

Queen Elizabeth II: *Defender of the Faith*

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Accidental turns of events, usually in the form of trauma, change personal lives for millions, but none more so than for Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor. Born into a life of extraordinary privilege in 1926, she was destined to turn privilege into a life of service following the abdication of her uncle and early death of her father: service to the people of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, service to the Commonwealth, and service to humanity at large.

Since her death, much has been written about the inequality of inherited wealth, the inappropriateness of dynasty, the cruelty of British colonisation, and the stealth and arrogance of Empire. Embracing truth in this critique is necessary for adjustment and right governance as Britain and the Commonwealth of Nations move forward into the testing global environment of the 21st century.

We are, however, all inheritors of the achievements and failures of the past. We can do nothing to change that. It is what we do with the situation we inherit that matters. Many commentators and critics of monarchy have held Queen Elizabeth accountable for what she inherited. She did indeed inherit a dying Empire, but she changed this structure of dominance, power and imposition into a Commonwealth of Nations with voluntary membership. The value of the Commonwealth to the 54 participating countries varies according to perceived shared values, history, culture, and partnerships. Becoming a republic has no bearing on Commonwealth membership.

She inherited extraordinary wealth, and her life was surrounded by much pomp and pageantry. However, within that environment she is reported to have lived simply (jam sandwiches) and to have abhorred waste. What is not acknowledged sufficiently is that the pomp and pageantry was not for her benefit but for the benefit of the people of Great Britain and their sense of culture and tradition. Charles III will need quickly to make it clear he understands this, for if he implies it is about himself, he will quickly lose the affection of the people.

She inherited the title *Defender of the Faith*. The way this title was conferred on Henry VIII by Pope Leo X for his pamphlet supporting the Pope and critiquing Martin Luther is bizarre. The title was later withdrawn but restored by parliament in 1554 and inherited by every subsequent monarch. Of course, in its conferring, the title had everything to do with Church politics, Reformation struggles, and a desire that Britain remain 'Protestant'.

But what did Elizabeth II do with the title, and why might its retention be vital in an increasingly secular and materialistic world?

The high point of the coronation ceremony, which for Elizabeth II occurred on 2 June 1953, is the anointing of the monarch with holy oil on the head, heart and hands by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Since the coronation of George III the anointing has been followed by a rendition of Handel's *Zadok the Priest*. The lyric begins: *Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king*.

In the Judaeo/Christian tradition prophet, priest, and king, are mutually interdependent and complementary roles. In the Christian tradition it is understood all three are fully present in Jesus.

Through the anointing, the monarch is indelibly linked to both priest and prophet. The role of priest is to be a channel of

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grace through his/her way of life and where necessary word; to lift people beyond the transient, material, and mundane to an awareness of God and the preciousness of life.

In an extraordinary manner, Elizabeth II has embraced this identity. She was clearly a woman of devout personal faith. It mattered a lot to her. Her Christmas messages were always thoughtfully constructed. The message was inclusive, insightful, focussed on generosity and forgiveness. In her travels she never failed to attend Sunday worship, insisting it be led by the local priest or minister, not a member of the Church's hierarchy.

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She was head of the Church of England with a mandate to appoint all senior positions. But as in politics, she appointed those commended to her. But more importantly, she understood her role to be one of encouragement of faith as a cornerstone element of human life, as it was to her. This became more important with the growth of multi-faith multi-culturalism in Britain and the Commonwealth. She would perhaps have agreed with the Dalai Lama who, when asked which the best religion was, replied: "the one that does you most good"!

The role of prophet is to act for, and speak courageously about, justice and righteousness in human affairs. Because those who act prophetically are perceived to be interfering with politics, this role is awkward for a sovereign. Nevertheless, one can hopefully assume that Elizabeth II adopted this role in her weekly meetings with Prime Ministers. The modernising of the monarchy which she began, and which must continue under Charles III, should be motivated by a desire to exemplify righteousness and justice in personal and private life.

We understand the coronation of Charles III is to be 'modernised'. This is a good thing, but it will be interesting to see how modernising is interpreted. Stripped of its spiritual dimension, monarchy would be hard to justify or sustain.

Britain, the Commonwealth, and the world have every reason to be deeply grateful for the life, service and sacrifice of Elizabeth II. We may indeed not see the like of her again. That she was deeply respected and admired is beyond dispute. Is it too much to ask a secular and materialistic world why? The answer is probably too challenging. It was because she was deeply a woman of faith committed to the role of service which had become her lot.



