the seventh-century Korean monk Wŏnhyo tell the story of a certain magician who had the extraordinary ability to make a tiger, only later to be devoured by his creation. It seems to me that all systems and ideologies we humans devise, including the religious, display this paradox. Religion was made to liberate human beings through transcendent experience, but they end up, paradoxically, shackling their creators, fostering their alienation, and exerting a dreadful influence over them. A religion that was intended to free its believers enchains and oppresses the human spirit instead. Religion is not alone in this. Any system we humans make, whether under secular or religious, has this problem. At first they are made out of necessity, but as time passes they change and begin to constrict and oppress those who made them. As Jesus said, the Sabbath is made for us, not us for the Sabbath (Mark 2: 28). His words are truly a great declaration of human liberation.

As I remarked earlier, the spirituality and faith of the Sufi pilgrim were not at first able to go further than religious idolatry. He had gone to such trouble to make the pilgrimage from a great distance and in the end had to return home having seen only the Kaaba (the external face of religion: the symbolism, the

tradition) and not Allah. In fact, for most people this is how living faith begins. They find themselves in a particular religion because it is the tradition of the home in which one was born or because they were fascinated by the external form of a religion they met. Later they learn the specifics of a religious tradition and its symbols. Knowledge and information concerning their own tradition is enriched as they read and study the scriptures, as they listen to sermons and lectures by religious ministers. But they often stop at the symbolism and are unable to ascend to the transcendent reality to which it all points, all because they fall into the trap of being too attached to the symbols. Just as the moon disappears from view when one focuses on the finger, even when reading the scriptures one can fail to hear the word of God or grasp the mind of the Buddha and instead get caught up in the text. Belief in a religion means that one loves it and is attached to it, but in the fervor of that belief one can confuse it for love of God.

There are two fundamental reasons why believers fail to take note of the symbolic nature of symbols and get caught in absolutizing them.

The first is literalism. Unaware that the letters of scripture and doctrine are fingers pointing to the moon, people mistakenly assume that words and letters as such are a direct transmission and expression of transcendent reality and transcendent experience. However sacred the words of the scriptures and the saints may be, they belong among the things of the everyday world from which they originate. Accordingly, the words and concepts we use are far from adequate to express infinite reality or the transcendent world. This is why, despite the great deal that theology has to say about God, we also speak of a *theologia negativa* or a *via negativa* to express the unspeakable mystery of the divine. We find this echoed in the opening words of the *Laotzi*: “The Way that can be talked about is not the true Way. The name that can be named is not the true name.”

As moderns in a literary culture that is accustomed to scientific thought and factual language, our religious imagination is impoverished and we find

it easier to treat words and symbols as referring to facts. The fundamentalism that has recently taken hold around the world is a good example of this. Absolutizing the words of scripture and worshipping them as if they were almost divine is not something inherited from ancient or medieval times. We need to understand this fundamentalist cast of mind as a fabrication of modern times.





At first glance, it may seem that fundamentalism is inconsistent with our modern world, where religious freedom has become a universal value and where scientific knowledge and various forms of liberalism have become prevalent. Yet it is our modern habit of literal thinking and the rigidity of the modern imagination that lies behind fundamentalist faith. Literalism was far from universal among the ancients and medieval who recognized other forms of language than the written word. Ritual, liturgy, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, celebrations, pilgrimages and the like were all ways of contact with the transcendent world. The fact is, temptations to literalism and fundamentalist faith were far fewer for them than they are for modern men and women.

A second reason for the attachment of believers to symbols comes from religions which attribute their religious symbolism to divine revelation, a problem especially acute for monotheistic faiths. We see this clearly, for example, in the divinization of Jesus Christ by Christianity and of the Quran by Islam.

The young man Jesus of Galilee mediated God's transcendent love by making it visibly real in his own person, but the lengthy process of transforming his story into Church doctrine—the development of Christological orthodoxy and Trinitarian doctrine—resulted in Jesus becoming more and more absolute until finally he was elevated to the same level as God and his existence equated with that of God. From its strict monotheistic faith, Islam criticized the Christian worship of Jesus and its doctrine of the Trinity, only to make the eternity

and transcendence of the Quran into doctrine and fell into its own brand of “idolatry.” Similarly, not to be outdone by Islam, Christian fundamentalists have come to worship the Bible by stressing its literal truth. In each case, this process took place irrespective of the ideas and faith of the man Jesus and the prophet Muhammad.

The danger of converting what is relative into an absolute is not peculiar to Christianity and Islam. It is present in all religions. It is only natural to accord a certain sacred quality to symbols that mediate an absolute and holy reality. But when the symbols themselves become something absolute to be worshipped, their function as symbols disappears. Religions that adhere to this kind of symbolism can only end up becoming self-righteous and exclusive.

One of the sermons of the Buddha recounts the famous “Parable of the Raft.” A certain man built a raft to ford a river. By the time he arrived at the other side, he had become so fond of it that he wondered whether he shouldn’t lift it up on his shoulders and carry it with him. The Buddha explained that his teachings were like that. It will not do to become so attached to them that they become a burden. Similarly, in the *Diamond Sutra* the Buddha says that although he spoke many words and saved numerous sentient beings, in fact he did not say a single word nor saved a single sentient being.

