



# Religion And Its Symbols: A Dynamic Interconnection

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**Abstract:** Religion functions as a symbolic system that expresses humanity's deepest concerns, values, and aspirations. The process of symbolization is intrinsic to human culture, rooted in social interaction and interpretive engagement. The paper deals with the foundational relationship between religion and symbolism, emphasizing how symbols serve as a central medium through which religious beliefs, experiences, and revelations are communicated and understood. Drawing on etymology, theological perspectives, philosophical insights, and sociological theories, the research interprets how symbols bridge between the visible and invisible, the personal and communal, and the spiritual and material dimensions of religious life. Religion is portrayed not merely as a belief system but as a dynamic, symbolic language that shapes and is shaped by human interaction, cultural context, and divine revelation. The study concludes that religious symbolism is both essential and inevitable in the human quest for meaning, identity, and connection with the sacred.

**Key Words:** Divine revelation, Language, Religious beliefs, Symbols, Sacred.

**Introduction:** Throughout history, religion has been one of the most significant ways in which humans interpret the existence, morality, and the purpose of life. The term 'religion' itself denotes a binding together of individuals through shared belief and practice; and central to this process is the use of symbols. Far from being decorative or optional, symbols form the core of religious language, embodying the ineffable truths of the sacred and mediating spiritual experiences in culturally recognizable forms. From sacred texts and rituals to myths and metaphors, every religion is permeated with symbols that not only represent deeper realities but also generate shared meaning within a community. Symbols are not mere representations; they are active participants in religious meaning-making. As such, symbolism is not an add-on to religion; it is its very fabric. The study of religious symbolism, therefore, is crucial for understanding how faith traditions function and endure across time, cultures, and communities.

## Religion as Connection and Meaning

The word 'religion' comes from the Latin roots *re* (meaning 'again') and *ligare* (meaning 'to bind' or 'to connect'), forming *religare*, which means 'to bind back' or 'to reconnect.' Etymologically, this suggests that religion is something that reconnects human beings with each other through love, compassion, and mutual responsibilities, and also with God.<sup>1</sup> Religion, in general, refers to the relationship humans have with what they consider sacred, divine, spiritual, or holy. It is often understood as a person's connection to God, gods, or spiritual forces. Worship is usually seen as a central part of religion, but other elements such as moral behavior, correct beliefs, and involvement in religious communities or institutions are also essential aspects of religious life, as taught by spiritual teachers and religious texts.<sup>2</sup> One way to define religion is as: "the human recognition of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods who deserve obedience and worship."<sup>3</sup> A religion can also be seen as a structured set of beliefs, cultural practices, and worldviews that connect people to a deeper understanding or order of existence.

Religion is a universal and all-encompassing phenomenon found in every human society. It originates from profound human experiences and draws strength from living symbols. In fact, we can say that religion cannot exist without symbolism. Different religions offer various answers to life's deepest and most fundamental questions. Indeed, religion plays a vital role in human life; it is both a personal and social activity. Within human communities, religious and social institutions evolve and grow in unique ways. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, religion is defined as:

The belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods, entitled to obedience and worship; the expression of this belief in worship; and a particular system of faith and worship.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the word *religion* refers to a deep connection or shared belief that brings people closely together. It is a sense of total dependence on something greater and serves as a way to organize life. Religion can look different depending on the culture and environment around it. Powerful emotional and spiritual experiences such as feelings of ecstasy or beauty often happen within religious discipline. A religious experience is called 'religious' because it happens within a system of religious beliefs, values, and practices. Even though religion focuses on inner spiritual life, it does not ignore physical and material needs. People still pray for things like good health, rain during a drought, and enough food; these are seen as valid parts of religious life and hope.<sup>5</sup>

### **Symbols: Essence and Understanding**

Symbols exist because they create meaning. Anything can become a symbol if someone sees meaning in it. If there is no meaning, then it cannot really be a symbol. Scholars Kannanayakkal Joseph and Puykunnel Joseph describe a symbol as an '*ontological referential*,' meaning it connects to the deep reality of things. They explain that the process of symbolization goes beyond the individual symbols themselves and beyond how people learn about faith through their culture. In fact, symbols are part of every human culture.<sup>6</sup>

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a symbol is something that represents or stands for something else. It does not have to look exactly like what it represents. Instead, it might suggest the idea through custom, tradition, or some connection. A symbol is often a physical object that represents something invisible or abstract like a person's idea, feeling, or situation. It can also be a sign or figure that stands for something larger. According to the philosopher Peirce, a symbol needs to be understood in order to be meaningful. Without someone to interpret it, it stops being a real symbol, just like spoken words do not make sense unless someone understands them.<sup>7</sup> The author Rollo May explains that symbols show our ability to be self-aware, to ask questions and to think deeply. This comes from knowing the difference between ourselves (the subject) and the world around us (the object).<sup>8</sup> As a result, symbol helps connecting the outer world (what we see and experience) with our inner world (thoughts, feelings, and meaning).<sup>9</sup> The ability to use symbols is an important part of who we are in this living world.