Lowitja Lois O'Donahue Smart AC, CBE, DSG, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Bishop George Browning at the ACC&C, 21 March 2000, photo supplied



Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Senator Margaret Reid, Governor-General Sir William Deane, Lowitja Lois O'Donahue Smart AC, CBE, DSG, Bishop George Browning, photo supplied



The Funeral of Queen Elizabeth II: The Power of Symbols

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One television narrator of the royal funeral sagely said: 'I will not interrupt the ritual by speaking further. I will let the symbols, such as the crown, orb, massed uniforms, silences, of this sacred ritual speak for themselves.' Why was he so wise? Simply because he had grasped the nature and power of symbols. And the symbols *did* speak for themselves.

Why are symbols important?¹ Symbols are as important to us as water is to fish. Without symbols we simply cannot converse with one another. In fact, we are in chaos! Symbols shape what we buy, the television programs we choose to enjoy, our responses to world events, our face-to-face communications, even our sense of identity. As Westerners we may like to think of ourselves as distinctly individualistic. We proudly choose the way we dress, even the car we drive, in order to show our distinctive identity, but however outrageous our efforts society does set symbolic limits to attempts to be unique. We are still expressing ourselves through symbols that are intelligible to society, otherwise we simply could not communicate.²

A symbol then is any reality that by its very dynamism or power leads to (that is, makes one think about, imagine, get into contact with, or reach out to) another deeper (and often mysterious) reality through a sharing in the dynamism that the symbol itself offers (and not merely by verbal or additional explanations).

Qualities

There are three fundamental qualities to any symbol: the meaning, the emotive and the directive. The meaning aspect is its *cognitive* quality; the symbol makes a statement about something that the mind is able to grasp. Second, a symbol has an *emotive* quality because it is able to touch the hearts and imaginations of people evoking positive or negative feelings. The emotive quality of a symbol is thus able to *re-present* the object. At the sight of the coat-of-arms of my Cambridge college I *re-live* the past positive experience of student days. Thirdly, a symbol has a *directive* quality. As a result of its cognitive and emotional impact I am directed to act in certain ways.

There are also other qualities of symbols.³ Symbols are said to be *multivocal*, that is they gather many meanings over time. Take Queen Elizabeth's coffin. It would have evoked a multiplicity of different meanings for people. Another quality is their *timelessness*. I had to think very hard in order to date the year of Elizabeth's coronation but it is still vivid in my memory. Because of their emotive quality, symbols have the ability to command the allegiance of people over a long period. Consider the example of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address. Although it was delivered in 1863, it continues as a symbol of freedom to evoke powerful patriotic reactions among Americans.

A symbol also has the quality of polarity; it is able to evoke opposite meanings at the same time. The royal coffin symbolised the death of the Queen but it also symbolised her life of decades of dedicated service.

Sometimes symbols are described as models *of* and models *for*. The former describes clusters of symbols that convey the way things are, the latter indicates the ways people are expected to behave. Sometimes the same symbols have this twofold function. The men's suits on sale in the shop window symbolise what is stylistically acceptable today, but they are also endeavouring to convey a message to me personally that I must follow today's styles if I am to be socially acceptable.

In summary, the effect of symbolic action is emotionally experienced meaning. Signs are concerned about visible and quantifiable experience, but symbols seek to draw us beyond the observable to a higher experiential, even transcendent level of knowledge.

Interpreting symbols

Symbols possess a density of meaning that words alone often cannot encapsulate. Consider how many people were lost for words when asked to express how they felt about the loss of Queen Elizabeth. Or consider the power of periods of silence during the ritual. It would be quite impossible to put into words alone the layer upon layer of meanings conveyed by the powerful symbols of the funeral.⁴

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1. See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

2. See Joy Hendry, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology: Sharing our Worlds* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 93-109.

3. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection*, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 36-58.

4. See Janine Roberts, *Setting the Frame: Definition, Functions, and Typology of Rituals*, in *Rituals in Families and Family Therapy*, eds. Evan Imber-Black, Janine Roberts, and Richard A. Whiting (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 22-23.

As symbols are cultural constructs, it is rare that any symbol is able to have a universally recognised meaning. A ring, for example, may indicate symbolically steadfast dedication when placed on the finger of a bride in a Western marriage ceremony, but among the Bangwa of the Republic of Cameroon a ring on the ankle of a woman shows that she has been a slave. A symbol, therefore, can only be interpreted when viewed in relation to other symbols that form part of the same culture.⁵

Thus the problems of an interpretation of others' interpretations are immense.⁶ Little wonder that anthropologist Clifford Geertz candidly warns:

'Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.'⁷ If we want to understand the meanings of other people's symbols we must be prepared to spend significant time listening and questioning. Even then we may misinterpret their meanings.

5. See Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 40.

6. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 18.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.