The Role of Symbolism in Defining Religion

The well known Christian symbol adorning the walls of churches around the world and dangling from chains around the necks of believing men and women everywhere. Representative of the death of Christ for the remission of mankind’s transgressions, the cross is a palpable image of God, a physical reminder of the crucifixion, essential for the conceptualization of this holy event. In the context of religion, symbols act as intermediaries between humanity and the divine, giving form to the inconceivable aspects of the higher powers. Many authors have described symbolism as a system of religion, though their perception of the nature of this system varies quite distinctly.

For Mircea Eliade, the purpose of symbols is to connect humanity with the divine presence above. In his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, he presents the religious significance of symbols through the consideration of celestial and aquatic symbols. “Symbolism plays a decisive part in the religious life of humanity…” he explains, “it is through symbols that the world becomes transparent, is able to show the transcendent” (Eliade 130). One example he gives of this symbolism is the sky. He notes that the sky “continues to reveal the transcendent in every religious complex” and that its symbolism “infuses and supports a number of rites (of ascent, climbing, initiation, royalty, and so on), of myths (the cosmic tree, the cosmic mountain, the chain of arrows connecting earth with heaven, and so on), of legends (e.g., magical flight)”

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(128). To Eliade, this symbol encompasses the verticality of religion and the way religious symbols seem to implicitly point upward in that they portray transcendence and a rising movement toward God. This symbolism consequently propels many religious fables and myths, displaying a similar vertical direction which is a clear reference to a divine presence. For Eliade symbols themselves have little implicit meaning, but rather provide portals through which the transcendent is made accessible for the human mind.

Furthermore, Eliade affirms that “a religious symbol conveys its message even if it is no longer consciously understood in every part. For a symbol speaks to the whole human being and not only to the intelligence” (129). This statement suggests that a symbol can impart its meaning to a person regardless of whether or not he is conscious of its effect. With this statement Eliade is furthering his proposal that symbols are fundamental to religion, now asserting that symbolism is constantly at work on the unconscious, sometimes unbeknownst to the individual. The symbolic meaning of an object is thus under continuous consideration and though it may not be understood in its entirety, fragments of its meaning are. Eliade also remarks that the characteristics of an individual symbol are subjective and prone to redifinition with the change of perception. “History constantly adds new meanings, but they do not destroy the structure of the symbol,” (137) he states, reflecting on the malleability of symbolic meaning. Though each symbol maintains a basic structure, it is capable of being altered and supplemented by individual thought and interpretation. This principle can also be applied to the structure of religion as a whole, as each religion is modified with each encounter of an unfamiliar situation and new interpretations regularly arise. As religion and religious symbols are directly related, religion is directly affected by interpretation of symbols and thus the two grow and change together.
Eliade also indicates the importance of symbols in repetition. He believes that this repetition is a method frequently employed in attempt to maintain a close connection with a given sacred event, accomplished by revisiting and celebrating it. Religious myths and occurrences are considered holy because of the divinity they represent. Especially in the case of the Creation, by repeating the event man is effectively revisiting history and attempting to bring himself closer to God by recreating the holiest of events. Water is one of the fundamental symbols involved in creation. The essential substance symbolizes both birth and death simultaneously. While “everything that is form manifests itself above the waters, by detaching itself from the waters,” immersion in water “signifies regression to the preformal… equivalent to a dissolution of forms” (130-131). Here water is a source of life, but also a destructive force resulting in eradication. The polarity present in this symbol expresses the necessity of dissolution before rebirth in that complete deconstruction must occur in order for regeneration to take place. In the Christian tradition of baptism the water serves as a purifying agent as well, cleansing the soul of iniquity and initiating the process of renewal and regeneration. Eliade also mentions that immersion in water “fertilizes and multiplies the potential of life” (130). The rebirth in this ritual parallels the creation of the universe from the primordial soup. By recreating the sacred Creation the act of baptism brings the individual closer to God, re-establishing the threshold between humanity and divinity and symbolically killing the old soul, resurrecting a new sinless one in its place via submersion.

Concluding his survey of the religious application of symbolism, Eliade asserts the importance of symbolism as a whole and its relation to the state of being. Though he has already made clear the significance of symbolism in religion, he clarifies that it is the system of symbolism, or “symbolism as a whole” (131) that integrates all the various connotations of...
multiple symbols and gives them meaning as a collective, permitting their comprehension. It is not specific aspects of a symbol that lend it its importance, he thinks, but rather the symbolism of the object in its entirety. Eliade’s most salient point, though perhaps also his most contentious claim, outlines the association of symbols with existence. He argues that for the religious, “sacrality is a full manifestation of being,” (138) after claiming that symbols reveal the sacred, thus indirectly citing symbols as the source of being. According to Eliade, symbolism has the function of propelling life itself in addition to religiosity.

