Religious Symbols in Public Space: Symbolic Effect as the Collective Intentionality of an Interpretive Community

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The contribution argues that the common definition of a religious iconic symbol, which builds on the similarity of the symbolized and the symbol, or a presence of the symbolized in the symbol, offers little help in analyzing the process in which a symbol assumes its status and role. The latter, however, is of special relevance in those cases in which a “non-religious” symbol in the public sphere is given a religious significance. Applying the philosophy of John R. Searle, the contribution discusses cases of Buddhist iconic symbols in Europe. Symbols, it is argued, become symbols through the collective intentionality of communities (religious or secular), and their efficacy, or “symbolic power,” is nothing less (or no more) than the respective communities’ normative assumptions on how interactions with the symbols shall take place. Therefore, “symbolic power” is neither to be construed as a special quality of the symbol (energized by a correlation of similarity between the iconic symbol and the “symbolized”), nor as something homogeneous, i.e. a power that will always trigger similar representations or reactions within individuals of a certain community. Against theories assuming an inherent agency of things and symbols, it is hold that the functionality of symbols, or their “deontic power”, can only be assured by declarative speech acts. Furthermore, from an etic perspective, the intention of the symbol’s creator must be taken into consideration. Emic perspectives, in contrast, often define an iconic symbol without reference to its context of production. Adapting a thought experiment by Hilary Putnam – a line drawn by an ant in the desert sand that by mere chance displays a recognizable “depiction” of a Buddhist “wheel” symbol – the external observer should recognize the fact that in this case the “iconic depiction” does not entertain a relation of “referentiality” to any object or representation. Emic discourse of religious traditions, however, devalue the specific circumstances and conditions of production – that, in this case, the ant did not intentionally draw a Buddhist wheel. These processes can be further elucidated.
by analyzing two real-world cases: In the first, Bernard Huwiler, a Swiss artist, had made, in 2006, a large mandala of colored stones for an art exhibition. It was announced that the mandala, which had certain similarities with a Buddhist maṇḍala, will be used as a stage for a performance. A protest letter, published by a local newspaper, pointed to the sacral quality of mandalas and made an appeal not to destroy the mandala in an act of blasphemy. After the performance in which the piece of art was damaged, the artist reflected the issue again, rebuild the mandala and invited Buddhist monks, who ritually desacralized the maṇḍala, and only after that it was destroyed and dispersed. A second, more recent case pertains to large Buddha statue that a Malaysian-British artist, Han Chong, had sculptured for an exhibition in Munich, “A Space Called Public – hoffentlich öffentlich [“hopefully public”]” (2013). The statue of a meditating Buddha, more than 3 Meter in height, was placed on a well-known plaza in Munich, but not in an upright position. It lay on its back, with a lowered head, so that observers were able to read the inscription on the bottom plate, “Made in Dresden.” Actually – so the artist was quoted – this, and the whole installation, was meant to problematize the difference between decorative Buddhas on the global market of consumption, and the “spiritual significance” of such statues especially in Asian countries. However, soon German Buddhists articulated protest against the profanation of the Buddha – yet, even a “protest meditation” did not convince the curators or the artist to dismount the statue. Interestingly, after the finissage the statue was given as a present to a Buddhist temple in Berlin.

Both cases reveal how a piece of art can assume the status function of a religious symbol, and that such processes may draw not on the similarity of an assumed “symbolized”, but on the similarity to other cogent iconic representations, and that, for institutionalizing this “sacral” perspective, declarations articulated in language are essential. Therefore, conflicts emerging from different interpretations of an artifact as either religious symbol or piece of art cannot be resolved by referring to a transcendence reference inherent in the symbol itself. As a general consequence, the demand by religious actors of treating “symbols” as religiously significant and, in consequence, of normative expectations in regard to respectful interaction, should not be construed in relation to the iconic object, or symbol, in question. Of relevance is, rather, if, and how, the collective intentionality of the community – or, in the case of conflicts, of the respective communities – shall be respected (though to decide in such questions is no longer a task within the domain of the study of religion, but rather a political and legal question).
The Roman Mithras cult is one of the so-called Oriental cults that spread in the Roman Empire. We continue to encounter the same problem with all of the cults in question. It is a fact that many of the gods and goddesses who were honoured in these cults bear names that had already been known for centuries in the different religions of the Ancient Middle-East. The question is: What was their connection to their namesakes from the Graeco-Roman world, with whom we are familiar?

The heritage of antiquity, represented by Statius, Lucian, and Porphyrios, already identifies the god Mithras, honoured in the Roman Empire, with the god Mithra, whose cult has left traces in the Iranian cultural space from different areas from Asia Minor to Central Asia and India. The position that the Roman Mithras cult is identical with the Iranian Mithra cult had, by the end of 19th century, been adopted by Franz Cumont, who laid the foundation for modern research on the Mithras cult, which was passed on for a long time as scientific dogma. Today, there are only a few researchers who consider the Roman Mithras cult to be an import cult originating from Iran. The researchers primarily fall into the category of supporters of one of two positions. Representatives of both sides are certain that the Roman Mithras cult is new, a cult formed during the Roman Empire, but they have different opinions on whether and to what extent the new cult is associated with the religious heritage of Iran. Radicals deny any associations between the Roman Mithras and Iranian Mithra, except for the name of the god. However, another group of researchers considers it possible that the new cult integrated certain parts of Iranian religious heritage.

