

## What Religious Symbols Do

What do religious symbols do? Obviously, many things in many contexts. In religious contexts, religious symbols are supposed to help save people, shape communities, and tell the truth about what they represent. Each of these points is important for the study, or at least this study, of religious symbols. The first section of this chapter will discuss issues concerning the relation of religious symbols to religion, asking what makes religious symbols religious. The second will consider the approach to religious symbols as instruments of salvation, and will conclude that, even if their primary value is soteriological instrumentality, they still are representations and should be examined regarding their truth. The third will look at approaches to religious symbols that construe them primarily as shapers of communities, and will also conclude that, however much they have a shaping function, they still need to be understood as representations. The fourth section will then consider summary issues concerning what it means to be a religious representation.

### I. I. SYMBOLS IN RELIGION

A study of religious symbols needs to acknowledge two traits of the subject matter. One is that the use of religious symbols is an activity of interpretation, a semiotic practice. Religious symbols are supposed to symbolize something. What do they symbolize? How do they refer in symbolizing? What kinds of meanings are involved? How can they be interpreted and under what conditions? Under what conditions are they true or false? These and like questions concerning the nature of religious symbols as signs are to be expected in a study of any kinds of symbols.

The other trait is that religious symbols are supposed to be instruments of transformation, of shaping religious, familial, and other communities,

of leading the soul to greater perfection, or the person to enlightenment, or to attunement. These transformations go beyond the mere interpretation of what the religious symbols mean. Encountering the symbols is supposed to lead to a transformation of personal, social, or cultural character. Sometimes this might mean only that, when the symbol is properly interpreted, people will behave, think, and feel differently, as when learning the morally relevant facts leads to improved moral behavior, or when learning what a work of art means leads to greater appreciation. But at other times, transformations of behavior, thinking, and feeling occur, or are supposed to occur, when the symbols are brutally encountered with no interpretation, or a wrong interpretation.

Transformation of people happens with many kinds of symbols, of course, but to a very high degree with religious symbols. Religious symbols are supposed to be instruments of salvation, or enlightenment, or basic attunement. Some people, indeed some significant branches of religions, believe that these soteriological purposes are much more important than inquiry into the truth, at least for the business of religion; for them, religious symbols are to be judged almost exclusively on the basis of their soteriological instrumentality, regardless of whether they are true. The Buddhist doctrine of *upaya* is an extreme example of this last view: symbols are merely expedient means to enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps also Tertullian's vexing remark that he believed in Christianity *because* it is absurd is an affirmation of the exclusive priority of soteriological

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1. On Buddhist practice aimed at enlightenment or samadhi, see *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, edited by Peter N. Gregory. Of course, Chinese Buddhism is not the same as Indian or Tibetan Buddhism, but it is the source of the most common Western apprehensions of Buddhist meditation and practice. On *upaya*, see all the articles in that volume. For further technical studies see *Buddhist and Taoist Studies I*, edited by Michael Saso and David W. Chappell, and *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society: Buddhist and Taoist Studies II*, edited by David W. Chappell. For more popular approaches see the Zen Buddhism of the San Francisco Zen Center in Sunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* or the Tibetan Buddhism of Naropa and the Karma Dzong in Boulder, Colorado, in Chogyam Trungpa's *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*; taking symbols as representations rather than skillful means (*upaya*) is often a form of "spiritual materialism." Perhaps the best single exposition of Buddhist thought, especially Zen thought, on all these topics is Park Sung-bae's *Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment*; Park treats *upaya* with the doctrine of the Two Truths as the culmination of the Buddhist understanding of faith, a topic neglected in most Western expositions. He then integrates faith with practice and enlightenment, all as dialectically, not sequentially, interconnected.

instrumentality in doctrinal symbols rather than a peculiar logic of doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Anyway, in religious practice creeds are recited often without understanding, hymns are sung with attention to harmonic feeling but not words, symbolic postures are sat in, gestures made, processions followed, sunrises and night skies grooved on—all for effect and often regardless of interpretation. Like reciting “nonsense” mantras, engaging at least some religious symbols is to be understood causally, not only, or even at all, hermeneutically.