To make an absolute of religious tradition is a constant temptation facing every religion. The Sufi pilgrim overcame this danger on his second trip to Mecca and in so doing ascended to the next stage of spirituality. Sidestepping the trap of religious idolatry with its fixation on symbols and absolutizing of the relative, he was able to see both the Kaaba and Allah. Or more precisely, he had experienced the transcendence of encountering Allah *through* the Kaaba. This is indeed the normal pattern of living faith.

The problem is that even though it is altogether natural for the religious life to experience transcendence through symbols, large numbers of believers cling to the symbols of their own tradition as absolutes and in the process enslave themselves to it, unaware of the symbolic nature of the symbols they believe in. But then, too, many modern men and women have grown weary of the rigid, narrow symbolic systems of the religions to which they belong. They feel stifled and turn away from religion. Failing to find meaning in the traditional symbolic system and increasingly indifferent to the role of faith in their lives, they take leave of religion and seek the meaning of life elsewhere. They sever their ties to the sacred and throw themselves into secularism, a danger common to all religions. The more this trend advances, the more fiercely fundamentalism, fanaticism, and other reactionary movements tend to cling to tradition as absolute.

If secularism does not offer a way out of this situation, neither does rigid traditionalism. A third way is called for, a way that understands symbols for what they are and is able to move beyond them and freely seek new modes of

expression that make the old symbolic language accessible to the modern mind. This is the path that religious modernists have pursued. Advance in Protestant theology since Schleiermacher have sustained the faith of many modern intellectuals, and in the case of Catholicism, the Second Vatican Council did much to open the doors of theological thinking and bring it into dialogue with the spirit of the times. Part of the crisis facing Islam today may be attributed to the fact that the forces of “Islamic modernism” and “modernist Islam” are too weak.

At the same time, I believe that the religionless spirituality of our times needs more than such modernism has to offer. The faith that today’s modernists are looking for stops with one religion. The spirituality of an age that has broken with religion needs more than an *aggiornamento*. Its choice is more radical, one that corresponds to the third stage of the Muslim pilgrim in which the Kaaba disappears and only Allah remains. A new spiritual realm is opening up unlike anything before it. Two things may be said of this new dimension of spirituality.

Firstly, those who understand symbols as symbols are casting open the doors of their hearts not only to the symbols of their own religions but to other religions and to the symbolic traditions of their neighbors. The more one clings to literal interpretations, the less need there is to seek truth outside of one’s own religion. Exclusivism follows as a matter of course. But liberation from symbols by encountering God through them frees one from a spiritual life dependent on the symbolic system of a single religion and opens the possibility of relating to the symbolism of other religions and conducting the spiritual life within a wider horizon. A liberating world of multidimensional spiritual riches opens up. Even as one continues to rely principally on one’s own religious language and tradition, one is still able to explore other religious ways for spiritual nourishment.

Secondly, once liberated from religious symbolism, it is possible to advance to the point that everything one experiences becomes a religious experience. Spirituality becomes “trans-religious.” One passes beyond a religiously plural spirituality to one in which distinctions between religion and irreligion, God and the world, sacred and profane yield to a still broader spiritual realm. The assumption that only religious symbolism can open a path to transcendence falls away. Wisdom and enlightenment are to be sought in secular experience as well, and so is God. When the wall between religion and irreligion collapses, everything that exists becomes a cypher of transcendence. With all its complexity of languages and diversity of experiences, the world just as it is opens the pathway to its transcendence. We are no longer subject to the duality of God and absolute reality, religion and irreligion, sacred and profane, the true and the worldly. God does not need religion.

Insofar as such an encounter with God resulting in liberation from religious symbols transcends the dualistic opposition of religion and irreligion, sacred and profane, God and the world, the natural and the supernatural, it is

literally a trans-religious spirituality, an encounter with a God beyond God. Or perhaps better, in taking leave of God the realm of the spiritual opens up. The daring words of Meister Eckhart, “I pray to God that I may be free from God,” seem to me to express just this state of mind. Elsewhere he remarks, “If a man asked life for a thousand years, ‘Why do you live?’ if it could answer it would only say, ‘I live because I live.’” As the Zen expression has it, “The ordinary mind is the Way.” Religious symbols are not the only ones to lead us to God. When all things become symbols of the encounter with God, the light of God and the radiance of the Buddha shine everywhere in the world. From moment to moment as we pursue truth, goodness, and beauty, whether we are living or dying, eating or sleeping, being or loving, we are living religiously. There is no need for religion and no need for special places like the Simdo Haksa.

A trans-religious spirituality in these two senses, that is, a multireligious spirituality that freely oversteps the divide between one religion and another, where religion and irreligion, sacred and profane, the true and the worldly become one, represents, I believe, the spiritual heights to which the human spirit aspires. I also believe that it is just such a transcendent spirituality that we need to pursue in our religionless age. It is my hope that the Simdo Haksa we inaugurate here today may take up that pursuit and I invite those of you present to join me in the task.

[Translated by James W. Heisig]