

Patrick Westfall

Instructor: Greg Cootsona, Ph.D.

Theories and Criticisms of Religion - RELS480

11/1/25

Analysis of Archetypal Theory

This essay analyzes archetypal theory through the interpretive lens of sociologist Robert Bellah (1927-2013), focusing on the work of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Friedrich Nietzsche as proponents of the *symbolic imagination*, and contrasting them with the "reductionist" models of Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud. Bellah's ultimate aim is to establish *symbolic realism*, a view that affirms the genuine power and depth of religious and cultural symbols.

Bellah's Framework: Symbolic Realism vs. Reductionism

The study of archetypes explores universal symbolic patterns embedded in human experience, bridging psychology, sociology, and religious studies. Throughout his various essays, and particularly in his seminal work *Religion in Human Evolution*,² Bellah integrates a vast number of key thinkers into a theory of symbolic and religious development, viewing Jung, Eliade, and Nietzsche particularly as affirming the human capacity to generate meaning through symbols as an imaginative link between biology and culture. He criticizes Durkheim and Freud as "reductionists" who acknowledge the symbolic nature of religion but ultimately explain it away as a mere function of social or psychological processes. Bellah uses archetypal theory to bridge the personal and collective, the sacred and secular, and the psychological and social, arguing that

religious symbols point to a non-reducible reality and therefore are not arbitrary human creations.

Jungian Archetypes: The Deep Structure of the Psyche

In his 1959 book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*⁸ Carl Jung bases his theory on the idea of a *collective unconscious*, which is described as an “inherited, universal layer of the psyche” that contains primordial images and symbolic patterns called archetypes. According to Jung, idealized figures like the Hero, Great Mother, and Wise Old Man are actually innate structures that shape human imagination and perception across all cultures. Other key archetypes include the Self, Shadow, Persona, and Anima/Animus.

Bellah views Jungian archetypes as the foundational symbolic capacities that make religion possible. They are not rational concepts but deep, pre-rational modes of apprehension that organize human sensory experience. Bellah sees archetypes as the product of human evolution, situating them at the intersection of biology and culture, and forming a "deep past" of religion, connecting humanity to the cosmos through symbolic participation. For Bellah, Jung's work shows that the human capacity for symbolic thought is an intrinsic *universal grammar* of meaning, which grounds the sacred imagination in the human species itself.

Eliade's Divine Patterns: The Sacred as Imitation

In *The Sacred and the Profane*⁵ and other books, historian of religion Mircea Eliade focused on myth and ritual as the means by which ancient people reenacted their sacred origins. His concept of *divine patterns* refers to the exemplary acts of gods, heroes, or ancestors that humans

imitate in an effort to consciously participate in the sacred cosmic order. For Eliade, myths are not just stories but "revelations of sacred reality" that establish the models for human behavior. Rituals re-enter the timeless moment of creation, making life meaningful and ordered, transforming profane existence into sacred reality.

According to Bellah, archaic societies sustained cosmic and social harmony through ritual imitation while later societies evolved toward reflection and ethical reasoning. He argues that the underlying human need for sacred models still persists even in modern, secular forms. Eliade's work confirms Bellah's view that the sacred imagination is a fundamental mode of human being-in-the-world, not a primitive illusion.

Nietzsche's Symbolic Figures: The Revaluation of Meaning

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche declared the "death of God," and called for a radical revaluation of all values. Despite this, Bellah notes that Nietzsche's philosophy is profoundly symbolic, using figures like Dionysus, Apollo, Zarathustra, and the Übermensch (Overman) as modern archetypes. These *symbolic figures* embody existential attitudes: Dionysus for creative chaos and life affirmation; Apollo for beauty and form. The death of God signifies the collapse of the Western symbolic framework that gave life coherence, while the Übermensch can be interpreted as a symbol of self-overcoming and creating one's own values in an immoral world.

Bellah sees Nietzsche's symbolic figures as a continuation of the archetypal imagination, not a rejection of it. They are secularized archetypes that express the human need for symbols in a disenchanted world. For Bellah, Nietzsche proves that the human need for symbols persists even

after traditional religion collapses, however, he views Nietzsche as tragic because he sought to destroy the old symbolic world without fully recognizing the enduring necessity of symbolism itself.

