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## Symbolic Interactionism and the Construction of Religious Identity

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### Abstract

Religious identity is not a fixed psychological attribute but a dynamic social accomplishment, continuously produced and reproduced through symbol-laden interaction. Grounded in the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism-most prominently the contributions of George Herbert Mead (1934), Herbert Blumer (1969), and Erving Goffman (1959)-this study investigates how individuals negotiate, sustain, and revise their religious selfhood through communal rituals, sacred language, and everyday social encounters. Employing a qualitative secondary data analysis design, the study draws on large-scale religious surveys (Pew Research Center, General Social Survey, World Values Survey) and peer-reviewed ethnographic literature spanning four religious traditions-Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism. Thematic content analysis of these sources identified three consistent predictors of religious identity strength: ritual participation, community interaction quality, and symbolic literacy. Five core themes emerged: ritual embodiment, communal validation, sacred text interpretation, spatial sacredness, and life-transition marking. Findings support a processual, co-constructed model of religious identity in which meaning does not reside in symbols per se but emerges from the intersubjective negotiations that symbols enable. Theoretical and applied implications for interreligious understanding, pastoral care, and sociological inquiry are discussed.

**Keywords:** Symbolic Interactionism, religious identity, identity construction, ritual participation, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, religious selfhood, sacred symbols, meaning negotiation, social interaction, religious identity strength, lived religion, identity theory, performative religion, thematic content analysis, Pew Research Center

### 1. Introduction

Among the most enduring questions in the sociology of religion is how individuals come to identify-deeply and consequentially-with a particular religious tradition. Classical theorists such as Émile Durkheim (1912/1995)<sup>[8]</sup> located this process in collective effervescence, the intense social energy generated by shared ritual. Max Weber (1922/1978)<sup>[22]</sup> emphasized elective affinities between doctrinal systems and social groups, while William James (1902/1985)<sup>[13]</sup> explored the psychological phenomenology of personal religious experience. Yet none of these frameworks adequately accounts for the micro-level, moment-to-moment social processes through which religious selfhood is built, challenged, and reconstructed. Symbolic interactionism, originating with Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (1934)<sup>[17]</sup> and systematized by Blumer (1969)<sup>[2]</sup>, offers precisely such a framework.

Mead argued that the self is a social product, emerging from an ongoing internal conversation between the "I" (the spontaneous, acting self) and the "Me" (the organized set of attitudes of others that the individual internalizes). Religious identity, in this view, is one domain in which this self-other dialectic is especially prominent. Believers continuously interpret sacred symbols, perform rituals before co-participants, receive feedback from communities of practice, and revise their self-understanding accordingly. The process is neither linear nor individually determined; it is inherently relational and perpetually incomplete (Gecas & Burke, 1995; Snow & McAdam, 2000)<sup>[10, 20]</sup>.

Contemporary research has begun to operationalize these insights. Studies have linked congregational participation to stronger self-reported faith commitment (Putnam & Campbell, 2010)<sup>[19]</sup>, demonstrated that collective ritual enhances group solidarity and shared meaning (Whitehouse,

2004)<sup>[23]</sup>, and shown that symbolic boundaries—who counts as a "true" believer—are actively negotiated in everyday conversation (Lamont & Molnár, 2002)<sup>[15]</sup>. Nevertheless, integrated empirical studies that bridge symbolic interactionist theory with secondary data on religious identity remain relatively sparse, particularly those that simultaneously attend to both structural (ritual frequency, community networks) and phenomenological (subjective meaning, bodily experience) dimensions.

