

## Sacred Symbols as Explanatory Geertz, Eliade and Lonergan

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This paper uses the thought of the philosopher and theologian, Bernard Lonergan, the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, the writer on religions, Mircea Eliade and a successor of Lonergan, Robert Doran, to look at sacred symbols. It argues that certain primary sacred symbols in a community function in an explanatory way. The paper concludes by illustrating how key symbols function in three religions: a native American religion, Christianity and Buddhism. The author notes that besides attending to the symbols of a religion, it is also necessary to pay attention to the concrete drama of daily living if we are to be able to interpret the symbols correctly.

Keywords: Blessingway (Navajo), Centre (Eliade), Thick Description (Geertz), Explanation (Lonergan), Symbol (Adler/Doran)

### ***Introduction***

The study of sacred symbols is a primary component in the hermeneutic investigation of religion. Phenomenological or descriptive methods can be a valuable approach to the study of religious symbolism. The methodology of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) invokes 'thick description' as a way of interpreting the symbols of a localized group. Regarding the study of symbols in their religious contexts he states:

The Anthropological study of religion is therefore a twofold 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 125.

He opines that researchers neglect the first. Therefore in light of his concern, in this paper I put forth a hypothesis concerning sacred symbols—the possibility of explanatory symbols—multivalent central symbols that encapsulate the essential religious meanings and values of a community.

Specifically, I make use of Geertz's methodology as a context and draw upon the distinction between description and explanation from Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) and the symbolism of the centre from Micea Eliade (1907-1986), to argue that certain primary sacred symbols in a community function in an explanatory way. I will demonstrate this by referencing three examples from the Diné (Navajo), Christianity, and Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. LONERGAN ON DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION

There is a fundamental distinction that occurs throughout Lonergan's thought between *description* and *explanation*. It is important to note that what Lonergan means by explanation is something specific but at the same time it is broader than 'scientific' explanation, although it includes science. He is concerned with the general horizon in which description and explanation occur and he understands that specific research fields articulate their own methods. The realm of explanation is the realm of theory.

Description pertains to objects as related to the inquiring human subject, i.e. "things related to us", it always involves the subject in the description. In contrast, explanation pertains to objects as related to one another, or "things related among themselves." The explanation as corroborated or verified is true independent of the subject. The movement to the world of theory occurs when a community moves beyond the world of practicality and commonsense to things as related to one another. Lonergan explains the difference between description and explanation:

Description deals with things as related to us. Explanation deals with the same things as related among themselves. The two are not totally independent, for they deal with the same things, and as we have seen, description supplies, as it were, the tweezers by

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<sup>2</sup> The treatment of the examples will not be even. Having most expertise in Christianity and having carried out original fieldwork with the Diné, I am admittedly less conversant in Buddhism. Nevertheless, the examples should suffice to illustrate my point.

which we hold things while explanations are being discovered or verified, applied or revised. But despite their intimate connection, it remains that description and explanation envisage things in fundamentally different manners. The relations of things among themselves are, in general, a different field from the relations of things to us. There is an apparent overlapping only when we consider the relations of men among themselves; and then the different procedures of description and explanation prevent the overlapping from being more than apparent, for description is in terms of the given while explanation is in terms of the ultimates reached by analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Scientific descriptions strive for exactness employing a range of methods and technologies to obtain descriptive data. These descriptions have “theoretical aspirations” which aim at universal validity. In contrast, there are commonsense descriptions that are restricted to the concrete and particular and have no theoretical aspirations.<sup>4</sup>

One of the goals in the natural and human sciences is to move from description to explanation.<sup>5</sup> That is, a biologist is not just interested in the description of this particular organism, she is interested in understanding how that organism is related to other organisms in the same genus or species. In other words, she is interested in the nature of the organism, and that cannot be obtained by limiting inquiry to description, sooner or later the scientist needs to move into the world of theory (things related to one another).

Description and explanation are intimately related. For example, in the natural sciences the knowledge that the moon is spherical, the explanation for its sphericity, was obtained through observing and describing the phases of the moon. Theorists began by describing the phases of the moon and eventually moved beyond description to give an explanatory account of the phases. In other words, they grasped the intelligibility in the relations between the phases—the phases as related to each other accounts for the explanation of the sphericity of the moon.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 316-17.

<sup>4</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 202-04; There is also a general bias of commonsense that prevents questions that would lead to theory. See *Insight*, 250 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 357.

