Duality, Border, and Transcendence: The Concept of Boundary in Twentieth-Century Religious Scholarship

Religion 101: Introduction to Religion

20 March 2009
Seated among the red bricks of Hopkins Hall, the orange bricks of Griffin Hall, and a green, grassy lawn, Thompson Memorial Chapel stands out on the Williams College campus not only because of its limestone exterior, nor merely because of its eighty-foot tower. Compared with its neighbors, in which professors lecture about history, philosophy, logic, and reason, it represents a bastion of religion in a primarily secular environment. Tall and thick, its imposing wooden doors emphasize this dichotomy. Clearly, the space in which worshippers attend holiday services is qualitatively different from that on which students read novels, play Frisbee, and sunbathe, if not for the students than at least for the worshippers. However, the chapel's doorjambs send a different and, indeed, opposite message: splayed out like a funnel, they draw passersby towards the doors. Instead of distinguishing the religious from the secular, they proclaim the mutual inclusiveness of the two worlds. Thus, the chapel's portal not only separates but also encourages passage between the church and the classroom.

In its simultaneous rigidity and permeability, Thompson Memorial Chapel corresponds to Mircea Eliade's concept of churches. In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, he describes a church's portal as a both divisive and engaging border between the religious and the secular: "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible." Like Eliade's threshold, the chapel's portal is a boundary between the sacredness of the church and the profaneness of the classroom that nonetheless encourages passage. However, his notion of boundary is by no means limited to churches, nor is it the only one that scholars of religion champion. More the work of a psychologist than that of a religious scholar, Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id* nonetheless challenges Eliade's belief that "the sacred is pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity" in its focus on the realness of the external world and its profane stimuli. In "What We
Do When We Believe,” Michel de Certeau depicts the limit between humans and gods as an abstract “contract,” not a concrete “hierophany” in which a rock, a tree, or a lake becomes suddenly imbued with the sacred. And the assertion in Victor Turner’s The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure that “each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communitas, and to states and transitions” goes against the claim that religious man “desire[s] to live in the sacred” and would “be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of [the] purely subjective experiences” of the profane. Though certainly significant, these assaults on the natures of the sacred and the profane, the limit separating these two worlds, and communication between them—the three most crucial aspects of Eliade’s threshold—nevertheless should not cloud the overarching similarities among these four and other scholars’ ideas of boundary. Indeed, despite its many permutations, this conception appears in almost every system of religion as a passable line between two opposing entities. As such, it is one of the most diverse and crucial subjects in the study of religion.

As Eliade sees the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane as primary and necessary to the development of religion, it offers an effective starting point for an analysis of boundary; however, Émile Durkheim offered the first variation of the concept of two opposing entities in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, published fifty-six years before Eliade’s book. In this study of totemism, he compares the mental states of isolated humans with those of humans in society, equating the former with the profane and the latter with the sacred. In doing so, he introduces a dichotomous religious system based on individuals’ perceptions but requiring social interaction to be fully experienced. For him, religious belief originates from and is best explained by respectful social interaction: “Society in general, simply by its effect on men’s minds, undoubtedly has all that is required to arouse the sensation of the divine.” In other words, neither totemism nor Islam results from an otherworldly spirit’s decision to grace humanity with its presence; instead, Hinduism, Christianity, and all other religions stem from the powerful effects of communal activity on humans’
Moreover, the sacred does not and cannot predate the profane, for the existence of isolated individuals is a necessary condition for their coming together into groups. As Durkheim states, “the world of the religious is not a special aspect of empirical nature: It is superimposed upon nature.” Put differently, the sacred is an ideal add-on to profane reality. Thus, many religions are based on false premises: for example, God did not create the world, and he does not interact with its occupants. However, the effect they have had on billions of adherents over the centuries is very true. In short, religious belief is a “delusion,” neither fully false nor fully real. The force that people have perceived as divine since the days of totemism has its actual root in society’s profound impact on individual humans’ psychologies.

