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Signs and Symbols: Interpreting Eternal Light in Jewish, Christian, and Secular Spaces

Introduction

The associations between light, the divine, and “the good” span many religions, both ancient and modern.¹ Over the course of this essay, I will explore the contemporary significance of the ever-burning flame in Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and secular spaces through a comparison of institutional statements and historical development. I will utilize the distinction between sign and symbol as discussed by Maurice Friedman, as well as the historical significance of light in the West, to argue that the contemporary eternal flame is a versatile, but vacuous symbol. The seeming “universality” of the ever-burning flame, its persistence in religious spaces over thousands of years, and the transition the eternal flame made from the religious realm to the secular suggest that the eternal-flame may become a symbol of almost anything, to almost anyone.

Ner Tamid: The History of Ever-Burning Light in Judaism

Both Christian and Jewish traditions link contemporary use of the eternal flame in religious spaces to the biblical authority of Exodus. The following two verses are part of a set of instructions given by God to Moses regarding the construction of the tabernacle:

¹ These associations span both Eastern and Western culture (the Buddha’s enlightenment is often represented in statues with a radiating halo, for example), but for the purposes of this paper I will largely confine myself to a discussion of light symbolism in the West.

And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually. In the tent of meeting, without the veil which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall set it in order, to burn from evening to morning before the LORD; it shall be a statute forever throughout their generations on the behalf of the children of Israel. (Exodus 27: 20-21)

Although Jewish sources link the modern-day institution of the *ner tamid* (literally, *eternal light*) to both the above verses in Exodus and to the continuously burning incense altar in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish tradition of the ever-burning lamp merits little discussion in rabbinic literature (Brasch 184, 261). Most notably, discussions of the *ner tamid* are absent from the Shulchan Aruch, the most widely consulted book of Jewish law (although references to the *ner tamid* can be found as early as the 15th century text, Terumat HaDeshen) (Ladon; Mann).

This relative lack of historical halachic discourse helps to explain the striking variance in design and material seen in contemporary sanctuary lamps. Although most traditional rabbinic authorities do link the *ner tamid* to the verses describing the olive oil-filled lamp in the tabernacle, modern sanctuary lamps are often electric and rarely use oil or flame (Bialosky). This is to be expected, perhaps, in the case of Reform, Reconstructionist, or Conservative synagogues, where electrical innovations have often usurped traditional candles and flames (in the case of Shabbat candles, the Chanukah menorah, etc.), but considerably more surprising in the case of Orthodox congregations, where intensive *halachic* debate generally undergirds changes from traditional practice.²

The relative lack of halachic discourse surrounding the *ner tamid* may also explain the

² See pages 136-142 of Bleich's "Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature" for a quick summary of the debate.

variety of symbolic interpretations ascribed to the light. For example, some suggest that the *ner tamid* symbolizes God's presence (the *Shekhinah*), divine law, or undying faith in God (Jewish Virtual Library; Brash 184). Other interpretations suggest that the *ner tamid* signifies Torah learning, the spark of which must always be sustained (Brasch 184). According to *The Unknown Sanctuary – The Story of Judaism, its Teachings, Philosophy and Symbols*, the *ner tamid* “speaks of Israel's conviction that, though the sanctuary lies in ruins, its task has not ended but is continued by every synagogue as a centre of light spreading knowledge and comfort, blessing and peace” (Brasch 261).

Historical texts from 17th century Eastern Europe illuminate another facet of practice surrounding the *ner tamid*: the development of societies (generally requiring a membership fee) which concerned themselves with the upkeep of the lamp in the synagogue. As Yaari and Wolf detail in “Ner Tamid Societies in Poland and Lithuania,” these organizations were often exclusive, admitting only prominent members of a congregation, and often slowly expanded their realm of duties beyond the upkeep of the *ner tamid* to the collection of charity, the purchase of the *sefer torah*, and more. Although still symbolically linked to the divine and celestial, the communities described by Yaari and Wolf link the *ner tamid* and its upkeep with worldly status and the construction of community.

The Sanctuary Lamp in Catholic Practice

Like the Jewish tradition, Catholicism links the use of the sanctuary lamp (which contains an ever-burning flame) to the Exodus verses. However, unlike in Judaism, the sanctuary lamp in Catholic practice is directly linked to the reservation of the Eucharist. This connection can be traced back to the Council of Verdun in the 6th century, which issued a decree that a light be left

burning (night and day, which echoes back to the language of Exodus) before consecrated sacramental bread and wine (Cavanaugh 78).

According to William Thomas Cavanaugh, in *The Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament*, the purpose of the sanctuary lamp is “to call the attention of the faithful to the very center of Catholic worship” (79). Therefore, Cavanaugh concludes, the lamp should be centrally displayed – placed within the sanctuary and close to the altar. Furthermore, if there are lamps burning elsewhere in a church (for instance, in front of statues of the relics of saints), the number of lamps before the reserved sacrament must be greater than the number before any single relic or statue (79). These requirements indicate that the primary function of the sanctuary lamp is to serve as a director of attention and an indication of the priority given to the reserved sacrament.

