



The ‘Gospel’ according to Vygotsky? Reflections on the role of symbolic mediation in religious education

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Abstract

As perspectives from the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky have made a substantial impact in the field of educational sciences, they have generated interest even in the field of religious education. To address some possible implications of Vygotskian perspectives for religious education, this study focuses on Vygotsky’s notion of symbolic mediation, compared with perspectives from theological publications, interviews with religiously affiliated students as well as curricula and textbooks. Based on a comparison and discussion of these sources, the study argues that Vygotsky’s psychological perspective on symbolic mediation as key to human self-determination is not in conflict with theological and empirical approaches to religious symbols but that the latter display a wider variety of perspectives. It is argued that while religious education may benefit from Vygotskian perspectives, a reflection is also needed on how to deal with the framing of religious symbols by varying theological positions and conflicting worldviews in different religious education settings.

Keywords Vygotsky · Symbol · Mediation · Religious education

1 Introduction

In recent years, sociocultural perspectives inspired by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) have gained increasing influence in educational research (Daniels, 2001; Wertsch, 1985). Even among researchers in the field of religious education (RE) Vygotskian perspectives have been considered as valuable contributions (Afdal, 2008, 2010; Estep Jr, 2002; Hassenfeld, 2018; Johnsen, 2013; Junker, 2013; Lewis, 2018). Vygotsky developed his understanding of human learning and development during the first phase of the newly established Soviet Union, dominated by Marxist materialism (Toassa & de Oliveira, 2018; Wertsch, 1985). Since RE addresses non-materialist, religious frameworks, it is of interest to examine the extent to which a Vygotskian approach is compatible with RE. As will be described below, RE researchers have addressed this question to some extent (Afdal, 2015; Estep Jr, 2002; Horner, 2017; Lewis, 2018). However, there are still

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aspects of the Vygotskian perspective that have not been thoroughly investigated in this respect, one of which is the understanding of *symbolic mediation* as a central aspect.

Although the role of symbols in RE has been discussed in previous research (e.g. Meyer-Blank, 2012; Pirner, 2001), literature searches indicate that studies of the particular relationship between Vygotskian perspectives and theological perspectives on symbolic mediation and the implications of this for RE has not been undertaken. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate *how Vygotsky's understanding of symbolic mediation relates to mediation of religious symbols in theological writings and what implications this has for RE*.

The investigation has been exploratory, drawing on Vygotsky's writings and on publications by Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians. To provide a basis for discussing implications for RE, literature covering symbolic mediation, religious symbols and student perspectives are presented in the review section. A short presentation on the role of religious symbols in RE curricula in a particular RE-context is also included.

2 Previous research on Vygotskian perspectives and RE

During the last two decades, Vygotskian perspectives have been considered by a growing number of RE researchers. In a paper in the early 2000s, James Riley Estep Jr (Estep Jr, 2002) argued that although Vygotsky had influenced education and psychology to a considerable degree he had been a 'neglected voice' among 'Christian educators' (pp. 143–144). Estep Jr argued for the use of Vygotskian perspectives in RE based on the understanding that Vygotsky's developmental psychology avoided the 'deterministic reductionism' of the contemporary Soviet Union (p. 145). According to Estep Jr, Vygotsky emphasised the role of social context and mediation of culture through physical and mental tools. Furthermore, Estep Jr referred to Vygotsky's emphasis on learning and development as processes of internalisation mediated through spontaneous and scientific concepts where the latter particularly contributed to the development of 'higher thought' (pp. 147–149). Estep Jr also referred to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the distance between actual and potential developmental levels where potential development is 'determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p. 153) (cfr. Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Estep Jr concluded that the Vygotskian perspective offers valuable insights for 'spiritual formation' in terms of a community based, holistic development through interactive 'zones'—rather than 'stages'—where religious faith is mediated through instruction and interaction between individuals (pp. 159–162).

During the following years, several researchers have applied elements of Vygotsky's approach to the field of RE. The ZPD has been used as a framework for addressing educational method in Torah schools (Iluz et al., 2018), addressing the development of spiritual concepts (Francis, 2019) or the interaction between the scientific and personal aspects (Court, 2010), and as a premise for curriculum development (Geikina, 2019).

Other researchers have emphasised the role of cultural, mediating tools (Afdal, 2015; Leganger-Krogstad, 2014), the role of spontaneous and scientific concepts (Rymarz & McLarney, 2011), as well as the balance between direct instruction and student inquiry (Hassenfeld, 2018). Furthermore, researchers have addressed the interaction between intersychological and intrapsychological categories of learning (Leganger-Krogstad, 2014), the mediation of religion in children's learning in different social contexts (Abo-Zena & Midgette, 2019), or the cooperation among the members of a learning community

(Junker, 2013). Researchers have also highlighted the Vygotskian emphasis on situated and collaborative learning (Sultana, 2022) and interaction in social practices (Alkouatli, 2023). Skrefsrud (2022) has argued for an experiential approach to RE, combining perspectives from Vygotsky, Freire and Dewey. More critical aspects of religious mediation within faith-based education have been addressed by Johnsen (2013), who emphasised how religious artefacts may mediate understandings among learners that differ from those intended by the educator.