In The Interpretation of Cultures, Clifford Geertz presents a similar understanding of symbolism, though he gives it a secular role in addition to its religious purpose. Articulating that “a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic,” (Geertz 90) he parallels Eliade’s belief that symbolism constitutes religion. In this definition of religion he joins Eliade in accrediting the conception of existence to this system. As for symbolism itself, rather than linking it exclusively to religion, Geertz explains that “it is used for any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception…” and concludes that “the conception is the symbol’s meaning” (91).

Where Eliade sees an undeniable connection between religion and symbolism, Geertz finds that symbolism “synthesize[s] a people’s ethos,” (89) and neglects to address the transcendental properties that are so exceedingly apparent to his colleague.

Geertz seems rather to express the more modern opinion that godly religion does not dictate each and every being’s existence. Though Eliade proposes that the symbolism of certain

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events proves to have subconscious religious implications even for the nonreligious man, Geertz
draws a clear distinction between religious and nonreligious symbolism and appears to be more
concerned with symbolism as a cultural determinant, though he argues that culture and religion
are unavoidably intertwined and that the system of symbolism is a means of communication
between them. A critical component missing in Geertz’s analysis is the role of spirituality and
God in religion. In mingling religion and culture, he seemingly removes God from religion,
demoting it to the status of social custom, and creates a stark contrast between his theory and
Eliade’s heavily transcendent approach to the same subject. The distinction between religion and
culture (in terms of symbolism), on the other hand, allows the system of symbolism to fuse
beliefs and culture. The duality of symbolism connects religious and secular life in that it is
possible for an object to have both religious and secular significance, though the religious
connotations of a symbol may not be completely understood by the faithless. Where a common
symbol like water may represent the unpredictability and danger of nature it may also hint at the
Creation, and the limitlessness of God’s power. Geertz relates religion and culture through the
system of symbolism, but leaves God out.

Sigmund Freud takes a different approach to examining symbolism in religion by
exploring its role in religious ritual. In his Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices, Freud
admits, in comparing religious rituals to neuroses, that “the minutiae of religious ceremonial are
full of significance and have a symbolic meaning” (Freud 119). He explores the function of a
primitive precursor to religion called totemism in Totem and Taboo, in which the system of
symbolism establishes a sequence of religious rituals reproducing the progression of the primal

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Like Geertz, he emphasizes the cultural aspect of religion as he traces religious rituals through the cultural evolution of totemism. In totemism, the totem (animal of worship) came to represent the father or God in religion over time. He reiterates Eliade’s notion of symbolism (symbolic ritual in this case) as a means of transcendence or a way of becoming more like God, saying that, “It was in fact the ancient totem animal, the primitive god himself, by the killing and consuming of which the clansmen renewed and assured their likeness to the god” (171), though in this case the “god” referred to may not be an actual god at all. This theory was supported by the mourning observed directly after the killing in sacrificial ceremonies.

Multiple theories for the creation of totemism are examined by Freud in his work, citing inspiration from the story of the primal crime and the wishes of the Oedipus complex. The tale of the primal crime recounts the murder of the father by the band of sons which is reflected in the process of sacrifice especially, Freud adds, in the totem meal. He believes the totem meal to be one of man’s earliest festivals and interprets it to be a reproduction of the murder of the father-complex by the sons. The way in which the totem animal’s slaughter is forbidden with the exception of this particular occasion (on which all members of the clan must take part in the crime, thus sharing the guilt) and the mourning that occurs after the sacrifice reflect the mentality and motivations seen in the event of the primal crime. Incorporation of the lesson learned from this historical event established the two taboos of totemism; murder of the totem animal, and incest, the two wishes of the Oedipus complex. The symbolism of animal sacrifice in this clan serves as a reminder to all of the members of the danger and evil of the two taboos, thus, through revisiting the scene, reestablishing respect for the father-complex represented through the totem animal (176-178). Freud demonstrates a parallel ambiguity in the father-complex recognizable in present-day Christianity and the role of the Eucharist. Consumption of the Eucharist is seen as a
sacrifice of the son as atonement for the death of the father. Christ’s death “redeemed the company of brothers from original sin” (190) and communion is performed in remembrance of this deliverance. Freud concludes that this evil deed was not only the precursor to the primitive totemism, but modern religion as well. Paul Tillich continues the exploration of the psychology of religion in his The Courage to Be, emphasizing the role of anxiety; however his analysis does not feature symbolism as the main focus.

