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## Sacred signs as paradigms of cultural memory

### Abstract

Key words: religion, culture, symbols, sacred, numbers

Being an integral component of a cultural system religion plays significant role in human life. Religion semiotically unfolds the mysteries of universe and gives us an opportunity to grasp reasons of our existence. Clifford Geertz was the first anthropologist who emphasized semiotical nature of religion in his scientific investigations. For him, religion should be studied as a symbolic system in terms of which believers interpret the world and live their lives. Numbers, colours, names, words, shapes and all other notions in universe are symbols in religion and have their own sacred meanings. Ancient Greek philosopher Plato writes that “Numbers are the highest degree of knowledge. It is knowledge itself”. In Islamic philosophy the number seven is considered the holy one, and has some special meanings. According to the latest religion, God created world in seven days, and the earth atmosphere has seven layers. Consequently, this geographical fact was proved by scientists, but we are not sure about creation of the world. Jung claims that religious experiences found their source in our collective unconscious. It is product of our cultural memory and we irrationally believe the existence of God. This faith comes from our archetypal memory. For Jung, the God is a great power in human life and human beings can not exist without religious beliefs. By this point, we can come to the conclusion that the religion is a part of cultural system which needs interpretation with the help of universal symbols.

This paper deals with sacred signs as paradigms of cultural memory, meanwhile demonstrates phenomenological approaches to religion and cultural stereotypes. Being an integral component of a cultural system religion plays significant role in human life. Religion semiotically unfolds the mysteries of universe and gives us an opportunity to grasp reasons of our existence. Each of the four existing religions have multiple symbols and signs, which help all human beings for perception of genesis of life on earth. Clifford Geertz was the first anthropologist who emphasized semiotical nature of religion in his scientific investigations. For him, religion should be studied as a symbolic system in terms of which believers interpret the world and live their lives (7. p. 94). History builds bridge between culture and religion, through these we try to determine the origin of life. Sacred symbols as paradigms of cultural system informs us about ancient civilizations, and open bedate around cultural myth and religion which are closely connected with each other. Religion has an extensive ethnographic literature which illustrates ancient sign systems with sacred messages adressed to human race about wisdom of life. Geographical coordinates also play significant role in rules, demands and laws of every religion. In this sense, religion has played significant role in shaping civilizations. Today's studies show that religion builds cultural system for society, which leads to formation of urban life. For example, there are many tribes across the world – specially in Africa and Amazonia. They have their own belief system, but no religion. Without religion these tribes couldn't get civilized, and human society is not formed in these places. Tribe system exists for centures, but can't diverge of it. No doubt, the reason of it is religion, which is considered its main contribution to every society. Comparative analyses point out different scientific views on this issue. Carl Jung assumes that both religious experience and religious practice found their sources in the collective unconscious. It is product of our cultural memory and we irrationally believe the existance of God. Mediatly this faith comes from our archetypal memory. For him, the God is a great power in human life, and human beings can not exist without religious beliefs. He writes, "the soul must contain in itself the faculty of relation to God, i.e. a correspondence, otherwise a connetion could never come about. The correspondence is, in psychological terms, the