Olive oil is the preferred substance for use in sanctuary lamps, again, deriving inspiration from Exodus 27:20 (and the idea of Jesus as the King of Peace) (Cavanaugh 80). In 1926, the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a decree allowing the use of electricity in sanctuary lamps, though the ruling is somewhat controversial for use in a time of peace (Cavanaugh 84).

In contrast to the *ner tamid* societies described in the previous section, where the social group was built around the eternal flame, the responsibility to ensure that the sanctuary lamp is kept burning falls to whoever is the custodian of the reserved sacrament (Cavanaugh 84). This bundling of duty, in conjunction with Cavanaugh’s statement of the sanctuary lamp’s purpose, suggests that the ever-burning flame is of secondary importance. The true focus of attention (for both Catholic Church worshippers and custodian-priests) is the reserved sacrament and altar.

Protestantism and the Eternal Flame

A downloadable information page from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

(ELCA) titled “What is a Sanctuary Lamp?” links the Protestant use of sanctuary lamps first to Exodus, and then to the Catholic practice of placing sanctuary lamps before the reserved sacrament. Noting that some Episcopal and Lutheran Churches continue to light a glass lamp near an aumbry which contains the reserved sacrament, the ELCA states that some Protestant churches include eternal lamps in their worship without maintaining tabernacles or the reserved sacrament. These lamps are typically made of red glass and are said to signify the eternal presence of God in the church (“What is?”).

Despite these precedents, the ELCA suggests that sanctuary lamps, even as a symbolic measure indicating the eternal presence of God in the church, may be problematic. Some concerns include the fear that, if the lit sanctuary lamp suggests God’s presence, an accidental extinguishment of the life could be perceived as a sign that God has left. The section concludes: “The people of God can be assured that God’s presence is with them eternally regardless of whether a sanctuary lamp is present in the worship space” (“What is?”).

This instinct of eschewing material culture may be traced back to the Reformation (as discussed in lecture), particularly Calvin’s statement: *Finitum non est capax infiniti*. This skepticism of material culture has clearly continued through more modern times as Donald L. Fennimore discusses in “Religion in America: Metal Objects in the Service of Ritual.” Fennimore writes that partly in reaction to the elaborate and symbolically rich Catholic religious ceremony, American Protestants tended to simplify ritual objects to four: the chalice or cup, the flagon, the baptismal basin, and the paten or plate (27). The sanctuary lamp is not mentioned.

Signs and Symbols: A Comparative Study

For Jews and some Protestants, the eternal flame is conceived as a symbol which points to the presence of God. For Catholics, the primary function of the sanctuary lamp is to serve as a

director of attention and an indication of the priority given to the reserved sacrament. In other words, what is for Jews and Protestants a symbol is for the Catholics a sign. As Maurice Friedman writes in “Religious Symbolism and ‘Universal’ Religion”:

The symbolic is not a negation of the literal but another and deeper level. To say a thing is a symbol does not necessarily mean that it is not what it is in itself but that it points beyond itself to something of still greater importance. In contrast to the sign, the true symbol points to the thing symbolized by virtue of some quality in itself which is the same as that in the thing pointed to. (216)

In other words, symbols share a characteristic of the thing to which they point. In the case of the eternal flame in Jewish and Protestant spaces, the eternal flame (in theory) shares the characteristic of *eternity* with God.

It’s worth noting, however, the problems raised by seeking to link the eternal flame to God through the shared characteristic of eternity. For one thing, despite its name, the eternal flame is not eternal. Accidents happen, generators burn out, and sometimes whole buildings are destroyed – the eternal flames do not remain.

This non-eternity seems to explain some of the unease the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America feels about the sanctuary lamp. In addition to pointing to the heavy Catholic associations of the sanctuary lamp, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America statement suggests that the implications of an eternal flame that indicates God’s presence may be problematic, either suggesting that God is always present *because* the light is lit, or else that God may no longer be present if the lamp is accidentally extinguished (“What is?”). In Friedman’s language, it seems the problem stems from the supposedly shared characteristic of “eternity” between the candle and God. Although both the flame and God are supposed to share this

characteristic, the flame does not. Perhaps we could refurnish Calvin's famous statement here:
the ephemeral cannot contain the eternal.

Secularization of the Eternal Flame

Despite the previously discussed problems created by using the eternal flame as a link with something else as an invocation of eternity, the eternal flame is often invoked in non-religious contexts or for non-religious reasons. In general, the secularization of the eternal flame occurs by taking the eternal flame out of the religious context, to maintain spiritual (but not explicitly religious) resonances at memorial sites. At times, however, this trend is reversed, and the religious context remains while the eternal flame itself is reconsecrated as a memorial.

St. Pierre Apotre Church, in Montreal, is an explicit example of this latter move. St. Pierre Apotre is located in an area heavily populated by performing-artists and the LGBTQ+ community (Gray 69). In 1996, the church opened the Chapel of Hope, a "place of peace and prayer for people with AIDS." On July 22, 1996, the eternal flame of the sanctuary lamp in the chapel was lit in memory of those who died from AIDS (Ravary).