Although Durkheim’s scholarship clearly influenced Eliade’s concept of the sacred-profane dichotomy, the later scholar differs from his predecessor in his insistence on the primacy and superiority of the sacred to the profane as well as the transhuman nature of its source. To him, the sacred is crucial to nature’s existence, not superimposed upon it. In fact, its manifestation “ontologically founds the world.” Contrary to Durkheim’s concept, in other words, the sacred is reality and the profane, “nonreality.” The Vedic ritual for claiming a territory further explains the reality of the sacred and the nonreality of the profane. During it, worshippers erect a fire altar, consecrate it to the god Agni, and in doing so repeat the Creation on a much smaller scale. In these actions, they equate the fire altar with the world and the sacred with the real. This ritual also highlights Eliade’s second departure from Durkheim’s theory of the sacred and the profane; the later scholar, the sacred does not result from society’s effect on individuals’ minds but instead has a source wholly external to the human experience. Indeed, the world—and therefore reality, religious feelings, and the sacred—“is a cosmos…because, in one way or another, it is the work of the gods or in communication with the world of the gods.” Thus, Eliade’s conception of two opposing entities is significantly different from Durkheim’s, even though he holds onto the structure and
language of his predecessor’s notion of the sacred-profane dichotomy. In his opinion, one cannot explain this dichotomy’s origin socially or psychologically. Although he does not define a particular God or group of gods, he maintains the existence of an otherworldly spirit that stands separate from humanity and manifests itself in hierophanies.

By no means religiously minded, Freud champions a worldview quite different from those of Durkheim and Eliade; nonetheless, one can draw several parallels between his theory of the human mind and the two religious scholars’ differing concepts of society and the individual and the sacred and the profane. Primarily a psychologist, he interprets the world from the viewpoint of the individual: to him, human life is a never-ending struggle between the passions of the unconscious id and the reason of the conscious ego. Given his further belief that the ego “has been modified by the direct influence of the external world,” a clear dichotomy between the internal and external worlds emerges in his thinking: “Moreover, the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id.”

This internal-external dichotomy is not religious in nature, but it is similar to the sacred-profane dichotomies of Durkheim and Eliade in two other ways. First, Freud sees the external world as real—it operates on the reality principle—and the internal world as nonreal—it is the realm of the pleasure principle. Second, the relationship between these two worlds raises the issue of primacy. In Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics, he describes a group of brothers who “killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde” after he had driven them out of the clan. In Freud’s opinion, this primordial crime founded totemism and all later religious beliefs and still holds sway in the depths of every individual’s unconscious. As a result, the external world and its events predate and influence the id. In Freud’s, Eliade’s, and Durkheim’s conceptions of two opposing entities, in other words, the real
one is also the primary one. However, the most important similarity among these conceptions
concerns neither reality nor primacy. Despite their clear dissimilarities, the society-individual,
sacred-profane, and external-internal dichotomies all necessitate some sort of line between their
fundamentally contrary forces. Thus, though widely various, the notion of two opposing entities is a
crucial, first step in understanding boundary.

Quite obviously, the line that separates the two opposing entities of Durkheim’s, Eliade’s,
Freud’s, and other scholars’ religious systems is also critical to an understanding of boundary.
Because of its long-standing influence, Durkheim’s interpretation of totemism most effectively
introduces this line. In his study of primitive religious belief, he identifies a clan’s totem—a plant or
animal to which members attribute an otherwise mysterious force—as the frontier between society
and individuals. Although the flag is a relatively modern construct, his description of its unifying
power perhaps best illustrates this characteristic of the totem. It is not merely a multicolored, fabric
rectangle; instead, it is a link between a national and his nation: “The soldier who dies for his flag
dies for his country, but the idea of the flag is actually in the foreground of his consciousness.”
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Only through his flag’s concreteness can the solider comprehend the abstract principles, beliefs, and
ideas that he associates with his country. Thus, it sits on the edge of the society-individual
dichotomy, neither fully the former nor fully the latter. It is a border, a line, and a boundary.