According to Langer, symbols are tools or carriers that help us form ideas about objects. She says that symbols do not directly represent real things or situations. Instead, they represent the ideas or thoughts we have when we talk about those things, not the actual things themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the definitions from different authors, we can say that a symbol can be understood as something that connects a person (the perceiver) to a certain reality. It acts as a bridge between what is experienced and the person experiencing it. This meaning is shared by a group of people who understand it in a similar way. A symbol reflects reality in a way that touches the mind, bringing out lasting thoughts, feelings, and meaning. It also moves people to believe and in order to act. In this work, the word 'symbol' is used in a broader, deeper sense; not just to refer to specific symbols found in different religions. Instead, it includes all kinds of symbols: physical objects, ideas, written texts like scriptures and their meanings (both spoken and written), myths, rituals, metaphors, analogies, and ways of life. This also includes social, cultural, economic, and political parts that are shaped by religion. In simple terms, everything that is part of living a religious tradition can be called religious symbolism. Each symbol may be more or less important, but together they create one clear tradition and often build a culture of worship. These symbols are the basic parts of the language people use to express and live their faith.

## The Process of Symbolization

The human mind uses symbols to help understand and explain reality. When we experience something, symbols help us move from simply noticing it to fully grasping and sharing its meaning with ourselves and others. As we said before, symbols act as bridges between what we see or feel (reality) and how we understand it (the perceiver). Hence, something is only a symbol when people recognize it as a reflection or image of reality. These recognized symbols keep the process going; they help us keep seeing, interpreting, thinking about, and emotionally responding to what we experience.

Symbols are images or ideas in our minds that represent something we have experienced either through our senses or through thinking. These symbols stand for reality or something that seems real. The process of creating these symbols in our mind is called symbolization. A good symbol gives the person a clear and meaningful understanding of the event, person, or thing it represents. Though, there are some important points about symbolization to remember. As symbols do not exist by themselves, they are connected to other symbols. Just like words in a sentence only make full sense when put together, individual symbols need to be linked with others to create complete meaning. Symbols also need to be near each other in order to show the full picture of what they represent.

Besides, symbols exist and change by being close to other symbols. The writer Brandt prescribes that symbolization is naturally connected to *syntax*, which means symbols gain meaning by how they are related to each other. He explains that meaning happens because symbols are linked together in thought and communication. According to Brandt, symbolize means to connect things within a certain frame or system, creating a structure (*syntax*). We do not create meaning by using single symbols alone; instead, we group and combine different symbols even things that do not normally go together to make new meanings.<sup>11</sup> Also the researcher Ogden says, "To be human means to live by faith and to seek understanding."<sup>12</sup> Living by faith means having confidence that life is worth living. Unlike animals, which naturally fight to survive and reproduce, humans accept life and adapt through free and responsible choice. Ogden believes humans live by following the principles of truth, beauty, and goodness. To solve life's big problems, humans create and use symbols to express important ideas.

## Religious Symbol-Making in Human Experience

In the beginning, symbolism in religion shows how humans try to understand the meaning of life and the universe, while also living within their society and culture. The thinker like Berger supports this idea by saying that religion is something created by humans. Since religion is created by people, it is influenced by culture. As culture and society are made by humans, but at the same time, they also shape who humans are. In any case, every time humans try to understand the truths about life and what they mean, they are creating meaning. This human effort, as Berger says, is a bold attempt to see the whole universe as something that has meaning for humans.<sup>13</sup> The scholar Boyer understands symbolism as representing the ideas, beliefs, actions, and ways people interact that involve powers or forces beyond humans.<sup>14</sup>

Here, religions are often recognized more by their symbols than by their ideas or philosophies. For believers, these symbols represent deep meaning; while for non-believers, they might just seem like simple signs or arguments. Symbols only make sense in certain situations and to the people who believe in them. People outside the religion understand that these symbols are important because others see them as sacred. Those inside the religion not only recognize the symbols but also know how to live according to their meanings. Symbols help to distinguish one religion from another. Even within the same religion, the way symbols are used and understood can be different.

Each religion can gain new meaning even while being a symbol on its own. If we accept that symbols work by complementing each other, we can see a broader, global symbolism when one religion understands itself as just one among many in the world. This kind of recognition opens a new way to understand one's own beliefs by seeing the divine at work in other religions, which cannot be ignored. When all theistic religions try to live out the meaning of their revelations, this can be called symbolistic theologizing, using symbols to understand and explain faith. Because of this, religions may share similar symbols or symbol systems that create similar meanings.<sup>15</sup>

We should understand that in the history of religions, many groups of people shared the same symbols and myths in their beliefs, even before their beliefs were seen as different religions. These shared symbols and stories probably happened because the groups lived near each other or because the human mind works in

similar ways when trying to explain how the universe began and other natural events. This sharing of symbols can be seen even among groups of people who lived far apart in time and place.