This is a significant turn from the traditional Catholic use of the sanctuary lamp to "call the attention of the faithful to the very center of Catholic worship" (that is, consecrated sacramental bread and wine). Rather than acting as a sign pointing towards the reserved sacrament, the eternal flame in the Chapel of Hope in the St. Pierre Apotre Church has been reconstituted as a symbol – one that links the eternal flame of the sanctuary lamp to the desire for eternal memory of those who died from AIDS.³

³ In some ways, this seems the most symbolically consistent move. For both the eternal flame and the eternal memory are known not to be eternal, but both are wished to be so.

The John F. Kennedy gravesite in Arlington National Cemetery, in contrast, represents a secularization of the eternal flame through displacement from the religious space.⁴ The John F. Kennedy grave marker is one of the most recognizable of any USA president's. Originally a wire basket welded to a tiki torch, the so-called "eternal flame" has been replaced several times since it was installed in 1963, and relit (after accidental extinguishment) many more (Carlson 184-185).

Still, JFK's grave marker remains one of the most prominent examples of the secularized eternal-flame, perhaps after the Memorial Flame for the Unknown Soldier at the base of France's Arc de Triomphe which inspired it. The idea for JFK's eternal gravesite flame came from Jacqueline Kennedy, who wanted to connect her husband's presidency to ageless, eternal values rather than his concrete earthly accomplishments (Carlson 185). According to Brady Carlson, in this sense, JFK's eternal gravesite flame is unlike "the other presidential graves, which place their subjects in the past" (184). Instead, Kennedy's eternal flame "aims for the future," as an abstract ideal does (Carlson 184). As J.D. Connor writes, in "An Eternal Flame: The Kennedy Assassination, National Grief, and National Nostalgia," the eternal flame at JFK's grave was intended to "yoke[d] national memory...to an individual" (179). In his discussion of the flame, Connor uses phrases like "perpetual devotion" – an example of religious language being, like the flame, taken out of an explicitly religious context and invoked in a more secular one.

Motivation for including the eternal flame at JFK's gravesite was also undoubtedly part of an effort to sustain JFK's memory for as long as possible. This explains, first, why JFK was

⁴ Of course, burial has deep religious significance for many people, and JFK was Catholic. Still, I use the term "secularized" because this is an example of the eternal light being taken out of its physically religious context of a Church or synagogue and placed on federally owned land for the purpose of communicating something to the masses united by nationality, not religion.

buried in the prominent Arlington National Cemetery instead of the family plot set aside for him in the Hollywood Cemetery in Massachusetts; and second, why Jacqueline chose to install such an aggrandizing, inefficient grave marker. Jacqueline once said, “Whenever you drive across the bridge from Washington into Virginia, you see the Lee mansion on the side of the hill in the distance... Now at night you can see his flame beneath the mansion for miles away” (Carlson 186). It seems clear that Jacqueline’s intentions were to turn JFK’s gravesite, and through this, JFK, into both sign and symbol: symbol of the “eternal values” John F. Kennedy stood for, and sign of his final resting place.

Final Analysis and Conclusion

As we’ve seen, the associations between light, the divine, and “the good” spans many religions, both ancient and modern. In contemporary Western culture, the associations are so ingrained that light is used to signify goodness and safety in children’s books (whereas darkness suggests evil and danger) (Weightman 67).

Undoubtedly, much of this association can be attributed to Christian sources,⁵ but the roots can also be traced to other foundations, including the creation mythology of a variety of traditions. Another likely influence is Manichean dualism where light/goodness is opposed to darkness/evil, and Mani was known as the “Apostle of Light” (Encyclopedia Britannica). But the roots of this association stretch back further, as can be seen in Zoroastrian fire-temples where fire represents divine light or wisdom and is seen an agent of ritual purity (“Zoroastrian Worship”). In *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*, Athanassia Zografou notes that “the ancient tendency to imagine the divinity in a flame returns in the rituals prescribed in PGM”

⁵ See NKJV John 1, 4-5: “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

(PGM being the Greek Magical Papyri) (Christopoulos 300). In the same text, Burkert and Marinatos note that since Homer, light has been associated with insight and the ability to understand. These two traits – insight and the ability to understand – characterized the superhuman and the divinely touched (Christopoulos 13).

Evidently, while many religious systems invoke light in sacred spaces or creation myths, the significance of light is interpreted in a number of different ways. Ultimately, however, the association of light as divine and good is deep-rooted in contemporary Western culture, and in the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions.

This deep-rootedness is key to tying together the discussion thus far, and to understanding the place of the contemporary ever-burning flame. There are few symbols which can claim a more evocative, transcendent, and yet amorphous meaning. Because light is non-representational, historical, and positively associated, the eternal-flame may become a symbol of almost anything, to almost anyone. This helps to explain why, for example, the use of the eternal flame has continued in both Protestant and Catholic spaces. It can also help us to understand why it is one of the few constants in nearly every Jewish synagogue, regardless of denomination. And the amorphous, but positive connotations of the eternal flame help us to understand how a religious symbol could have been borrowed for memorials to figures as diverse as AIDS victims, unknown French soldiers, and President John F. Kennedy.

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