

Borrowing symbols from my neighbor

It took only a few short weeks at seminary before learning many of the symbols and stories in the Bible were borrowed from other religions. From the Old Testament we have the Epic of Gilgamesh dealing with creation, while the early depiction of Jesus resembled the god of Apollo of the Greco-Roman world. Other symbols borrowed were water, wine, bread, dove, lamb, land and the cross. Even the symbol of the good shepherd came from the god of Hermes.

What set me back in my seat was learning the actual birth of Jesus did not occur on December 25th. Originally December 25th was a holiday for the pagans. Christians borrowed the pagan holiday hoping to destroy paganism.

We all live with different signs and symbols assisting us through life and through our faith. Every country, religion or fraternity have their own special signs or symbols. As Paul Tillich reminds me, signs are rather straightforward in their meaning while symbols are more complex, ambiguous. A sign points to itself, while a symbol points beyond itself.

For several months this Protestant will be protecting a statue of the Virgin Mary from any harm. For the Catholics the Virgin Mary is an avenue to God. She deepens their faith in God, points their way to Christ and fosters fellowship.

This retired Protestant minister chooses not to wear any crosses on a chain dangling from my neck nor paints a cross under my eyes might be shocked by my neighbors to see a 3' 9", one hundred fifty-pound statue of the Virgin Mary on my lawn. I too am a little surprised, but as a promise to my neighbor moving

back to Arkansas, I will protect the statue until spring when it can be properly placed on his wife's grave.

The neighbor's wife, Jean, passed away and I conducted a funeral for her on June 17, 2023. Jean never professed to call herself a Christian, she preferred to borrow ideas from many religions and philosophies. Positioned at the entrance to their home was the statue of the Virgin Mary, now in my caring protection.

Unlike a sign, a symbol points beyond itself to something greater. I am leery of many symbols. Especially the symbols being carelessly flown during the riots on Washington D.C. White nationalists were using Christian symbols to spread hate. Symbols like the Christian flag being carried while they attacked our nation. Or the symbol of Trump carrying a Bible while posing in front of an Episcopal church. The Bible was not even his own and he was standing in front of a very liberal church who didn't even support him.

Borrowing can be a good thing as long as we don't turn a symbol pointing outwards to a sign pointing only to ourselves as a way to dominate and to be exclusive.

Going back to the Virgin Mary. Yes, she is a great symbol for Catholics but for this plain protestant I will continue praying directly to God without any intermediary.

But who knows, maybe after a few months on my front lawn I might borrow her for my own spiritual life.



Sincerely,

A dyed- in- the- wool Protestant,

Dennis Siebert