In Emile Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, the transformation of religion from struggle toward the divine to social convention is complete. Durkheim defines religion as “an eminently social thing” (Durkheim 9) and suggests that the god represented in the totem animal of the totemic principle is really a representation of the clan itself. To an even greater degree than Geertz, he extracts the element of the divine from religion and replaces it with a worldly substitute. “A society is to its members what a god is to its faithful,” (208) he comments, explaining that “the hallmark of moral authority is that its psychic properties alone give it power. Opinion, eminently a social thing, is one source of authority” (210) and with opinion comes credibility, thus opinion and more generally society hold authority over the individual due to respect and comprehension of the potential risks. Credibility is essential and men are aware of its importance, thus society is highly esteemed and, in Durkheim’s opinion, an object of worship. Despite this apparent group mentality, Durkheim makes it clear that society is made up of individuals and the aspects of each person both mold and are molded by the collective. To symbolism he attributes the transformation of an item “From the most commonplace object…” to a “sacred and very powerful being” (229). He qualifies this attribute by specifying that “the world of the religious is not a special aspect of empirical nature: It is

superimposed upon nature,” suggesting that the sacredness of a symbol is not intrinsic to the object itself, but is added on by the speculation of humanity. He concludes that “religious forces are human forces, moral forces,” (421) implicitly stating that symbolism’s connection is to society, not a deity, refuting the Eliade’s hypothesis that it serves as a connection between humans and gods. He goes on, however, to state that these forces are the product of feeling transference onto an object which he mentions is the only way these forces can organize and become conscious. Though he does present a relationship between the system of symbols and religion, he claims that society is the soul of religion, again emphasizing the absence of a higher power as the center of religion. Durkheim’s theory of social religion is further explored in Michael De Certeau’s “What We Do When We Believe,” though this work speaks more directly to the system of belief and society rather than symbolism and thus is not particularly relevant to the argument at hand.

In Claude Levi-Strauss’s Structural Anthropology, the Isoma ritual performed by the Cuna tribe in the Panama Republic is analyzed for the meaning of the many symbolic objects and processes involved. The purpose of this ritual is to relieve mothers in difficult labor through inducing an experience in which the mother must overcome the symbolic forces preventing her from giving birth. The Cuna believe that Muu is the power that captures the fetus, and also hold her responsible for preventing childbirth in times of difficult labor. In curing the patient, the shaman, his assistant, and the midwife embark on a journey to find Muu and engage in a battle with her and her daughters to free the expectant mother’s “purba” or soul (Levi-Strauss 182-184). Many of the actions and objects mentioned in the songs and myths perpetuating this ritual

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quite obviously symbolize parts of the female genitalia or the birthing process. By revisiting the mythical situation and dominating the source of repression, the mother is thought to gain strength and overcome the physical suppression she is experiencing. These historical myths contain a fixed structure and each individual produces their own vocabulary from their own personal history. Although the vocabulary varies from person to person, Levi-Strauss emphasizes that “the structure remains the same, and through it the symbolic function is fulfilled” (199). Though he does not include much about symbolism’s link to religion, Levi-Strauss stresses the reliance of symbolism upon a static transhistorical structure influence by noting the importance of structure over content, associating symbolism strongly with tradition. Mary Daly also describes symbolism in terms of history and tradition, though she brings in the concept of gender roles which diverges from the theme of this paper.

In an investigation of rituals of the Ndembu tribe of Central Africa, Victor Turner also uses a primitive religion to a theory on symbolism’s relation to ritual and religious practice as a whole. He concurs with Levi-Strauss on the point that structure is the critical aspect, but in this case referring to cognitive structure, stating that “It is not a matter of different cognitive structures, but of an identical cognitive structure articulating wide diversities of cultural experience,” (Turner 3) citing cultural influence as the point of differentiation, but maintaining that the cognitive approach of each individual closely compares to the rest of civilization. Beginning his survey he attributes a great deal of importance to the system of symbols, expressing that symbols are “basic building-blocks, the “molecules,” of ritual” (14). Turner describes the purpose of the Isoma ritual, in Ndembu thinking, to be the re-growth of the infertile woman into a fertile woman, though he specifies that “there is analogy, but not replication,” (21)

