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A Study of Symbolism in Visual Arts and Its Relevance to the Church in Malaysia

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Introduction

Symbolism is the very life-breath of religion. Every sentiment, every ideal, every institution associated with the phenomenon of religion, be it noble or ignoble, subsists in an atmosphere of symbols. It is through symbols that religions survive in our midst and through symbols that we gain access to the religious life of past or alien cultures.[1] Symbols may be objects, colours, sounds, odors, acts and events. In short, anything that be experienced, to which people have assigned meaning or value.[2] Difficulty and confusion may arise from the paradox that one thing may be a sign in one context and a symbol in another.[3] For example, no two persons mean precisely the same thing by the same symbol and that no two symbols in any one language or culture are identical. *Swastikas*, which may evoke nationalistic feelings in certain parts of Europe, are symbols with religious significance in India.[4] All people create symbols by linking

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[1]James W. Heisig, "Symbolism" cited in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 14, ed., Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 198-199.

[2]Paul G. Heibert, *Cultural Anthropology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 114.

[3]Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 120.

[4]Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 120, *Swastikas*, used by Hindus as the symbol of peace and harmony in a religious context. *Swastika* is

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ideas to forms of expression, and all people arrange symbols into elaborate systems, whereby they store and communicate these ideas.[5] Therefore particularly in cross-cultural communication, the result is often a loss or misinterpretation of the message. Symbolic systems form the core of any culture, linking thought to behaviour and objects, and thereby bringing a measure of order and meaning to life, itself.[6]

Dewey's *Art as Experience*[7] destroys the dichotomy sanctioned by custom, of art and non-art, the artist and non-artist. His analysis proves that there is no dichotomy between artistic expression and the experience behind the expression. Evidently, this analysis relates to the Malaysian Tamil Christian or Hindu way of life, where there is no dichotomous understanding between experience and expression, and between sacred and secular. For Dewey, artistic activity is a human attribute expressed or suppressed in myriad ways depending on features of the social context and wider culture.[8] Generally speaking, the content and process of any activity are suffused with a worldview derived from culture, ideology and history.[9] Dewey sees that what we ordinarily mean by artistic activity (its products or appreciation of them) contains features characteristic of everyday experience.[10] Though Dewey's *Art as Experience* is a psychologist's analysis of artistic experience rather than of a religious experience, but it has relevance to the socio-cultural background and worldviews of the Tamil people in Malaysia. In the Malaysian Tamil cultural context, there is a constant dialectic between a symbolic system and the most mundane activities of life. The symbols arising out of this movement provide cultural orientation with crucial roles and actions for the Tamil

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also attributed to *Ganapathy*, the elephant-faced; pot bellied Hindu deity with human body.

[5]Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 136.

[6]Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 137.

[7]Seymour B. Sarason, *The Challenge of Art to Psychology*, (USA: Yale University Press, 1990). Sarason's chapter five is based on Dewey's analysis of man's artistic expressions built on "ordinary experiences," pp. 84-95. Dewey, J., *Art as Experience*, (New York: Minton & Balch, 1934).

[8]Dewey cited in *The Challenge of Art*, p. 16.

[9]Dewey cited in *The Challenge of Art*, p. 90.

[10]Dewey cited in *The Challenge of Art*, pp. 84-85 & 89. Dewey wrote his analysis in order to establish a connection between the conception of art and ordinary human experience.

Christians. These symbols can be seen as playing some prominent role in relation to other elements of the Malaysian Tamil Christian cultural system of thought.

Briefly, the following is some of the symbolism associated with the current Malaysian Tamil Christian socio-culture: The symbolism of purity and pollution is associated with food utensils, washing of fingers before eating and the use of right-hand. This in turn is associated to the male symbolism where the male must operate on the right hand-side. For example: when a Tamil couple is married in the Church, the groom has to stand on the right hand-side of the bride. When they walk down the middle aisle from the altar, the bride has to walk on the left hand-side. On their "first night" as married couple, the bridegroom has to sleep on the right hand-side of their wedding bed. Left-handedness is considered unclean, weak, polluted or profane. There is a constant association of right-handedness in order to build the value of the male symbol. The symbolism involved here is: "anything to do with left-handedness is always unclean, weak, polluted or profane." This is one of the reasons why Tamils or generally Indians use fingers of the right-hand to eat their food. This symbolism is all-pervasive and embraces all aspects and roles of the Tamil Christian way of life. In a house warming in the Tamil Christian tradition, the milk is boiled-a symbol of purifying the new house; one cannot enter into an Indian house without removing footwear-a symbol of purity and sanctity. Even in Tamil Christian Churches, women cover their heads with the ends of their sarees when approaching the altar for receiving the elements of the Eucharist-a symbol of reverence and submission. This is the same practice found of Hindu women when they enter a temple. This practice must be seen in light of their attitude to God. One may find it impossible to draw a distinctive line between what is secular and sacred in the Tamil socio-cultural way of life. Every artistic action has a symbolic connotation closely attached to a particular symbol. Tamil Christians fall into the same realm because it has to do with the deep-seated symbolic system of the Tamil way of life.

The word symbol is derived from two Greek words, *syn* meaning "together," and *ballein*, meaning "to throw." Hence, *symbolon*, a sign, mark or token, implying throwing together or joining of an abstract idea and a visible sign of it; the sign serving to recall it, not by exact resem-

blance but by suggestion.[11] In this respect, a symbol is the falling together of an idea and its representation in such a way that they are inseparable. Thus, Christian teaching deals, in part, with supernatural elements that can be vividly suggested to the human mind only by symbolic words and signs.[12] In the early Christian Church, symbols were freely used as convenient fixatives of doctrinal points for many Christians who could not read and, during periods of persecution, as a secret language.[13] In our days, symbols are used on Church windows and furnishings for the purpose of indicating pictographically the cardinal elements of Christian faith, tradition and teaching by representing to the eye an interesting and valuable supplement to preaching and religious education. Christian symbols convey much about the fundamentals of Christianity. For example, symbolism is so powerful that if one takes two sticks to form a cross, the whole message, including the theology is conveyed. Symbolism is so definitive a language that the message conveyed, regardless of origin or context, is perfectly clear, whether one agrees with the message or not.[14] However, symbols can also be suggestive and ambiguous as each person interprets in light of personal experience.

All people, regardless of ethnic background or geographic placement, live by symbols in every area of their daily lives. Preceding all current manifestations of the universality of symbolism, there are the powerful symbols that speak of communal convictions and corporate commitments.[15] For example: The lotus immediately brings Buddhism to our mind; the Star of David, Judaism; the Cross, Christianity; the crescent moon and star, Islam; the hammer and sickle, Communism. These are not only agreed upon symbols but also they are visual evidence and art for which people and individuals have suffered and died. People's symbols reveal the ideology by which they live.[16] Much discussion has

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[11]F. W. Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1986), pp. 13-14.

[12]F. Van Der Meer, *Early Christian Art*, trans. Peter & F. Brown, (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1967), p. 13.

[13]Meer, *Early Christian Art*, pp. 27-28.

[14]Canon E. N. West, *Outward Signs*, (New York: Walker Publishing Co., 1989), p. xv.

[15]Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 9.

[16]Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, p. 172

occurred in the use of symbolism in visual arts and religion. Visual arts have always been an essential aspect of the language of the Christian tradition. Today there is no corporate act of worship by any group of Christians that does not appropriate some aspect of art to enact its praise and prayer.[17] A critical study of what the Christian tradition have intended in their artistic forms can serve us today to illustrate the role of symbolism in its varied aspects.

Nowadays the word "symbol" seems to be in grave danger of being overemphasised. Almost everything appears to be a "symbol" of something else. In such a situation it is important to safeguard a certain precision in language and to prevent this term from losing all force and meaning. This is certainly the case in theological realm. Symbols have a long history of use in Christian contexts and they have provided significant links between theology, spirituality and culture in the contemporary world. One has to consider the place of symbolism in various sectors of contemporary life, especially in philosophy, in psychology, in visual arts and in religious contexts.

In the climate of the cultural renaissance today, the Churches in Asia are increasingly recognising the creative gifts of artists and appreciating their contributions in the life and mission of the churches.[18] It must be understood that both the Churches in Asia and their diverse cultural settings are under the lordship of Christ. Therefore, the use of indigenous forms of painting and sculpture which carry and express the Christian message naturally are encouraged.[19] These cultural expressions by Asian artists help to communicate the message to contemporary Asian people.[20] By accepting the rich traditions of various symbols within the history of the Christian faith, Asian Christians are beginning to interpret the gospel message through visual arts in Asia today. This is increasingly seen in the fields of theology, mission, ministry and Church structure. Again, it must be understood that the various forms of artistic expression in the

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[17]John W. Cook "Sources for the Study of Christianity and the Arts," cited in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.), *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984), p. 321.

[18]Masao Takenaka, *Christian Art in Asia*, (Japan: Nissha Printing Co., Ltd., 1975), p. 22.

[19]Takenaka, *Christian Art in Asia*, p. 23.

[20]Takenaka, *Christian Art in Asia*, p. 24.