Durkheim labels the totem “the flag of the clan,” so it also sits on the edge of the society-individual
dichotomy. xv Like the flag, it simultaneously contains society’s mysterious power and
exists on the material level of the individual. A fusion between the tangible and intangible, it
concretizes the clan’s abstract values so that its members can understand them. In short, it is “the
clan transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal.”xvi As a bird, a beast, a
bush, or a tree, the totem is a line between the profane coldness of isolated individuality and the
sacred fervor of social interaction, touching and connecting the two opposing entities.
Claude Levi-Strauss’s interpretation of a Cuna curing ceremony in *Structural Anthropology* offers a different view of the line between the two opposing entities of a religious system. Like the totem, his line is a physical object with considerable spiritual power; however, it is a link between the physiological and the mythological, not society and the individual. More notably, it is neither a plant nor an animal but instead a human. During the ceremony, a shaman recites a myth in which he “undertakes a journey to the supernatural world in order to snatch the [spiritual] double [of a woman undergoing a difficult childbirth] from the malevolent spirit who has captured it”\(^{xvii}\); at the same time, she imagines the mythical journey as the cause of her subsequent bodily sensations. In this process, the shaman cures the woman’s bodily ailments, and her mind becomes the border between physiology and myth. According to Levi-Strauss, though, she is not merely a passive line between these two entities. Indeed, the ceremony works precisely because she plays an active role in a process similar to Freud’s practice of psychoanalysis. Its purpose, like that of psychoanalysis, “is to bring to a conscious level conflicts and resistances which have remained unconscious, owing…to their own specific nature, which is not psychic but organic or even simply mechanical.”\(^{xviii}\) Before she is cured, in other words, the woman must first unite the shaman’s myth with her physiological symptoms in a sort of *transference*. Although her mind exists “on the border between the physical world and the psychic world,” it must also actively connect them.\(^{xix}\)

Unlike Durkheim and Levi-Strauss, de Certeau sees line as neither a power-laden, physical object nor an active, human mind but instead an indefinite contract of belief. In his religious system, a “believer” shares an economic agreement with “something Other” in which he “abandons a present advantage, or some of its claims, to give credit to a receiver” with the expectation that the receiver will repay this debt in time.\(^{xx}\) This contractual notion of belief distinguishes a believer from his something other in much the same way that the totem and the human mind differentiate between society and the individual and mythology and physiology, respectively. Every time that
Moses made a sacrifice to Yahweh, for example, he affirmed his subordination to and separateness from this deity. Every time that he fulfilled his end of the contract, he also acknowledged his confinement to this end. However, de Certeau refuses to accept division as this belief system’s primary function. In his critique of modern religious skepticism, he describes belief as “the link, distended, that connects by speech [the] two distinct gestures” of stating and doing. When this link breaks, so does belief. Particularly significant to the study of boundary is his assertion that a believer should live within this line between him and his something other. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac distinguished him from Yahweh but signified much more than his passive observation of their contract. In Durkheim’s, Levi-Strauss’s, and de Certeau’s religious systems, in other words, line offers and demands action: clansmen interact with their totems, Cuna child bearers mentally connect mythology with physiology, and believers participate in contracts with their deities. Interact, connect, participate: such activeness suggests that transcending the line between two opposing entities is the most important aspect of boundary.