Having analysed the associations between the Roman Mithras cult and the Iranian Mithra cult postulated by several researchers, the author of this article concludes that although the cult cannot be considered an import cult from Iran, the radical standpoint is not justified either, as it denies any contribution by Iranian religious heritage to the formation of the new cult. In addition to the name of the god, a Latinised version of the ancient Indo-Iranian god name Mitra/Mithra, the cult includes some other elements associated with Iranian religious heritage.

Thus, the god’s solar nature can be derived from Iranian religious heritage. Although Avesta does not identify Mithra with the sun, and the historical heritage of the Achaemenid era also considers them to be separate gods, Mithra and the sun are identified with one another from the 1st century BCE, and over time Mithra becomes more of a sun god. The solar nature of Mithra is iconographically emphasised with a halo surrounding Mithra’s head, borrowed from Greek art and
seen on reliefs from Hellenistic Asia Minor (from the territory of the Kingdom of Commagene; 1st century BCE), on coins from the Kushan Empire (1st–2nd century BCE), and on different monuments from the Sassanid era (Taq Bostan rock relief, 4th century BCE, images on coins and signets). The solar nature of Mithras is also emphasised by inscriptions and reliefs from the Roman Empire, whereby such god images have also been preserved that show sunrays emanating from his head.

Another important common feature for the Roman Mithras and the Iranian Mithra is that both gods are linked to contracts/alliances, the iconographic symbol of which is shaking hands. The validation of contracts with a vow given in the name of Mithra has been verified already from the Achaemenid era. The oldest currently-known images of Mithra from the Kingdom of Commagene depict the local king shaking hands with the god (1st century BCE). Obviously these images refer to a friendship treaty between the king and the god. Mithras is also seen shaking hands with the sun god Helios/Sol in the Roman Mithras cult, and brotherhood members called themselves *syndexii* (“those who are connected through shaking hands with the right hand”). Due to geographical reasons, it is viable that the creators of Roman Mithras cult iconography may have been familiar with the Mithra images of Asia Minor.

Additional associations between the Roman Mithras and the Iranian Mithra can also be found. While Iranian mythology has no tradition of Mithra slaying an ox, he is associated in particular with plant growth and water. The Roman Mithras has a link with both: Often plants are growing from the slain ox’s body or its blood, and Mithras is also depicted shooting an arrow into a rock from which water bursts out. As the wall paintings found from the Hawarte (Syria) Mithras sanctuary indicate, the Roman Mithras cult was also familiar with the idea of Mithras as a conqueror of demons, already seen in Avesta. The motives mentioned above prove that although the Mithras cult was a new cult that developed during the time of the Roman Empire, it integrated old motives from Iranian religious heritage.

_Schrift und Charisma: Zur Rolle von Lehrbüchern in der pfingstlichen Mission in Subsahara-Afrika
Script and Charisma: The Role of Textbooks in Pentecostal Mission in Sub-Saharan Africa_

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This contribution deals with books written by Dag Heward-Mills, the founder and leader of a Ghanaian Pentecostal-charismatic church called the Lighthouse Cha-
pel International. It is argued that Heward-Mills aims to establish a textual community with the help of his books, i.e., a community based on his teachings and materializing through the organizational structures following from them as well as the literary practices that go along with the use of the books. The article shows how Heward-Mills’ writings represent and present his charismatic gifts and how they justify the introduction of institutional forms, such as teaching positions and church administration. Thus, my thesis is that the worldwide distribution of his writings and their use as textbooks aims at the creation of a textual community, and that this again works towards the institutionalization of charisma as much as towards the ‘charismatization’ of institutional forms within the Lighthouse Chapel International.

The essay is based on an examination of some of Heward-Mills books (Church Growth; The Art of Leadership; Church Planting) and on ethnographic research in Madagascar where the Lighthouse Chapel International evangelizes in the framework of a so-called Literature Crusade. The article begins with a short review of Pentecostal studies, questioning the dominant focus on new media and the experience-orientated forms of community building. For a different approach, my study introduces the concept of textual community used in communication studies and by historians. I show that a textual community is not only based on an agreement of canonical works and their content, but on the script that evolves around the writings, i.e., the social practices and organizational forms that are involved in the distribution and teaching of texts.