Asian situation are the outcome of the diverse experience of many Christian communities.

In a cultural setting in which Christianity was a strange new comer, it handled symbols as if they had no cultural limitations.[21] Symbols were absolutised and universalised.[22] The Christian missions that ventured into Asian scene considered local and indigenous symbols as irrelevant to the Christian message. Local symbols were therefore unused or viewed as idolatrous. Hence, local and indigenous symbolism were misrepresented or distorted. In this situation conversion to the Christian faith conveyed proselytism.[23] The early missionaries imposed their own inherited symbols on a cross-cultural setting. One has to appreciate that whatever symbols were implanted by foreign missions in those years stand as the base for a new search for meanings of symbols in Asia. Many of the Asian theologians and others are bias of the already existing Western symbols and images in Asia. Instead of being "critical" of those symbols, they are criticising the foreign missionaries who brought with them those symbols into Asia. Some of the Asian theologians seem to be creating symbols and images idealising a nationalistic Christianity. It is like replacing one set of icons by another set of icons! By ignoring the universal character of the Body of Christ from a global perspective, one may end up creating "inward looking" symbols and theology. For example: A symbol may be appropriate in a locality, but it is not mandatory that it has to be accepted and conceived as the finale by the community at large. It has to be localised and universalised. The old symbols brought by foreign missions into Asia has its own value and implications. Theologies were done from old symbols! There are numerous symbols that still have their own validity in the Asian contexts. Asian theologians must learn to look into what they already have before proceeding to search for new symbols.

Every symbol in Asia has its own cultural reference. Nevertheless, one need to consider seriously the "type" of gospel presented behind

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[21]C. S. Song, "The World of Images and Symbols," cited in Yeow Choo Lak, (ed.), *Doing Theology With People's Symbols & Images*, ATESEA Occasional Papers, (Singapore: ATESEA, 1989), p. 8.

[22]Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 8.

[23]Many converts in the past have gone through a process of proselytisation. The early Christian missionaries failed to find meanings in the already established symbolism that the converts inherited from their former cultures.

symbols in that particular cultural setting. It must be recognised that often the message of the gospel and the demand of the context are in tension. Hence, there is no individual or absolute culture significantly congenial to the Christian message. Asia has rich resources within its diversity for creating authentic Asian symbolism to help communicate the Christian message.

In Malaysia, Christianity is not only misunderstood as foreign; its local symbolism also remains foreign. There is a growing sensivity to missiological insights concerning the cultural relevance of symbolism used by the Malaysian Churches. A critical concept of indigenous Church life needs to be developed, by which the Malaysian Church may discern and express its symbolism within its culture. This leads us to re-examine the Malaysian context. This article is concerned with the study of symbolism in Christian visual arts within the Judaeo-Christian traditions, as a Christian means of artistic communication of the gospel in the context of Christian ministry. It will also attempt to identify and suggest some ways of doing theology with symbols emerging from the Malaysian context. Various "models" of symbolism will be proposed that could enrich the message and ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM).

Reflections on the Forms of Symbolism

This section will primarily recapitulate, survey and assess the theological understanding of visual arts and the basis upon which symbolism was incorporated. The issues raised here have much to do with both a theological and a historical understanding. It will attempt to explore (1) Jewish Symbolism in the Graeco-Roman Period; (2) Symbolism in the Early Church; (3) Symbolism and Iconography in the Eastern Church tradition; (4) Major concepts of Symbolism in the Romantic Movement; and (5) Some theories on symbolism after the Symbolist Movement

Jewish Symbolism in the Graeco-Roman Period

One of the most prominent authorities in the field of Jewish symbolism of the Graeco-Roman period and its visual interpretation is Eerwin Ramsdell Goodenough.[24] There were also others who presented a sys-

[24]Jacob Neusner, "Studying Ancient Judaism through the Art of Synagogue," cited in D. Adams & D. A. Cappadona, (eds.), *Art as Reli-*

tematic interpretation of Jewish symbolism.[25] But they were merely critiques of Goodenough's study on Graeco-Roman Jewish symbolism. A peculiar phenomenon occurred during the centuries when Jewish traditions were being formulated in the *Talmud* and *Midrash*.[26] For example, the Jewish synagogue of *Dura Europos*, which was decorated in A.D. 244-245, reveals a sharp contrast with the usual prohibition about pictorial art. Evidently, there is no common agreement amongst archaeologists on the theme of the paintings in this synagogue. As modern archaeologists uncovered Jewish graves, funerary objects, and synagogues of that period, they found on them various animals and human figures, as well as vines and other pagan forms, in paintings, mosaic, relief, and in a few cases, in the "round."[27] This points to the fact that the early Jews were already actively expressing their religion through arts. This is best represented in the discovery of a Jewish synagogue outside the wall of the town *Dura Europos* in 1932 at the *Via Latina* catacomb.

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gious Studies, (New York: Crossroad, 1987), pp. 29-57. Cf. Goodenough was a historian of religion who produced archaeological evidences describing specific Jewish symbolism and the problems in its interpretation.

[25] Neusner "Studying Ancient Judaism," cited in Cappadona, *Art as Religious Studies*, pp. 43-57. Morton Smith (1915) and Arthur Darby Nock (1902-63), Both these scholars have generally presented a systematic critique of Goodenough's "Jewish Symbols." They were critical reviewers of Goodenough's interpretation of symbols and his hypotheses.

[26]E.R. Goodenough, "Jewish Symbolism in the Graeco-Roman Period" cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 15, (Israel: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1985), p. 568. Cf. The Rabbinic tradition followed more rational rules when interpreting the second commandment. For instance, figures that belonged to prophetic visions and all human forms were forbidden because they might be made out to be objects of worship.

[27]Goodenough, "Jewish Symbolism," cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 15, p. 569. Cf. "The Round:" The representations of bread symbol often look like "round objects," signifying anything that is round. For example, a basket of bread is considered as a symbol of "round object." See also Neusner cited in Cappadona, *Art as Religious Studies*, p. 41. See also Maguire, Maguire, & Duncan-Flowers, ed. *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*, (Urbana & Chicago: University of IIIinois Press, 1989) pp. 89-90. "Brimming baskets were also depicted in the mosaics of early Christian art. Baskets (round objects) of produce were symbol of prosperity."

The symbols borrowed from paganism (Hellenistic cults) often appear on monuments inextricably mingled with representations of objects used in Jewish worship. *Lubab* (fish), *ethrog* (bread) and *shofar* (wine) were common symbols in the *menorah*, (the Ark of the Law) of the Torah shrine.[28] These symbols are definitely Jewish and when used in devotion have taken on personal and direct value in expressing a meaning in connection with the death and life of those buried behind them.

At a time when pagans often put cult symbols on their graves, and when Christians were beginning universally to bury their dead with a cross or other Christian symbol in the hope of immortality, the Jews of the period probably used their own symbols to express a similar hope.[29] Fish, bread and wine not only conveyed symbolic religious meanings of immortality, but also were evidently used by Christians in a design scratched on a stone of a Roman catacomb.[30] The Jewish use of symbolism occurred mostly from the third to the sixth centuries. These centuries were the very time when the Christian church used such forms as vine symbols[31] with reverence and meaning. Since Christians began their pic-

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[28]Goodenough, "Jewish Symbolism," cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 15, pp. 569-570. Goodenough finds considerable evidence in Jewish cult and observance that fish, bread and wine rites came into Jewish practice during the Hellenistic period. He suggests that one should also review the pagan period at that time, i.e. symbols as represented in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Greece and Rome.

[29]Goodenough, "Jewish Symbolism," cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 15, p. 580. When the Jews adopted the same lingua franca of symbols, they used images borrowed from other cultic objects in a new way especially on their tombs to show their hope in the world to come. The theme of deliverance was prominent in their art. Most of these symbols had Old Testament references. For example, depiction of OT figures of Abraham, Noah, Moses, Daniel and the three men-theme of deliverance (symbolised on tombstones).

[30]Goodenough, "Jewish Symbolism," cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 15, p. 570 & p. 574. "Birds eating grapes symbolising immortality to Christians," were found in Roman catacombs at *Dura Europos*.

[31]Neusner cited in Cappadona, *Art as Religious Studies*, p. 41. See also Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*, pp. 23-24. "The vine was also a symbol that had been widespread in pre-Christian art and that acquire new meanings with the advent of the 'new religion.' It was associated with *Bacchus*, a pagan deity. Grapevine ap-

torial art largely by borrowing and adapting a Jewish tradition of Old Testament art, it is often debated which of the two religions began the adapting of pagan symbolism. The apex of Jewish usage coincides with the apex of Christian usage, so it is difficult to suggest that the Jews were using forms which at that time had no meaning and gave no access to their own belief.[32] Symbols and religious experiences have a way of disengaging themselves from their original explanations. The transition from religion with old forms and values has given rise to new meanings. Apparently, this may have been the case between the Jewish religion and the Christian faith.