In Durkheim’s notion of transcendence, totemic ritual bridges the boundary between the individual and society by enabling clansmen to experience the spiritual energy of social interaction. His description of a Warramunga religious ceremony, taken from the Sir Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen’s study of the Aboriginal tribe, effectively describes the manner in which a clan’s totem—in this case, the snake Wollunqua—encourages them to come together and act in a similar manner. First, the clansmen draw a snake by arranging red down on a damp mound of sand. Then, they march around the representation of Wollunqua in a serpentine manner, “rising in unison with both hands on their thighs, kneeling again a little farther along…[and] mov[ing] their bodies left and then right.” Finally, they launch a united attack on the image and destroy it. In the excitement of the ceremony, the individual Warramunga forgets his isolation and identifies with a much larger group. Through “collective action” around his clan’s totem, Durkheim asserts, the
Clifford Geertz supports Durkheim’s view of the connecting nature of religious symbols. In “Religion As a Cultural System,” he argues that they unite reality with spirituality through their dual roles as “models of” and “models for.” As models of, they represent and explain the laws, principles, and truths of the world. As models for, they offer examples of proper belief, feeling, and action. Thus, the Balinese monster Barong stands between its culture’s world view—“the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order”—and ethos—“the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood.” However, its purpose is not to divide reality from spirituality but to unite the two opposing entities. Like Durkheim, Geertz sees symbolic ritual as an ideal means of accomplishing such unification on a repeated, continuous basis. Through it, members of a culture witness the meeting and collective reinforcement of “the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men.” Thus, for both Geertz and Durkheim, symbols and rituals are simultaneously borders and points of intersection. Although they certainly distinguish between reality and spirituality as well as the individual and society, their significance for both worshippers and religious scholars lies primarily in their encouragement of transcendence.
Like Durkheim and Geertz, Turner assigns transcendence a primary role in his religious system; however, he sees it as a greatly influential, one-time experience rather than as a continuous source of spiritual energy. For him, it takes the form of liminality, a period of transition in which a believer abandons the structure of society for the vagueness of communitas. He does not live in this transitory state, though; nor does he feel its effects permanently. Instead, like Odysseus journeying to the Underworld, he gains valuable knowledge from his experience in communitas but promptly returns to structure. Turner’s description of the installation rites of the chief of the Ndembu tribe effectively illustrates his notion of liminality. During it, the chief-elect wears tattered clothing, lives in a hastily constructed hut, and endures insult and torment at the hands of his fellow tribesmen before assuming authority over them. Symbolically, he “dies from his commoner state” and is reborn “with all pomp and ceremony” as a leader. This passage between structure and communitas is not to be repeated: after his rebirth in the former world, the chief does not return to the latter one. Nonetheless, transcendence is as crucial to the operation of this religious system as it is to Durkheim’s theory of totemism and Geertz’s notion of symbols.

Although Caroline Walker Bynum criticizes the primary component of Turner’s religious system in “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner’s Theory of Liminality,” she does not fully reject his conception of passage. Using the lives of medieval, female saints as evidence, she asserts that women do not experience liminality because of their subordinate social roles. Whereas male saints like St. Francis of Assisi underwent dramatic social changes in their conversions to Christianity, “women's images and stories expressed most fundamentally…neither reversal nor elevation but continuity.” Compelling though it may be, Bynum’s critique of liminality is less a rejection of transcendence than an alteration of Turner’s notion of it. Despite her essay’s argumentative nature, she criticizes neither the structure-communitas dichotomy nor the role of liminality in it. Instead, she takes issue with Turner’s
incorrect treatment of liminality “universalist and prescriptive.” Indeed, female saints lived religiously unfulfilled existences precisely because their structureless social roles denied them access to the spiritual power of passage.