That religious symbols are supposed to have causal effects as well as interpretations does not mean they always in fact have the effects they are supposed to. Feminists have argued that symbolic language, and even some elaborate theological doctrines, have consequences quite the opposite from what would be supposed to be their meaning or intended causal consequences. Chapter 6 studies a case of this in detail. Therefore, a study of religious symbols must examine how they function in context, with causal consequences of various sorts and interpretations dependent on the context.

How do we hold together the hermeneutical and the instrumental traits of religious symbols? By examining them in the context of religious practice attempting to engage its object, not merely as a species of signs in semiotics. There is good precedent for this. The influence of anthropology on the study of religious symbols has emphasized their embeddedness in religious practice, and in religious dimensions of society beyond religious cults.<sup>3</sup> We should also be wise to the causal consequences of religious symbols that run counter to their explicit meanings and counter even to their religious functions as a sociologist or anthropologist might recognize them. Historians and cultural critics or moralists can discern non-systematic consequences of religious symbols. To make much progress with this, we need to inquire more deeply into the nature of religion itself as the context or partial context for religious sym-

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2. See Paul Tillich's discussion in *Systematic Theology I*, pp. 150–151, and *II*, p. 91. In the later place he says the phrase *credo quia absurdum* is wrongly attributed to Tertullian; I cannot find the direct quotation in Tertullian. Kierkegaard, of course, was the one who developed the connection between faith and absurdity *ad absurdum*; see, for instance, his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the chapter on “Truth as Subjectivity,” say, at pp. 191–195. In *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 43, Kierkegaard attributes the phrase to Tertullian.

3. Consider, for instance, the importance of Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

bolism. What difference does religion make to the functioning of symbols?

Of course there is an even more pressing reason to look at definitions of religion, namely, to say what makes some symbols religious. What is our subject matter here? Or if that is too blunt a question, What are the issues in defining our subject matter? The scope of religious symbols is almost impossible to indicate because religion itself is not easily defined.

One could take a denotative approach and say that religious symbols are those playing major roles in the world's religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Daoism, primal religions such as the traditional ones of Africa and Oceania, shamanisms of Asia and America, and post-Axial Age variants and blends such as Mormonism, Sikhism, and Ba'hai. This list could be extended and subdivided indefinitely, but sooner or later most important religious symbols would have been encompassed.<sup>4</sup> Such an approach

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4. This approach is, perhaps by necessity, that followed by anthologists, authors of introductory textbooks on religion, and generalizing comparativists. An influential introductory text such as John B. Noss's *Man's Religions* just starts off with "Primitive and Bygone Religions" that are treated anthropologically, with some discussion of anthropological definitions, and then deals with thirteen religions or religious movements. James W. Dye and William H. Forthman's anthology-with-commentary *Religions of the World* solves the problem of definition by recognizing "major" religions. Arvind Sharma's collection of "state of the religion" essays by contemporary representative religious thinkers, *Our Religions*, treats the Big Seven and defines its topic with this first sentence: "The world of religion is composed of the religions of the world, seven of which—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are presented in the covers of this book. Geoffrey Parrinder's *World Religions From Ancient History to the Present*, a collection of articles by scholars of twenty one religions or religious movements, begins with the Oxford English Dictionary definition of religion as "the recognition of superhuman controlling power, and especially of a personal god, entitled to obedience," accepts it [!] and then proceeds to add other things one might want to say about religion, in no apparent order and with no coherence. In his *The World's Religions*, Ninian Smart, a sophisticated philosopher of religion, raises the question of the definition of religion, notes some difficulties with particular examples of attempts to define the essence of religion, concludes that we cannot define the essence of religion, and then lists seven dimensions that together are to be found in religions: the practical and ritual, the experiential and emotional, the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, and the material dimensions. The problem is that these dimensions apply to most social institutions: the government, the economy, the judiciary, the educational system, and so forth. However important it is to look at these dimensions, they do not have anything specific to do with religion, and Smart really answers the question of the definition of religion by listing them; as an historian his list is fullsome and subtle.

would not say what makes a symbol religious, however. It would miss religious symbols that are not taken up into organized religions. Its sole advantage as an approach for defining religion is that it indicates where to look for counterexamples that would not fit some normative definition of religious symbols. Running through a list of religions at the beginning of a study of religious symbols is an important reminder of how catholic our conceptions need to be.