Thus, symbols belong to individuals or groups, and it can deeply affect the people who own them. These symbols create a strong bond between the people who share them. The connection is so powerful that, although people use and own their symbols, they often feel like the symbols actually own them. This feeling of being owned by the symbol can be even stronger than just owning it, which makes people feeling much attached to their symbols. For example, a believer often says they 'belong' to a certain religion or faith because of the symbols they share.

### **Interpreting the Sacred Through Revelation**

Apart from this, symbols are considered sacred because they have special purpose and meaning. In the same way, every believer is also set apart and becomes a symbol of that sacred revelation. When a believer talks about or lives the experience of revelation, they act both as a symbol and as someone who understands and explains that revelation (a theologian). Because symbolism is always committed and sacred, there cannot be 'halfway' or 'compromised' symbols or believers. In this way, a true believer is just as sacred as the symbol they represent.

Now we find that revelation and symbolism are closely connected. Symbolism includes all religious symbols, myths, and rituals. On the other side, revelation is often expressed through symbols, and symbols themselves reveal deeper truths. Though, religion can be seen both as a symbol and as the way humans behave in response to a supernatural experience. Religion is part of what it means to be human. It combines social and cultural elements that bring out the religious side of people. Since religion is found everywhere, we can say that every person has some form of religious understanding or awareness.

Religion, as a human symbol, represents things beyond what people can normally see or understand. Humans try to connect with these deeper realities, find meaning, and get answers to life's big questions. Choosing to follow a religion or take part in religious activities is a decision made by a person who is searching for something good. This choice shows the dignity and freedom of the believer. Religious experiences and events give new knowledge, called revelations. So, all religions that come from these experiences have some kind of revelatory structure, a way of sharing special knowledge or insights. For example, the author Ward says that while different religions understand revelation in different ways, major religious traditions all have this kind of structure. This helps providing special knowledge, experiences, and skills.<sup>16</sup>

It is a true fact that all religious symbols are closely linked to human emotions. Religious symbols show the feelings people have about religion, faith, and revelation. Unlike ordinary signs, all symbols whether sacred or not, bring out emotions. The difference between sacred and ordinary symbols shows the special emotions that religious symbols create. Here human emotions are part of every religious activity. Things like ceremonies, worship, holy places, religious objects, important people in religion, and celebrations all involve emotions. Because religion touches the deepest parts of a person, everything related to religion is connected to feelings. In short, nothing in religion can be truly sacred or meaningful without being connected to human emotions.

Now we can see that most of the major religions in the world are based on revelation, or the idea that divine truth has been shown to humans. For example, Hindus believe the *Vedas* were revealed through *Śruti*, which means 'what is heard.' Muslims believe the *Qur'ān* was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed, who is Allah's messenger. Jews follow the *Torah* and writings of the prophets, where *Yahweh* (God) shows Himself as the one true God. Christians believe that *Jesus* is the *Eternal Word* who became human and revealed God the Father to the world. Even smaller or lesser-known religions often have *shamans* who receive messages or powers from the supernatural, sometimes called *Mana*. In general, most religions claim that revelations can happen whether long ago or still today either personally or as a group. These experiences often happen through meditation (*dhyana*), dreams, visions, or spiritual signs. The hidden truths that are revealed often come through symbols, meaning that what is shown or communicated is done in a symbolic way.

## Symbolism as the Language of Religion

When studying from where symbolism comes, we need to be careful not to have personal biases or to make the past seem more fixed than it really was. Why is this important? Because stories about the history of religious symbols can be influenced by present-day opinions and might sound like people are proud to have 'discovered' something important from the past. If symbolism started with communication, then a big question is: When did communication itself begin? Actually, ideas like symbol, religion, and myth might not have meant the same thing to ancient humans as they do today, even if those things existed back then. Whether we believe humans evolved or were created, we know we have a past and ancestors. We also believe we share traits with them. One important thing we all share is that we are made to connect with others. We are born to communicate. As Lieberman says, "We are wired to be social." Humans use symbolization as a way to communicate.

Now the author Murphy sketches that religion is best understood like a language, using similar methods to study how language works and how people use it. Because of this, religious symbolism can be seen as having the same qualities as language. Its behavior can be understood by comparing it to language. So, religious symbolism can be thought of as a kind of religious language that helps people to communicate about religion. Since it expresses ideas and helps sharing religious messages, it can be called a symbolic language.<sup>17</sup>

Tillich, the writer, pens that only symbolic language can express the deepest, most important truths about life.<sup>18</sup> Because of this, what expresses the ultimate meaning of human life also becomes a set of beliefs. These beliefs are shaped by how people communicate with themselves and with others. The ways people express these beliefs come together to form a special religious language and system of symbols. Like any language, the value and power of this symbolic language do not just come from how it is made, but from how useful it is in communicating meaning.

