„Break on Through to the Other Side“: The Symbols of Creation and Resurrection/Salvation in Jim Morrison. Theological Explorations

Mgr. Pavol Bargár, M.St., Th.D.

Abstract:
Although scholarship in many disciplines has paid much attention to the life and work of the American poet and vocalist of the band „The Doors“, Jim Morrison (1943-1971), virtually no contributions to this topic have been made from a theological perspective. The submitted paper will seek to fill this lacuna at least to some extent. It explores the symbols of creation and resurrection/salvation as they appear in some of Morrison’s poems and lyrics. The paper will aim to argue that even though these symbols can have different meanings in Morrison and Christianity, respectively – and the latter ought to be in no way overlooked, much less leveled out – for Christian theology it is most helpful and refreshing to also engage in dialog with authors and ideas which are apparently non-Christian or even anti-Christian.

Keywords:
Symbol, Jim Morrison (1943-1971), Imagination, Theology and culture, Creativity

1. Introduction

Even more than four decades after his untimely death, Jim Morrison (1943-1971), lead singer of the band The Doors, continues to be one of the most influential characters in the history of rock music, attracting the worldwide attention of people across cultures and age groups. However, it would be a mistake to view Morrison as a musician only as he also left a significant mark as a poet. Tony Magistrale, for instance, argues that „the lyrical verse of

---

1 The present paper is a part of the research project „Myth as a Means of Expression of Narrative Theology“, GAČR P401/14-22950P. The author is grateful to the Czech Science Foundation (GACR) for their kind support.
Jim Morrison [represents] the Doors’ real contribution to rock history.\textsuperscript{2} Although there are others who are more critical in their reception of his poetry,\textsuperscript{3} it is beyond any doubt that Morrison has come to acquire a certain mythical quality to his person; indeed, he has become a myth himself.\textsuperscript{4} However, the concept „myth“ is related to the figure of Jim Morrison in yet another way as, to use the words of Magistrale once again, „[a]bove all poetic considerations, however, Morrison was interested in creating a new mythology appropriate to an age no longer heroic and out of touch with the natural world.“\textsuperscript{5}

It is precisely this „mythology“ that will be of interest in this paper. The present paper draws from the concept of myth understood as a dynamic interplay between a narrative and symbols. Symbols are not static; they acquire new meanings depending on a context which is provided by a narrative. In this paper, two particular symbols from Morrison’s poems and lyrics will be discussed, namely, creation and resurrection/salvation. Even though Morrison’s oeuvre includes plenty of symbols which could be fruitfully explored and interpreted, the reason for choosing these two specific ones is first and foremost the emphasis Morrison seems to put throughout his work on the dialectics of the old and the new as well as on the role of and need for a radical transformation in the life of both individual humans and society. Morrison expressed it very succinctly, yet unambiguously in a 1967 interview when he said:

„First you have to have the period of disorder, chaos, returning to a primeval disaster region. Out of that you purify the elements and find a new seed of life, which transforms all life and all matter and the personality until finally, hopefully, you emerge and marry all those dualisms and opposites. Then you’re not talking about evil and good anymore but something unified and pure. Our music and personalities are still in a state of chaos and disorder with maybe an incipient element of purity kind of starting.\textsuperscript{6}"

It is precisely the symbols of creation and resurrection/salvation, respectively, that seem to capture this artistic intention most adequately. Moreover, it is important for the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Tony Magistrale, „Wild Child: Jim Morrison’s Poetic Journeys,“ \textit{Journal of Popular Culture} 26, no. 2 (1992): 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Magistrale, „Wild Child,“ 134-135.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman, \textit{No One Here Gets Out Alive} (London: Plexus, 1980), 143.
\end{itemize}

137
intention of this paper that these symbols are to be found both in Christianity and in Morrison’s oeuvre.

The material used for analysis in this paper comes from two main areas. First, it is taken from the lyrics written by Morrison for his band The Doors. In particular, all of The Doors’ albums recorded during Morrison’s lifetime were considered, namely, „The Doors“ (1967), „Strange Days“ (1967), „Waiting for the Sun“ (1968), „The Soft Parade“ (1969), „Morrison Hotel“ (1970), and „L. A. Woman“ (1971). In addition, a posthumously recorded album, „An American Prayer“ (1978), is considered as it consists of lyrics, poetry, and stories authored by Morrison and accompanied by the remaining The Doors’ music. Second, Morrison’s poetry published in book form has also been considered for the purposes of this paper. This includes „The Lords and the New Creatures“ (1985), „Wilderness: The Lost Writings of Jim Morrison, Vol. I“ (1988), and „The American Night: The Lost Writings of Jim Morrison, Vol. II“ (1990).