Although Paul Tillich’s religious system also centers on transcendence, his conception of this aspect of boundary differs considerably from those of Durkheim, Geertz, Turner, and Bynum. In *The Courage to Be*, he introduces the dichotomy between being and nonbeing. Although he does not offer any explicit definition of these entities, he sees the former as self-affirmation and existence and the latter as anxiety and despair: “One could say that ‘being is the negation of the primordial night of nothingness.” As these indefinite explanations suggest, the being-nonbeing dichotomy is considerably more complex than that of any other religious system. For instance, not one but several, qualitatively different borders stand between being and nonbeing. Neurosis is one such example. According to Tillich, it is “the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being.” In response to anxiety and despair, the neurotic adopts a reduced existence. Thus, though neurosis is a border between being and nonbeing, the neurotic neither lives nor crosses between these entities. Indeed, it is not a belief system precisely because it discourages transcendence. The courageous believer, on the other hand, accepts both being and nonbeing. Standing on the border between the two entities, he affirms his being “in spite of the fact of nonbeing.” Instead of fleeing to the weakened self-affirmation of neurosis, he rejects such an inadequate symbol. Tillich argues that he must similarly reject religious symbols—the personal God of theism, for example—in order to transcend earthly existence. Though unable to cross between humanity and deity, he can thereby live on the final frontier of the human experience, in “[a]bsolute faith…the state of being grasped by the God beyond God.”

Mary Daly further highlights the transcendence, promise, and hope that result from rejecting religious symbols. In *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, she criticizes
modern Christianity as patriarchal as well as its image of God as a male being. A fusion of Bynum and Tillich, she argues that this symbol significantly limits women’s and, to a lesser extent, men’s religious experiences. However, her solution to this limitation distinguishes her from Bynum’s mere lamentation of it: like Tillich, she urges believers to reject such inadequate symbols as pseudo-borders withholding their religious fulfillment. By dethroning such “false deities” as “the God of explanation,” “the God of otherworldliness” and “the God who is the Judge of ‘sin,’” women can transcend these fake frontiers and live on the boundary of a new space much closer to the God beyond God. Thus, by finding the same faults in Christianity that Tillich finds in neurosis, Daly makes an assertion with which most religious scholars would agree: uncovering, understanding, and transcending the line between the two opposing entities of a religious system—the key elements of boundary—are also important aspects of religious experience.

In some way or another, every religious scholar—whether a theologian, a sociologist, an anthropologist, or a psychologist by training—includes boundary and its three elements—dichotomy, border, and transcendence—in his or her religious system. Is this consensus merely coincidental, or does it signify the crucial role of boundary in religion? A return to the portal of Thompson Memorial Chapel supports the latter alternative. If its solemnity inspired no deeper feelings than did the grassy lawn in front of it; if its imposing nature in no way emphasized such duality; or if its spiritual magnetism did not encourage worshippers to pass through it, then it would be no different from the secular Hopkins Hall. Put simply, Christianity and other religions depend on boundary. Whereas they may or may not include such concepts as sin, redemption, and eternity, they cannot exist without the concept of passage across a line dividing two opposing entities. Thus, though by no means the only aspect of religious thought, boundary is without question the most critical one.


**Ibid.**, 230.

**Ibid.**, 227.


**Ibid.**, 21.

**Ibid.**, 30.

**Ibid.**, 30.


Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 222

**Ibid.**, 208.

**Ibid.**, 208.


**Ibid.**, 193.

**Ibid.**, 194.

De Certeau, “What We Do When We Believe,” 192-93
How I Read and Structure My Comments on a Religion 101 Paper

I comment first on the introduction. I am looking here for your setting the theme you want to pursue, defining initially the terms that will be central to your exposition, and your providing a reasonably detailed map as to where you are going.

An engagingly written introduction, though I’m not quite clear how you reach your conclusions on the reading of the space of the chapel. That is too bad since once you get underway with your more
substantive thesis paragraph you start going great guns, just not supported very well by the example you start with. You suggest that from the outside it appears as quintessentially other to the rest of activities on campus (defining those both as class and as recreation, which itself is a bit startling, though I like to think we have fun in class.) then you suggest that from the perspective of the church there is not the division of the sacred and profane and an inviting inclusiveness. That is an interesting hypothesis and one I think that helps capture where most of our authors place the power and energy, but you haven’t made clear how the chapel generates such energy and also how it invites. Being an historian I also couldn’t help expecting you to say something about the false Gothic of the building and the way it invokes the Middle Ages as the age of faith in opposition to the colorful bricks of modernity.

