

Religious Symbols

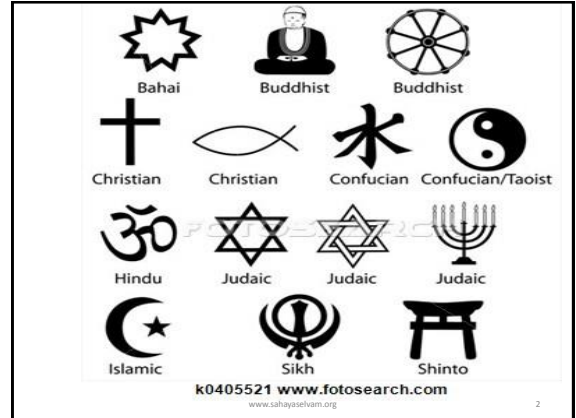
Lecture 6

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Loss of Symbol

“One of the gravest problems of our day is the lack of commitment to common symbols... Ritual has become a bad word signifying empty conformity. We are witnessing a revolt against formalism, even against form... Shades of Luther! Shades of Reformation and its complaint against meaningless rituals, mechanical religion, Latin as the language of cult, mindless recitation of litanies. We find ourselves, here and now, reliving a worldwide revolt against ritualism.”

M. Douglas, 1970/2003, *Natural symbols*. London: Routledge Classics, p.1.

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Centrality of symbols in religion

The Anthropological study of religion is therefore a two fold operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in symbols that make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social structural and psychological processes.

- Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 125.

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What is a symbol?

- A Symbol is something that stands for something else.
- Some authors make a distinction between sign and symbol; others understand sign is representational (eg. green = go) and symbol is presentational (eg. the cross = suffering).
- Signs are arbitrary and functional, symbols are part of reality, evoke emotions, and are archetypal.

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Symbol: a Marcelian framework

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973): French existentialist

- We exist with problems and mysteries;
- Problems are in the realm of having, and mysteries are in the realm of being.
- Problems have solutions, but mysteries have meanings.
- Selvam: signs offer solutions to problems and symbols offer meaning to mysteries.
- Eg. Traffic signs, and symbols of water & fire.

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Varieties of symbolic expressions

Religion is simply a collection of symbols that offer meaning to mysteries of human existence:

- Symbolic objects
- Symbolic narratives (myths)
- Symbolic actions (rituals)

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Eliade: Functions of Symbols

1. Symbols are capable of revealing a modality of the real or a condition of the World which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.
2. Symbols are always religious, since they point either to something real (numen) or a World-pattern.
3. An essential characteristic of religious symbolism is its multivalence = its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings.

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Eliade: Functions of Symbols

4. The symbol (even in its multitude of meaning) is capable of revealing a perspective in which diverse realities can be fitted together or even integrated into a 'system'.

5. The symbol is capable of expressing paradoxical situations or certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way.

6. Existential value of religious symbols – a symbol always points to a reality or a situation concerning human existence – which we are part of.

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Jung: Symbols as Archetypes

Carl G. Jung (1875-1961), *Man and His Symbols*

Summary Point 1:

The psyche (self) has different layers and components within itself



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Jung: Symbols as Archetypes

Summary Point 2:

The archetype is the primordial, structural elements of the human psyche; part of the collective unconscious.

- Archetypes are systems images and emotions.
- They are inherited with the brain structure.
- It is that portion through which the psyche is attached to nature.
- Archetypal images, as universal patterns or motifs are the basic content of religions, mythologies, legends and fairy tales.

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Jung: Symbols as Archetypes

Summary Point 3:

The archetypes manifest themselves in different forms.

- **archetypal events:** birth, death, initiation, marriage, the union of opposites;
- **archetypal figures:** great mother, father, devil, god, wise old man, the trickster, hero;
- **archetypal motifs:** the apocalypse, the deluge, the creation.

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