Norwegian RE researcher Geir Afdal (2008, 2010, 2013, 2015) has paid considerable attention to the use of Vygotskian perspectives in RE. In two publications (Afdal, 2008, 2010) he addressed methodological aspects. In a publication in the Norwegian language (Afdal, 2013), he introduced more recent developments of Vygotsky's notion of mediation, emphasising learning as dynamic processes, with tensions and interactions, mediated by artefacts on several levels. Afdal (2013) described how language, rituals, symbols and material artefacts mediate objects of religious reality, how this mediation changes reality and how subjects and mediating means are also changed through the mediated actions. In another publication (Afdal, 2015), he argued that 'RE and religious communities can be fruitfully analysed as collective, interactional and tool-mediated practices' (p. 270).

The overall impression is that RE researchers evaluate Vygotskian perspectives as a suitable framework for analysing and developing practices of RE. Some authors have explicitly discussed how a Vygotskian framework should be evaluated from normative theological or philosophical positions. Horner (2017) argued that the Vygotskian ZPD may be understood as a secular version of a Calvinian perspective on revelation. From a Confucian position, Lewis (2018) found synergies between Vygotskian perspectives and the teaching on learning through ritual practice in the writings of the Confucian teacher Xunzi.

Despite this positive verdict, there is still reason to consider whether a Vygotskian perspective is able to address and include the whole range of aspects or dimensions that are accentuated when religion is addressed in RE. In this paper I undertake a more in depth investigation of this aspect of a Vygotskian approach to RE, and, as already stated, I do this by taking a closer look at the understanding of the concept of *symbolic mediation*. As will be described below, this concept is a central aspect of Vygotsky's approach to human perception, self-organisation and interaction with the environment, and the concept is also addressed by theologians.

In publications from RE researchers, however, symbolic mediation has for the most part been touched on very briefly. The authors typically have mentioned symbols among several forms of mental or psychological tools: 'language, symbols, writing, concepts, [...] art' (Estep Jr, 2002 p. 146), or 'signs, symbols, and texts' (Alkouatli, 2023 p. 35). Estep (2002) described a spiritual formation as a mediation of faith between individuals, which in Vygotskian terms may be called a 'mediation through words, symbols, and images as means of leading the developmental process' (p. 161). Afdal (2015) distinguished between material and symbolic tools, and focused on 'words and language' as examples of the latter (p. 257).

In a publication in Norwegian language (Afdal, 2013), Afdal addressed symbols in a slightly more extensive way. He described tools such as language, images, music and stories as both symbolic and material (p. 151). Material tools have symbolic aspects, and symbolic tools have material aspects. Afdal used the term 'artefact' to include the combination of symbolic and material aspects (pp. 151–152). He described how physical objects may become artefacts: they achieve symbolic meaning by being used in intentional, goal-oriented practices. Bread-like physical objects may achieve different meanings by being part of a breakfast or a religious communion.

In this way, RE researchers suggest that symbols play central roles as mediators in religious and educational practices. This indicates that several perspectives on symbolic mediation may interact in RE practices, educational and psychological as well as theological. The aim of the present study is to uncover such a potential coexistence of different understandings of symbolic mediation, and discuss the possible implication this has for RE.

3 Literature on religious symbols

The literature on religious symbols displays a variety of perspectives and understandings. Some publications focus on the legal aspects of displaying religious symbols in public schools. In such a context religious symbols may be understood as ‘objects of religious veneration’ (Europe, 2009) (p. 62). From this perspective it is ‘for the individual, rather than for the state or for the Court, to determine whether something is, for them, a religious symbol’ (p. 64) while ‘the real significance of something being a religious symbol lies in the response of others to that symbol’ (p. 66).

From the perspective of anthropology and sociology a symbolic perception may be described as applying organising means that ‘point to mysteries behind the literal object’ (Tiaynen-Qadir & Qadir, 2023) (p. 20). In this respect everything may become a symbol and symbols may be open to a variety of interpretations. However, unlike a sign, a symbol is unreplaceable because it ‘participates in the reality it signifies’ (p. 21). A ritual symbol such as the Eucharist in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions may be seen as ‘a body-felt, living experience that “moves beyond the self”’, and the multitude of interpretations it evokes ‘points to its dynamic nature and depth that is repeatedly disclosed through an embodied experience’ (p. 70). ‘Blood and wine become living symbols, not mere allegorical representations’. (p. 71).

Religious symbols have also been addressed in RE context. Reflecting on the use of symbols in religious dialogue and formation, Patrick R. Manning (2014) sees symbols as distinct from signs in that they ‘evince two or more meanings—the thing itself and the thing it symbolizes’ (Manning, 2014, p. 441). Moreover, Manning refers to Karl Rahner’s statement that symbols are ‘means by which we come to awareness of ourselves’ (p. 444) and to Ricoeur who argued that ‘it is in symbols that our thoughts and feelings first come to linguistic expression’ (p. 445).