Another approach is to attempt a normative definition of religion. Such a definition would be presupposed at any rate in any attempt to give an account of religious symbols. Nevertheless, two common lines of definition should be marked for avoidance at the outset. One, associated with anthropology and sociology, defines religion in terms of cultural and social functions.<sup>5</sup> Of course religions have such functions and many of them are unique to religion. But religion also deals crucially with individuals in some ways that transcend social and cultural origins. The other, associated with philosophers such as William James and Alfred North Whitehead, picks up precisely the individual focus of religion and defines it as what people do with their solitariness.<sup>6</sup> Important as this is, it misses the social and cultural parts.

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5. Durkheim has already been mentioned. In sociology Max Weber is likely the most important figure; see Part III *From Max Weber*, edited by Gerth and Mills. Sociologists of knowledge dealing with religion, such as Peter Berger, will be discussed later.

6. William James was deeply aware of the elements of religion neglected by his famous definition, and pointed them out, claiming that his definition pertained only to the studies contained in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he wrote in chapter 2, "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*" Note the reference to the divine, to which my text shall return.

Whitehead, too, was more circumspect than his famous definition: "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness," in *Religion in the Making*, p. 16. The profundity and fruitfulness of his ideas require that his definition be put in context, reading from pages 16 to 18.

No one is invariably "justified" by his faith in the multiplication table. But in some sense or other, justification is the basis of all religion. Your character is developed according to your faith. This is the primary religious truth from which no one can escape. Religion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts. For this reason the primary religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity.

A religion, on its doctrinal side, can thus be defined as a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended.

Perhaps the whole enterprise of attempting to define religions is misguided. Under criticisms deriving from deconstruction and postmodernism, we have become wary of “essences.” Perhaps there is no “essence” of religion of which the religions are species. Of course the language of “essences” reflects a formalist Aristotelian metaphysics that few people follow these days<sup>7</sup>. But the empirical question is a good one. Are there traits common to the religions, and perhaps found sporadically outside

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In the long run your character and your conduct of life depend upon your intimate convictions. Life is an internal fact for its own sake, before it is an external fact relating itself to others. The conduct of external life is conditioned by environment, but it receives its final quality, on which its worth depends, from the internal life which is the self-realization of existence. Religion is the art and the theory of the internal life of man, so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things.

This doctrine is the direct negation of the theory that religion is primarily a social fact. Social facts are of great importance to religion, because there is no such thing as absolutely independent existence. You cannot abstract society from man; most psychology is herd-psychology. But all collective emotions leave untouched the awful ultimate fact, which is the human being, consciously alone with itself, for its own sake.

Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness. It runs through three stages, if it evolves to its final satisfaction. It is the transition from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion.

Thus religion is solitariness; and if you are never solitary, you are never religious. Collective enthusiasms, revivals, institutions, churches, rituals, bibles, codes of behavior, are the trappings of religions, its passing forms. They may be useful, or harmful; they may be authoritatively ordained, or merely temporary expedients. But the end of religion is beyond all this.

Accordingly, what should emerge from religion is individual worth of character. But worth is positive or negative, good or bad. Religion is by no means necessarily good. It may be very evil. The fact of evil, interwoven with the texture of the world, shows that in the nature of things there remains effectiveness for degradation. In your religious experience the God with whom you have made terms may be the God of destruction, the God who leaves in his wake the loss of the greater reality.

In considering religion, we should not be obsessed by the idea of its necessary goodness. This is a dangerous delusion. The point to notice is its transcendent importance; and the fact of this importance is abundantly made evident by the appeal to history.

7. On these issues see John D. Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics*, David L. Hall's *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, and Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*.

organized religions, that make them religious, in contrast to other traits common to religions having nothing to do with religion, such as being human activities, involving people of different ages using symbols, taking place on the Earth, and so forth?<sup>8</sup> We should look for attempts to distinguish religious from non-religious elements.

A third approach, then, expressed best in recent years by Paul Tillich, takes religion to be that dimension of life, including both individual manifestations and those appearing in cultures and societies, that constitutes a response to the divine, the absolute, the infinite, or the unconditioned.<sup>9</sup> An old-fashioned Western way of saying this is that religion has to do with the bearing of God on human life. An obvious difficulty with this approach is that to this date it is not clear whether non-theistic religions such as Daoism and some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism have analogues to the Western notion of the divine. In their popular forms they have altogether too many gods and in their philosophical expressions seem to unify these by transcending divinity to something beyond theism. Related to this difficulty is the fact that the very idea of *religion* arose out of the self-reflection of the Western theistic religions, and some scholars claim that it simply does not apply to some of the phenomena that Western thinkers have catalogued in the above list as religions. The problem here is an empirical one for scholarship. We need comparative categories with academic legitimacy, that do not now exist, to facilitate the examination of “religions” regarding whether some analogue of divinity is a common trait.