While Morrison’s life and work has received relatively much scholarly attention, virtually no contribution has been made from a theological perspective. This paper seeks to fill this lacuna. It will seek to argue and demonstrate that Morrison’s work represents useful material for theological reflection, offering a new and challenging perspective on issues, which are at the heart of the Christian faith. There is no legitimate base for maintaining a position that Morrison was a Christian author. This paper therefore does not seek to „baptize“ his oeuvre. However, it does not want to go the path of merely using Morrison’s person and work as a contrast background for showing stark differences between his position and the Christian faith, either. Instead, the present paper follows the approach trod by Gordon Lynch in his project of interpreting popular culture from a theological perspective. Lynch convincingly argues that popular culture can represent material for theological reflection: „Using popular culture as a medium for theological reflection can also provide an important means of exploring essential questions about our

---

7 It is important to note that in this paper only those songs of The Doors are considered which lyrics were written by Jim Morrison himself.
8 The two other The Doors’ albums recorded after Morrison’s death, „Other Voices“ (1971) and „Full Circle“ (1972), were not considered as they do not include any material authored by Jim Morrison.
existence in ways that connect with symbols, concepts, and concerns of contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{10} Such an exploration is what this paper seeks to pursue.

2. Creation
The scholarship has widely recognized the influence of the English Romantic poet, William Blake, on Morrison’s understanding of imagination.\textsuperscript{11} At this point we will discuss one specific aspect of this legacy. In particular, for both Blake and Morrison imagination is a way how one creates one’s own reality, freed from any limits others might wish to impose on it. The lyrics of the first The Doors’ hit single, „Break On Through (to the Other Side)” (1967) illustrates the point:

\begin{verbatim}
„You know the day destroys the night
Night divides the day
Tried to run
Tried to hide
Break on through to the other side
Break on through to the other side
Break on through to the other side, yeah“\textsuperscript{12}
\end{verbatim}

Although Morrison is aware of the fact that there are necessities of life that one cannot escape either by „running“ or „hiding“ from (i.e. the day-and-night cycle), one can use the power of one’s imagination to „break on through to the other side“, i.e. to a reality which is completely under one’s control. Such „breaking on through“ frees one from a shallow existence of „chasing [after one’s] pleasures“ and „digging [one’s supposed] treasures“, leading one to an imaginative recollection of „times we cried“, i.e. to a more authentic mode of existence.\textsuperscript{13} In another poem-song, „An American Prayer“ (1970), Morrison invites the reader/listener to consider the following:

\begin{verbatim}
Contra Erkel (cf. Erkel, „The Poet behind the Doors,” 31-32) I would, however, argue that „found[ing] an island in your arms / A country in your eyes“ refers to a potential deception one can suffer from when relying utterly on another person instead of one’s own abilities (cf. „Arms that chained us / Eyes that lied“). Therefore, to my mind, imagination has also another quality – that of unmasking false and/or restrictive realities.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{10} Gordon Lynch, \textit{Understanding Theology and Popular Culture} (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 42.
\textsuperscript{11} See a detailed discussion in Erkel, „The Poet behind the Doors,“ 9-28.
\textsuperscript{13} Contra Erkel (cf. Erkel, „The Poet behind the Doors,“ 31-32) I would, however, argue that „found[ing] an island in your arms / A country in your eyes“ refers to a potential deception one can suffer from when relying utterly on another person instead of one’s own abilities (cf. „Arms that chained us / Eyes that lied“). Therefore, to my mind, imagination has also another quality – that of unmasking false and/or restrictive realities.
Only those who are aware of their own existence, who are „alive“, are able to make an imaginative journey of „reinvent[ing] the gods [...] myths“ and of „celebrat[ing] symbols“. These gods, myths and symbols refer to the roots of existence of individuals as well as a society. It is noteworthy that Morrison does not speak of inventing, but rather of reinventing. Throughout his oeuvre, Morrison was a stern critic of the contemporary mainline society with its conformist and shallow existence. According to Morrison, that society had become alienated from its true roots, and had lost „its spirit“. The above cited poem thus suggests that Morrison was interested in rediscovering and reclaiming these roots. There are some foundations to build upon; however, these need to be liberated and reconstructed. Another one of Morrison’s poems, „Original Temptation“ can be of help in this regard as a poetic expression of his program:

„To screw things up.
To bring Things
into being.“15

These verses suggestively evoke the same idea that Morrison expressed in the already cited 1967 interview, when describing The Doors’ artistic endeavor. Due to its crucial significance, let us refer to the passage in question once more:

„First you have to have the period of disorder, chaos, returning to a primeval disaster region. Out of that you purify the elements and find a new seed of life, which transforms all life and all matter and the personality until finally, hopefully, you emerge and marry all those dualisms and opposites. Then you’re

not talking about evil and good anymore but something unified and pure. Our music and personalities are still in a state of chaos and disorder with maybe an incipient element of purity kind of starting."

