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Orduighean: A Dominant Symbol in the Free Church of the Scottish Highlands

In this article I describe and interpret the Protestant ceremony of church communion called Orduighean, which has been made significant as a dominant symbol by the Free Church of the Scottish Highlands. Orduighean is a condensed representation of several themes and events in Highland social life and culture; I present examples of its multiple uses and meanings in a crofting village on the island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. A brief discussion of the political, economic, linguistic, and cultural history of the Scottish Highlands is also provided to show how Orduighean acquired its significance as a dominant symbol.

AS WOLF (1979) POINTED OUT IN HIS DISCUSSION of the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe, certain symbols in a culture are powerful, highly evocative, and multivocal; they are used in a variety of contexts and convey multiple meanings. They may be used, for example, to fuse history with the present, promote political arguments, define ethnicity, or sanctify certain social relationships. A variety of names have been given to these densely packed capsules of meaning—national, master, key, dominant, emphatic, significant, central, and core symbols; root paradigms, root metaphors, foundational metaphors, and conceptual archetypes—and these symbolic capsules have been credited with a power that varies from effective advertising (Mills 1961), to enshrining “the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society” (Wolf 1979:112), to reorganizing metaphysical systems and world view (Nisbet 1969), to myth (Pandian 1985). As Turner’s classic study *The Ritual Process* (1969) demonstrated, dominant symbols are frequently associated with rituals and ceremonies that provide a concrete behavioral context for the organized expression of complex meanings.

Orduighean (pronounced [ordion] in English, as in “accordion”) is the Gaelic term for “communion.” As used by members of the Free Church of Scotland, it has two meanings. First, it signifies beliefs and practices associated with the ceremony known to many Christian denominations as Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the sacrifice of the Mass, or the act of receiving the Eucharist elements—in other words, the ceremony involving the consumption of bread and wine in an act of thanksgiving and declaration of full union with God and a community of true believers. Second, it refers to a five-day ceremony that precedes, includes, and follows the specific service in which communicants take bread and wine. This five-day ceremonial period occurs twice a year, in the fall and late winter, on the island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.¹ For five consecutive days church services are held twice a day, beginning on Thursday and ending on Monday. Ministers and villagers from other parts of the island attend, and at the end of the five-day period some of the participants move on to another village, where another five-day ceremony is held. This continues for six weeks, the villages staggering the *Orduighean* so that members of different congregations may attend.

I use the term *Orduighean* to denote the Five-Day Communion (or “Communion” capitalized), and lower-case “communion” to refer to the specific act of taking bread and wine on Sunday morning.

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