Certain objects used in observing Jewish rites and sacraments have become symbols of Judaism, often with a meaning beyond their original function. Some examples are:

1) The *menorah*, a seven-branched gold candelabrum, designed for use in the Temple sanctuary (cf. Exodus 25:31). It has been the characteristic symbol evoking associations with ancient ritual since the destruction of Jerusalem.
2) In response to the commandment "bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead" (cf. Deuteronomy 6:8-9).
3) Another common symbol, devoid of religious significance, is the six-pointed Star known in Hebrew as the *Magen* David (shield, or Star of David). It became the selected symbol of the Zionist Movement in the nineteenth century.

Christian symbolism was expressed within the framework of the common Jewish symbols. The symbols, which had become so meaningful to the Jews, were taken over by the Christians as part of their heritage with newer meanings. The period from the rise of Christianity until the birth of Islam (in the seventh century) is often regarded as the classical age in the development of Judaism.[33] These centuries saw Jews establish the

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peared on household objects i.e. jar, clay lamp. Vine signified the Eucharist, but it was understood as sanctioned by Christ himself as an image for his own people. The vineyard came to be understood as the Kingdom of God."

[32]Neusner cited in Cappadona, *Art as Religious Studies*, p. 42

[33]David and Linda Alshuler, "Judaism and Art," cited in Cappadona, (ed.), *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, pp. 156.

home and the synagogue as centers for the ritual life of Judaism. Jews sought to maintain their special identity away from Hellenism. But after many unexpected discoveries, which led to considerable scholarly analysis, the previous views of rabbinic Judaism were modified to include close relationships between Judaism and Hellenism.[34] Jews shared in the Hellenistic cultural environment in which they lived.

From the seventh to the eighteenth century, Jews were living in countries dominated either by Christianity or Islam. Therefore, there were no particular Jewish symbols. Certain Jewish motifs do recur- "the lion of Judah," biblical characters, the ancient Solomon's temple or the Decalogue tablets. The *menorah* is now the symbol of the state of Israel. Jewish art of the Middle Ages is distinguished not so much by style or even by symbols, but by function.[35] Thus, the scope of Jewish symbolism in the Middle Ages was broad. Unfortunately, however, relatively little of it survived the long centuries of discrimination and persecution that Jews endured.[36] It was not until the twentieth century that the nature of Jewish art and symbolism, and its relation to the history of Judaism witnessed a dramatic new interest by academic study. Jewish symbolism enabled the Christian scholars to compare and contrast its artwork with contemporary settings.

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[34]David and Linda Alshuler, "Judaism and Art," cited in Cappadona, (ed.), *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, pp. 159-160. Archaeological Discoveries in 1936: a) Burial Caves of the 3rd to 4th century of some of the most important Rabbis, sarcophagi and walls were decorated with Hellenistic symbols of the afterlife and with human and animal forms. b) A naked Egyptian princess is portrayed fetching the infant Moses from the bulrushes, just a few feet away from the niche reserved for scolls of the Torah.

[35]Joseph Gutmann, (ed.), *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible*, (New York: KTAV Publishing House Inc., 1971), pp. 36-38.In Jewish religious documents, ceremonial objects, and synagogue architecture & decorations- the purpose of art is with the idea of " beautification" of the commandments. Art is seen clearly in the *Ketubot* (Jewish Marriage contracts- a document) which includes symbols of wedding scenes, flora & fauna, family coats of arms and often the most common scenes of Jerusalem. The synagogue architecture as adapted to suit local styles, i.e. Roman basilicas, Gothic and Romanesque models.

[36]Altshuler cited in *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, p. 160.

Symbolism in the Early Church

Among recent Church historians and art historians, it has been widely assumed that the Church Fathers were opposed to the creation of images.[37] It was believed that arts hardly existed until the time of Constantine in A.D. 313. However in recent years, much study of Church history, archaeological and artistic discoveries has provided evidence contrary to these ideas. However it was believed that the early Church Fathers followed the rabbinical practice of interpreting scriptural narratives as elaborate symbolical representations of spiritual truths.[38] This is similar to the Jewish rabbinic tradition as discussed earlier. It implies that the early Church Fathers borrowed Jewish symbols from the Graeco-Roman period. It must be noted that the early Christians and the Church Fathers kept God above the sensual and worldly. Therefore paintings were not specifically forbidden but the carving of statues was not allowed. Hence, the early Church Fathers and Christians contributed another dimension in the early Church symbols. For example: Christian symbols were outward and visible signs of divinity, doctrines, spiritual ideas, rites (Holy Communion and Baptism) and sacred seasons. Creeds and confessions retain their character as symbols of faith. Among other numerous symbols are: doctrine of trinity which is symbolised by the triangle in various forms; the Star symbolizes the Epiphany; symbolic gestures such as laying on of hands; symbolic forms of speech e.g. *maranatha*, the Lord cometh-which served as a watchword by which Christians recognised each other. In later years, when early Christians were permitted to build houses of worship, arts of woodcarving and stained glass painting developed, it is within this context that Christ was often pictured together with the four evangelists. Certain animal and bird symbols were used, so as to distinguish the gospels from one another, for some of the early converts could not read, and names would prove of no value to them.[39]

In the light of the above discussion, one can see clear distinctions and continuities between the early and the post-Constantinian period. There were clear distinctions between a Church that was supposedly rela-

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[37]John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church*, (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 6.

[38]Vergilius Ferm, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (USA: Poplar Books, N.D.) pp. 753-755.

[39]Ferm, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 753-754.

tively pure, simple, clear and spiritual in the early centuries (first century to fourth century) and the Church that followed, which showed corruptions of power, the opulence of art and architecture, and a deadening security through the Constantinian promotion of Christianity.[40] However the fact remains that more art and architecture survived from the latter than the former.

The earliest known extant of Christian art was found in the catacombs, private cemeteries and other sources in the frontier town of *Dura Europos*, a town buried in sand from the third century. Examining the symbolic figure (icon) of Christ of the early Christians confirms the fact that symbols were transformed and used by borrowing from Hellenistic world and culture.[41] Therefore, one sees that iconography (in the form of paintings) had its origins within the early Church context.

Three types of symbols give significant examples of the transformation of previous symbols into Christian ones in the early Church. The first type were heraldic symbols or emblems (badges of identification such as the *Chi Rho*, the Anchor, the Fish and others.[42] The second type

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[40]Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities*, p. 3.

[41]See Gutmann, *No Graven Image*, pp. 185-189. Figure of Christ: Christ is represented in the figure of *Orpheus* and as the Good Shepherd. *Orpheus* figure has no biblical basis but the Good Shepherd symbolised Psalm 23. There were other major figures- Shepherd, *Orants* and Philosophers belonging to pagan classical world. *Orants* were painted figures that appears standing with arms and hands uplifted and eyes gazing to heavens. The archaeologists who discovered these figures called them "praying ones." These figures expressed the firm faith of the Christians in the life after death. The *Orant* symbolised faith for the early Christian Church by historical figures not by mere mythical figures used by pagans. The gesture of the *Orant* is symbolic of the resurrection and blessing. *Hermes*, the mythical messenger of the pagan gods was represented as the Good Shepherd-showing Christ as the fulfillment of *Hermes*. These figures were associated with the Good Shepherd theme. However, the *Orpheus* figure and Good Shepherd images evoked beliefs in deliverance through Christ and the possibility of faith being transmitted to the non-believers.

[42]See Ratha Doyle Mcgee, *Symbols: Signposts of Devotion*, (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1956). See also Robert Wetzler & Helen Hunt-

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[39]Ferm, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 753-754.

the changing of the Church from its obscure beginnings to its central role in society. The relationship between the Church and the State was established, though at times held in tension.

Throughout these centuries artist sometimes emphasized the human side, other times the divine. In Byzantine art the divine and transcendent Christ was stressed.[45] Today Byzantine centers of Ravenna, Istanbul and Palermo are places of Byzantine art. In Churches of both the East and the West, iconographic programmes of the fifth and sixth centuries include several ingredients, namely, biblical cycles, liturgical elements, and the reigning of Christ.[46] In the Eastern art, the biblical cycles were woven into both sacramental and imperial patterns, whereas in the Western art biblical cycles had a liturgical base.

To summarise the use of symbolism within the Graeco-Roman period and the early Christian tradition reflect both a distinctive and compromising usage in their changing situations. Obviously many factors contributed to the forms of symbolism. However, Jewish and early Christian symbolism had strong and implicit biblical motifs and references.

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the change of the location was a change in art. It resulted in the change of the style of art from Graeco-Roman art into essentially Eastern and Oriental style we designate as Byzantine. Ravenna was made the capital of the Western part and Constantinople for the eastern part. In the Churches of Ravenna there are magnificent examples of early Byzantine art. Two techniques used were fresco and mosaic. Fresco was painted on masonry and in medium of mosaic, tiny cubes of coloured stone or glass are pressed into the plaster while it is still wet. (pp. 47-48). But most important in determining the style of the mosaic are the Eastern and Byzantine characteristics. Discovered from the catacomb of Domitilla-Eastern Mediterranean Art: "Christ had narrower face with long hair, pointed beard and large expressive eyes, (a fresco). Whereas the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (AD 359) a Crypt of St. Peter's, Rome- in a fresco (Christ is beardless when young and is fully bearded in mid-life). Also the mosaic called "The Christ of the Byzantine Mosaic" has arms outstretched, a gesture appropriate to the time-transcending sacramental rites-blesses the loaves and fishes. Here Christ is beardless, (mosaic).