<sup>6</sup> Lonergan refers to the example of the phases of the moon in *Insight* to illustrate a distinction in Aristotle between the *causa essendi* [the reason why it is so] and the *causa cognoscendi* [the reason why we know]. See *Insight*, 272; I have adapted his example to the distinction between description and explanation

Again, explanation is not limited to the realm of scientific theoretical explanation. Any researcher who begins to relate objects to one another within a given field of inquiry has moved into the world of theory. Social scientists, economists, architects, etc. move from the world of commonsense to the world of theory in their attempts to advance knowledge in their respective fields. Even theologians seek to explain the mysteries of the faith, not by attempting to justify the mysteries and dogmas that establish the faith, but by trying to relate the various doctrines to one another in order to enrich understanding, although since they are dealing with mysteries, their attempts are always proximate and analogous.<sup>7</sup> In Catholic theology the scholastic term *transubstantiation* exemplifies this type of explanation. It is attempt to account in metaphysical language for how the substance of the Eucharistic species are transformed during the Mass, while the material properties or accidents of bread and wine remain unchanged.

Lonergan's philosophy of intentional consciousness is one area where description and explanation do converge. We experience, understand and judge ourselves as experiencing, understanding and judging—what Lonergan calls the self-affirmation of the knower. This turn to interior consciousness begins with the experience and description of the dynamic operations moving from experience to understanding to judgment. It may seem precarious because the verification can only occur in a personal way, in the subject's relating the patterns of operations to oneself, affirming to oneself that one's knowing occurs in this manner. However, the fruit of the correct judgment, "I am a knower" is explanatory in that all human beings come to know through the same recurrent and cumulative patterns of experiencing, understanding, and judging. Again, the verification remains a personal stance affirmed by the subject's correct description of the operations as related to one another.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in view of the distinction between description and explanation, the question of phenomenology arises. Phenomenology as a

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because I think it illustrates the difference between the two and also illustrates their interrelatedness.

<sup>7</sup> On systematic theology, see Chapter 13, Lonergan, *Method in Theology*; the distinction between the method of theologians and the method in religious studies pertains to the faith perspective of the former. More precisely, the differences in their methods can be clarified by the different types of questions each one asks. See Dadosky, *The Structure of Religious Knowing*, 33 ff.

<sup>8</sup> This is the basis of Lonergan's epistemology. See *Insight*, Ch 10. I am grateful to a referee of this article for bringing my attention to this important point.

methodology is primarily descriptive, be that a description of data as it is manifests in consciousness or in a religious ritual as documented by an observer. In the social sciences and religious studies, phenomenological method is particularly useful because of its emphasis on epoché or suspended judgment. This can be helpful when trying to obtain precise descriptions of religious phenomena while trying to refrain from one's own cultural and religious biases. This would be useful to the anthropologist or religious scholar who is studying a group of people as an observer. Such is the case with the Clifford Geertz's 'thick description' and Mircea Eliade's phenomenology of religion, although Geertz does not consider himself to be a phenomenologist.

However, there are limitations to the method. Strict phenomenologists cannot move to further theoretical questions pertaining to the data which would yield explanation.<sup>9</sup> Although they may in fact be content with this fact, if the exigencies of human knowing demand a movement beyond description to explanation, then we can expect to see this manifest in Geertz and Eliade as well. For example, presumably when Geertz puts forth a definition of culture, as we will see below, he means that definition applies to all groups of people, not just to a particular group. Similarly, when Eliade begins to speak of *sacred space* or *homo religiosus*, he is speaking about a universal feature of human religious behaviour. I will summarize their respective approaches to sacred symbols before turning to the possibility of explanatory symbols.

## 2. CULTURAL HERMENEUTIC DESCRIPTION

Clifford Geertz would probably not view himself as a phenomenologist, but his emphasis on description, especially interpretive description, places him within that broader orientation. He implements an interpretive descriptive method in cultural anthropology. He invokes the term "thick description," coined by Gilbert Ryle, as a means for doing ethnography.<sup>10</sup> Thick description is contrasted with thin description. Thin description merely records the fact of an event while thick description tries to determine the intentionality of the subjects being recorded in the event. This "I-am-camera" approach of thin description does not attempt to discern, as Ryle's example emphasizes, a wink as a spontaneous twitch, a wink as social communication, or a wink as mockery of the social

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<sup>9</sup> See Lonergan's discussion of the limitations of phenomenology in Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, 275-279.

<sup>10</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 6.

communication. It simply records the fact of the wink. In contrast, thick description involves the further interpretive move which includes the intentionality of the subject.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, Geertz will speak of the distinction between description and explanation. However, he associates description with “inscription” or “thick description” and explanation with “specification” or “diagnosis”. The difference between the two lies “between setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are [the goal of thick description], and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such [the goal of specification/diagnosis].”<sup>12</sup> Geertz is reluctant to presume an explanatory knowledge beyond that obtained in the local group. The goal beyond description seems vague. He mentions *specification* as “a system of analysis” that is “generic to those structures” viewing the interpretations of a particular group as they “stand out against other determinants of human behaviour.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, his methodology reflects a reaction against the influence of anthropological method such as Levi-Straus’ (1908-2009) structuralism that sought to identify universal patterns underlying cultural behaviour. Nevertheless, the question arises: in the sense that Lonergan defines explanation, does thick description yield a thin explanation?