The Reductionist Models: Society and the Unconscious

Bellah contrasts Jung, Eliade, and Nietzsche with the reductionist approaches of Durkheim and Freud, which he claims "explain away" the sacred by tracing its origin to a non-sacred source. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,⁴ Émile Durkheim introduced *collective representations* as "the symbols, myths, and ideas through which a community becomes conscious of itself." He argued that the sacred is the symbolic expression of the collective, and when a tribe worships a totem, it is symbolically worshipping its own social unity and moral power. Religion to Durkheim is a social fact, a system of shared symbols that bind individuals into a moral community. Bellah agrees that symbols arise in social life but criticizes Durkheim for wholly identifying the sacred with society, and reducing symbols to mere reflections of social processes rather than genuine "mediations of transcendent reality." Bellah insists that once created, symbols possess their own power beyond their social origins.

Sigmund Freud argued that dreams, myths, and religious beliefs are symbolic expressions of the *unconscious*; a dynamic realm of repressed desires and conflicts. In works like *The Future of an Illusion*,⁶ Freud interpreted religion as a collective neurosis for coping with guilt, dependency, and mortality that views God as a projection of the father image. Bellah respects Freud's insight into the symbolic psyche but critiques his reductionism. By locating religion's origin in neurosis or infantile wishes, Bellah argues that Freud "dissolves its spiritual significance." Bellah

reinterprets the unconscious as part of the creative ground that generates religious meaning, and interprets the symbolic imagery of Freud as expressions of the human drive to connect our inner lives with ultimate reality.

Conclusion: Bellah's Symbolic Realism

Bellah's analysis synthesizes these diverse approaches to form a unified vision of human symbolic life. Jung, Eliade, and Nietzsche affirm the creative, autonomous power of symbols and the deep human need for a meaningful cosmos, while Durkheim and Freud reveal the social and psychological mechanisms that sustain symbols but err by reducing them to mere by-products of those mechanisms. Bellah's *Symbolic Realism* insists that symbols are real mediations between humanity and the ultimate conditions of existence; they are not illusions but the very medium through which human beings experience truth, value, and transcendence. Archetypal theory, in Bellah's view, thus becomes a vision of the human condition; destined to create meaning through symbols that connect the personal and the cosmic, the biological and the spiritual. Throughout this essay, the diversity of perspective demonstrates the thesis of William Paden's book *Interpreting the Sacred*⁹ that our interpretive lenses shape our worldviews, which in turn shape our views on religion. As a result, students of religion may wish to make wide allowances for cultural differences and for various ways of interpreting the sacred.

My personal interpretation of archetypal theory is pluralistic, integrating the work of various thinkers who have posited the existence of innate, collective patterns. The concept, which originated with Plato's *Forms* in the 4th century B.C.E., remains analytically elusive as these theorists reveal. Yet it is readily identifiable in common experience—for example, when people

refer to *being an empath* or to *playing the savior*. This pluralistic view is supported by esoteric sources, such as H.P. Blavatsky's *divine ideations* and Alice A. Bailey's *cosmic rays*, which all point to a unifying, divine pattern as well as an evolutionary telos—a unique purpose and archetypal goal for all classes of matter and consciousness. This syncretic approach to archetypes relies heavily upon analogous relationships between the macrocosm and the microcosm, between the sacred and the profane, and it suggests that all religious traditions offer symbolic pathways for perceiving one's place within the larger scope of Creation.

AI Use Statement: Google Gemini was used to study the various arguments presented by Bellah regarding Jung, Eliade, Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Freud, and to format the citations. The analysis, critical contrast, rhetorical structure, and final wording of this paper were composed and written by Patrick Westfall.

Works Cited

1. Bellah, Robert N. "Religious Evolution." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1964.
2. Bellah, Robert N. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.
3. Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. 1912. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain, George Allen & Unwin, 1915.
4. Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*. 1949. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton UP, 1971.
5. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. 1957. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959.
6. Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. 1927. Translated by James Strachey, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1961.
7. Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. 1913. Translated by Abraham A. Brill, Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918.
8. Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 2nd ed., 1959. Translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1968.
9. Paden, William. *Interpreting the Sacred*. Beacon Press, 21 Nov. 2000.
10. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. 1883-1885. Translated by Thomas Common, Project Gutenberg, 1999.