It can be very convincingly argued that Morrison in the aforementioned words addressed the issue of what he saw as America’s need of rebirth, „redemption from the narrow, bureaucratic rationality that led to Vietnam and global pollution.“ This idea finds its emphatic expression in yet another, arguably the most famous Morrison’s text, „The End“ (1967):

„Can you picture what will be
So limitless and free
Desperately in need...of some...stranger's hand
In a...desperate land"

The poet suggests that in the „desperate land“ of contemporary capitalist and consumerist societies there is a „desperate need“ of a „limitless and free“ act of imagination. Nevertheless, the outlined artistic (and, really, political) agenda has broader implications. To turn our attention to „An American Prayer“ once again:

„We can invent Kingdoms of our own
Grand purple thrones, those chairs of lust"

Interestingly, unlike in the first passage quoted from this poem, here, several verses further ahead, Morrison does not speak of reinventing, but of inventing. It is significant and logical as here focus is not so much on searching for one’s roots, but rather on creating one’s own authentic works (“Kingdoms of our own”), works which are hardly to be found in the mundane reality due to their beauty and splendor (“Grand purple thrones”). The poem does not suggest that it would be due to special powers that

16 Hopkins and Sugerman, No One Here Gets Out Alive, 143.
19 Morrison, „An American Prayer.“
20 Erkel argues convincingly that it is not because of the use of drugs, either, contrary to the argument of Prochnicky and Riordan. Cf. Erkel, „The Poet behind the Doors,” 36-39; and Jerry Prochnicky and James
Morrison is capable of doing this. To the contrary, the creation of „Kingdoms“, „grand purple thrones“ and other new realms is within the reach of every human being thanks to his or her imagination. As Stephen Erkel puts it, „Thus, like Morrison, his readers can free themselves from what he considers ‘their limited existence’, and create and re-create their ‘own Kingdom’ through their imagination.”

There is one more aspect which deserves attention in this discussion. Although Erkel argues quite convincingly that Morrison strives to live in a world that would not be created by another entity, lest he be completely free, there is a line in „An American Prayer“ which allows for the possibility of the creator motif in Morrison’s work:

„O great creator of being grant us one more hour to perform our art & perfect our lives.”

This line suggests that Morrison does not disregard the idea of the Creator of being, of everything there is. However, the existence of such a Creator does not and should not diminish the role humans play in „perfecting their lives“ and creating their own realities.

3. Resurrection/salvation
When discussing the symbol of resurrection one is easily led to conclude that Morrison disapproves of any idea thereof. For instance, Coupe maintains that Morrison „rejects the Christian way, understood as life-negation.” To support his claim, Coupe refers to „When the Music’s Over“ (1967), where one line reads: „Cancel my subscription to the Resurrection“. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to argue that the symbols of resurrection and salvation play an important role for Morrison, albeit their meanings might be perhaps unusual on the surface. For instance, Christopher Crenshaw offers an interpretation of the song „The Unknown Soldier“ (1968) which is very illustrative in this regard:

---

21 Erkel, „The Poet behind the Doors,“ 39.
22 Morrison, „An American Prayer.“
23 Coupe, Myth, 55.
"After the eponymous Unknown Soldier is ‘executed’ in a dramatic martial interlude, the song repeats the subdued tone. ‘Make a grave for the unknown soldier / Nestled in your hollow shoulder,’ Morrison nearly whispers over the ethereal organ before repeating the chorus and taking the song out in a triumphant cacophony with cheering crowds and shouts of joy. The dramatic confrontation with fear and pain — indeed, the death of the ‘unknown’ — in the song leads the listener to a climax of ecstatic release."