For Geertz, the most effective way for understanding a culture is by “sorting out the structures of signification” or “established codes.” This is often best accomplished through an analysis of cultural symbols.<sup>14</sup> His emphasis on symbol and codes are part of the hermeneutics of thick description that enable one to grasp a particular group’s common meanings and values: “symbolic elements...are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.”<sup>15</sup> The symbols permeate the culture as illustrated by his definition of a culture as denoting:

...an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [human beings] communicate,

<sup>11</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 91.

perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the importance of symbols is included in his definition of religions as well.

Primarily religion exists as a subgroup within the cultural complex of meanings and relations which Geertz calls a *cultural system*. The latter functions as a heuristic device for obtaining a more specific understanding within a given culture. Among other cultural systems, he identifies art, law, and commonsense.<sup>17</sup> He defines religion as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [human beings] 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.<sup>18</sup>

The sacred symbols as they appear in religious ritual provide an important component to this “thick description” for understanding a culture. Particularly, religious ritual “involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world view.”<sup>19</sup> The overarching form of a society’s religious system is constituted by a “cluster of sacred symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole.”<sup>20</sup> Geertz highlights the ritual process in terms of its “symbolic forms” which are representative of the culture’s ethos and world view. He states:

In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one’s sense of reality....<sup>21</sup>

Attention is drawn to the sacred symbols that are important to each respective society because they contain a certain compact summary of a society’s values, beliefs and worldview:

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<sup>16</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> For a treatment of *art, law* and *commonsense* as cultural systems see Geertz, *Local Knowledge*.

<sup>18</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 113.

<sup>20</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 112.

Such religious symbols, dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt somehow to sum up, for those for whom they are resonant, what is known about the way the world is, the quality of the emotional life it supports, and the way one ought to behave while in it. Sacred symbols thus relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import.<sup>22</sup>

Certain religious or “sacred symbols” have a priority which “function to synthesize a people’s ethos.”<sup>23</sup> It is precisely these types of symbols, those that hold together the meanings and values of a community as particular expressions of communal identity, which will concern us here.

### 3. ELIADE AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CENTRE

Geertz would be suspicious of Eliade’s attempts to acquire underlying universal structures of religion. Still, what will interest us here is Eliade’s reference to the hermeneutics of the centre—those concepts that encapsulate the worldview of a particular group—those that capture what Gilbert Ryle refers to as the “genius” of a people.

According to Eliade, religious or sacred symbols are multivalent. By this he means a symbol’s “capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.”<sup>24</sup> He explains further:

Images by their very structure are *multivalent*. If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things, it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts. (We know what desperate efforts have been made by various theologies and metaphysics, oriental as well as occidental, to give expression to the *coincidentia oppositorum*—a mode of being that is readily, and also abundantly, conveyed by images and symbols). It is therefore the image as such, as a whole bundle of meanings, that

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<sup>22</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism.” In Eliade & Kitagawa (eds.), *History of Religions*, 86-107 at 99.



is *true*, and not any *one* of its meanings, nor one alone of its many frames of reference.<sup>25</sup>

Multivalence is closely related to one of the central themes in Eliade's notion of sacred symbolism—the *symbolism of the centre*. For religious people, Eliade claims, every “microcosm, every inhabited region, has what may be called a ‘Centre’; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all” (i.e. sacred above all other profane places). The Centre is where the sacred has revealed itself or at least a place that has been ritually constructed where the sacred is accessible. In addition, any microcosm or inhabited region is not limited to one sacred centre; there remains the potential for a multiple and even an unlimited number of centres in a given region.<sup>26</sup> At this point, several themes of Eliade's theory of sacred symbolism converge with his notion of the *centre*. The symbol of the centre represents at once: the point where the sacred or the *real* is revealed or encountered, the *axis* whereby the three cosmic regions are made accessible so that one can communicate with the ‘gods,’ a sacred space ‘recreating’ the creation of the world, and a sacred time ‘recreating’ the moment of creation.

Obviously, symbols of the centre may take multiple forms and various expressions, such as the sacred mountain, the sacred tree, the Pillar of the World, the ladder, the mandala and the temple. In Christian theology, for example, the cross becomes a symbol for Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and a focal point for the Christian faith—the cross is a symbol of the centre for Christians. Moreover, Eliade would interpret the cross as representing the *axis mundi* for Christians in that it connects the three cosmic regions: Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Eliade draws this conclusion from the Christian belief that following the crucifixion Christ descends to Hell, leads those souls to Heaven, and opens the way for the rest of humanity on Earth to have access to Heaven.