With the example of the Literature Crusade in Madagascar the essay introduces Dag Heward-Mills and his church: In the context of the Literature Crusade 2013, a Ghanaian missionary distributed the books of Dag Heward-Mills in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, and taught pastors of different churches how to work with the books. Distributing the books and teaching with them is one of the ways in which the Lighthouse Chapel works towards the objective of global church growth, understood as numeric and spiritual growth. A closer look at some of the writings then shows their specific style and content, and the way Heward-Mills stages himself: He presents himself as an anointed apostle, evangelist and author who is able to impart the power of the Holy Spirit to his readers and thus to let God’s power act upon them, through him. According to the author, reading his books offers the reader a way to learn lessons on how to lead and manage a church and, at the same time, it allows the reader to learn about the power of God by partaking in the gifts of an anointed author. By doing so, the books link experience and information and present both as basic religious knowledge to found and lead churches. Furthermore, the presentation of the books as sources of knowledge produced with the help of godly gifts also justifies the structural differentiation between (anointed) author, teachers and students that goes along with their use as textbooks.
The essay closes with a discussion of the use of Max Weber’s work on charisma in the context of Pentecostal studies. Following Weber, charisma is usually opposed to institution, i.e., in many cases the dissemination of charismatic Christianity and the development of global charismatic forms/formations is interpreted as a loss of personal charisma in the processes of institutionalization. However, coming from the analysis of the work of Heward-Mills, I conclude, in contrast, that the author is striving for the formalization and standardization of his godly gifts and gifted teachings via his books and their uses. Through his writings, he attempts to establish a structurally differentiated textual community and an organizational form that is inspired by and based on his personal charisma. Thus, the books help to institutionalize charisma as much as they charismatize institutional forms.

Bourdieu, Weber und Rational Choice: Versuch einer Weiterentwicklung des religiösen Feldmodells am Beispiel Chinas
Bourdieu, Weber, and Rational Choice: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Religious Field Model, Exemplified by the Religious Landscape of China

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The present article aims at a novel understanding of the “religious field” model as it was developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his reading of Max Weber’s sociology of religion. Taking the religious landscape of China as a point of departure, I will argue that this model is only of limited value to analyze religious diversity. First, Bourdieu’s model ignores the importance of the state in the formation and regulation of the religious field. Second, his typology of four primary field positions (priest, magician, prophet, and “laity”) is too simplistic to adequately address the variety of religious interactions in China, and other religiously pluralistic societies as well. By taking into account these considerations and by incorporating a number of hypotheses from the so-called “rational choice theorists” Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Roger Finke, and Yang Fenggang, I will propose a new understanding of the religious field model.

The main body of this article consists of three parts. In the first section I sketch the highly heterogeneous religious landscape of China in order to demonstrate the varieties of religious social forms and religious interactions in Chinese history. Drawing on the work of Yang Fenggang and Hubert Seiwert, I argue for an active role of the state in shaping the religious field in the second section of
this paper. I show that the state regulation of religious diversity leads to the emergence of a religious oligopoly (as in the case of late imperial China, the Republic of China until the late 1980s, or the People’s Republic of China) or a religious polyopoly (as in the case of the Republic of China on Taiwan since the late 1980s) in the sense that a number of religious traditions are being favored by the state or granted a legal status while all the others are subject to more or less severe regulation or even outright persecution. In addition, I also argue that the favored or legal religious institutions too are “domesticated” by state regulation in order to conform to the state’s notions of political and social order. Therefore, instead of being a field of contest between one monopoly church and rival religious enterprises (e.g., sects), I suggest to conceptualize the religious field of China as comprising a number of oligopolistic religious organizations on the one hand and several non-oligopolistic religious organizations on the other.

In the third part of this article I attempt to reconceptualize the four field positions as proposed by Bourdieu (and Weber). First, I argue that we can distinguish four primary groups of religious specialists: (1) the clergy of oligopolistic religious organizations, (2) the clergy of non-oligopolistic religious organizations, (3) magicians, and (4) prophets. While the (1) clergy represents rather conventional religious specialists because of their proximity to state domestication, the (2) clergy is much more likely to produce novel and sometimes alternative religious syntheses. Second, I distinguish three different, albeit interconnected types of “lay actors” in order to analyze nonprofessional and nonspecialist actors in terms of commitment to religious interactions: (1) followers (voluntary and relatively highly committed practitioners and members), (2) clients (customers of religious services), and (3) spectators (occasional observers and participants). Third, I introduce a new category of “intermediate forms”. Based on the observation that these types of actors possess certain religious expertise and skills because of the cultural or political positions they hold in a certain social context, I propose to distinguish four different positions: (1) amateur priests and teachers, (2) state officials, (3) religious appointees, and (4) daily practitioners. Following Bourdieu, I understand these different types of actors not as ideal types in the Weberian sense, but as objective positions that individual actors occupy in the religious field. Following this interpretation, actors do not necessarily “belong” to this or that category exclusively, but we may imagine individual actors to occupy more than one position at once.

In the last part of the article I summarize the findings in order to present what may become a more general model of the religious field. Because of the limit of space, however, I confine myself to rather brief outline of what this model could look like.