This is a fascinating example of a poetic, even theatrical representation of the dialectics of death and life. While the song can certainly be interpreted literally as a protest against the execution of an ‘unknown soldier’ and, more generally, against the logic which leads the society to war, Crenshaw’s suggestion to read the lyrics symbolically as ‘the death of the ‘unknown’’ and of ‘fear and pain’ related therewith discloses another possible meaning. The ecstatic jubilation then stands for a symbol of the resurrection of a new consciousness, freed of the fear from the unknown and ready to embrace new realms of life. There is thus a close proximity between such a resurrected consciousness and freed human imagination, capable of creating one’s own reality, as we showed above. For Morrison, similarly to Blake, imagination therefore becomes a means of liberation from any outward oppression. Erkel provides some helpful insights in this regard:

"In his early work, Morrison argues that the human imagination could free men and women from what he saw as their societal oppression and allow them to become the creators of their self-images, as well as their external reality. Indeed, instead of perceiving the world based upon the edicts of the government, school, parents, our five senses, and religion, Morrison argues that we have the potential to manifest a world within our imagination, free from external influence, oppression, or dictation. For Morrison, liberation can only be achieved if individuals free their minds from any exterior influence. Morrison, like Blake, uncompromisingly insisted that if people are subject to influences outside of themselves, they could not be considered free, as their lives are still subject to dictation and pressures created outside of themselves."
One can therefore legitimately argue that for Morrison the symbol of the resurrected human consciousness or human self is closely related to liberation from social oppression and to authentic creativity. Tony Magistrale concurs with this claim when he argues that Morrison’s work “centers primarily upon transformation of spirit”. Magistrale goes into a greater detail to explain what he has in mind:

„Morrison was committed to the value of change in all of its manifestations [...] But Morrison clearly believed that the basis for any lasting political action had first to emerge from the within the individual. [...] The individual is at the center of Morrison’s politics and poetics; the enlightened self carries the guidance of the godhead. Thus, like Emerson and Thoreau, [...] Morrison’s poetry and lyrics emphasize the importance of transcendence: from the progressive nucleus of the self, expansion outward toward other transformative states of being is infinite and natural.”

For Morrison the symbol of resurrection thus implies transformation in a broader sense; not only transformation of the inner self-leading to a fuller life, but also social and political transformation. However, transformation always begins within the individual, and only then can the external reality be changed. In one interview Morrison explicitly voiced this conviction when he was arguing that a personal revolution, on an individual level, must come first; only then can a political revolution follow. A personal revolution can only take place, to Morrison’s mind, by facing the fear of the unknown, in order to „be what you really are.“

There is another intriguing aspect of Morrison’s poetic work that we should like to discuss here. Not explicitly related to the symbol of resurrection, it is, however, of relevance for a reflection focused on the motif of salvation. Analyzing songs such as „Moonlight Drive“ and „Riders on the Storm“, Tony Magistrale observed and came to argue that, for Morrison, women represent a way of salvation:

„Against the threatening chaos of the world, the women in Morrison’s lyrics and poems are both inspiration and salvation; as evinced in ‘Moonlight Drive’,

---

28 Magistrale, „Wild Child,” 143.
29 Cited according to Crenshaw, „Five to One,” 11, note 63. Although Morrison uses the terminology of revolution instead of transformation, the thrust of the argument is the same.
the sexual bond is analogous to the visionary quest itself – one more avenue to transport the poet beyond this world and toward idyllic perfection.  

Let us consider in turn the first and third stanzas of „Riders on the Storm“ (1971):

„Riders on the storm
   Riders on the storm
   Into this house we’re born
   Into this world we’re thrown
   Like a dog without a bone
   An actor out on loan
   Riders on the storm

   Girl, you gotta love your man
   Girl, you gotta love your man
   Take him by the hand
   Make him understand
   The world on you depends
   Our life will never end
   Gotta love your man, yeah”

The first stanza compares human existence to a ride on the storm – it is unstable, unpredictable and apparently meaningless. The text represents an existential lament over human life. It very starkly gives an expression to the human condition of „thrownness“ into existence in this world. The images of „a dog without a bone“ and of „an actor out on loan“ illustrate the desperate character of this situation.

However, in the third stanza Morrison tries to offer a solution by calling for love of a woman (girl) „as kind of light amidst encroaching darkness“. Indeed, the love of a woman seems to be regarded as a means for a man to find a meaning of his existence. Magistrale goes even further when he says that Morrison views „the love of a woman as a means for the soul’s survival. [...] Therefore,] the constancy of love between a man and a

30 Magistrale, „Wild Child,” 139.
32 Cf. Magistrale, „Wild Child,” 139.
33 Magistrale, „Wild Child,” 140.
woman [...] is a last sanctuary against the storm of madness raging in the world.”34 This love is described as a foundation on which the world as such – not only the reality of the couple in love! – depends. Moreover, it is introduced as a power capable of transcending the boundaries of human earthly existence as the life of those who are in love will „never end“.