In addition, the centre becomes a focal point for religious ritual life and worship as in the case of a ritually constructed sacred space, or temple. In Islam, for example, the holy rock of Mecca represents a centre where devout Muslims must make a pilgrimage in order to realize their faith fully. For Eliade this exemplifies the power of accessing the centre; as one encounters the sacred, or the real, one's life is transformed, and one's authentic religious commitment is deepened.

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<sup>25</sup> Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 39.

One can see how the symbolism of the centre leads into the topic of the religious orientation and ritual life of human beings. For Eliade, human beings have a natural desire to live near the sacred, that is, near the centre. He refers to this natural religiosity of human beings as *homo religiosus*. This desire to live near the sacred at all times is reflected in symbols that express human beings' conscious or unconscious longings for their true centre. This type of symbolism is especially reflected in their dwellings, temples and cities.

Finally, there is an additional function of the symbol of the centre which Eliade employs as a hermeneutic device and this will concern us here. That is, he believes it is possible to locate the centre of a specific religion by identifying the "central conception which informs the entire corpus of myths, rituals and beliefs."<sup>27</sup> In many cases the centre represents the focal point of belief in a religion where one has primary access to the sacred. In turn, the centre is expressed in the core or central symbols of a community or faith tradition. In Christianity, for example, the central principle of faith or centre is the figure Jesus Christ. In other religions, the centre is not always easily identifiable. For example, Eliade notes that initially the central conception in traditional aboriginal religion in Australia was believed to be *totemism*.<sup>28</sup> He states that this belief about the centre of aboriginal religion has been since corrected:

Whatever one may think of the various religious ideas and beliefs brought together under the name of 'totemism', one thing seems evident today, namely, that totemism does *not* constitute the *centre* of Australian religious life. On the contrary, the totemic expressions, as well as other religious ideas and beliefs, receive their full meaning and fall into a pattern only when the *centre* of religious life is sought where the Australians have untiringly declared it to be: in the concept of the 'Dreaming Time,' that fabulous primordial epoch when the world was shaped and man became what he is today.<sup>29</sup>

Identifying the centre of Australian aboriginal religious life where *they* insist it belongs, namely in the Dreaming Time, or the Dreaming, enables one to better interpret the Australian religious worldview.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Eliade, "A New Humanism," *Quest*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> On *totemism*, see Wagner, "Totemism," in Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 14, New York: Macmillan, 1987, 573-576.

<sup>29</sup> Eliade, "A New Humanism," 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> The question remains as to what extent a Westerner can ever properly understand Aboriginal religious worldviews. The question lies beyond the scope of this study but the Australian theologian, Frank Fletcher, has addressed the

Hence, what is central to traditions is always expressed in the symbolism of a centre. In the case of the Dreaming Time, it functions as a centre insofar as it represents the hermeneutic core of traditional Aboriginal religion. Nevertheless, the mythology ascribed to it simultaneously contains various symbols of the centre.

Other theorists have corroborated Eliade's hermeneutic of the centre of a religion, such as John Farella's work on the Diné (Navajo) philosophy *Mainstalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy*. Therein he argues that the hermeneutic centre of their complex worldview lies in the Blessingway Ceremony, symbolized by the corn stalk. I will return to this below. It goes without saying that the symbolic expressions of the centre may vary.

The symbolism of the centre as hermeneutic may be one of Eliade's most provocative contributions to the study of religions. Although this is not to imply that simply locating the centre of religion is sufficient for an exhaustive understanding of a religious tradition. In reality religious views are more complex, and one must consider numerous factors when attempting to interpret religious data. Nevertheless, identifying the centre of a religion through its various symbolic expressions provides an interpretive tool to assist those seeking to understand vastly different religious worldviews. In the case of the Australian aborigines, as Eliade pointed out, to miss the hermeneutic of the centre is miss the interpretation altogether, to identify it properly is to at least orient one in the right direction.

In sum, if sacred symbols can synthesize a peoples' ethos, as Geertz states and some of the symbols can express the hermeneutic centre of a worldview as Eliade states, then to what extent can we say that such symbols, appropriately interpreted in context, can function in an explanatory way, that is, insofar as the multiple communal meanings expressed within those symbols can be related to one another thus offering a 'thick description' of the people's worldview? However, the question arises in light of Lonergan's definitions of description and explanation, to what extent is a thick description really moving toward a proscribed explanation? It would seem that once an ethnographer begins relating the symbols or codes of a culture to one another, one has moved beyond

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issue with respect to Lonergan's foundations. See Fletcher, "Towards a Dialogue with Traditional Aboriginal Religion," *Pacifica* 9 (June 1996), 164-174 and "Finding a Framework to Prepare for Dialogue with Aborigines," *Pacifica* 10 (February 1997), 25-38.

description. In other words, is Geertz's thick description really an explanatory account of the peoples' ethos delimited to that context?