In the German context, particular attention has been paid to ‘*Symboldidaktik*’, which, according to Dominik Helbling (2022), includes Catholic and Protestant RE approaches that understand a symbolic sign (‘*Symbol-Zeichen*’) as a sign rich in meaning from which the user derives a certain meaning and interpretation of experience. The literature on ‘*Symboldidaktik*’ has emphasised a communicative approach in which symbols are generated and function in symbolisation processes, which also include issues of ambivalence and power (Pirner, 2001). In the Protestant part of the *Symboldidaktik* the fact is reflected that the role of symbols is somewhat more restricted in Protestantism than in, for example, the Catholic tradition (Meyer-Blank, 2012).

Empirical studies of RE students’ perceptions of religious symbols are sparse. In a study from Brazil (Haracemiv & Branco, 2018), primary and secondary school students identified what most symbolised the connection with the sacred: a cross (17), a Bible (9), a church (5), ‘the most holy sacrament’ (3), a rosary (2), a star of David (2), Jesus Christ (1), water (1) and a dove (1) (p. 571).

Since some of the theological writings addressed later in this article draw attention to sacraments as symbols, empirical studies of pupils' or adolescents' perceptions of sacramental rituals may also be of relevance for the final discussion.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'religious capital' in relation to religious symbolic systems and religious competences, a study by Ann Casson (2013), conducted focus group interviews with teachers and with students, aged 11–16, from three Catholic secondary schools in England. While the majority of students defined themselves as Catholic, they ranged from 'hardcore' to 'Catholic atheists' (p. 212). Among the findings were that while a majority of the students did not regard Sunday Mass attendance in a parish Church as 'an integral part of their Catholic identity' (p. 210) they expressed that the celebration of Mass within school 'engendered a "sense of community" within the Catholic school' (p. 211).

In a similar study from Spain, Vicente Vide and David Wroblewski (2022) conducted focus group interviews with 118 students, aged 12–18. They found that the students 'do not recognise Mass as the cornerstone of Catholicity' (Vide & Wroblewski, 2022, p. 14). However, when the discussion addressed the Eucharistic celebration specifically, the informants showed a perception of the Mass 'in connection to many essential experiences' (p. 20). Among the issues addressed were: 'connection to God', 'experience of peace', 'forgiveness', self-improvement and joint prayer (p. 15). Moreover, a minority of the students addressed issues such as praising God, uniting with Jesus, the presence of God in prayer, connection and communication with God and closeness to God (p. 15). When asked about the meaning of the Eucharist, the most frequent answers given by the students addressed connection with God, communion with God, dialogue with 'the transcendence', listening to God, receiving God, praying and having faith (p. 17). Some answers indicated a deep relationship, such as: union with God, being 'surrendered by God' and following 'Jesus' path' (p.17).

In a Swedish study, Minna Salminen-Karlsson (2005) interviewed 20 young Swedish Catholics, aged 17–25. She reports that several of the informants talked about the mystical presence in the Eucharist, not only as part of the church teaching, but as something they experienced as a reality, a real encounter with Christ. The informant Claudia emphasised how the sacrament had moral implications: 'the sacrament ... keeps me in control, since I know that if I have committed a serious sin then I cannot receive the sacrament' (p. 159, author's translation).

A Norwegian interview study by Vestøl (2016) covered young Lutheran and Catholic students who participated in a multi-faith RE in Norwegian upper secondary schools. While the Lutherans focused mainly on their personal, inner experiences of faith, the young Catholics addressed the sacraments. Although the informants did not use the words 'symbol' or 'mediation', they described sacraments as means of divine presence and of self-consciousness. While the divine presence was related to both the Eucharist and the sacrament of Confession, the strengthened self-consciousness was articulated particularly by female informants in relation to the Confession. The aspect of divine presence was particularly emphasised by the informant Marius who talked about the sacrament as an opportunity to meet God as a loving Father standing 'with his arms open' (p. 9).

The aspect of self-consciousness in the Sacrament of Confession was introduced by the informant Sunniva who stated that you are 'sort of purified just by admitting to yourself what you've done' (p. 9). Her statement was confirmed by the informant Maria who added that the confession means that 'you become more conscious about yourself and what you *do*, get a strengthened attention' and the informant Carmen who emphasised that 'when you actually have spoken it, physically, then it is really clear to you' (p. 10). The informants in Vestøl (2016) study also reported how the sacraments become catalysts for conflicts between the

religious faith of the informants and the secular worldviews of their classmates. This conflict was particularly related to the Catholic understanding of a real presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist and the role of repentance in the sacrament of Confession.

4 Symbolic mediation and curricular context

Although this study investigates psychological and theological textual sources, the study also aims at discussing possible implications of the investigation for the role of symbolic mediation in RE. While such implications have general and principal aspects, they also depend on the characteristics of the particular RE contexts to which they relate. To provide a basis for some reflection on how such contextual conditions may influence the role of religious symbols in RE I briefly refer to the Norwegian secondary school context as an example. Norwegian secondary education is offered by 320 state run schools attended by 186.000 students (UDIR, 2022) and 100 private school attended by approximately nine percent of the students. Of the private schools, 38 have a Christian foundation (KFF, 2023), and a majority (24) of these Christian schools are run by Lutheran organisations within the dominating Church of Norway. Only one school is run by the Catholic Church and no schools are run by Orthodox Christian Churches. Other schools are run by different evangelical churches or groups.