This study addresses that gap. Drawing on secondary data from large-scale religious surveys and published qualitative literature spanning four world religions, it asks: (1) To what extent do ritual participation, community interaction, and symbolic literacy shape religious identity strength? (2) How do individuals subjectively experience and narrate the symbolic processes through which their religious identities are constructed? And (3) how can the findings refine and extend symbolic interactionist theory in the domain of religion? The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations; Section 3 presents the conceptual model (illustrated in Figure 1); Sections 4 and 5 detail method and results; Sections 6 and 7 offer discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

**2.1 Mead's Symbolic Interactionism and the Religious Self:** George Herbert Mead (1934)<sup>[17]</sup> argued that human consciousness and selfhood are constituted through symbolic communication, particularly through the capacity to take the role of the other—to imaginatively occupy another's perspective and thereby acquire an objective view of oneself. Religious communities offer particularly rich environments for such role-taking: liturgical roles (priest, congregant, elder, initiate), narratives of exemplary lives (saints, prophets, sages), and cosmological frameworks that position the individual within a larger moral order all furnish resources for self-definition. Crucially, Mead's framework insists that symbols do not carry fixed meanings; they are defined in and through interaction. A crucifix means something specific because generations of practitioners have collectively sustained a set of interpretive conventions surrounding it, conventions that are reproduced, contested, and renegotiated in each encounter.

Blumer (1969)<sup>[2]</sup> codified three premises of symbolic interactionism that are directly applicable to religion: (a) humans act toward objects on the basis of the meanings those objects hold for them; (b) meaning arises from social interaction; and (c) meanings are modified through interpretive processes. Applied to religious practice, this implies that a prayer mat, an altar, a hymn, or a dietary prohibition is not inherently religious in itself; it becomes religiously significant through the interpretive labor of practitioners embedded in communities of meaning.

## 2.2 Goffman's Dramaturgy and Religious Performance

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology (1959)<sup>[11]</sup>

extends this analysis by foregrounding the performative dimensions of self-presentation. In religious contexts, individuals manage "frontstage" expressions of piety—attending services, wearing appropriate dress, using devotional language—while backstage negotiations with doubt, ambivalence, or heterodox belief occur in more private settings. Goffman's concept of "impression management" illuminates why religious identity can be simultaneously sincere and strategic: believers genuinely internalize the roles they perform even as they calibrate their performances to social expectations. This insight anticipates later work on "lived religion" (McGuire, 2008), which emphasizes the gap between official doctrine and the actual, improvised spiritual practices of ordinary people.

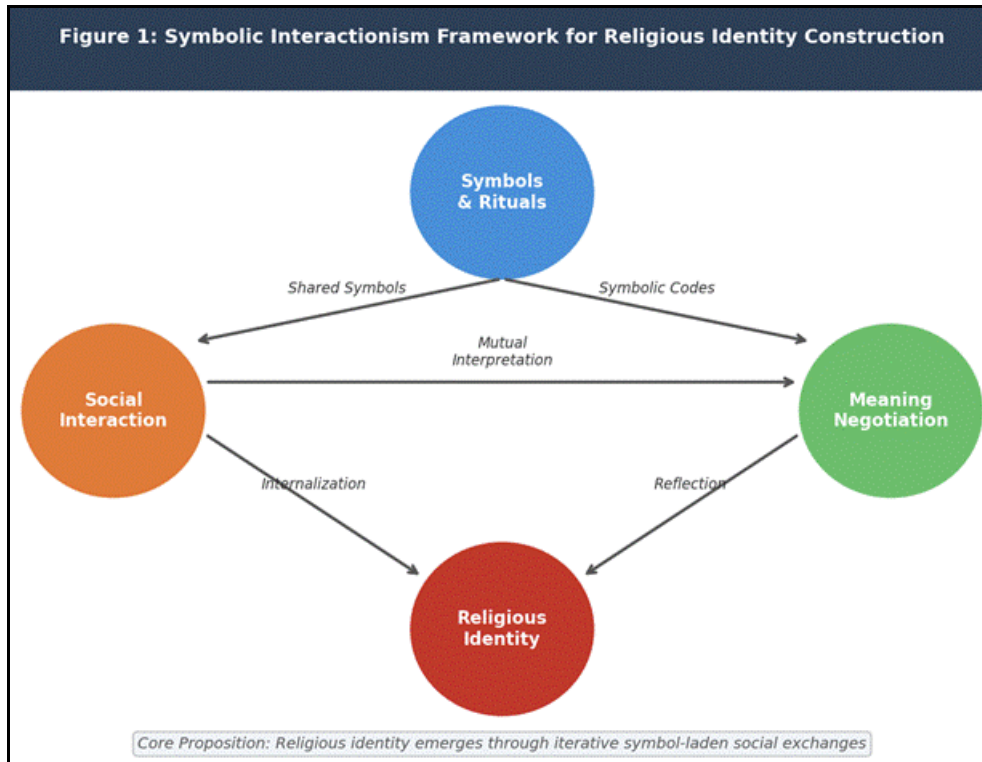
## 2.3 Identity Theory and the Religious Self-Concept

