

Universal Metaphysical Symbols and Their Role in Cross-Cultural Inspiration.

Change is of course universal, and in a consumerist society, it is often manifest in new merchandise being sold with promotional imagery. This usually happens as fast as merchandise can be invented and marketed. Daily we are exposed to countless images, icons and symbols that are in themselves disposable and empty of meaning. Yet some few symbols have meaning that has endured through centuries—meaning that is felt across all of the cultures of the world. We call these “metaphysical” symbols, because they seem to derive their meaning from a realm that is larger than that of the universe to which we consciously relate.

Religious historian Mircea Eliade designated these symbols as ‘religious symbols,’ using the term ‘religious’ to reflect it’s Latin root ‘religare,’ meaning to bind, to connect man to a higher concept or experience. Eliade described these symbols, saying “An essential characteristic of religious symbol is its multivalence, its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience¹”.

What is it so special about these symbols? What makes their life span so long? What makes them so unchangeable? Are their meanings derived from their own cultural background and then dispersed, or do they evoke similar ideas and feelings in other parts of the world, regardless of their place of origin?

To begin to answer these questions this research will investigate ‘the eight auspicious symbols of Tibet’ as a case study using Mircea Eliade’s idea of ‘multivalence of meanings’ as its structure. ‘The eight auspicious symbols of Tibet’ are; the parasol, the pair of fishes, the vase, the lotus flower, the conch, the endless knot, the victory banner and the wheel.

This image-based investigation will focus on the meaning of these symbols and the network of meanings around them; the results will be organized and analyzed through a matrix of meanings, some of which can evoke inspiration and action, regardless of the place, time or audience.

1 Eliade Mircea, *The Two and the one*, Harvill Press, 1965, pg 203