In the state run schools an RE curricula, 'Religion and Ethics', is provided for the third year of upper secondary school. The previous curriculum (UDIR, 2006) was substituted by a new curriculum in 2020 (UDIR, 2020a). This curriculum is also used in private schools. However, Christian private schools usually offer an additional subject to give more in depth information on the Christian religion. A shared curriculum labelled 'Christian Knowledge' is offered for Protestant schools (KFF, 2020), while the Catholic 'St Paul gymnas' have a separate curriculum, labelled 'Catholic Christianity' (OKB, 2020). St Paul gymnas also provides supplementary objectives and competence aims to the curricula 'Religion and Ethics' (UDIR, 2020b).

Word searches show that the term 'symbol' is not used in any of the curricula (KFF, 2020; OKB, 2020; UDIR, 2006, 2020a, 2020b). Terms such as 'ritual' and 'sacrament' are found only in a couple of curricula. The older curricula 'Religion and Ethics' mentions 'rituals' and 'ritual expressions' (UDIR, 2006), while the curriculum addendum of the Catholic school St Paul (UDIR, 2020b) states that the students 'should participate in, and contribute to, various liturgical actions and reflect on the experiences' and the curriculum for the subject 'Catholic Christianity' (OKB, 2020) states in a less specific way that students should be able to 'explore, reflect on and present the liturgy as it is expressed in the Church's Tradition and practice'. Similar, but more general expressions are found in the curricula 'Christian knowledge' for the Protestant schools (KFF, 2020) where students are given the opportunity to 'explore how people locally and globally practice their Christian faith' and 'practice in Christian communities and organizations'.

5 Material and method

This investigation of symbolic mediation in RE was conducted as a qualitative analysis based on writings by Vygotsky and texts by a selected number of Christian theologians. The presentation of Vygotsky's psychological and educational approach to symbolic mediation was mainly based on two texts. The text 'Tool and Symbol in Child Development' (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994) was made available for publication by Vygotsky's student

Alexander Luria, and the book *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) is a collection of texts from Vygotsky edited by Vera Jolm-Steiner, Michael Cole, Ellen Soubberman and Sylvia Scribner.

The identification and selection of theological writings was based on literature searches as well as knowledge of texts from previous readings. I decided to focus on texts from religious traditions that have been dominant in the Western cultural tradition, since this is the cultural context within which even the Marxist perspective of Vygotsky originated. In the search for relevant theological writings within the major Christian denominations, both European and North-American writers were included. The final selection includes writings by Protestant (Lutheran) theologian Paul Tillich (1957, 1958), Eastern Orthodox theologian Nathanael Neacșu (2021), and Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner (1959/1966), Roger Haight (1999) and Elizabeth Johnson (1992/2014). The reason for including three theologians from the Roman Catholic denomination was to investigate possible diversity both across and inside religious traditions. While Rahner represents a mainstream Catholic theology Haight and Johnson have challenged traditional positions. Rahner served as a theological advisor (*peritus*) during the Vatican II Council. In contrast, Haight developed a Christology that was criticised by the *Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* and he was barred from teaching theology in 2009 (Vatican, 2004) while Johnson's contribution to a feminist Catholic theology has partly been criticised by *Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Allen, 2011).

The analyses of the texts by Vygotsky and the theologians were conducted in a hermeneutical approach identifying passages dealing with the terms symbol/symbolic and mediation leading to an interpretive dialogue with these text passages to establish an understanding of the notion of symbolic mediation in the texts (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

With these methodological remarks in mind I proceed to the presentation of perspectives on symbolic mediation.

6 Vygotsky on symbolic mediation

As already mentioned, Vygotsky developed a non-determinist approach to human learning and development. A fundamental principle in his approach is how human beings mediate their relationships with their environments through cultural tools or artefacts, with language being the most significant (Daniels, 2001; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994; Wertsch, 1985). According to Vygotsky, the use of artefacts as outer stimuli allows man to 'control his behaviour from without' (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994, p. 145). The use of signs 'leads man to a completely new and specific structure of behaviour, breaking away from the traditions of natural development and creating for the first time a new form of cultural psychological behaviour' (p. 145).

Vygotsky (1978) distinguished between physical tools and signs or symbols, which may operate separately or jointly. According to Vygotsky (1978), a physical tool serves as a 'conductor of human influence on the object of activity' and is externally oriented, while a sign or symbol is 'a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself' (p. 55).

Vygotsky saw the use of signs and symbols as tokens of higher mental functions among human beings. Although the term 'mediate' is used to some extent, Vygotsky (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994) preferred terms such as 'symbolic activity' and 'symbolic operation'. According to Vygotsky, 'symbolic signs', such as the use of language, operate as 'auxiliary stimuli' organising human behaviour (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994, p. 111). Through the

development of speech, children establish a 'system of symbols' that transforms psychological processes (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994, p. 130). This 'inclusion of symbolic functions' establishes a new type of mental connection between the present time and the future: 'the actually perceived elements of the present situation are included in one structural system with symbolically represented elements of the future' (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994, p. 134). This provides a foundation for voluntary action through which human beings gain mastery of their own behaviour by means of symbolic stimuli (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994).

