

Arguments for a Symbol Theory of Embodied Religion

A Response to Mark Wynn

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ABSTRACT

Within a scientific view of the world, rituals and sacraments are suspect. They are often invoked as proof of the incompatibility of religion and modernity. Mark Wynn employs important theoretical and phenomenological arguments against this widespread view. These arguments allow for a non-reductionist understanding of everyday and religious experience. In my reply I reconstruct these considerations in the context of a symbol theory that incorporates insights of philosophical anthropology and the contemporary theory of emotion. In this light, metaphorical language about rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God or religion can be approached with interpretative strategies that can take criticisms into account.

KEYWORDS

symbol theory, rituals, sacraments

This paper presents some critical (but constructive) remarks, directed less at the arguments put forward by Mark Wynn than at the dismissive attitude toward religious symbols implied by this session's subtitle, 'Beyond a purely symbolic religion.' I aim to show that rituals and sacraments make

sense as embodiments of God only within – not beyond – symbol theory. My approach to symbol theory relies on a framework that departs from symbol theory proper, encompassing a whole set of methods for understanding embodied religion. The plausibility of my claim will be measured in large part by whether I succeed in reformulating the sense of ‘purely symbolic’ in terms of symbol theory.

Before sketching out my position, I consider Mark Wynn’s nuanced arguments for a theory of religious experience that he believes paves the way for an understanding of rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God. I begin with our (many) points of agreement. I then identify some problems that lead me to pursue a symbol theory approach to embodied religion.

1. MEANINGS AND EMBODIMENTS OF GOD

Mark Wynn’s text begins with a germane – and, in my view, spot-on – observation: the scientific worldview has the coercive tendency to see rituals and sacraments as deficient forms of engagement with the world. According to scientism’s naturalist epistemology, rituals and sacraments originate in a prescientific stage of civilization superseded by modern empiricism. In this view, not only rituals and sacraments but also positive religion itself (of which rituals and sacraments are essential embodiments) represent hold-overs from an outdated era.

A recent court ruling in Germany offers a forceful example of scientism at work. A four-year-old Muslim boy was hospitalized due to complications arising from a circumcision procedure he underwent a few days earlier, leading a local prosecutor to file criminal charges against the doctor who performed the operation. The judges at the regional appellate court in Cologne who presided over the case ruled that non-therapeutic circumcision inflicts permanent and irreparable damage to the body and without consent is tantamount to criminal assault. A political uproar followed the court’s decision, with the vast majority of Germans supporting the legality of ritual male circumcision. The ruling and the strong public reaction it provoked exemplify the conflict between the naturalist epistemology of modern medicine and a belief system that makes exceptions for traditional religious rituals.

According to Wynn, this conflict affects the very foundations of a theory of religious experience, and once again I agree. He argues that our idea of religious experience must, therefore, reject the assumptions of scientism.

That is to say, a philosophy of religion cannot be grounded on a concept of experience borrowed from naturalist epistemology. If we did, then religious values would wind up becoming isolated phenomena in a scientific ontology and we'd be forced to see them in pejorative light.

Wynn attributes scientism's reductionist approach to the analytic tradition, which, as we all know, was greatly shaped by logical positivism. Before anyone raises objections – pointing out the variety of views within the analytical philosophy of religion and the numerous corrections to logical positivism that have been offered over the years – we should see Wynn's claim for what it is: a pointed generalization, and in this sense it can hardly be denied; quite the contrary. Something like a scientist tendency accompanies the West's entire religious history. In every period of Western civilization, movements arose that overemphasized the discursive side of religious experience and that provoked counter movements in return. For instance, medieval scholastics such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham warned against the convergence of knowledge and faith, a concern that culminated in Luther's ideas about religious belief. When the intellectualism of Protestant orthodoxy grew too powerful, the Pietists sought to ground faith in personal devoutness. Any remaining rationalist hopes of securing religion through metaphysical knowledge were dashed once and for all by Kant, who claimed that an unbridgeable gap separated knowledge and faith – a tenet Schleiermacher would later take up as well, albeit in an entirely different way.

How should we address today's scientist approach to religious experience, which is far more virulent than its historical manifestations? I want to highlight two basic methodological premises made by Wynn that I find supremely helpful in this regard. First, Wynn couches his approach to religion in a theory of meaning. Religion – however we understand it – has always been bound up with meanings we can access through understanding. That is, religious or spiritual beliefs always reveal themselves to us as meanings we can understand. One particular advantage of seeing religion this way is that it spans philosophical traditions, uniting positions in continental theories of consciousness, in language philosophy, in theology and in hermeneutics.