#### 4. THE NOTION OF AN EXPLANATORY SYMBOL

One does not typically ascribe to symbols the ability to 'explain' perhaps because traditionally explanation has often been associated with the theoretical differentiations of consciousness rather than with the aesthetic or religious differentiations of consciousness.

One of Lonergan's successors, Robert Doran, suggests that it might be possible to speak of symbols and explanation at least in the context of depth psychology. He states that a "mind that knows the terms and relations of its own symbolic productions can use symbols in a explanatory fashion...."<sup>31</sup> To illustrate what Doran means he refers to the work by psychoanalyst Gerhard Adler, *The Living Symbol*.<sup>32</sup> In this text, Adler documents the dreams of one of his patients over a considerable period of time. The result is an explanatory account of the symbolic content of the patient's dreams is revealed from select content during the course of roughly one year. In other words, there is a descriptive account insofar as the symbolic content of the dreams is recorded and reported by the patient, but insofar as the symbols are related to each other over the course of the year, there is an explanatory account of the inner-workings of the patient's psyche. In this way, Doran argues for symbols communicating explanatory knowledge, that is, as the symbols are related to each other, they can communicate a 'story' or explanatory account of the patient's process towards self-transcendence.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted, however, this is not exactly how Lonergan employs the notion of explanation in *Insight*. In the latter, explanation is universal in the way that the mathematical definition of a circle is universal. The explanation holds true apart from a commonsense specific context. In addition, explanation pertains to the realm of the non-imaginal. For example, the definition of a circle is expressed in mathematical symbols but the

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<sup>31</sup> Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> See Adler, *The Living Symbol*; see also Ch 5, Doran, *Subject and Psyche* and Ch 6, *Intentionality and Psyche, Theological Foundations*, vol. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, this kind of explanatory account would be specifically oriented to the patient. Jung's theory of archetypes, by contrast, attempts to get a universal explanation of psychic symbols that applies to the whole human race, these archetypes are part of what he terms the collective unconscious.

intelligibility that is expressed by the symbols cannot be imagined, the intelligibility is something beyond the imaginal.

In the cases Adler documents in *The Living Symbol*, the relating of the symbols to one another from the subject's personal unconscious would not be universal because the explanation pertains strictly to an individual and does not hold for all human beings. However, this does not preclude the further step, that Carl Jung has taken, to relate the various symbols of various patients to one another in order to reach an explanation, which is what he is doing with his theory of archetypes. Secondly, it appears that relating the symbolic contents of the subject's unconscious to each other would pertain to the realm of the imaginal. In these two respects it would be difficult to employ Lonergan's notion of explanation in the strict sense that he develops it in *Insight*. However, it may be possible to invoke the notion of explanation in a broader sense if we take into account the fundamental distinction between description and explanation that Lonergan invokes:

Our distinction between description and explanation was between the type of knowledge that appeals ultimately to the relations of things to us and the type of knowledge that involves relations of things to one another.<sup>34</sup>

When I employ Lonergan's notion of explanation I use it in a broader sense than Lonergan expounds in *Insight*. Specifically, I suggest an application of a particular aspect of his notion of explanation, i.e. the relation of things to one another. So it may be more accurate to say that I am borrowing an aspect from his notion of explanation, as Doran does, and expanding it, rather than employing Lonergan's own notion as he defines it in *Insight*. I am also applying it in a way he does not, in multivalent symbolism.

Recall for Eliade symbols are multivalent—they are capable of communicating many meanings, which may even conflict at times. Likewise, symbols are subject to multiple and varying interpretations.

Religious symbols are often invoked for descriptive purposes in order to express the meaning one encounters in an experience of transcendent mystery. In such cases, the symbols convey the meaning of the experience in relation to the subject. The symbols function in a descriptive manner with the symbol as an object related to the subject. The interpretation of a symbol may vary as different subjects interpret the

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<sup>34</sup> Lonergan, *Understanding and Being*, 141.

symbol differently, but again the multivalent feature of symbolism permits a multitude of personal meanings.

In the case where symbols represent common meanings and values in a community, interpretation is limited to those common experiences and interpretations. In addition to the descriptive aspect of symbolism, there exist *explanatory symbols*. I emphasize that the aspect of his definition of explanation more broadly applies to refer to objects as related to other objects. Further, the explanatory symbols pertain to sacred symbols representative of a community or tradition.