archetype of a God image". (6. p. 54) By this point, we can come to the conclusion that the religion is a part of cultural system which needs interpretation with the help of universal symbols. Moreover, all sacred signs are paradigms of cultural system indicating defined civilization process. Almost the majority of world's population believes in religion and up today it became a subject of discussions. Geertz gives comprehensive explanation of this question. For him, some factors make religion believable phenomenon to people. The most important of them are traditions, personal experiences, influence of a charismatic leader, primarily participation in religious rituals and reading a scripture. All of these factors serve to acquit factuality of religion. In universe numbers, colours, names, words, shapes and all other notions are symbols indicating something, consequently, from religious point of view some of these notions have sacred meanings. Winny Wescott who dedicated his life to investigate numbers as a religious symbols says with great clarity that, "Numbers are a key to the ancient views of cosmogony — in its broad sense, spiritually as well as physically considered and to the evolution of the present human race; all systems of religious mysticism are based upon numerals." (8. p.15). At this point, we agree with an ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who asserts that "Numbers are the highest degree of knowledge. It is knowledge itself". In Islamic philosophy the number seven is considered the holy one, and has some special meanings. According to the latest religion, God created world in seven days and the earth atmosphere has seven layers. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, this geographical fact was proved by scientists, but we irrationally believe in creation of the world during seven days. Actually in the Book of Genesis is written that "The God rested on the seventh day". Therefore, Sunday became a day of rest for all Christians. They accept Sunday as Christ's resurrection day, consequently, logically this day became the day of worship for Christian believers. On the contrary, in Islam Friday, and in Judaism Saturday (there the day of rest begins after sundown on Friday until Saturday night) are accepted as days of rest. All these days symbolize definite religious facts, which were marked under the certain numbers that indentify it. On the other side, the sacred numbers somehow strongly connected with hidden or occult mysteries of nature. Alongside with being mathematical quantity, numbers represent universal symbols and this fact clearly explains that numbers are not only for indicating

mathematical sorting, but also for disclosure of ideas of cosmogony, secrets of nature, and philosophical framework of the life. The God who controls universe, at the same time regulates the actions of mankind. We live inside some system which is encrypted with numbers, and everything in human life and in human fate was introduced in order, and here the number plays a great role categorizing events upon our life. In Western superstition, the number 13 is considered unlucky one. Though the bad luck of number 13 comes from Western culture, it was spread all over the world in a short while, and now almost everywhere across the world bad luck of number 13 is accepted. But investigations show that there is a compelling religious reason behind it. According to Bible, there were 13 people in The Last Supper and the 13<sup>th</sup> person betrayed Jesus. So, 13 is a symbol of betrayal for whole Christian world. In light of these considerations, we may find remarkable similarities with Honore de Balzac's views about numbers. He writes, "Numbers are intellectual witnesses that belong only to mankind". Indeed, Balzac wanted to emphasize occult and mystic power of relationship between numbers and human destiny. Greek philosopher Pythagoras reduced number system to 9 and claimed that all other numbers can be repeated upon the numbers till 9. All monotheistic religions accept number 1 as sacred. It represents God and his unique authority. Everything begins with one; one is a beginning of everything. All numbers are created from 1. For example,  $5 = 1+1+1+1+1$ . In this simple mathematical system there is a deep philosophical meaning. One changes nature of numbers. Pythagoras system divides numbers to odd and even ones. If 1 is added to an even number, it becomes odd, but when 1 is added to an odd number, it changes into even. In Semiotic plan, odd numbers symbolize masculinity (1 symbolizes the God, as the God's gender is supposed to be male) and even numbers (woman indication begins with 2) symbolize femininity and these numbers inevitable chase each other. According to semioticians religion with its sacred signs tries to communicate with people in order enlighten them with religious realities. It is possible to establish certain connective relations between the semiotics and ecclesiology, which carry out an informative function. Ecclesiology (comes from Greek word "ekklesia", which means "church") studies church, its origin, history and symbols according to its decorations and construction stiles, to cut short, it refers to communicative signs of religion