Connected to this approach is Wynn's second premise: religious understanding must be distinguished from everyday understanding. For Wynn, this holds true – especially so – even when we acknowledge the structures they have in common.

This twofold approach shapes Wynn's very notion of meaning. His concept of 'existential meanings' takes into account the fact that we understand meanings not only theoretically, discursively and inferentially but also practically. In our everyday dealings with the world we have a special access to meaning that grounds our interactions with the environment. We can attempt to describe these existential meanings abstractly, but such descriptions never capture the actual richness of meaning we experience, and, at any rate, we rarely think about such everyday meanings on a meta-level.

For Wynn, existential meanings are tied to two central elements: bodily movements and place-relative contexts. Both these elements are crucial for religious experience. Just as existential meanings are 'embedded in particular material contexts' (90) to which we adjust our bodily movements, so too are sacraments and rituals. In the second section of his paper, Wynn specifically considers the phenomenology of sacred sites. He identifies many parallels between the meanings experienced at sacred sites and existential meanings in general, which leads him to conclude that the former are a special case of the latter. That is to say: not all existential meanings have religious meaning, but all religious meanings have existential meaning – the kind we register via bodily interactions with a specific place. For Wynn, religious meaning is a kind of microcosmic meaning in that it contains a holistic perspective. Microcosmic meanings may reveal themselves at sacred sites but also in per se nonreligious contexts where we feel a spatial relationship to our biography as a whole (places of childhood) or where we experience nature in a certain light.

The link between existential and microcosmic meanings forces Wynn to consider the epistemic structure of existential meanings in general and of microcosmic meanings in particular. In a somewhat surprising move given his initial arguments, Wynn does this by turning to the role of concepts. He argues that sensory phenomena represent religious meaning only when abstract concepts (divine nature, say) participate in the experience. Yet this does not contradict his basic idea that religious experience is not primarily theoretical or doctrinal; our abstract religious concepts must inhabit the sensory world and be registered by us directly in experience, which is why on several occasions he speaks of the body's own intelligence (77, 90). Wynn seeks to further support his argument with the notions of 'salience,' 'hue,' and the 'newly real,' but, to my mind, the main argumentative burden for Wynn lies on the previous claims that I reconstruct above and that ultimately ground his understanding of sacramental and ritual practice.

This brings me to some criticisms of Wynn's position. I begin with his section on 'Sensory Experience and the Embodiment of God.' There, if I understand him correctly, he draws a distinction that tries to account for the attitude expressed in the *beyond a purely symbolic religion* of the session subtitle. The distinction he makes is between a simple imaging relation and an imaging relation in which 'the thing imagined . . . is causally present in the image,' i.e. one in which divine nature, say, 'can appear in, or be bodied forth in, or "embodied in", the material world' (87). In traditional Christian dogmatics, the later phenomenon concerns the question of God's 'real presence,' a question that arises with particular vehemence in the doctrine of the sacraments. Wynn supports this distinction with several allusions to creation theology – he speaks of 'causal sustaining' and God's 'sustaining the world' (87, 90) – but the main thrust of his argumentation springs from incarnational Christology. His claim goes somewhat like this: if Jesus is the incarnation of God, then the sensory appearance of human beings is the embodiment, or manifestation, of God in a real sense. The moral lesson from this claim is poignant: the dignity of all persons must be acknowledged based on their sensory appearance alone. But this moral argument does not provide a sufficient theological justification for Wynn's position, as it can be argued from a universalist standpoint, which needs no theology. Neither does the doctrine of incarnation, beset as it is by a whole nest of philosophical problems. Wynn's final section, which applies his view to sacraments and rituals, provides no additional attempts at justification. Rather, Wynn describes his account as something 'for the more metaphysically adventurous' (90). Without denying in principle the possibility of such a metaphysics, I see Wynn's ontological assumption as unproven. Moreover, the idea of a supernatural causality, which runs through medieval theology, contradicts Wynn's initial idea: eschewing the scientific paradigm when developing a philosophical theory of religious rituals and sacraments.

In the following section, I turn to symbol theory to provide an alternative account, especially regarding the reality of rituals and sacraments. I begin by asking what exactly Mark Wynn means when he says that existential meanings are inhabited, or embedded, in material contexts. In conclusion, I offer some thoughts on Wynn's question about the epistemic character of nondiscursive understanding.