9 Daly, Mary, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
meaning that it is impossible to reproduce the event, though reenacting it serves the same purpose. This part of the ritual closely parallels the cosmogony presented by Eliade, as rebirth is being symbolized in the repetition of a previous event. Additionally, the Ndembu create a “sacred space” (23) where the ritual is to take place in which “a small realm of order is created in the formless milieu of the bush” (23). This creation of order among chaos corresponds to the idea of the Creation. These similarities draw an undeniable link between primal ritual and the religious conception of God, though it is still unclear which preceded the other. The contradictory elements of life and death are portrayed in this ritual in the form of hot and cold medicines (representing death and life respectively) and the two sides of the tunnel which the patient passes through, symbolizing the passage from death to life. He cites symbolism as the embodiment of invisible forces, thus “to name an inauspicious condition is halfway to removing that condition” (25) because it has now been given form. Turner also addresses the Geertz’s concern with the duality of symbolism by that “in binary opposition on each plane each symbol becomes univocal,” (42) presenting the contradicting meanings of a symbol as intertwining parts of one meaning. He agrees with Levi-Strauss that the properties of symbols are shaped by life experience; however he takes the significance of symbolism beyond the cognitive faculties in the case of Isoma stating that “the whole person, not just the Ndembu “mind,” is existentially involved in the life or death issues with which Isoma is concerned” (43). Turner concludes that the symbolism of religious ritual certainly provides psychological benefit, however not much else can be proven as a result. He succeeds in accenting the general structure of symbolism and the effects of experience on this system as he reestablishes symbolism’s theological import.
Caroline Walker Bynum, unsatisfied with Turner’s theory, critiques his approach and findings, while presenting her own analysis in her *Fragmentation and Redemption*¹¹. She criticizes him for selecting a focus population that was too large and for reducing the “multivocality” that to her is apparent in the individual historical context of each symbol (Bynum 28). She removes the idea of transcendence from liminality and reduces the Christian symbols the crucifixion and the Eucharist to mere manifestations of “social drama,” (32) pausing only to remark that Turner’s focus was mainly on the symbols of men rather than women. Bynum continues to analyze symbolic meaning in terms of gender, and discredits Turner’s transcendent undertones, relating symbolism back to humanity in place of divinity, much like Durkheim. Her work seems to focus more on the criticism of others and nitpicking of minor issues than the development of her own theory.

Though the definition and nature of religion itself is a controversial and much disputed subject among the authors presented, the idea of symbolism as a system of religion seems to be a widely accepted theory. Despite the debatable plausibility of transcendent representation in symbolism, the purpose of symbols to give form to the formless or allow ideas to be established within a palpable object was unanimously expressed. For the religious, symbols are representations of God, while to the nonreligious they have other secular implications. Until the existence of God is proven, the transcendent properties of the symbol will remain in question; however symbolism has been and always will be a common language through which groups of people communicate history, tradition, and thought in a universal dialect.

Works Cited


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.

This paragraph sets the theme of symbolism nicely but is missing two important features. You give one illustration of a symbol (from one tradition) but don’t move toward a more general definition of what a symbol is or does. You also don’t give a map of where you are going, what more substantive issues you are going to discuss.

The letters in the margins or comment boxes 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

Follows the order of authors discussed, but no clear indication is given of why this particular order.

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

Notably missing

Exposition Style  (Clarity)  Sentence level criticism

Good interaction with quotations, but on too many occasions the quotation undoes the claim you make. Generally at the sentence level your writing is good. Sentences are nicely formed.
Paragraphing Paragraph level

You need stronger introductory and concluding sentences moving beyond the 'furthermore' strategy. It makes your exposition too staccato and doesn’t give the sense of your making connections between the paragraphs. Overall this is the area of greatest weakness in the paper.

Conceptual acuity (Do your central concepts cohere?)

Your central ‘notion’ of connection I think weakens your paper since it isn’t that clear that symbols make connections, it seems more that they are representations or images that are significantly incomplete. The notion of ‘culture’ and its apparent antipathy to ‘godly’ religion is invoked but not defended. I also note how the issue of symbolism disappears as you move on and the real issue you wanted to talk about was the reduction of religion to ‘culture’, which is fine, but you don’t give any indication that that is what you want to do or what it means.

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

The treatment of Eliade I think misses the points he makes both about the symbol as hierophany and the notion of modality. I’ve indicated in my comments the issues with your readings of Geertz and Freud, which weaken the clarity and conviction of your paper. You cover all the authors, but you’ve missed entirely the critique of the danger of taking symbols literally that informs Daly and Tillich.

Interpretations and Creative Misinterpretations of the Authors

Again good interaction with the texts, though it is striking how often you misinterpret them without seeming to recognize it. No problem with creative misinterpretation, but you do need to let your reader and yourself in on the fact that you are doing it.

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

While several of the claims you make in the conclusion I think you needed to better ground it was well on the way to articulating more carefully what you wanted to argue. It should have been at the beginning of the paper.
Then I close with a final comment looking back at the whole effort.

Good work and I’ve very much appreciated your engagement in class. As my comments indicate I’m struck by the way that you want more to write a paper in defense of religion rather than elucidating the character, roles and limits of ‘symbolism’. I think if you’d recognized that that was the issue motivating you you would have more successfully found your voice and delivered a stronger paper. As it is it still has many good moments, but doesn’t hold together or get very far in its putative topic.