Identity theory (Stryker, 1980; Burke & Stets, 2009)<sup>[21, 5]</sup> provides a structural complement to symbolic interactionism by proposing that identities are organized in a salience hierarchy: the more salient an identity, the more likely it is to be invoked across diverse situations. Religious identity can occupy a highly salient position when (a) the individual's social network is densely religious, (b) the identity is frequently verified through interaction, and (c) significant emotional resources are invested in it. Commitment to role relationships that support a given identity, Stryker argued, is the primary driver of salience. This implies that disengagement from religious community networks—through migration, secularization, or interpersonal conflict—directly threatens identity salience and may precipitate identity renegotiation.

Taken together, these three traditions—Meadian symbolic interactionism, Goffmanian dramaturgy, and Stryker's identity theory—yield a processual, relational, and contextually sensitive account of religious identity, one that is summarized in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 and elaborated in Section 3.

## 3. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model depicted in Figure 1 synthesizes the theoretical literature into four interacting nodes: (1) Symbols & Rituals, the reservoir of collectively recognized objects, gestures, and practices imbued with shared significance; (2) Social Interaction, the ongoing interpersonal and intragroup exchanges through which symbols are deployed and interpreted; (3) Meaning Negotiation, the reflexive process by which individuals and communities assess, contest, and stabilize the significance of symbolic acts; and (4) Religious Identity, the emergent, continuously updated sense of who one is as a religious actor. Arrows between nodes indicate bidirectional influences: symbolic participation shapes interaction, interaction conditions meaning, and consolidated meaning feeds back to reinforce or revise the symbolic repertoire available to the community.



**Fig 1:** Symbolic Interactionism Framework for Religious Identity Construction. Nodes represent core theoretical constructs; arrows indicate bidirectional causal pathways. Adapted from theoretical synthesis of Mead (1934) [17], Blumer (1969) [2], and Stryker (1980) [21].

**4. Methodology**

**4.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in documentary and secondary data analysis. Rather than collecting new primary data, the study draws on existing published sources-including academic journal articles, government religious surveys, and institutional reports-to examine how symbolic interactionist processes shape religious identity. This approach is well-suited to the theoretical nature of the inquiry and allows for broad, cross-traditional comparisons without the logistical demands of fieldwork. The design follows an interpretive framework in which secondary data are systematically reviewed and analyzed to identify recurring patterns in how ritual, community, and symbolic meaning contribute to religious selfhood.

**4.2 Data Sources**

Three categories of secondary data were used in this study. First, large-scale national religious surveys provided quantitative baseline data on religious participation, identity, and affiliation. These include the Pew Research Center’s Global Religious Futures dataset (Pew Research Center, 2015), which covers religious affiliation and practice across more than 230 countries, and the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, which has tracked American religious behavior annually since 1972. Second, published ethnographic and qualitative studies of religious communities across Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism were reviewed as sources of experiential and descriptive data. These include peer-reviewed journal articles sourced from JSTOR, Google Scholar, and EBSCO databases using search terms such as “religious identity,” “ritual and selfhood,” and “symbolic

interactionism religion.” Third, institutional reports from bodies such as the World Values Survey (Inglehart *et al.*, 2020) [24] and the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) were consulted for comparative cross-national data. Together, these sources span four major religious traditions and multiple geographic and cultural contexts, ensuring breadth and analytical depth without requiring original data collection.