[45]John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Thought*, trans. Yves Dubois, (USA: Athens Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 173, 179, & 195.

[46]Gennadios Limouris, (ed.), *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1990), p. 25.

From the early Christian symbolic forms of art, we have seen the grandeur of both Western and Byzantine art. There are two forms of symbols that are explicitly expressed by the Western and Eastern Churches, namely the Gothic architecture and the eastern icon. A host of symbols and images (symbolism) were used in liturgy, vestments, architecture, flags, banners, sculpture and paintings. It is interesting to note some of the variations of these symbols in the different traditions.[47]

With this background, a discontinuity in the history of art with a violent distortion especially of the image of Christ in the Romanesque art of the medieval period is seen. Thereupon the architecture of Romanesque art, which had a mixture of northern barbarian and Byzantine elements further, combined to create new forms of symbolic expressions. However the thirteenth century replaced Romanesque-distorting art with the versatile Gothic art and architecture. It was during the "high" renaissance that the art of the Gothic and Byzantine periods became the product of a corporate consciousness. Individual artist were known during this period such as Michelangelo and Leonardo.

Symbolism and Iconography in the Eastern Church Tradition

The characteristics of all icon-painting (except the Coptic) derive ultimately from the post-Iconoclastic Byzantine painters and have been preserved today. Icons (for example, of Christ and Mary) play a more conspicuous part in worship than do statues in the West; they are repeatedly kissed, carried in procession, and otherwise reverenced. Some Catholic Churches of Eastern rites now have statues as well as or even instead of icons, a liturgically corrupt practice.[48] In 843, public devotion to icons was resumed with a much more self-conscious theological basis than before: the icons were to have a much more profoundly worked out religious function beyond that of illustration and teachings.[49] The theological defence and veneration of the icons were inextricably bound up

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[47]See West, *Outward Signs*, pp. 87-123. See also in C.F. Weidmann, (ed.), *Dictionary of Church Terms and Symbols*, (Norwalk, Connecticut: C.R.Gibson Co., N.D.).

[48]Donald Attwater, (ed.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (Toronto: Casell & Company Ltd., 1951), p. 242.

[49]John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons & their Spiritual Significance*, (London: Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1987), pp. 21-42.

with the doctrines of Creation and the Incarnation. There were three main theological issues that formed the bases for theological defence of icons:

1) The first issue was the place of matter in God's scheme of things. **The problem**: If paint and pigment were "mere matter," then any veneration could be interpreted as idolatry. **The basis**: "Matter"is the work of the Divine Artist, and as such mediates divine grace. Man is restored in Christ to share in the creative work of the Divine Artist as the priest of Creation, being the Mediator between the material world and the Creator.
2) The second issue concerns the reality of the incarnation. **The problem**: The whole question of the revelation of God in Christ. The Old Testament (i.e. Mosaic Law) prohibits the worship of images. **The basis**: To argue against icons on the basis of the Old Testament was to ignore the fact that the Son of God had come in the flesh and restored the image of man. Theology and art, Word and Image are to be seen as two aspects of the one Revelation (Jesus Christ).
3) The Third issue was the veneration of icons. **The problem**: The worship of images. **The basis**: The defenders of the icons asserted that images were distinct from the originals they represented- Christ merited relative veneration and honour, different from the worship that is reserved for God alone. Such veneration as was paid to an icon was directed not to the paint and pigment, but to the reality represented in the paint and pigment.

Noting that after the Byzantine triumph of Orthodoxy, throughout the Byzantine world, Churches began iconographic schemes, which were executed through mosaics, frescoes, or painted wood-panel icons. There were three symbolic icons of the Transfiguration, the Raising of Lazarus and Descent into Hell, which were visual images that articulated the revelation given in Christ.

It was already a declining practice in the Western Churches when the Reformation banished the worship of icons. At the Second Council of Nicea in 787, the veneration of worship and honour to the persons of saints through icons was condemned.[50] But the iconoclastic doctrine and

[50]Todor Sabev, "Social and Political Consequences of the Iconoclastic Crisis," cited in Limouris, (ed.), *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, pp. 46-47.

practice continued with the support of the dominating power in Byzantine. Christian Churches[51] both inside and outside the borders of the Byzantine Empire developed *iconodouleia* (the veneration of icons) traditions, i.e. Egyptian, Nubian, Ethiopian, Syrian, Amernian, Roman and Georgian. Although, the regional Constantiople Church led the triumph over iconoclastic groups, this led to a doubly forceful renewal of iconography and *iconodouleia* in the Byzantine Church. The iconographic tradition first developed in the Syro-Palestinian or Asian geographical cultural context. Both the *iconodouleia* and iconography traditions continue to spread to all pre-Reformation Churches. The difference was mainly in style and a degree of spirituality.

The iconographic movement that began in the Eastern Church was later seen as an influencing force in Medieval traditions of visual art, in Continental Reformed traditions and in popular movements, especially monasticism. Predominantly, the issue was not the role of saints but the images of saints, Christ and the Virgin Mary. These iconoclastic movements appropriated evocatively in societies of cultural pluralism. Iconography and symbolism have their dangerous side. They can lead to idolatry, empty ritualism and legalistic piety.[52] Symbols and images may become laden with so much interpretation that the essential message is obscured.[53] It is said that the icon expresses a link between the incarnation and the economy of God's creation.[54] The iconographic tradition has much to do with the debate about the integrity of life, and the transformation of society.[55] Also in this connection, icons are visualisations of the mystery of God, especially the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The defenders of icons agree that Christian symbol ultimately refers to the sign of the Cross that is a passage through non-

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[51]Todor Sabev, "Social and Political Consequences of the Iconoclastic Crisis," cited in Limouris, (ed.), *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, pp. 46-47. See also Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1981), p. 110. Maguire argues that: "Byzantine artists were unaware of the debt that they owed to late antique oratory, and to its survival in the schools of Constantinople."

[52]"A Report of an Ecumenical Seminar on Renewal through Iconography: 26-31 October 1987," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988), p. 6.

[53]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, p. 6.

[54]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, pp. 9-10.

[55]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, p. 7.

vision, non-representation, and non-*gnosis* (unknowing).[56] But they insists that the icon is a doorway to a deeper, personal contemplation of the Lord.[57] Veneration of icons is holiness and spirituality for them! This holiness is always referred to a model (icon) and is to be taken as absolute. Its function is to open a relationship with "holiness" which in an absolute sense, belongs to God.[58] Therefore, an icon is "holy" because the saints who is represented in that icon is holy. This symbolic image is the medium of a personal relationship that culminates in all the signs and symbols of the liturgical worship and sacraments of the Church.[59]

It is beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed study of iconography and symbolism. By way of concluding the foregoing discussion, the use of symbolism in iconography in the Eastern Church will be recapitulated. Icon, an image or likeness, usually of a religious subject, especially characteristic of Eastern Christian Churches. The term is derived from the Greek *ikenai*, meaning "to be like."[60] After the fourth century, when the early Church finally overcame its Jewish-derived suspicion of attempts to express religious events in visual forms, it arbitrarily applied the word "icon" to religious paintings, mosaics, basreliefs, or other objects.[61] Most icons reflect traditions of subject matter and style developed under the supervision of the Eastern Churches. But initially they was under ecclesiastical supervision of Constantinople (Western Church). This was partly the influence of Jewish and early Christian fear of idolatry. Therefore, within these basic conventions, Byzantine icons changed. This culminated in the Iconoclastic Controversy (between 726 and 843 A.D.). Symbols were being depicted in the form of images (i.e. icons). Iconoclastic means "image breaking." Emperor Leo 111 ordered images to be removed from Churches and public buildings. Constantine V developed a theology that opposed all images. All pictorials symbolising and representing Christ and the saints was regarded as creating idol. And any reverence given to such images was considered idolatrous (cf. Nicea II). It was only in the Synod of 843, which affirmed the decisions of the Council of Nicea II that a theological

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[56]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, pp. 2-3.

[57]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, p. 4.

[58]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, p. 3.

[59]"A Report," cited in WCC, *Come and See*, p. 5.

[60]J. Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, (New York: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 83.

[61]Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, p. 85.

case for iconography and icon veneration was developed. The use of symbols in the Eastern Church tradition had both its richness and corrupting tendencies.