In keeping with the multivalent feature of symbolism, wherein meanings ascribed to the symbol vary, it is also possible to relate the different meanings representative of the community within the symbol to one other. I refer to those sacred symbols that express what Eliade defines as the hermeneutical centre of a community. When the various *meanings* ascribed to the symbol are related to one another then the symbol is functioning in an explanatory manner—expressing in symbolic form the various common meanings and values of a community. In this way, the symbol ‘explains’ the various relations in a given community that they hold as true and valuable. The advantage of positing explanatory symbols is that it may provide an interpretive key for understanding more accurately and efficiently the complex worldviews of various religious traditions.

This does not necessarily mean that by an explanatory symbol one relates the various personal or individual meanings ascribed to the symbol. Rather, the explanation pertains to those meanings ascribed to the symbol that represent the values and identity of the community as a whole. These meanings are acquired historically as the religious tradition is formed and develops. A religious symbol in a given community will express different meanings for different people in the community. To say that the symbol is descriptive in this sense simply refers to the meaning the symbol conveys to an individual. To one member the symbol may signify consolation, to another member it may signify dread or anxiety, and to another it may convey something entirely different. However, the symbol conveys more than personal meaning, it also conveys communal meaning. That is, the symbol also conveys the ‘meanings’ that the community has collectively ascribed to it. Still, it goes without saying that in most cases the communal meanings inform and shape individual interpretations of a symbol as well.

For now, I wish to establish the groundwork for a more extensive study of this notion.<sup>35</sup>

For Lonergan communally shared understanding often pertains to the realm of commonsense and likewise would be descriptive. However, I argue that a communal symbol can function in an explanatory way. When the various meanings of the symbol that a community as a whole has ascribed to it are related to each other, then the symbol can be said to be explanatory. Let us illustrate this further.

Let a given symbol expresses a series of meanings for a given community. Let us label the respective meanings ascribed to the symbol M1, M2, M3, etc. When each meaning (as expressed through the multivalent feature of the symbol) in the series is related to the others, then one can say that the symbol functions in an explanatory way. Moreover, in this way, the symbol can function as an interpretive device for understanding the worldview of a given community especially if the explanatory symbol in question is central to the community.

As stated above, Eliade's notion of the *symbolism of the centre*, presupposes that it is possible to locate the "centre" of belief of a community. This sacred centre is often expressed in central symbols. Eliade focuses mainly on aboriginal and ancient religions and their various symbolic expressions of the centre. I noted above the example of traditional Aboriginal religion in Australia whose members access the sacred or centre through the *Dreaming Time*. Let us examine some other symbols.

#### *Diné (Navajo): Cornstalk*

According to John Farella, the centre of the Diné (Navajo) traditional religion is the Blessingway ceremony (hózhooji). The Blessingway ceremony is the centre of the entire chantway system in Navajo ritual life; and as a rite, it expresses symbolically and succinctly the entire Navajo worldview—although this worldview is highly rich and complex. It is the "backbone of Navajo philosophy."<sup>36</sup> He states:

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<sup>35</sup> Further exploration of the notion of explanatory symbols will undoubtedly entail a detailed study of P Ricoeur's and E Cassirer's studies of symbolism.

<sup>36</sup> Farella, *The Main Stalk*, 20. This author's own experience with the Navajo corroborated aspects of Farella's synthesis. See Dadosky, "Navajo Blessingway Ceremony," 214.

“Blessingway and Navajo culture are, from the native perspective, identical.”<sup>37</sup> This centre is often symbolized by the corn plant:

Navajos commonly conceptualize and refer to their philosophical and ceremonial system as a corn plant. The junctures where the plant branches are the branching off of the major ceremonials. The ‘roots’ extend into the underworld and, of course, refer to the pre-emergence stories. The main stalk is, on the one hand, a reference to hózhooji (blessingway), and, on the other hand (but really the same thing), a reference to the essence or the synthetic core of the philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

Note Farella’s nuanced distinction between Blessingway and the essence or synthetic core. The synthetic core of Diné philosophy and their traditional worldview is *sa’a naghái bike hózhó* (SNBH) traditionally glossed by early ethnologists as *long life and happiness* but it also can mean completeness, wholeness. These glosses do not capture the richness and depth of this fascinating and complex notion.<sup>39</sup> The phrase connotes two essential elements that make up entire the basis of life. Part of the difference is what I would call a principle of protection (*sa’a naghái*—SN) and a principle of beauty (*bik’e hózhó*—BH). For the Diné, the former is a male principle, the latter a female principle. These two are fundamental to every aspect of life and they permeate every aspect of the created order. The failure to grasp this complex central notion impedes any further understanding of Diné culture and religion. Beauty (*hózhó*) is the hermeneutic centre and the genius of the Diné philosophy. However, protection is needed in order to ensure that one walks in beauty so that the two principles SN and BH permeate every aspect of the Diné philosophy.