Morrison’s understanding of salvation represents a most interesting complement to his concept of resurrection. While the latter, in Morrison’s interpretation, seems to depend on the power of human imagination alone as the resurrected self/consciousness is freed from fear and any external limits and ready to be involved in creating one’s own reality precisely because of the human imagination of that particular individual, the former, to the contrary, is introduced as a gift endowed to a particular individual by the power of love of another human being. Therefore, salvation, as Morrison seems to maintain, is something one can never deserve; it always comes as a gift.

4. What does a theologian have to do with this? Some theological implications

The present paper has so far explored two particular symbols in selected poems and song lyrics by Jim Morrison. The argument of the paper is that popular culture can represent useful material for theological reflection which can provide new insights and approaches to the exploration of theologically relevant questions and themes. The remaining part of this paper will undertake such an exploration in an attempt to outline several theological implications with the conviction that the above discussed symbols of creation and resurrection/salvation as used by Morrison (and interpreted by us) can inform our theological discussion.

Morrison’s understanding of creation and of the role of imagination in the creative process has several theologically relevant ramifications. First, it relates to the biblical doctrine of the creation of human in the image of God. As such, humans are called to continue with and to participate in God’s creative activity in the world. In a certain sense following Bonhoeffer’s line of thought, Morrison radicalizes this mandate when he explores what it means for human to be a creator in the situation „etsi Deus non daretur“, as if there were no God. Such a position has, of course, its ethical implications. The reflection can include explorations of the Christian responsibility for ongoing creation in

34 Magistrale, „Wild Child,” 139 and 140.
the light of the question whether individual Christians' behavior would remain the same had there been no „grand plan“ and no „eternal reward“.

Second, Morrison was first and foremost interested in using his creative faculties to pursue personal liberation from any external limitations. Christians can, however, reasonably explore in what sense creating non-oppressive structures in this world represents part of their divine call to be creators. Moreover, another issue worth pursuing is the question of possible collaboration between Christians and non-Christians in efforts to create such non-oppressive conditions.

Third, it could be argued theologically that it is first and foremost imagination which represents the core of human createdness in the image of God; like their Creator, humans are also called to be (sub-)creators through their ideas, words, and actions. In other words, humans represent the ‘imago Dei’ because they are endowed with imagination, just like their Creator, the great Artist and Designer of this world. When reflecting on the role of human imagination in Morrison, it seems to be helpful to read this author in the light of C. S. Lewis’ thoughts about imagination. According to Lewis, human imagination does not create a meaning or a reality, but rather discovers it by referring to the Foundation or Source of all reality. To the contrary, as we have seen, Morrison is convinced that imagination provides people with an ability to create a new, authentic reality. His position thus represents an impulse to a theological discussion on the role of humans in the doctrine of ‘creatio ex nihilo’, exploring (im)possibilities of humans creating „something out of nothing“.

In the next part of this paper we have discussed Morrison’s use of the symbols of resurrection and salvation. This discussion can also inform theological reflection in several respects. First, drawing from Morrison’s rendition of resurrection as the death of the unknown and the resurrection of a liberated human self, a theologian can fruitfully reflect on the adequacy of the term „sin“ in expressing the aforementioned event. In other words, the theologian can investigate in what sense it is (i)relevant to speak of sin when describing the situation of the estrangement of the human from his or her destiny to be a free and creative individual.

---


Second, another line of reflection might explore the relevance of thinking about the implications of the Resurrection for human earthly existence as it can be legitimately argued that this event ought not to be limited to the hereafter. Moreover, there could also be a fruitful discussion on the relation of the symbol of resurrection to the life of each individual human being.

And finally, third, Morrison’s idea of love between two people as a means of salvation can inform a discussion on the relationship between what in theology has traditionally come to be designated as „agape“ and „eros“. Human love can be explored as a power that enables transcending limitations and challenges of earthly life. Furthermore, the notion of human existence fathomed as a gift and made meaningful thanks to the love of the other is something that relates very well with traditional Christian doctrine and provides space for some new insights informed by the fact that „the other“ in such a love relationship does not necessarily have to be the Divine.

Kontakt na autora:
Mgr. Pavol Bargár, M.St., Th.D.
Evangelická teologická fakulta
Univerzita Karlova
Černá 9
11555 Praha 1
Česká republika
Email: bargarp@yahoo.com

Peer reviewed by:
doc. Mgr. Ondrej Prostredník, PhD.
Mgr. Adriána Biela, PhD.

[Published online December 18, 2017]