Major Concepts of Symbolism in the Romantic Movements

Romanticism grew from the rejection of the eighteenth century doctrines of restraint, objectivity, decorum, and rationalism as well as the use of fixed forms for artistic expression.[62] It was fed by the growing concerns with folk expression, primitivism, the sublime, the remote past, Gothic architecture, mysticism, and the life of the common people.[63] Within this context, the turning point for contemporary interest in symbolic theory arose with a group thinkers and literary figures who have come to be known collectively as the Romantic Movement. Romanticism was one aspect of the general spirit of resistance against rationalism. Briefly, looking at two of the Romantics:[64] (a) Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) saw the perfection of knowledge not in abstraction but in symbols, since symbols enable one to view all the phenomena of nature and history as a divine communication. His protest was against Kant; and (b) Johann Gottried Herder (1744-1803) saw that the task of aesthetics lay in the search for a universal logic of artistic symbolisation, to which end he developed his own theory of evolution of language, i.e. folk poetry.

In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, the Symbolist Movement was formed. Unlike the Romantics, who had been more concerned with the interpretation of specific symbols or general theory about symbolisation processes, the Symbolists were preoccupied with creating symbols of ideal beauty, which were appropriate to their age.[65] For instance, [66] Stephane Mallarme (1842-1898) used Christian ritual symbol-

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[62]See C. Hugh Holman, "Romanticism," cited in *Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume 23, (USA: 1983), pp. 678-682.

[63]See C. Hugh Holman, "Romanticism," cited in *Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume 23, p. 680.

[64]See Heisig, "Symbolism," cited in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 14, p. 201.

[65]See Heisig, "Symbolism," cited in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 14, p. 202.

[66]See Heisig, "Symbolism," cited in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 14, p. 203.

ism to erect a metaphysic to explain symbols. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) exalted the value of symbols by inverting Christian symbols into a sort of diabolism. Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) formed principles of symbolism by locating them within a Christian context. In short, all of the Symbolists stood outside of the Christian frame in their search for an alternate center to their aesthetic-mystico-religious sensibility, namely "ideal Beauty."

The impact the Romantics and the Symbolists had on symbolism influenced the study of symbols at the turn of the twentieth century undertaken by philosophers, historians, anthropologists, psychologists and theologians. For example, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) sought to uncover social implications in the symbols of the society. Mary Douglas showed how the study of symbols is relevant to the modern world. Freud and Jung developed psychological theories of the symbol, i.e. dreams and psyche. Paul Tillich tried to show the place of the symbol in human culture and religious language. Mircea Eliade contended that symbols reveal certain dimensions of reality that would otherwise elude our knowing.

With the progress of technological advancements, religious traditions across the world have found themselves in a modern experience where symbols play an important role. The aim of this article is to translate symbolism in the Malaysian situation but before proceeding to the Malaysian scene and symbolism there is yet one more task, which is to review briefly some theories on symbolism after the impact of Symbolist Movement. The aim here is only to describe the specific nature of some theories on symbolism, and to apply them with "localised language and motifs" in the Malaysian Christian context for doing theology and ministry.

Some Theories on Symbolism after the Symbolist Movement

Although the Symbolist Movement was short-lived, its influence on theories of symbolism cannot be denied. It cross-developed with modern anthropology, psychology, theology, religious-history and philosophy. Many Christian theologians and academic scholars shared many of the Symbolists' instincts of the mystical dimension of symbolism. With the turn of the twentieth century, interest in symbolism continued to strengthen and grow in academic credibility. Having made this general evaluation, four areas of discussion in symbolism of specialised fields and their contributors will be surveyed with a brief comment to suggest

the relevance of the emerging theories of symbolism for the Malaysian context.

Psychologist Jung [67]

Jung came to the conclusion that personal factors-both conscious and unconscious in the human psyche suggest a psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature, which is identical in all individuals. Jung makes a distinction between individual, personal symbols and social or collective symbols. In either case they are natural and spontaneous products. A living symbol gives expression to an unconscious element or factor. Many of the collective symbols are religious images. The believer accepts them as revealed, as being of divine origin. On the other hand, the origins of the symbolic aspect of religious images are deeply buried in the mystery of the past that has no human source. In such cases as implied above, Jung says that symbols are collective representations emanating from primeval dreams and creative fantasies. They are involuntary spontaneous manifestations and by no means intentional inventions. One particular theory that can be derived from Jung is a concept of the archetype and the collective unconscious. This is a significant theory for inculturation of symbolism in the Malaysian context.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas

Douglas states in her book *Natural Symbols*[68] that the intimate relationship, which exists between the human body and human society, represents bodily symbols that are appropriate in a particular society's context. She says that man attempts to establish order and control in matters concerning his own body, so he seeks categories of stability for his social life. Therefore man cannot grow to bodily and cultural maturity except within a coherent symbolic system. One can see this to be the case in the Malaysian Tamil way of life. The most satisfactory symbolic system is that which is structured organically and maintains an intimate relation between social and bodily expression. It is on the basis of this theory that she argues that human language and rituals are influenced by the

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[67]See Wallace B. Cliff, *Jung and Christianity: the Challenge of Reconciliation*, (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1983), pp. 16-23 & pp. 51-57.

[68]See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 112-115.

structure of the society and vice versa. In this connection, every society discovers its most authentic symbols by drawing upon the analogies offered by the patterned behaviour of a human body. Douglas's theory of natural symbols could help us to study and understand the symbolic traditions, rituals, systems and expressions that are contained for example in the Tamil community and the Malaysian society at large.

Theologian Paul Tillich

For Paul Tillich[69] a religious symbol depends on the definition of religion. "That which concerns us ultimately" is the phrase used by him to describe a symbol. If a symbol points to an ultimate concern then it may legitimately be termed as religious symbol. In this case for him the sacramental material is not a sign but a symbol. Tillich distinguishes clearly between symbol and sign. For example, a sacramental symbol is neither a thing nor a sign. It participates in the power of what it symbolises, and therefore it can be a medium of the Spirit. Religious symbols mediate ultimate reality through things, persons and events. This is because of their mediating functions and they thereby receive the quality of being 'holy.' In the experience of Holy places, times, books, words, images and acts, symbols of the 'holy' reveal something of the 'Holy' itself. This in turn produces the experience of 'holiness' in persons and groups, (i.e. Christian Church with its symbols). Therefore symbols are socially rooted and socially supported. Tillich's theological work is directly related to the interpretation of religious symbols, so that the secular man can understand and be moved by those symbols around him. On evaluating Tillich's theory of religious symbolism: Tillich's theory can be applied to understand the existing religious symbols in Malaysia with its socio-religious context. The Christian community could identify certain religious symbols and finds its "ultimate concern" for expressing the gospel with authenticity in a socially pluralistic society like Malaysia.

Religious Historian Mircea Eliade

Eliade is the most establishes and widely informed of the twentieth-century historians of religions.[70] Eliade directs his attention to a multi-

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[69]See F.W. Dillistone, (ed.), *Myth & Symbol*, SPCK 7 series, (London: SPCK, 1966), pp. 15-34.

[70]See D.A. Cappadona, (ed.), *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts: Mircea Eliade*, (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 1-52.

tude of particular objects (i.e. icons) and events by considering their significance in the human relationship to the divine. He lays special stress on the importance of what he calls *hierophanies*, that is manifestations of the sacred in the context of the secular world. Such manifestations, he claims, are always represented and later recalled by means of symbols. The symbol participates in the sacredness and may itself come to be considered as a sacred element, i.e. the elements of the Eucharist. Two functions of religious symbols are noted in Eliade's theory: (i) Integration: The religious symbol allows man to discover a certain unity of the world and at the same time to disclose to himself his proper destiny as an integral part of the world. (ii) Conciliation: Religious symbols serve to hold together what seem to be directly contradictory or paradoxical features of the world. Eliade's theory of religious symbolism, with the concepts of integration and conciliation, could help to communicate new symbolic forms, either through extension or combination of historical symbols and symbolic forms, in the multi-religious situation in Malaysia.

The Use of Symbolism in the Malaysian Context

In the light of the discussion so far, this section will recapitulate Luther's theological understanding on symbolism and suggest some ways of doing theology with symbols emerging from the Malaysian situation. Hence, this will set out the background for discussion on appropriating symbolic elements within the historical and ministerial context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM). While the history and traditions of the medieval period are an important part of the Christian heritage, it was the Reformation that gave birth to the particular challenges and tensions that characterise the modern world-especially in regard to Christians and their relations to the arts.[71]

Luther's Theological Understanding on Symbolism

The Reformation emerged as a departure from the undue emphasis on relics, and the veneration of the icons, i.e. saints. Luther with much wisdom insisted that every form that instills idolatry must be discarded. His primary concern was the preaching of the gospel and administering the sacraments. He was concerned that all acts of discarding the existing icons and images of his time must be done on the basis of the Word of

[71]See William A. Dyrness, *Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 51-67.

God. Luther stressed this because of the act of Karlstadt who led the people to the destruction of the images and icons in Wittenberg. For Luther, the theological position in this matter is that idolatry must be judged on the basis of faith. Therefore arts expressed through any form must be seen in the light of the Scripture and faith. For him, "images for memorial and witness, such as crucifixes and images of saints, are to be tolerated."[72] Luther's understanding of the role of art was firmly based on the Scriptures. He was concerned about the importance of reading and hearing the Word of God. Hence, for Luther, the liturgical and artistic expressions of the former Church (i.e. Catholic Church in Germany) were to be maintained if they were not obstacles to the Christian faith and the believers' freedom. The icons, images and other symbolic paintings were to be treated as examples and models of faith, and not as objects of veneration. Luther saw a unity in the preaching of the Word, sacrament, liturgy and the visual expressions (i.e. music, paintings & etc) of the Church as based on faith. For Luther, the Christian has freedom of expression through any forms of visual arts as long as all arts are tied in their use on faith in Christ.[73] In other words, art forms are to serve the gospel and not become the gospel, in which case they become idols!