According to Vygotsky, the development of higher psychological functions using signs and symbols unfolds through a transformation from outer mediation into intrapsychological culturally generated mediation. To demonstrate the interplay between the social and individual dimensions and between the external and internal dimensions in this development, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p. 86). Vygotsky (1978) stated that the ZPD explains the relationship between human learning and development, in which development 'lags behind' the learning process (p. 90). As learners achieve mastery of new tools and signs/symbols, this provides a basis for the 'subsequent development of a variety of highly complex internal processes' in the thinking of the learner (p. 90). In this respect, the ZPD addresses the social nature of human learning and development, as well as how human beings learn and develop through interaction with 'more capable peers' (p. 86), achieving access to the reservoirs of cultural tools available in their communities and subsequently internalising the use of these tools.

In the Vygotskian perspective, symbolic mediation represents human self-determination in close interaction with the social community and physical surroundings. Raised in a Jewish community, Vygotsky was familiar with the religious perspectives of the Jewish tradition, but in his post-revolution writings, he did not address religious perspectives as such. In a chapter on Ethical Behaviour Vygotsky (1997) states that the link between morality and religion has been broken and that moral behaviour is 'amenable to education through the social environment in exactly the same way as is everything else' (p. 221). This may indicate that religion as a phenomenon was peripheral to Vygotsky and probably regarded as a product of conditions in line with other cultural phenomena.

To see how symbolic mediation looks from a religious perspective I turn to the writings of Christian theologians.

7 Symbolic mediation in writings by a Protestant and an Eastern Orthodox theologian

In the presentation of theological perspectives, I start with the perspectives of Paul Tillich, since all the other authors refer to his writings to some extent. While the two selected texts focus extensively on the concept of the symbol, the term mediate is not used by Tillich. He uses words like 'point' and 'reflect' to express the mediating function of the symbol (1958, p. 5).

In the book *Dynamics of Faith*, Paul Tillich (1957) described symbolic language as the only mean able to express 'the ultimate' (p. 41): 'The language of faith is the language of symbols' (p. 45). According to Tillich, all that is said about the ultimate concern has a symbolic meaning, whether it is called God or not. Tillich distinguished between signs and

symbols. Like signs, symbols point beyond themselves to something else, but unlike signs, symbols 'participate in the reality of that to which they point' (p. 42). Symbols are said to unlock dimensions of the human soul which corresponds to the dimensions and elements of reality. Symbols are created, or collectively, unconsciously accepted, and they grow and die accordingly. Tillich distinguished between intuitive and active symbolic expressions, or the mythical and the ritual which in cultic life are interdependent.

In a paper published the following year Tillich (1958) elaborated further on the understanding of religious symbols. He described religious symbols as expressing 'an object that by its very nature transcends everything in the world that is split into subjectivity and objectivity' (p. 5). He stated that '[r]eligious symbols represent the transcendent but do not make the transcendent immanent. They do not make God a part of the empirical world' (1958, p. 5).

Tillich referred to several theoretical perspectives on symbols (negative and positive) and to different types or groups of religious symbols: firstly, the divine being(s) ('God'), secondly, characterizations of divine beings and thirdly, natural and historical objects that are drawn into the sphere of religious objects (such as personalities, cultic gestures and illustrative objects). Concerning the word 'God' Tillich stressed that it contained 'at the same time that which actually functions as a representation and also the idea that it is *only* a representation' and in this respect atheism may have a religious function in reminding us that religion has to do with the 'unconditioned transcendent' of which every objectification is a destruction and contradiction of religion (p. 15).

According to Tillich, religious symbols originally were 'holy objects laden with magical sacramental power' (p. 18) but in more recent times, due to processes of religious 'demonization' and secular 'profanization' (p. 19), religious symbols have to a considerable degree been reduced to 'mere "pointing" symbols' (p. 18), which means symbols that are pointing to other levels. In a final endnote Tillich argued that symbols are ultimately superfluous, because if the idea that God is all in all is realised, 'there is no more need to speak of God in special symbols and even to use the word God' (p. 21, note 7). Tillich stated that for him 'the greatest religious utterances are those in which this type of non-symbolic speaking is more or less reached' (p. 21, note 7).

Turning to Eastern Orthodox perspectives on symbolic mediation I draw on a paper by Nathanael Neacșu (2021), who is teaching Eastern Orthodox theology at the University of Iași, Romania.

Neacșu (2021) underlined the fundamental role of symbolism, both from a phenomenological point of view, where 'all human expressions have symbolic importance and impact', and from a Christian theological perspective, where 'man's entire existence has a symbolic-transcendent character' (p. 273). Despite some general similarities, Neacșu made a clear distinction between the broader religious or phenomenological view of symbolism and the Eastern Orthodox view: 'The essential difference between the two types of symbols is that Jesus Christ, as incarnated God (and perfect image of the Father), is the theological source of any theological symbol and of all implications' (p. 276). The difference is said to be 'between a simple representational role and an ontological, personal and concrete role attributed to symbol' (p. 281).

Symbolic mediation is given a Trinitarian and Christological basis with the incarnation of Christ as a central point: 'In the Christian tradition, the Symbol is a divine and human Person at the same time' (p. 274). In this respect the symbol is said to represent 'the means for God's revelation' (p. 275). Christian symbolism is also represented by God as the 'Creator of symbols' which includes man as created as an 'icon of his Creator' (p. 277). The fall of man reduces man to a state of 'idolatrous pseudo-symbolism' or 'a distorted form

of the primary theological symbol', but the original symbolic order is restored through the incarnation (p. 277).