Leland Wyman in his classic study of the Blessingway ceremony states “All Navajo should identify themselves with them [SNBH]. This is the goal in life, and Blessingway by constant repetition reminds” them of this goal.<sup>40</sup> The Blessingway is an essential component in the promotion of SNBH and the particular ceremonies benefit not just the individual patient, but the entire community.<sup>41</sup>

Corn is a central symbol that permeates the entire Navajo traditional culture and ceremonial system. It is sacred. To walk in beauty,

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<sup>37</sup> Farella, *The Main Stalk*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> Farella, *The Main Stalk*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> For a more extensive and critical review of this notion see Farella’s *Main Stalk*, Ch 5.

<sup>40</sup> Wyman, *Blessingway*, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Farella, *The Main Stalk*, 183.



is to walk on the corn pollen path, which is to walk in the way of beauty and protection. The Blessingway promotes both of these. Gladys Reichard summarizes it as: "Corn is more than human, it is divine; it [is] connected with the highest ethical ideals."<sup>42</sup> Wyman concurs stating that corn pollen "the beautiful, is a fit gift for the gods".<sup>43</sup>

While the symbolic expressions of the centre vary, the hermeneutic centre remains the central organizing principle of the entire set of beliefs. For the Diné the hermeneutic centre is SNBH, and this is expressed in the complex religious ritual of the Blessingway ceremony. This ceremony is not only symbolized by the cornstalk, but the symbol of corn permeates the entire ceremony and their entire worldview. The corn symbolism functions in an explanatory way because it simultaneously represents the various meanings central to their ethos insofar as these meanings can be related to one another.

### *Christianity: The Cross*

The hermeneutic centre of Christian belief is the person and message of Jesus as communicated in the Christian Scriptures and as affirmed by conciliar statements in the early church (Nicaea and Chalcedon). That is, Christian beliefs about Jesus inform the entire corpus of faith and tradition. Notwithstanding the complexity of ecclesiastical and theological structures that exist in Christianity, its normative meanings pertain to the historical person and message of Jesus Christ.

To invoke the language of Eliade, as mediator between human beings and God, Jesus Christ constitutes the 'centre' where Christians access the sacred. Christians also seek to live *in* Christ, and by this seeking, they strive to live permanently in the sacred centre. In addition, while Jesus Christ is the central principle of faith in Christianity, the symbolic expressions of him as centre can vary. For example, in early Christianity the person and message of Christ was symbolized by a fish. The choice of this symbol was due to its manifold meanings. The Greek word for fish is ΙΧΘΥΣ (*ichthus*). The word served as an acrostic containing the letters representing the theological phrase: Ιησους Χριστος Θεου Υιος Σωτηρ *Iêsous Christos THEou Uios Sōter*

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<sup>42</sup> Reichard, *Navaho Symbolism*, 540.

<sup>43</sup> Wyman, *Blessingway*, 30.

(Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour).<sup>44</sup> The symbol was also one of baptism for the Christian swimming in the living waters of Christ. Since fish also provided sustenance it simultaneously spoke to the developing Eucharistic theology of the consumption of the body and blood of Jesus. Moreover, under persecution, the symbol of the fish could be used to identify other hidden Christians. A Christian could communicate to another individual by drawing half of the fish with his/her toe in the dirt, if the person responded in kind thereby completing the image, their common affiliation was discreetly communicated. In addition, the IXΘΥΣ acronym served as a simple catechetical device for new converts. For the early Christians, this common symbol contained multiple meanings that could be related to one another. More than just a description, the meanings ascribed to the IXΘΥΣ symbol, encapsulates the essence and ethos of Christian identity in an explanatory way.

It is perhaps with the age of Constantine, inaugurated with the peace of 314 C.E., that the symbol of the cross became the primary one of Christian identity. Constantine's decisive battle which won him the Emperor's throne was due, in his mind, to the vision of the XP *chi-rho* on the eve of battle and his subsequent use of the symbol as a battle emblem that led him to victory. Subsequently the post-persecution Christians sought to put a distinctive mark on Roman assembly halls by building apses into the subsequent architecture of their cathedrals to create the image of the cross. Similarly, Christians make the sign of the cross with their hands before invoking God in prayer.<sup>45</sup>

The cross has predominated and perdured throughout the history of Christianity. As a primary symbol of the hermeneutic centre of Christianity, it can function in an explanatory way. For Christians, it presupposes the Incarnation of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. The cross symbolizes simultaneously the death and resurrection of Christ. Since the death is interpreted as Jesus' sacrifice, this theme is carried over into the sacrament of the liturgy of the Mass. Since the message and example of Jesus includes one of death and rebirth, the cross becomes a baptismal symbol representing death to oneself and new life in Christ. Further, it is a spiritual symbol that functions as a source of strength for believers dealing with the struggles or 'crosses' of life. It is a symbol of hope signifying the redemption of humanity from sin in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>44</sup> Murphy, "Early Christian Symbolism," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 13, 667.