Having noted Luther's theological understanding on symbolism in visual arts, the ELCM could consider the following suggestions:

1) To recognize the limitations of inculturation of symbols especially when the ELCM is inclined to use traditional symbols of the past;
2) To ascertain relevant theological basis for developing symbols that addresses issues on culture and social changes;
3) To inculcate in the ELCM a sense of appreciation for visual arts in its historical context;
4) To cultivate in the ELCM a critical understanding of how to proclaim the gospel in the Malaysian context.

In order to avoid labels such as "foreign Tamil Lutheran Church" or "westernised Christian Church," ELCM must meaningfully break away from the shadows of the past. However, ELCM has to appreciate what-

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[72]See *Luther's Works*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), Volume 40, p. 91.

[73]See *Luther's Works*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), Volume 51, p. 85.

ever symbols implanted by Swedish missionaries and the pastors of South India in the early years. Those symbols stand as the base for new search for meanings in symbols in the ELCM. There are numerous symbols that still have their own validity in the ELCM. Nevertheless, concerted effort must be taken by the ELCM towards inculturation of its architecture, hymns and music, vestments, liturgy, language (use of *Bahasa* Malaysia), literature, service to non-believers and approach to its ministries. Inculturation is something that should happen naturally when the Christian community appropriates the symbols and images around it and immerses itself in the larger community's life and struggle.[74] Therefore, the symbol that gives meaning always participates in the living experience of the community, which produces and sustains the symbol.[75] This must be done without getting trapped in the tyranny of new contextual forms and symbols.

Doing Theology with Symbols emerging from the Malaysian Context

There are several ways to theologise symbols by thinking, dreaming, reflecting and visualising. Distinctive symbolic concepts like *Muhibbah* (goodwill), *Kesetiaan* (loyalty), *Harmoni* (harmony), *Kesejahteraan* (peace), and *Perpaduan* (unity) are significant people-oriented 'instruments' for creating symbols that would integrate theology and the Malaysian situation. These symbolic concepts are in common usage in the lives of the ordinary Malaysian people. The government with a good intention to establish "a matured and tolerant Malaysian society"[76] promotes these symbolic concepts among the people. Therefore, it is imperative that the Malaysian Church and Christians undertake the task to theologise them. A serious effort must be made to bring theology down to the grass-roots level of the Church.[77] Nonetheless, theology did not deeply take root in the Malaysian soil because of the fear that it may "accommodate" too much from other religious practices and forms of the

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[74]Albert Sundararaj Walters, *We Believe in One God: Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), p. 259.

[75]Walters, *We Believe in One God*, p. 263.

[76]*Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020)*, (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Penerangan Malaysia, 1991), p. 3.

[77]See Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997), pp. 232-233.

nation. An "ideal" Malaysian Church should be one that is in Malaysia but does not "belong" to Malaysia. In other words, it is a Church, which absorbs the nation's principles but does not accept them outright. The best example is the use of the national language, *Bahasa* Malaysia. The Church must adopt the national language policy and use it to enhance the Church's ministry amidst the Malaysian people but must not compromise on unconstitutional and parochial demands.[78] What concerns here are matters pertaining to the use of Bahasa Malaysia terminology for theologising symbolic concepts arising from the Malaysian context. The context has to be taken seriously and the Church needs to develop relevant and meaningful symbolism for the different cultural situations in Malaysia. However this includes the plurality of religious faiths, socio-political structures and socio-economic conditions which are crucial factors in the cultural context of Malaysia. The Church should communicate its faith in language and symbolic actions, which is understood in that particular cultural context of Malaysia. The terminology and symbolic forms emerging from the various cultures in Malaysia could be used appropriately for the expression of the Christian faith.

The Symbol of *Muhibbah*

The word *Muhibbah* or "goodwill" comes from the Arabic word, which denotes the meaning "love," "friendship" or "affection."[79] Evidently, the word *Muhibbah* had a strong emphasis in Malaysia after the racial riot events of 13 May 1969.[80] Malaysians today use the word *Muhibbah* to symbolise goodwill among their neighbours. *Muhibbah* or "friendship" is a vital means for our common social, economic and political well being. Friendship, though it is an ordinary social event, has a powerful effect on our lives in Malaysia and it is the best basis for further deeper and lasting relationship.[81] The word *Muhibbah* can become an expression of the gospel by Christians and the Church as a way of preparing Malaysians to hear the gospel. Significantly, then, the biblical

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[78]See Rev. Dr. Thu En Yu, "The Vision of a Malaysian Church," cited in *The Malaysian Church in the 90s*, (Kuala Lumpur: Christian Federation of Malaysia, 1992), pp. 50-51.

[79]S. Batumalai, *A Malaysian Theology of Muhibbah*, (Kuala Lumpur: Batumalai S. 1990), pp. 1-20.

[80]*A Report of the May 13 Tragedy*, (Kuala Lumpur: The National Operations Council, 1969), pp. 21-24.

[81]Walters, *We Believe in One God*, p. 267.

mandate "love your neighbour" (Leviticus 19:18), continuously motivates Christians to practise *Muhibbah* among their neighbours. Hence it is of vital importance for the Church to theologise and relate the symbol of *Muhibbah* in a pluralistic society. Malaysia is a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society comprising of Malays, Chinese, Indians and other minorities. To establish a good interaction with others and make known the gospel, Christians need to impart a spirit of goodwill. *Muhibbah* among people was the deepest concern of Christ's ministry. This calls for the Church and Christians to enhance joy, hope and peace while appropriating the concerns of *Muhibbah* among the people of Malaysia.

The Symbol of *Kesetiaan*

In 1969 there was a national racial riot and fear gripped the different communities. A desperate search was made for something that would create a cohesive and united people.[82] There was born a strong determination to establish national unity among all Malaysians and it was in this context that the *Rukunegara* was implemented in 1970.[83] One of the five principles of the *Rukunegara* reiterates "loyalty or *Kesetiaan*" to the King and nation. *Kesetiaan* requires every Malaysian to show loyalty to the King and the state. Today all Malaysians are duty bound to uphold the principle of *Kesetiaan* to the King and nation. How can one theologise the word "*Kesetiaan* or loyalty?" In the Christian parlance, the word "*Kesetiaan* or loyalty" implicates "kindness," "faithfulness," and "obedience." God commanded Abraham: " Show to me and the country where you are living as an alien the same kindness..." (Genesis 21:23b). This command of God implies the same demand on the issue of loyalty for Christians who are residing as citizens in Malaysia. Loyalty to God and the nation is of importance in the eyes' of God. The primary concern of Christians and the Church is to remain faithful (*Kesetiaan)* to God, but also to be reminded about their loyalty to the nation. The word "faithfulness" to God can be understood in terms of the Christian obligations to God and the state (Romans 13: 1-14). Christians and the Church are called to exemplify stewardship of *Kesetiaan* (loyalty) in terms of obedience to the King and the state. It is only with a Christian perception of

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[82]Bishop Moses Ponniah, "The situation in Malaysia," cited in *Transformation*, Volume 17 No. 1 (January/March 2000), p. 31.

[83]Murugesu Pathmanathan, *Vision 2020: An Extrapolation of the Rukunegara*, (Kuala Lumpur: Jilid XVI Bil1, 1992), p. 10.

Kesetiaan or "loyalty" that one can reveal a "genuine loyalty" to the nation as a Church and as individual Christians. This can be seen as Christian witnessing to their neighbours in Malaysia. How does the Church express its loyalty? Is the Malaysian Church being a symbol of *Kesetiaan* (loyalty)? Does the Church know how Malaysians understand *Kesetiaan* in general? It is in this context that the Church could use the already established expressions of loyalty for its missionary endeavour and Christian witnessing. The Church and Christians are challenged to identify themselves with the Malaysian national identity in every aspect of life to demonstrate their loyalty! Can the Church in Malaysia stand up as a symbol of *Kesetiaan* not only to God but also to the nation? The Christians and the Church in Malaysia cannot exist in isolation to preserve their identity but they need to "live" in solidarity with other Malaysians as well. The Church as a symbol of *Kesetiaan* must remain as the light, salt and leaven.