In the original and restored state man gains a communicative relationship with God, and the mediation of this relationship can be said to be the central theological focus and function of the symbol:

'in Eastern Christian Orthodox the symbol is, in a concrete and fundamental sense, understood as an organic and important form and pattern of communication with the Divinity. The symbol mediates the presence of the other, precisely of a real *other* who, given the conditions of the creation, can only be partaken of through symbol' (p. 275).

The symbolic mediation also includes the 'deepest and highest Christian symbols' which 'correspond to the Holy Sacraments of the Church'. Such symbols are said to 'host God Himself in the form of His energies'. (277).

In his paper, Neacșu referred briefly to Paul Tillich in an endnote to exemplify how the symbol often is described as 'an external representation of the symbolized reality' in contrast to the Eastern Christian Orthodox understanding of the symbol understood in 'a concrete and fundamental sense' as an 'organic and important form and pattern of communication with the Divinity' (p. 275, p. 282 note 4).

8 Symbolic mediation in writings by Catholic theologians

Turning to the Catholic theologians, their use of terms varies to some extent (Haight, 1999; Johnson, 1992/2014; Rahner, 1959/1966). While all three theologians used the terms 'symbol' and 'mediate', they also used other terms to describe the mediating role of religious symbols.

In the publication by Karl Rahner titled *The theology of the symbol* (Rahner, 1959/1966) the point of departure was that all beings are 'by their nature symbolic' because they 'express' themselves' to attain their own nature (p. 224). Rahner (1959/1966) made a distinction between 'genuine symbols' or 'symbolic realities' on the one hand and 'arbitrary "signs", "signals" and "codes"' or 'symbolic representations', on the other hand (p. 225). He also distinguished between two concepts of the 'sacred image': an Aristotelian concept in which the image is treated as an 'outward sign of reality distinct from the image itself' and a Platonic concept in which 'the image participates in the reality of the exemplar' and 'brings about the real presence of the exemplar which dwells in the image' (Rahner, 1959/1966, p. 243). Rahner argued that, in Christian theology, symbols mediate a real presence:

In a real theology of the symbol, based on the fundamental truths of Christianity, a symbol is not something separate from the symbolized [...]. On the contrary, the symbol is the reality, constituted by the thing symbolized as an inner moment of itself, which reveals and proclaims the thing symbolized, and is itself full of the thing symbolized, being its concrete form of existence. (Rahner, 1959/1966, p. 251).

For Rahner (1959/1966), this understanding of the symbol was closely related to divine self-communication as expressed in the Christian doctrine of incarnation: '[T]he incarnate word is the absolute symbol of God in the world, filled as nothing else can be with what is symbolized' (p. 237). Rahner widened the implication of this understanding of incarnation,

referring to a New Testament statement: 'All things are held together by the incarnate Word in whom they exist (Col 1.17), and hence all things possess, even in their quality of symbol, an unfathomable depth, which faith alone can sound' (p. 239). Rahner then proceeded to say that 'the Church is the persisting presence of the incarnate Word' and that it 'continues the symbolic function of the Logos in the world' (p. 240). This 'symbolic reality of the Church as a primary sacrament' is made 'concrete and actual, for the life of the individual' through the sacraments (p. 241). Rahner's distinction between sign and symbol is not consistent across his writings. In a more recent work, Rahner (1978/2019) used the expression 'efficacious sign' to describe the significance of the Church (p. 412) and described the Eucharist as a 'sign' which is 'the tangibility and permanence' of God's grace and salvation (p. 427). He also drew on Thomas Aquinas' concept '*signa demonstrativa*' to designate the sacrament as something that really effects what it expresses (p. 429).

While Rahner reinterpreted the Thomistic tradition, Catholic Jesuit theologian Roger Haight searched for a language that could communicate with contemporary postmodernity. Similar to Rahner, in his work on Jesus as 'Symbol of God' (Haight, 1999), he distinguished between sign and symbol. While a sign is referential, the religiously symbolic is 'always that which reveals something other than itself that is transcendent, and which bears its presence in history and to consciousness' (Haight, 1999, p. 199). Haight (1999) also distinguished between conceptual symbols and the 'concrete symbols', such as persons, things and events, which mediate 'a real presence within itself of something other than itself' (p. 198). In the case of Jesus, 'we are speaking of the real presence of God to him, and through him to the world, that is mediated by him' (p. 198).

While traditional theological approaches, according to Haight, presented a theology of the symbol 'from above' (p. 29), Haight wanted to shift the emphasis to a theology 'from below' (Haight, 1999, p. xii). The function of a symbol is communicative and participatory and symbolic communication is not 'objective' but 'demands participation' and 'subjective or existential engagement' (p. 200). Haight stated that in 'epistemological terms, one encounters and construes God in and through the life of Jesus', and in 'objective terms, flowing from the epistemology of symbol, Jesus makes present to or in history the possibility of this encounter with the transcendent God' (p. 486). Haight listed Rahner and Tillich among the authors from which his theology of the symbol has borrowed. He described Rahner's theology of the symbol and its implications for Christology and the understanding of the sacraments 'in many but certainly not in all respects' as a theology 'from above' (p. 432) and as a 'modern' interpretation (p. 431) of which Haight himself made a 'revisionist interpretation' that 'will take into account the features of postmodernity' (p. 424).