2. THREE APPROACHES TO EMBODIED RELIGION

2.1. How do we explain the phenomena of pre-discursive understanding described by Wynn, in which we comprehend existential meanings via bodily interactions with the world? A good place to look for answers is 20th-century philosophical anthropology. One reason its insights are important today is that they draw on natural and social sciences to overcome philosophical dualism and in doing so unintentionally provide biblical anthropology (especially Old Testament anthropology) with a new theoretical language. The basic tenet of philosophical anthropology is that human beings are ‘open to the world.’ Unlike animals, which are rooted in a specific environment, human beings must actively build a world in response to the challenges of existence. Culture – the habitat human beings engineer – is their ‘second nature.’ Crucially, human interactions with the world rely on mind and body as a single unit.¹ Sensomotoric feedback loops, an especially important aspect of early child development, guide our actions in a mutually reinforcing system of sensory perception and motoric orientation.² Over time, these somatosensory operations lend the objects we perceive a symbolic character: we immediately grasp their usefulness without having to interact with them directly; so unburdened, we can focus on adjusting our bodily movements to the exigencies of space. For example, we all know just by looking at a whitewashed wall which tactile or gustatory qualities it possesses without having to touch or taste it anew. This elementary symbolization takes place already at the optical level. Though these optical symbols form at the prelinguistic, or pre-discursive, level (similar to Wynn’s existential meanings), they can also develop into more complex symbols such as language.

2.2. According to the view of philosophical anthropology, our physical orientation in the world is mediated by symbols that do not necessarily start

¹ The sense of body as understood by Wynn and the conference organizers conflates the human body as physical object with the human body as a vehicle for experience. The German language distinguishes between *Körper* (the physical object) and *Leib* (the living body). In Husserl’s phenomenology, the concept of *Leib* plays a central role in overcoming dualistic anthropology. For more on the German notion of *Leib*, see Emmanuel Alloa a.o. (eds.), *Leiblichkeit: Geschichte und Aktualität eines Konzepts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

² For more on feedback loops, see Arnold Gehlen, *Man, His Nature and Place in the World*, trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). For more on Gehlen’s anthropology and its influence on the philosophy of religion, see Friedrich Ley, *Arnold Gehlens Begriff der Religion: Ritual – Institution – Subjektivität* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

out linguistic or discursive. Do such symbols play a role in our religious understanding? Let us recall Mark Wynn's premise that specific differences exist between nonreligious and religious forms of understanding. If symbols make religious understanding possible, then there must exist similar differences between symbols as well. Now the anthropological notion of the symbol I have sketched so far is quite broad. It is equivalent to the definition of *cognitio symbolica* in the enlightened hermeneutics of Scholastic philosophy, which understood the symbol as a cognition mediated by a sign. This unspecific understanding can be found in Schleiermacher's idea of symbolic action or in Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. But there also exists a narrower idea of the symbol that restricts it to a certain kind of sign. The bulk of this tradition goes back to Immanuel Kant, who understood symbolic cognition as a specific subclass of intuitive cognition (*cognitio intuitiva*) rather than its opposite, as argued by the Scholastics. For Kant, the true antithesis of symbolic cognition is discursive cognition, i.e. cognition through concepts.³

In addition to linking symbolic cognition with intuitive cognition, Kant emphasized religion's need for symbols. Not surprisingly, further contributions to the philosophy of religion have taken much inspiration from Kant's ideas. For instance, Paul Tillich and Paul Ricœur both essentially argue that the language of religion consists of symbols.⁴ Although Tillich and Ricœur start from very different premises,⁵ they agree for the most part that symbols are a class of signs whose indirect and intuitive meaning points beyond itself to a secondary, transcendent meaning. Symbols, thus, have a double intentionality. They represent everyday objects but also render sensible that which transcends representation. The transcendent meaning of symbols, like Wynn's religious forms of understanding, is not entirely irrational; it displays a certain inner logic, which, traditionally, has been understood as a form of analogy. The transcendent meaning ultimately exceeds the finite horizon of discursive imagination. Here lies the affinity between symbols and religious

³ On the intellectual history of the symbol, see Andreas Kubik, *Die Symboltheorie bei Novalis: Eine ideengeschichtliche Studie in ästhetischer und theologischer Absicht* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 25–80.

⁴ See Paul Tillich, 'The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,' in *Writings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 417 and Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 8.

⁵ Tillich relies on a theory of the unconditional; Ricœur takes a phenomenological approach.

understanding – and, on the other hand, the reason transcendent meaning must be rendered sensible.⁶

It should be clear from my brief sketch so far that the phenomena Mark Wynn analyses contain classic examples from symbol theory. A distinguishing feature of religious meaning is its ability to transport an experience of totality that affects reality as such or signifies in it a deep dimension that transcends everyday experience. Religious meaning is not intuitive in itself; to be able to imagine it at all, we must register it in sensory form. When Wynn argues that meanings ‘are embodied in material contexts,’ he describes the basic mechanism of the symbol.