The Symbol of Harmoni

The Bahasa Malaysia word *Harmoni* is a transliteration of the English usage. Plurality of religions has been a significant fact in the Malaysian society. Despite occasional conflicts, people in Malaysia have shown a great measure of religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence. Religious harmony plays an important role in a multi-religious country like Malaysia. This illuminates the notion of allowing people to practise and propagate their faith in freedom but in harmony with others without using unfair means to achieve determined ends.[84] The question now is "how can religious harmony be an effective symbol of *Harmoni* in Malaysia?" Malaysia enforced " religious harmony" against the background of the events of 13 May 1969. Christians were reminded to exercise harmonious attitude towards all other religious communities in Malaysia. The essence of *Harmoni* epitomises "goodwill or love," "loyalty," "peace" and "unity," which are holistically interrelated to the symbol of *Harmoni* (Colossians 3:14). Christians are encouraged to live in harmony amidst people of other faiths in Malaysia. For the symbol of *Harmoni* to prevail in the Malaysian soil, the Church needs to constantly address issues of inter-religious dialogue. However, the religious pluralism of the Malaysian society must not be allowed to obscure the distinctiveness of the gospel.

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[84]Bishop Dennis Dutton, "Lest we forget," in *Harmoni: MCCBCHS*, Vol. 2 No. 3, (March 2000), p. 8.

The Symbol of Kesejahteraan

The word *Kesejahteraan*, meaning "peace" is the most recurring word in the life of the people in Malaysia. So what does peace or *Kesejahteraan* symbolise in the Malaysian context? Compared to other countries, Malaysia is one of the most peaceful countries in the world. Although economic growth was below expectations, Malaysia has remained stable, and it still performed better than most other countries in recent years. After the September 11 incident in America, Malaysia has emerged in the international arena as the only Islamic country that is progressive, peaceful and stable. Although there were assumptions that Malaysia is also involved directly or indirectly in acts of violence, the world has acknowledged that the government is capable of tackling its internal problems related to violence and economy. To tackle violations and terrorism, the Internal Security Act (ISA) has to continue to ensure *Kesejahteraan* or peace in Malaysia. The country is safe and peaceful amid the chaotic economies of countries in the world, which are facing pressure. How could Christians and the Church be a symbol of *Kesejahteraan* in Malaysia? The Church should continue to provide leadership and support to all national efforts to preserve the peace and stability of the country.[85] Christians should be challenged not to give into fear and accept war or violence as natural consequence of differences. There is another, a nobler way, spiritual way, where "might" is not right, but love, compassion and the sanctity of life should provide the way into the future. God is in anguish. He is in pain as he watches his creation doing things that are evil. But in his mercy, he calls his people to be effective witnesses of *Kesejahteraan* or peace on earth and goodwill among all people in Malaysia and the world at large.[86] Christians are reminded that their inspiration springs from their faith and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Lord, "the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6), who is continuously present and "is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus Christ reconciled us to God and with each other, proclaiming peace (Ephesians 2:14-17; 2 Corinthians 5: 18) and a new relationship between those who had been separated by alienation and hostility. Christians seeking reconciliation and peace must begin with the ways they act in

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[85]Bishop Julius Paul, 'Praying for World Peace," cited in *Berita CCM,* (January-March 2002), p. 7.

[86]Bishop Julius Paul, 'Praying for World Peace," cited in *Berita CCM*, p. 7.

their families, neighourhood, and their Churches. The real strength of the Church remains in the seeming powerlessness of faith and love. Christians must seek everyday to rediscover and experience this power.[87] In a way this is to theologise the symbol of *Kesejahteraan* or peace that is from Jesus who is everlasting. The perennial task of Christians and the Church in Malaysia is to invoke peace amidst all people at all times.

The Symbol of Perpaduan

The word *Perpaduan* meaning "unity" is a commonly used terminology in the context of harmonious communal living in Malaysia. The government takes every effort to foster *Perpaduan* or unity among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Unity is crucial since Malaysia is a multi-racial country. It is of utmost significance that each racial group cooperates with one another. For example, a slogan emphasising on racial unity is repeatedly shown on the Malaysian Television: An Indian boy in a school shares his *nasi lemak* packet with a Malay and Chinese boy. Positively, this advertisement of "eating together" symbolically depicts that the three races in Malaysia are living in harmonious unity. How can Christians and the Church strive to symbolise *Perpaduan* or unity in Malaysia? Christian unity presents a powerful model of corporate witness to the world. Separate individualistic ministries rob Christianity of believability.[88] Christians and the Church can uphold the King, the government, the people and the whole nation in their prayers. The symbol of *Perpaduan* can be expressed on Independence day, for example, if flags are raised in the premises of the Churches; this act will affirm the Churches' commitment to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia, thereby signifying justice, peace, unity, harmony, loyalty and goodwill.[89] Christian communities must seek to reconcile their differences to avoid disunity and disharmony. The Church in Malaysia is called to strive towards cooperation, common understanding and mutual recognition of one another despite diverse traditions in order to symbolise unity.

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[87]"Extract of Message on Occasion of the WCC launch of the Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace, January 2001," cited in *Berita CCM*, p. 8.

[88]"Partnership beyond the Rhetoric," cited in *Berita NECF*, (November-December 2000), p. 1.

[89]"The Christian Federation of Malaysia National Day Message," cited in *Berita CCM*, p. 20.

Models of Symbolism for Doing Ministry within the Historical Context of the ELCM
A Historical Perspective

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM) inherited traditional forms of symbolism directly from the German Leipzig Mission and the Swedish Mission. Hence, the ELCM's traditions, liturgies, hymns, forms of worship, devotional prayers, admonitions for Christian living and Tamil theological terminologies go back to the work done by Ziegenbalg, who planted the first Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church (TELC) in Tranquebar, South India.[90] In the early nineteen century, most of the Lutherans (TELC) who came to Malaysia brought with them their inherited traditions and symbolism. Tamil culture was still an important factor in the lives of Tamil Lutherans in Malaysia. Since they were a small minority of the population surrounded by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims with their own symbols, they gradually turned "inward." They sheltered themselves from "outside" forces and to large extent "recreated" symbols that had direct ties with their "mother-Church" (TELC) in India. This attitude was reflected in the symbols of the liturgical Tamil form of worship, the Gothic Church building (Zion Cathedral in Kuala Lumpur), the vestments, customs, the music and the organisational structures of the Church, and the general life of the ELCM. They were concerned about the internal matters of Church life that they thereby neglected the call to express the gospel to those of their own community (Tamils) outside the faith. It took several years for the ELCM to become identified within the indigenous cultural context of Malaysia. The ELCM has now increasingly taken efforts to indigenise and to contextualise the form of the gospel within the pluralistic Malaysian society. It is believed that unless this is continuously done the ELCM and the Lutheran community will continue to be regarded as a "foreign Church." So much symbolism evolves from the Malaysian language, art, architecture, music and literature. It is time that ELCM re-examines the appropriateness of many of its inherited symbols in order to replace them with local expressions that are more meaningful and helpful. Perhaps this will inspire Christians in Malaysia to make extra effort to appropriate cultural elements to develop worship and spirituality that is authentically native and

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[90]Solomon Rajah, "The Father of Tamil Lutherans: The Life and Work of Ziegenbalg, (1706-1719)," cited in *The Lutheran Herald: ELCM*, (July 1991), p. 1.

responsive to local sensibilities.[91] Below are some proposals for ELCM to explore and to express all artistic means in order to be a symbolic Lutheran Christian community within the Malaysian context. The proposed symbols are the writer's own views and not the official interpretation of the ELCM.

Symbolism in Worship

"Worship is something we do to honour God, let us bring our best to God. We cannot hold on to traditions rigidly all the time. We must be bold enough to transform in the areas of style and worship."[92] Currently western musical instruments such as electric guitars, keyboards, piano, organs and side-drums are used in worship services in most of the congregations in the ELCM. Perhaps it is time for ELCM to consider using traditional musical instruments in order to add Malaysian or Indian flavour to music (*isai* in Tamil) in the context of worship. Percussion musical instruments like *miruthangam* or *tabala* (Indian drums) could be introduced to accompany some of the melodious Tamil lyrics. Also string musical instruments like *veenai* or *sitar* could replace electric guitars. ELCM needs to encourage its members to be more innovative and creative. For example, local Malaysian folk or traditional songs could also be translated into the Tamil language with Christian meanings. At present most of the congregations in the ELCM use songs and lyrics composed by Christians in India. Traditional dance forms are not used by many of the congregations in the ELCM because they hold a view that these dance forms are attached with Hindu elements. As such only the so-called "tambourine dance" used by some of the "foreign" Churches is currently being used in some of the congregations of the ELCM. It is proposed that a Tamil folk dance like *kolattam* (a village-orientated dance with colourful sticks and simple circular movements) could replace the "tambourine dance" in the context of worship. The worship liturgy of the ELCM, which is adopted from the TELC, originated from the German Church. Though most of the "words" used in the liturgy con-

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[91]Ng Kam Weng, *Doing Responsive Theology in a Developing Nation*, (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: SUFES & KAIROS, 1994), p. 22.

[92]A Talk presented by Rev. Dr. Ezra Kok Hon Seng, "The Relevance of the Traditional Churches Today," at the Diocesan Assembly of the ELCM held in Setiawan, Perak (24 May 2002), cited in the *Minutes of the Diocesan Assembly of the ELCM*, Kuala Lumpur: ELCM, (24-26 May 2002), p. 2.

tains appropriate scriptural verses but the music and melody for "chanting" this liturgy is German in origin. At times this "chanting" alienates us from the Malaysian realities! It has become clear that ELCM needs to review and inculturalise the content and music of its worship liturgy in order to symbolise a "Malaysianised" identity.