Haight did not address the sacraments as symbols, but he briefly addressed the Eucharist as an element of the context of worship and cult which was central to the historical development of Christology. He also stated that the 'effects of Christ's saving works, are appropriated concretely through the sending of the Spirit which unites divinity to our humanity, and by baptism and the eucharist which are, as it were, physical participations in this world of the incorruption and resurrection won by Jesus Christ' (Haight, 1999, p. 216–17).

While Haight reinterpreted the theology of symbols in response to postmodernism, American feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson (1992/2014) has been engaged in a deconstruction of 'symbol systems' (p. 31) and the symbol of God, in particular. According to Johnson (1992/2014), the historical development of the symbol of God is characterised by a 'literal patriarchy' (p. 34), even if 'theology in the light of the gospel depiction of Jesus of Nazareth has the potential to critique the patriarchy of the God-symbol' (p. 35). Johnson (1992/2014) referred to Tillich's description of religious symbols as 'double edged' because they direct attention towards the infinite while simultaneously elevating the

segments of reality that they use into the realm of the holy (p. 37). Johnson (1992/2014) stated that when the symbol becomes exclusive and literalised, it is distorted into an idol, and that all ‘good symbols of God drive toward their own transcendence’ (p. 40). Referring to Tillich’s description of the ‘dying and rising of religious symbols’ Johnson described a contemporary ‘crossroads’ where the ‘symbol of the patriarchal idol is cracking, while a plethora of others emerge’, among them female symbols for the divine mystery (p. 46).

Johnson (1992/2014) developed a reinterpretation of the symbol of God centred on the symbol of Sophia (Holy Wisdom), a ‘resymbolization of divine power [...], as the liberating power of connectedness that is effective in compassionate love’ (p. 270). Johnson only referred very briefly to sacraments, placing ‘word and sacrament’ in an inclusive community setting, stating that the presence of the risen Christ Jesus, ‘hidden in the glory of God’ is ‘known only through the Spirit wherever two or three gather, bread is broken, the hungry fed.’ (p. 162–163).

Although Haight and Johnson have been met by critical responses from their own church authorities (Allen, 2011; Vatican, 2004), the three Catholic theologians presented above demonstrate how understandings of symbolic mediation are developed in dialogic negotiations between theological traditionalism and contemporary ideological positions such as modernism, postmodernism and feminism. The spectrum of positions is increased when the contributions of Tillich and Neacșu are added. The theologians have expanded the perspective of symbolic mediation in several ways. While Neacșu and Rahner highlighted how a transcendent reality becomes present in a symbol, Tillich, Haight and Johnson argued that the traditional mediations of religious symbols need to be challenged and reinterpreted. Despite the differences, all the theologians seem to demonstrate how language serves as a mediator of religious understandings of God and of the sacraments and how theology strives to communicate such understandings in dialogue or in conflict with contemporary cultural frameworks.

9 Discussion: symbolic mediation and diversity in RE

The previous parts of this article have shown how Vygotsky and Christian theologians approach symbolic mediation from varying angles and with varying emphasis. In the following I will reflect on this variety in light of the literature and contextual premises presented in the first part of the article.

In summing up the theological perspectives, Roger Haight’s distinction between approaches ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ may serve as a suitable framework. The Eastern Orthodox approach in the text by Neacșu (2021) seems to represent a perspective ‘from above’, understanding symbolic mediation primarily as a divine action. In contrast, the liberal Protestant approach in the writings by Paul Tillich (Tillich, 1957, 1958), seems to represent a perspective ‘from below’, regarding symbolic mediation primarily as man’s effort to grasp the unfathomable ultimate being. Among the Catholic theologians, Roger Haight (1999) and Elizabeth Johnson (1992/2014) seem to emphasise a perspective ‘from below’ as they seek to reinterpret religious symbols in light of postmodernist and feminist frameworks, while Karl Rahner (1959/1966) may seem to take a more intermediary position, where religious symbols are interpreted in the intersection between revelatory theology (‘from above’) and anthropological perspectives (‘from below’).

It may be argued that the distinction between ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ would be of little relevance to Vygotsky, since his approach was basically materialist,

addressing symbolic mediation from within the human cultural sphere, leaving the religious or theological sphere largely unaddressed. Thus, while Vygotsky sought to establish man's autonomy and self-determination, the theological perspectives address man's dependence on the ultimate or divine. The cultural-psychological perspective of Vygotsky and the religious and existential perspectives of the theologians are therefore not directly comparable since they have different scopes and address different questions. However, the investigation of the theological texts does not indicate that the theological perspectives are incompatible with Vygotsky's perspective per se. The theological understandings of symbolic mediation seem to include processes where humans interact actively with religious symbols. Such interactions are also empirically exemplified in studies referred to in the first part of the article where young Catholics describe their personal ritual experiences (Vestøl, 2016; Vide & Wroblewski, 2022). Moreover, some of the theologians also state that human existence has a symbolic dimension (Neacșu, 2021; Rahner, 1959/1966). Such aspects of active participation are also reported by RE-researchers who describe symbols and ritual actions as means for strengthening human self-awareness (Vestøl, 2016; Manning, 2014).