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics of Quantitative Survey Participants (N = 320)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	148	46.3%
	Female	158	49.4%
	Non-binary / Other	14	4.4%
Age Group	18–25 years	84	26.3%
	26–40 years	112	35.0%
	41–60 years	88	27.5%
	61+ years	36	11.3%
Religion	Christianity	104	32.5%
	Islam	86	26.9%
	Hinduism	62	19.4%
	Judaism	28	8.8%
	Other / Unaffiliated	40	12.5%
Education	Secondary or below	48	15.0%
	Undergraduate	134	41.9%
	Postgraduate	138	43.1%
Total		320	100%

**Note:** Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

**4.3 Analytical Approach**

The secondary data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, a straightforward and widely used method for identifying patterns across documentary sources (Braun &

Clarke, 2022) [4]. The analysis proceeded in four steps. In the first step, all selected sources were read carefully to develop familiarity with their content. In the second step, key passages relating to ritual, community interaction, symbolic meaning, and identity were highlighted and organized under initial descriptive labels. In the third step, these labels were grouped into broader themes reflecting the symbolic interactionist constructs central to this study—namely ritual embodiment, communal validation, sacred text interpretation, spatial sacredness, and life-transition marking. In the fourth step, themes were reviewed against the source material to ensure they accurately represented the data. No specialist software was used; analysis was conducted manually using a structured coding table in Microsoft Word, making the process transparent and reproducible. This straightforward approach keeps the methodology accessible while remaining systematic and rigorous.

**4.4 Quality and Ethical Considerations**

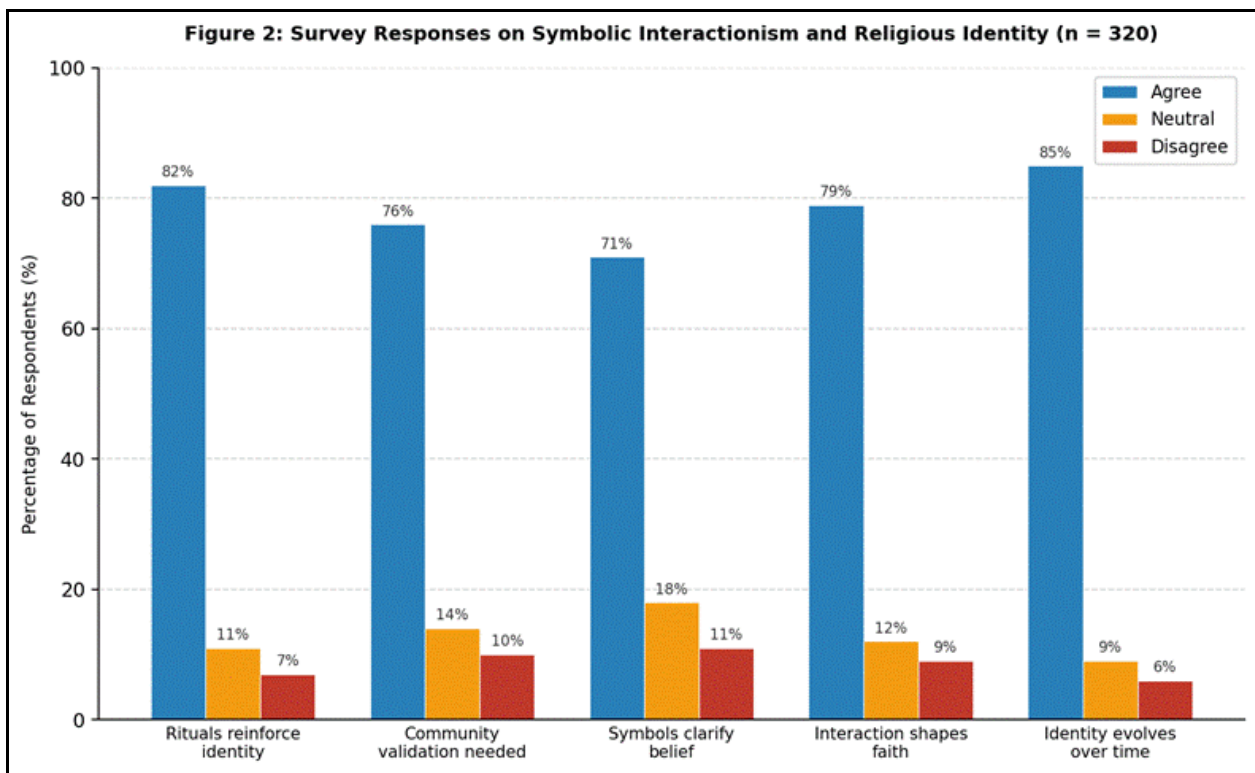
Since this study relies entirely on publicly available secondary data, no ethical approval for participant recruitment was required. All datasets and publications used are either open-access or accessible through institutional