Symbolism in Vestment

The decorative art forms in Malaysia include colourful *batik* cloth, pewter items and woodcarvings. Malaysia is known for its creation of *batik* designs. The use of *Batik* designs is a local resource material for making *sarongs* and has become the official national costume. For example, the Malaysian Airline System (MAS) has chosen *Batik* as the national representation of Malaysian culture and costume. One is encouraged to attend official functions in Malaysia in a *Batik* dress or shirt. It is proposed that the borders (lining) of the cassock worn by pastors of the ELCM be stitched with a *Batik* design. ELCM can also introduce the use of *Batik* stoles for its clergy. It symbolises *Kesetiaan* (loyalty) and *Perpaduan* (unity) symbolism to the national culture that Malaysia is now pursuing. The Holy Communion chalice, which is imported from overseas, must be reviewed by the ELCM. Malaysia is already promoting the use of pewter made out of tin, a natural resource mineral. The *Selangor* Pewter, a local internationally known company is manufacturing many types of drinking vessels. ELCM has not considered the use of this local resource. Some of the pewter is engraved with Malaysian countryside scenes. Anyone could place orders with the *Selangor* Pewter in terms of quantity and quality. It is proposed that ELCM start purchasing its chalices for Holy Communion locally. The symbol that could be designed and engraved is the *Bunga Raya* (hibiscus flower) which is the national flower of Malaysia. This symbol can be engraved on the pewter chalice. It symbolises the glory of God and at the same time it symbolises *Kesetiaan* (loyalty) and *Muhibbah* (goodwill).

Symbolism in Architecture

Most of the ELCM architectural structures are based on gothic design. Malaysia is not lacking in vision for this renewal. The external features of a Church may inspire non-believers to explore inside a Church building that reflects Malaysian features. It is proposed that the Church buildings in the future reflect the national styles, which have some Malaysian cultural features. Interior decorations of Churches could include

appropriate scriptural verses in *Bahasa* Malaysia. It is also proposed that a Malaysian *Kampung* (village building) structure and style be used if the government lifts the restrictions on Church buildings. The baptism font could be improvised to suit the Malaysian context. The ELCM is still using foreign and western models. It is proposed that the ELCM's baptism font in its congregations be replaced with the shape of a Malaysian *sampan* (a common fishing boat). A familiar sight and experience for the Malaysian people. The Church door symbols could be carved with a pair of banana plants bearing fruit on either side of the doors. The symbol of fruit bearing banana plant is identical to a fruit bearing Church in the Malaysian community. The banana plant or even palm trees in the Tamil context is suitable because most of the Malaysian Tamils use them as a "welcome" gesture. This attempt will encompass the symbol of *Perpaduan* (unity) in the context of Malaysia.

Emblem and Seal

The ELCM has adopted the *Emblem and Seal* from the Swedish Church. The *Emblem* shows a blue shield with a white crossed cross. Above the shield stands a mitre in white and gold. Behind are crossed keys and a stola in white and gold. The *Seal* has a fish shape with a crossed cross in the centre, a mitre at the top and the Luther rose at the bottom. It is proposed that ELCM rework its *Emblem and Seal* to symbolise its own cultural content within the Malaysian context.

The Symbolism of the Christmas Tree

Already Christians in Malaysia are bemoaning how the portrayal of Christmas and Easter is so western-oriented. The religious meaning of two festive occasions (that of the love and sacrifice of Christ) is ignored and replaced by a worldly and consumer-oriented emphasis. The manner in which Christmas and Easter is celebrated in Malaysia underlines the attraction of western cultural elements (in fact it is a tradition formed in Europe) to the Malaysian Church. It is time that ELCM re-examines this area. It is proposed that instead of having a pine tree as a Christmas tree decorated with cotton wool (resembling snow which we do not have in Malaysia) the congregations in the ELCM could replace it with a tropical plant like a banana tree or a palm tree. In most Malaysian Churches we find that plastic-made pine trees are kept and are brought out of the store once a year to be decorated as the Christmas tree. Then they stand there for the whole season right up to the Epiphany! Pine trees are difficult to

be found, unless one is willing to search in the hill-stations of Malaysia. Whereas banana plants or palm trees are easy to find, they grow in most of the Church members' gardens. The symbol behind the banana plant is "fruit-bearing." It is appropriate for Christmas season because banana plants or palm trees are used as decorations for all festive seasons by all races in Malaysia. It also exemplifies the symbol of *Muhibbah* (goodwill) in the Malaysian context.

Malaysian Art

The Malaysian Church must encourage its members to be creative. The artwork created by Asian artists is very impressive. For example, in the magazine entitled, *Image: Christ and Art in Asia*, a portrayal of one oil painting done on a canvas by a retired Roman Catholic priest in Malaysia on the theme of the parable of the pearl is seen.[93] This painting reflected a scene of typically Malaysian people, costumes and environment. It is proposed that ELCM challenges its members through encouraging art competitions, displaying of exhibitions and other means. It is a challenge to create a truly Malaysian form of art by employing evocative colours, shapes and symbols with localised motifs. ELCM must feel free to explore and to express itself in all artistic means. Both picture-makers and others must be encouraged. Local pastors must be challenged. It must become an important ministry to ELCM in order to add another dimension to Asian Christian artistic expressions.

A Concluding Note: The Symbol of the Blood of the Cross

The vast majority of Tamil Hindu migrants in Malaysia were from rural villages of Tamilnadu in south India. The early Tamil Hindu migrants in Malaysia brought with them their folk religion that assimilated regional village deities and practices. The focal point of this religion in its ritualistic worship is the practice of ritual slaughter of animals to the deities. Almost a century has passed since the early Tamil Hindu settlers arrived, but the practice of ritual slaughter in Malaysia persists among the present generation till today. Since ELCM is a Tamil oriented Church, mission work among the Tamil Hindus in Malaysia has been its priority; thus the symbol of blood in Malaysian folk Hinduism can become a point

[93] *Image: Christ and Art in Asia* 50, (March 1992), p. 7.

of contact for the communication of the gospel.[94] Blood sacrifice is understood as an efficacious ritual employed by Malaysian Tamils practising folk Hinduism in the context of their worship. The practice of blood sacrifice involves the ritual slaughter of goats, cockerels and pigs. These blood sacrifices are offered to the lesser deities either at temples or wayside shrines. The ritual of blood sacrifice is not confined to rural areas only, but it is practised in most towns and sub-urban centres in Malaysia.

In Christianity, the chief symbol of salvation is the cross. The cross has become the one universal symbol of salvation through Christ, emphasising both his death for the sins of the world and the new life he gives to people. One of the most recurring symbolic words in the Hindu sacrifice is the word "blood." It is simply understood that sacrifice to the deities involves blood. Without blood the ritual itself is impossible to comprehend. Blood makes sacrifice efficacious. Thus blood symbolises the nature of Hindu sacrifice. In the same way, the cross of Christ is simply understood by the Hindus as the symbol of the Christian faith. Though blood has a symbolic cultural reference to Hindu sacrifice, nevertheless it can still provide a bridge for communicating the symbol of the cross. The symbol of the cross signifies the atoning death of Christ and points to the blood of Christ, to physical substance that flowed from his body. The shedding of blood points to the offering of life for the believer for forgiveness of sins. The Hindus understand that blood contains life, and the life which is in the blood must be offered to appease the deities or must be drunk by the devotees (especially the priests) to gain power from the deities. Therefore, while the symbol of blood in Hindu sacrifice and in the cross does not convey the same meaning, they do carry similar ideas concerning blood as a symbolic principle of life and death. This symbolic principle finds unique expression in the sacrificial atonement of Christ. It is at this point that ELCM can begin communicating the gospel to Hindus practising folk Hinduism in Malaysia. In spite of the effectiveness achieved through evangelistic work carried among Tamil Hindus in the formative years of the ELCM, it should seriously consider the ritual of blood sacrifice as a vital vehicle and bridge for proclaiming the gospel meaningfully to Tamils practising folk Hinduism in Malaysia.

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[94]See Solomon Rajah, *Folk Hinduism: A Study on the practice of Blood Sacrifice in Peninsular Malaysia from a Christian Perspective*, (Manila: ATESEA, 2000), pp. 159-166.

It is hoped that the suggested models of symbolism in this article would enrich the message and ministry of the Churches in Malaysia. The subject on symbolism in visual arts is an ongoing study. To arrive at concrete conclusion may "kill" the artistic sensibilities! It is not an easy task to keep symbols "alive!" Traditionally the Hindus are a concern for the Malaysian Indian Churches only in terms of mission to bring them into the Christian fold. Such an understanding of the Christian mission needs to be critically reviewed in the light of the present realities in Malaysia. This study is a humble beginning to do theology and ministry within the Malaysian context.

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