This why we find at the heart of Wynn’s ideas about the relationship between sensory appearance and religious understanding the classical topos of religious aesthetics: the experience of grandeur, also known as the sublime. Kant believes the sublime comes in two forms: the mathematical sublime (things that have great magnitude) and the dynamic sublime (things that have great power).⁷ According to Tillich and Ricœur, not only linguistic signs can be understood as symbols in the narrower sense of the term; cultic acts and rituals can as well. Such activities and objects are made comprehensible by virtue of the symbolic function of language.

Although more can be said about the sublime and its relationship to symbolic cognition, I now want to address the suspicion that symbols are ‘purely’ symbolic – that they inadequately describe God’s reality – as this session’s title appears to insinuate. This suspicion is nothing new. As early as 1925, Tillich addressed misgivings about symbols, and he almost succeeded in eliminating them. In his view, the ‘nothing more’ of the symbolic was, in truth, a ‘nothing less,’ as without symbols we misjudge actual religious practice, if not close ourselves off to religious meaning entirely. But the actual argument used by Tillich and Ricœur to explain the symbol’s dialectic was this: religious meaning can only appear in the form of symbols.⁸ And, as I

⁶ See Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 10–18; and Paul Tillich, ‘The Religion Symbol,’ in *Writings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 213–28.

⁷ For more on Kant’s notion of the sublime, see Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, 23–29, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 98–146. Wynn’s concept of ‘hue’ corresponds to that of the sublime (12); his notions of ‘salience’ (11) and ‘the newly real’ (12–13) describe the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime, respectively.

⁸ Tillich implies so much in his *Religionsphilosophie* when he chooses to discuss symbolic action and language not in the first part (‘The Essence of Religion’) but in the second, titled ‘The Philosophical

have argued, religious meaning is embodied in actions, objects and words whose intuitive meanings are finite. Indeed, on close examination, we discover that *symbols need reality*. It is precisely in this sense that we refer to the transcendent *through* symbols without representing the transcendent as itself as ‘purely’ symbolic. This paradox between the infinite meaning of content and the finite meaning of form explains also the need from within positive religion to criticize its own finite manifestations. Think of the positions taken in the Jewish prophecy movement, in Early Christianity, in Monasticism, in the Christian sects, in Protestantism, or in the conflicts about the status of the sacraments. The telos of religious history in this respect is the full awareness of the symbol *as* symbol *in* the symbol. For Tillich it is at least the concrete, Christological symbol of a self-sacrificing intermediary that is paradigmatic; but so too are rituals, which as active performances prevent symbolic meaning as it pertains to objects from coagulating, so to speak. Both these examples – Christ as sacrifice and rituals as active performances – make explicit that even the most inverted symbols need a meaning in everyday reality to express transcendent meaning. This point was best emphasized by Ricœur, who in his hermeneutics of symbols also demonstrated its truth.

2.3. We are left with the question as to the epistemology of symbolic understanding. As I mention above, Wynn too poses this question and hints that its answer lies in concepts, which he believes both inform our sensory experiences of religious meaning and develop from them. But this suggestion, as well as Wynn’s idea that we are guided by the ‘body’s own intelligence,’ does not identify the specific epistemic form of religious understanding.

The beginnings of a real answer, I argue, can be taken from recent studies in the philosophy of emotion, and I believe Wynn would follow me in this. Unlike previous generations of theorists, in the last 15 years or so philosophers have sought to prove that emotions possess a specific form of rationality or intelligence.⁹ Despite their many differences, they all agree that emotions neither result from propositional or discursive beliefs nor represent subject-

Doctrine of Appearance.’ See Paul Tillich, *Religionsphilosophie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, I (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959), 294–364.

⁹ See, for instance, Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

tive states or desires. Rather, emotions are states that represent and evaluate objects in a specific sort of way. But what these philosophers deliberately overlook is that this understanding of emotions was already put forth in the classic texts of religious phenomenology. The German theologian Rudolf Otto, for instance, rejects the idea that the emotion of the numinous is an irrational condition existing only in opposition to rationality. Instead he argues that it is a 'category of value and [...] a definitely "numinous" state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied.'¹⁰ In our emotional response to experience, the world – and with it, our very selves – appears in a new 'hue,' to borrow Wynn's expression. From this perspective, emotions can be seen as mental correlates of religious symbols and as forms of religious understanding. Neither for Otto nor for recent philosophers of emotion does this perspective speak in favour of irrationalism. Rather, it provides a more complete idea of rationality, including the rationality of religious symbols. And since emotions belong to the embodied soul we have a quite narrow sense of embodied religion.

¹⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 7.