So, we are not talking about things like telepathy or intuition, even if those involve symbols in some way. But if we want to find where symbolism started, it does not actually begin in history or the past; it begins with the person who looks at history, studies the present, or imagines the future. The origin of symbolism is in the beholder, the one who understands and interprets. Lieberman explains this well: "Only humans live in a world of *why*, with deep meanings and explanations to understand what others do."<sup>19</sup> We are social beings. Our interpretations become shared and have common meanings. But before that, there are shared ways of understanding as things. If trying to be completely objective makes it hard to connect the past and present when studying symbolism, we can find comfort in who we are now. We can explore the past of symbolism with confidence because we ourselves are the living link to that past.

Emile Durkheim said religion reflects a society's care for itself and is meant to keep people united. He believed religion is not about sacred things outside the community, but about the community itself. So, the world of symbols includes the shared ideas, values, beliefs, legends, myths, and religious symbols that a society holds about itself.<sup>20</sup>

Another idea about where symbolism comes from is called symbolic interactionism. Symbolism is naturally part of social life and happens within a group of people. Blumer, who came up with the term, describes it as a special way to study how people live and behave in groups. This idea is different from Durkheim's because it looks at small, everyday interactions between people rather than large social systems. Symbolic interactionism helps us understanding how symbolism in religion begins and why it is important.

The scholar Blumer explains symbolic interactionism with three main ideas,<sup>21</sup> these are: People act toward things based on what those things mean to them; these meanings come from social interactions with other people; and, people interpret and sometimes change these meanings as they deal with things.

This means that meaning is always connected to what people do, both as individuals and as part of a group, and there is always a process of interpreting those meanings. People look for meaning and interpret it to give purpose to their actions. In religion, events or symbols do not have fixed meanings by themselves. Instead, meanings come from how people interact and talk about them. When many people respond similarly to a religious experience, their shared actions form what we call a religion in that society. So, symbolic interactionism shows how people find meaning in religion through social interactions and interpretations. It assumes a connection between the symbol and what the symbol represents in religion. So, it can be said that the symbolic language is not just decorative; rather it plays a vital role in expressing as

well as in achieving ultimate truths. Finally, it would help fostering both individual identity and inter-religious understanding, acting a shared language across time and culture.

### Core Traits of Religious Symbols

The symbolism shapes and shows religion has its own special features. Unlike some earlier views, today we see symbolism in religion as having important meaning and function. Some key features of religious symbolism are:

- Symbols within a religion share a common background or connection.
- Religious symbols attract attention, create strong feelings, and help bringing people together.
- Religious symbols are different from everyday symbols and are given special respect.
- They are used carefully and have unique meanings.
- Religious symbols teach lessons, spread faith, and encourage others to join.
- They express emotions and strong beliefs.
- Sometimes, the symbols of the majority religion look down on minority religions and try to control what is seen as normal or acceptable.<sup>22</sup>

According to the writer Tillich, symbolism has several important characteristics when seen as a living, changing process:<sup>23</sup>

- It represents the religious experience as a whole.
- It holds the power to be interpreted and reinterpreted, becoming part of the religious experience itself.
- Symbolism brings the religious experience to life and makes it present now.
- Symbolism comes from the unconscious mind, either of individuals or groups, and is not created on purpose.
- It is not fixed or lifeless; symbolism grows, changes, and sometimes disappears along with the community.
- Besides showing the religious experience, symbolism also offers a way to encounter and connect with it.
- As a form of communication, symbolism helps believers to relate personally to their faith.

**Conclusion:** Through the ongoing research, we find that religion and symbolism are inseparably intertwined. Symbols are the living language of religion, conveying meaning that words alone cannot capture. They emerge from the deep well of human experience and cultural expression, reflecting our attempts to grasp the divine, the transcendent, and the ultimate purpose of life. Whether through rituals, language, sacred texts, myths, or communal practices, symbols help to embody and express religious revelation, turning abstract belief into lived reality. Moreover, symbolism does not remain static. It evolves with communities, responding to new contexts and interpretations, yet always rooted in the shared human need for connection, meaning, and transcendence. Religious symbols function not only as signs of divine presence but as tools for personal transformation and communal identity. By understanding religious symbolism as both a product and a medium of revelation, we can come to see religion not merely as a system of beliefs but as a dynamic and symbolic mode of being in the world. In doing so, we acknowledge the enduring human pursuit of the sacred, forever bound up in symbol, story, and shared spiritual vision.

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