Regarding the title I do find it a bit flat—I think the old colonized introduction is too easy a fall back position and you’ve packed a lot into a long title, while at the same time suggest that your focus is a second order conversation with twentieth century scholarship. Strictly speaking that is true, given what we’ve read, but I’d like to think what we are looking at is wider than just the second order conversation among observers.

The letters in the margins or side comments are then keyed to individual comments that follow. It is here that I am in dialogue with you both about content and about style. I do make corrections on spelling and punctuation on the paper itself though I don't make my grade decision based on such mechanics.

At the end of the paper I try to formulate my judgment of the paper in regard to the following criterion.

Structure of the Paper Does the paper show an organization into useful units?

Well done and a nice habit of gathering your material in rich, if not always convincing, comparative conversations.

Mapping for the Reader Does the paper give the reader a map of where you are going

Very nicely done!

Exposition Style (Clarity) Sentence level criticism

This is the essence of a teacher's dilemma here. I don’t want you to lose your wonderfully rich sense of sentence structure, but I do want you to think about whether deploying it gets you in trouble. You have a dependence on the semi-colon, which ties issues together and raises issues of the connection between clauses, which my notes indicate sometimes misfire. You also have a tendency to use two or more verbs when one would do. Behind all of this is a muted request for simpler sentence structure, which I recognize is my taste preference. But I’d like to think this is
more than an issue of personal preference, there are issues of clarity of communication that I think make it useful for you to think a bit more about whether you always need such a complex prose. As I’ve read on and formulated this note I now see how your title showed some of these tendencies I’m trying, gently, to signal.

Paragraphing  Paragraph level

Here there are fewer problems except for the misdirection of some of the flow of your paragraphs and the lack of strong and simpler thesis and concluding sentences.

Conceptual acuity (Do your central concepts cohere?)

The central theme of boundary I think is articulated well and the apparent asymmetry of any boundary depending on which side you are on I think is nicely done. What is less well integrated because they were discovered in the writing are the specific features of the symbolic process and also the concept of transference, both of which are there but needed more reflection. On the other hand, I find your coming to them well done.

Transcendence does an extraordinary amount of work for the later portion of the paper. I find it least successfully parsed.

Treatment of the Individual Authors: Are all appropriate authors addressed?

Durkheim, Eliade, Freud, Durkheim, Levi Strauss, De Certeau, Durkheim, Geertz, Turner, Tillich. I found the double recourse to Durkheim indicative an important intellectual breakthrough in the writing, which needed to be unified in one more editing.

Interpretations and Creative Misinterpretations of the Authors

Exemplary use of supporting quotations, but sometimes it would be useful to have a longer one to demonstrate not the soundbite, but the development of an argument.

Your reading of Durkheim I think misses his insistence that religions are all true in the name of a more reductionist view of religion and society than I think is in him. Eliade and Freud are much better done.

Quotations and Reference (Mechanics of Citation): Please note that I expect and welcome your acknowledgement of help or stimulation from your friends and classmates.

Fine

Conclusion
Extremely deft! It makes me feel better both about your title and also your starting point. I’m still not convinced as to the process you describe in connection to the architecture, but that is my failing.

Then I close with a final comment looking back at the whole effort.

An excellent and stimulating overview. Substantively I remain convinced that you don’t quite get the asymmetry of the dichotomies that form the borders, i.e. the way in which one side is always the more powerful. I think that lies in your strong emphasis on the mutuality that a border also includes. That is a quibble, though. Your later development of the notion of ‘symbols’ of the boundary I think needed to be better integrated from the start, partially because it illuminates why you are so interested in the way in which boundaries hold things together–combine and ethos and world view to invoke Geertz. I’ve tried to address my reactions to your prose style and gently nudge you toward working on it. I’ve very much appreciated your fine work in class and your obvious engagement with the material.