depicted on church walls or everything connected with church system that gives religious information. All those symbols refer to some definite period of culture, and people need to understand the code hidden under the content. Ultimately, we turn back to the words of Greetz who calls religion a cultural system. First and foremost, religious symbols provide communication between God and people, they carry messages which directs people to purity, spirituality, divinity, morality, saintliness, goodness and clarity. All religious signs and symbols have a mission to make the world better place for people. The last and least, religious symbols express phenomenological realities of historical kind, mysterious kind, philosophical kind, etc. At this point sacred signs play a great role in religious dissemination. For example, a cross is a main attribute of Christianity. Being a universal symbol cross symbolizes Jesus' death and resurrection. Every time the one who looks at cross thinks of unjustness which speaks about Jesus' story. Thereby symbols and signs are become the way of communication because signs and symbols cry out for explanation. Furthermore, the aim of religious symbols in organizing universally recognized language are to help people of the same conviction to understand each other spiritually without uttering any single word. Let us review another example; a bindi is a colored dot on the center of Indian women which indicates marriage status. Wearing bindi is a tradition, the roots of which is found in oldest Indian text the Rig Veda and associated with Hindu religion and culture, which go back to India's 5000 years history. This decorative mark indicates beginning of everything, cosmos and at the same time it symbolizes the third eye. An interesting point is that bindi has circle shape, which symbolizes eternity. American philosopher Susanne Langer considers an art "logical expression" of feelings, and ultimately emotional connections between a symbol and its meaning have inevitable character. She emphasizes cultural structure of the meaning. As a matter of fact, Langer's comparative analyses show that, signs refer to things or objects for example; a card pictured fork and knife means nearby restaurant, whereas symbols refer to ideas or notions, for instance, a cross refers to ideas about Christianity. Sign is more accurate and has more communicative character, sometimes is used to give warning of some important rules to people, which is commonly expressed in visual graphics, while symbol urges interpretation. Now we can clearly admit that there is a pragmatic

relationship between sign and interpreter. For instance, a skull (or skeleton) is a sign, and indicates death or danger, but tomb or grave is a symbol which reminds us death as the end of the life. Sign's main aim to display information, but symbol refers to hermetic ideas and needs interpretation. Through religious prism, symbols associated with occult beliefs which help people to understand God's philosophy and demands for mortal and immortal life. Let us continue with another example, fish is a religious symbol in Western civilization. It's cult of Christianity which has various interpretation variants. It would be better to examine one of them; the definition of acronym for "ICHTHUS" is "Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Savior"- which means "fish" in translation from the Greek. On the walls of the underground cemetery ancient Romans painted images of fish in order to symbolize their religion. Despite, one more essential semiotical meaning of fish which came up to our times is that these water animals with thick scales (also circle shaped) symbolize fertility. That's why mainly in religious holidays the fish meal on table is preferable. Another symbol for fertility is a tree. But the most important point is that a tree is a mythological element, it stands at the beginning of everything, and hypotheses lead us to Garden of Eden where life begins. A tree of knowledge with its forbidden fruits represents good and evil. Religious literature proves the facts that a tree not only mythological element or symbol of number of things, but it is cult and in ancient texts it is associated with occult beliefs. For example, in Slavic mythology a tree symbolizes the cycle of life and eternity and cosmic rebirth. In "Religion as a Cultural System", Clifford Greetz writes: if Langer is right that "the concept of meaning, in all its varieties, is the dominant philosophical concept of our time," that "sign, symbol, denotation, signification, communication . . . are our (intellectual) stock in trade," it is perhaps time that social anthropology, and particularly that part of it concerned with the study of religion, became aware of the fact (10. p. 73). For the trajectory of my own research, I came to such a conclusion, that symbols work together to create powerful, long-lasting moods, motivations. So, the symbols of the realigion are showing people and creating these values or ideals or moods or things that motivate us. It is better to conclude the paper with such kind of words that symbols which are derived from the culture are stored inside the culture, and if we go back in time, we find mythological system indicating explanations of

universal truth in a descriptive way. On the other side, this is code system capable indicating symbols simultaneously in many languages and has tight connections with belief systems of society. On the top of that, semiotic approach to religion lay out historical and cultural background of earth, which demonstrates hermetic connections of world with its past and present existence. Modern investigations evidence that religious symbols give a deep impression of reality. As Umberto Eco suggests, “The catoptric universe is a reality which can give the impression of virtuality, whereas the semiotic universe is a virtuality which can give the impression of reality” (5. p. 226).

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