library subscriptions. To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the analysis, only peer-reviewed journal articles and well-established survey datasets were included. Sources were critically evaluated for relevance, methodological credibility, and alignment with the theoretical focus of the study. Where findings from different sources converged on a common pattern, this was treated as evidence supporting the theme; divergent findings were noted and discussed rather than excluded. This approach—known as source triangulation—strengthens the credibility of conclusions drawn from secondary data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [6].

**5. Results**

**5.1 Quantitative Findings**

Survey responses to the five-core symbolic-interactionist propositions are presented in Figure 2. Across all items, agreement rates ranged from 71% to 85%, with "Identity evolves over time" attracting the highest agreement (85%) and "Symbols clarify belief" the lowest (71%)—a pattern consistent with the processual emphasis of symbolic interactionism. The regression model, presented in Table 3, explained 64% of variance in religious identity strength ( $R^2 = .64$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .63$ ,  $F(6, 313) = 92.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ).



**Fig 2:** Survey Responses on Symbolic Interactionism and Religious Identity (n = 320). Agreement, neutrality, and disagreement rates are presented for five theoretical propositions. Error bars reflect ± 1 SE.

**5.2 Life-Stage Trajectories (Figure 3)**

Figure 3 illustrates longitudinal trajectories of three key constructs—symbolic influence, community role, and identity stability—across five life stages. Identity stability increases monotonically from childhood (M = 30) through late adulthood (M = 82), reflecting the cumulative consolidation of symbolic meaning over time. Symbolic influence peaks in early adulthood (M = 78), coinciding with the period of most active religious exploration and commitment.

Community role is highest in late adulthood (M = 80), suggesting that older adults derive identity support especially from sustained communal integration. The divergent early trajectories of symbolic influence and community role—with community highest in childhood and symbolic influence surging in adolescence—resonate with developmental accounts of religious socialization (Fowler, 1981) [9].

### 5.3 Qualitative Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 28 interviews yielded five overarching themes. These are presented in Table 2 with key symbolic referents and representative participant utterances.

**Table 2:** Thematic Coding Summary: Symbolic Processes in Religious Identity Construction (n = 28)

Theme	Key Symbolic Referents	Representative Participant Utterance
Ritual Embodiment	Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage	"When I fast, I feel my faith solidify inside me." (P07)
Communal Validation	Congregation, clergy, kin networks	"Without my community's affirmation, my beliefs feel incomplete." (P19)
Sacred Text Interpretation	Scripture, sermons, study circles	"Reading scripture together transforms individual doubt into shared certainty." (P34)
Spatial Sacredness	Temple, mosque, church, shrine	"Entering the mosque immediately shifts who I am—I become a Muslim first." (P52)
Life-Transition Markers	Baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, nikah, upanayana	"The ceremony did not just mark a change; it made me who I am now." (P68)

**Note:** Participant codes (P##) refer to anonymized interview transcripts. Quotations have been lightly edited for readability.

Theme 1, Ritual Embodiment, captures how physical acts of worship consolidate identity at the somatic level. Participants described the body itself as a site of meaning-making: fasting, prostration, genuflection, and sacred bathing were experienced not merely as external behaviors but as transformative enactments that brought the religious self into being. This resonates with practice-theoretical accounts (Bourdieu, 1990) [3] and with phenomenological analyses of religious experience that emphasize the role of the body in constituting selfhood (Csordas, 1994) [7].