On the other hand, the theological understandings of human agency in the mediation processes seems to vary. In theological perspectives 'from below', the human agency seems to be emphasized—and the mediational role of religious symbols relativized—to the extent that the symbols are regarded as dependent on historical change and power relations and are ultimately superfluous. In perspectives 'from above' the symbols are rooted in a realm of eternal divinity that make them basically elevated above historical change.

As described in the first part of the paper, RE researchers tend to regard a Vygotskian perspective on symbolic mediation as compatible with RE (Afdal, 2015; Estep Jr, 2002; Horner, 2017; Lewis, 2018). The present study does not challenge such a verdict, given the premise that the focus is on RE as a cultural psychological and pedagogical activity. The present study does however indicate that when theological perspectives 'from above' address religious symbols the symbolic mediation may be regarded as going beyond the Vygotskian notion of cultural mediation. Accordingly, it may be argued that the Vygotskian cultural psychological perspective overlaps to a considerable degree with theological perspectives on symbolic mediation 'from below', while perspectives 'from above' add dimensions to symbolic mediation that are basically outside the scope of Vygotsky's perspective. Whether this generates a potential discrepancy between a Vygotskian perspective and RE may depend on the contextual circumstances.

In some RE contexts, the focus is on cognitive aspects such as knowledge and understanding of religious symbols, as is the case in the previously mentioned RE curriculum in Norwegian state runs schools (UDIR, 2020a). In other RE contexts, participation in ritual symbolic mediation will be promoted to some extent, as indicated by the curriculum of the Norwegian Catholic School (OKB, 2020; UDIR, 2020b). In both cases, Vygotsky's perspective on symbolic mediation may be of value in designing learning environments that mediate understanding of religious symbols and reflections on the role they play within religious traditions and communities. However, as participatory aspects are introduced in education, students and teachers may be expected to partake in a 'communication with the Divinity' (Neacșu, 2021, p. 275). Active participation in ritual symbols may imply an understanding and acceptance of divine mediational activities that are supposed to have transformative effects beyond a pure cognitive understanding, producing 'body-felt, living experience that moves beyond the self' (Tiaynen-Qadir & Qadir, 2023, p. 70). In such cases of RE, the Vygotskian perspective as a secular cultural perspective will address only the 'from below'-parts of the mediating processes

that are supposed to take place, and the Vygotskian perspectives may have to be supplemented by theological perspectives to make explicit the ‘from above’ aspects of the symbolic mediation.

Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir (2023) emphasise that there is a wide variety of symbols and interpretation of symbols. Literature on the legal status of religious symbols in schools also emphasise the right of individuals to define religious symbols (Europe, 2009). The role of individual interpretation is displayed to some extent through the variety of theological perspectives on symbolic mediation. Moreover, individual interpretations are also made visible in the empirical studies reported in the first part of the present article. While the theologians—despite differences in perspective—emphasise the importance of the religious symbols, some of the empirical studies show how for example Catholic students vary in their relation to ritual symbols (Casson, 2013; Vide & Wroblewski, 2022). The Norwegian study by Vestøl (2016) even report how Catholic students’ understandings of ritual symbols are challenged by their classmates who challenge the religious understanding of symbols from secular materialist positions.

How RE programs deal with diversity in approaches to symbolic mediation may depend on the educational framework and the degree of diversity among students. To the extent that RE addresses diversity, there may be a need to clarify the premises for addressing religious symbols and their mediating function. As this study indicates, distinctions may have to be made between the cultural-psychological aspects of symbolic mediation and theological aspects of symbolic mediation, and also between religious perspectives on symbolic mediation ‘from below’ and ‘from above’. Such distinctions may serve as tools for identifying differences in approaches to symbolic mediation and differences in the perception of the mediating function of religious symbols.

One final aspect that is displayed in the texts covered in this study is how symbols mediate power relations (cfr. Pirner, 2001). Vygotsky was concerned with how the symbolic mediation empower humans. Among the theologians the issue of empowerment is more complex. While some theologians emphasise how the incarnation and the sacraments reconstitute true, God-given human life (Neacșu, 2021; Rahner, 1959/1966) other theologians argue that religious symbols have been estranged or gained suppressive power and need to be reinterpreted in order to regain their restituting or liberating function (Haight, 1999; Johnson, 1992/2014). For RE, the issue of potential suppressive and liberating power of symbolic mediation raises additional questions that may have to be addressed.

10 Conclusion

While this investigation has suggested that a Vygotskian approach may serve as a valuable contribution to addressing the cultural aspects of symbolic mediation in an RE context, the theological texts and empirical data also indicate that RE needs to deal with a wider variety and complexity in working with religious symbols. In a further exploration of these issues it may be of particular importance to examine and discuss how distinctions between aspects of symbolic mediation may facilitate students’ understanding across differences in framework that influence their perception of symbolic mediation and religious symbols.

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Ethical approval The study in the article is an analysis of previously published texts and does not include empirical data involving human participants or animals.

Informed consent .

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