<sup>45</sup> See Schaff, "The Cross and the Crucifix," *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 2, 269-272.

The cross, as a communal symbol for Christians, conveys the various essential aspects of the Christian story. It is explanatory in the sense that the various meanings of this Christian communal symbol of the cross can be related to one another revealing the central ethos or synthetic elements of Christianity. However, it should be noted that the cross is not just a symbol for Christians; it is also a sign, one of hope for redemption and salvation in Christ.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Buddhism: Lotus flower*

The Lotus flower (Sanskrit: *padma*) is considered to be one of the eight auspicious symbols in Buddhism. The lotus flower is a symbol of human potentiality for purity and transcendence over the desires that lead to suffering. Mehr MacCarthur summarizes it thus

Buddhists believe that just as the lotus flower rises up from the depths of muddy ponds and lakes to blossom immaculately above the water's surface, so the human heart or mind can develop the virtues of the Buddha and transcend desires and attachments, to reveal its essentially pure nature.<sup>47</sup>

Many of the great figures of Buddhism, such as Guan Yin, bodhisattva of compassion, are often depicted on lotus thrones signifying their purity and achievement.<sup>48</sup> The unopened bud of a lotus symbolizes the potential for human beings for enlightenment.<sup>49</sup> In tantric Buddhism, the lotus can represent the female sex organ. In artistic depictions, particularly in esoteric Buddhism, the lotus is often depicted with eight petals symbolizing the eightfold path of enlightenment—the means of overcoming the suffering of desire.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the various colours of lotuses can symbolize different important aspects of Buddhism. The white lotus

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Langer makes the distinction between a symbol and a sign in her *A Philosophy in a New Key*. She influenced Geertz's understanding of symbol. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 57-63. For Langer, a sign gives information or direction while a symbol is thought conceptualized. See also Robin Koning's unpublished doctoral thesis, "Clifford Geertz' Understanding of Culture as an Anthropological Resource for Theology: A Lonergan Reading," 59-60; The cross is not just a symbol representative of key meanings and values of Christians but it is also a sign of their hope for salvation.

<sup>47</sup> McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Beér, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Beér, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Levenson, *Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism*, 124; McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art*, 48.

symbolizes “mental purity and spiritual perfection.”<sup>51</sup> The pink lotus symbolizes the historical founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni. The red lotus, especially when in full bloom, symbolizes the heart of compassion. The blue lotus is the symbol of knowledge and wisdom.<sup>52</sup>

This certainly does not exhaust the symbolism of the lotus. The various lineages of Buddhism are complex and at the risk of sounding trite, I simply want to indicate that the lotus is a central symbol in Buddhism; that its multivalency at once represents central features of Buddhism: the human potentiality for enlightenment, the great figures who have shaped the tradition, and the means by which that attainment can be achieved to name a few. In this way, the symbol is explanatory of the basic tenants of Buddhism.

### ***Conclusion***

Geertz is certainly aware of the existence of sacred symbols that are central to a religious community. He explicitly mentions some examples in his essay entitled, “Ethos, Worldview and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols.”<sup>53</sup> He states, “It is a cluster of sacred symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole, which makes up a religious system.”<sup>54</sup>

The scholars of religion who invoke Geertz’s anthropological method as the attempt to grasp the meanings embodied in symbols, should also note that this method alone is incomplete. It must include for Geertz the study of the behaviour in the local context in which it occurs. To attend primarily to the ‘core symbols’ can lead to an abstraction from the concrete drama of daily living. Account of such behaviour is also essential to interpretive description. The symbols themselves do not speak to the “flow of behaviour” or “social action” wherein “cultural forms find articulation.”<sup>55</sup>

Although Geertz’s notion of thick description does not appropriate sacred symbols in the way I have been suggesting, still his method helps to raise the question in light of Lonergan’s distinction between description and explanation as to whether there is some kind of

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<sup>51</sup> Frédéric, *Buddhism*, 62-3.

<sup>52</sup> McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art*, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 126-141, cf. 127.

<sup>54</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 129.

<sup>55</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 17.

limited explanation possible at the level of symbolic and mythical discourse.

We have adapted an aspect from Lonergan's notion of explanation in light of aspects of Eliade's thought in order to suggest that there is a sense where communal sacred symbols can function to 'explain' the relations among various beliefs within specific traditions represented by such symbols. In this way, the symbol can serve as an interpretive key for more adequately understanding and speaking about specific traditions.

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