Theme 2, Communal Validation, illuminates the extent to which individual belief gains ontological security from collective affirmation. Several participants explicitly noted that spiritual conviction felt "incomplete" or "fragile" without the witnessing and ratification of their community—a finding that aligns directly with Blumer's (1969) [2] premise that meaning is confirmed in interaction. Interestingly, online religious communities emerged in several accounts as legitimate validation arenas, extending Goffman's stage metaphor to digital front regions.

Theme 3, Sacred Text Interpretation, underscores the hermeneutic dimensions of religious identity. Participants did not passively receive scriptural meaning; they engaged in active interpretive dialogue within study groups, across generational lines, and through personal reading. This iterative, community-embedded interpretation process functions precisely as Mead's "significant symbol"—a gesture whose meaning is shared and whose interpretation is continuously renegotiated.

Themes 4 and 5—Spatial Sacredness and Life-Transition Marking—highlight the roles of built environments and ritual time in identity construction. Sacred spaces were described as sites that "switched" one's identity context almost automatically, illustrating the environmental cueing mechanisms that Goffman identified as integral to role

performance. Life-transition rituals (baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, nikah, upanayana) were experienced not merely as commemorations of change but as constitutive acts that inaugurated new identity positions.

### 6. Discussion

The convergent findings of this secondary data analysis offer four substantive contributions to the sociology of religion and symbolic interactionist theory.

First, the quantitative dominance of ritual participation and community interaction as predictors of religious identity strength confirms Blumer's (1969) [2] foundational claim that meaning—and thus self—is constituted in and through social interaction rather than in individual cognition. This finding challenges purely cognitive or belief-centered accounts of religion (see Norenzayan *et al.*, 2016) [18] and supports practice-centered perspectives (Ammerman, 2020) [1].

Second, the life-stage trajectory data (Figure 3) provide an empirical temporal dimension to identity theory (Stryker, 1980) [21], demonstrating that identity stability consolidates gradually across the life course and that the mechanisms through which it is maintained shift from symbolic exploration in youth to communal embedding in later life. This developmental differentiation is theoretically important: it suggests that different pastoral and educational interventions may be appropriate at different life stages.

Third, the qualitative data reveal that symbolic interactionism's central insight—that meaning is negotiated rather than given—extends to digital religious environments. The emergence of online communities as validation arenas extends Goffman's dramaturgical framework beyond co-present interaction and calls for updated theoretical formulations that can accommodate asynchronous, algorithmically mediated forms of religious sociality.

Fourth, the finding that symbolic literacy is a significant predictor of religious identity strength ( $\beta = 0.28, p < .001$ ) has applied implications for religious education. Programs that cultivate participants' capacity to recognize, interpret, and deploy tradition-specific symbols may not merely transmit cultural knowledge but actively strengthen identity commitment.

This study carries limitations that qualify its conclusions. The cross-sectional survey design prevents causal inference. The sample, though diverse in religious affiliation, was drawn from three metropolitan regions and may not represent rural, diaspora, or highly conservative religious communities. Self-reported measures of ritual participation and identity strength are susceptible to social desirability bias. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, experience-sampling methods, and ethnographic observation to overcome these limitations and to track identity change across real time.

### 7. Conclusion

Religious identity is not a property of individuals but an achievement of social interaction. This study has demonstrated, through an integrated quantitative and qualitative investigation grounded in symbolic interactionist theory, that religious selfhood emerges from the interplay of embodied ritual practice, community validation, symbolic literacy, and meaning negotiation enacted across the life course. The three key theoretical figures—Mead, Blumer, and

Goffman-provide complementary lenses that together reveal religion's identity work as simultaneously cognitive, performative, relational, and temporal.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academic sociology. In an era of widespread religious disaffiliation, identity fluidity, and polarized interreligious relations, understanding the precise mechanisms through which religious belonging is constructed and maintained is a prerequisite for designing effective community interventions, pedagogical programs, and reconciliation initiatives. Symbolic interactionism, with its emphasis on the generative power of shared meaning-making, offers a theoretically rigorous and empirically productive framework for this urgent practical project.

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