The preliminary evidence, however, is positive more or less. Anthropologists and phenomenologists of religions such as Tylor, Frazer, Otto, van der Leeuw, and Eliade have amassed extraordinary amounts of data that illustrate the commonality of at least the sacred or holy, if not something transcendently sacred or holy.<sup>10</sup> Of course their works are mutually inconsistent in their interpretations of these data and we now

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8. The dimensions of religion listed by Ninian Smart at the beginning of his *The World's Religions* are like the latter.

9. See, for instance, chapter 1, “Religion as a Dimension in Man’s Spiritual Life,” and chapter 4, “Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture,” in Tillich’s *Theology of Culture*; or the pervasive discussion of Spirit in his *Systematic Theology III*. Tillich’s technical definition of religion is “the self-transcendence of life under the dimension of spirit”; see, for instance, *Systematic Theology III*, p. 96. That definition is too technical to connect much with my own argument at this stage, although later it will be apparent how it connects with my discussions of self-transcendence, dimensionality, and spirit.

10. For their compendious works, see the bibliography.

appreciate the degree to which any data-gathering is already theory-laden.<sup>11</sup> But precisely because of the great variations in their theories, their inconsistencies and diverse classifications, the commonalities that do show through likely have some point. Probably the case is that *religion* roughly describes the collective human responses, individually and socially, to the divine as sacred or holy.

Whether the distinction between the sacred and profane parallels those often drawn in Western theisms between the infinite and finite, God and the world, the transcendent and the natural, can be left to later reflection. Suffice it to note for now that even in Western symbolism the symbols vary systematically by context. The God of storms, trials, mercy, persecutions, and death (see the Tindley hymn, "Stand by Me," quoted in chapter 5) is existentially vivid in personalistic images. Yet Jews, Christians, and Muslims also say that God creates all these things and hence transcends them; in each of those traditions theological moments occur when personalistic images are explicitly denied, when it is affirmed that God is, for instance, simple, something no personal or even individualized being could be. Therefore even within monotheistic religions there is a spectrum of contextual construals of symbols for God, from representations of God as a concrete personal individual to representations of God as *esse*, Being-itself, a mystical Godhead, or the God beyond Gods. We can call this a "personalizing/form-transcending spectrum." The same spectrum of contexts is found in Mahayana Buddhism when worshippers pray for help from Guanyin on the one hand and affirm that even Emptiness is empty on the other. The spectrum or something

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11. See my *Normative Cultures*, chapter 2, for a detailed discussion of value-ladenness, based on a reconstruction of Peirce's theory of theories.

12. Western scholars have often given very great contrast to the religious Daoism that dances with gods versus the philosophical Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Recent scholars have argued that this is exaggerated; see Livia Kohn's discussions in the first chapters respectively of her *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* and *Early Chinese Mysticism*. The exaggeration has occurred, perhaps, because Confucians from Xunzi onward liked and learned from the Daoist philosophical texts and rejected their rites and pantheon, whereas religious Daoists were often from the lower classes and did not have access to the highly refined, discussion oriented, religious practice of Confucians, even though there are striking parallels between medieval and later Daoist projects of self-cultivation and those of the Song and Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucians. But the point about the spectrum holds whether or not the philosophical Daoists of the Dao that cannot be named are the same people as the religious Daoists of temple ceremonies and exotic mystical practices.



much like it occurs in Daoism when priests entrance themselves to inquire of gods about divinitory questions on the one hand and on the other say that the Dao that can be named is not the true Dao.<sup>12</sup> Vedantists worship Isvara as the creator of the world but say that Brahman truly is without qualities. The personalizing/form-transcending spectra in these religions, from concrete, devotional, and personalistic images to abstract, theological, and ultimate ideas, are at least similar to the monotheistic cases. The difference is that for the non-monotheistic cases, there is no one symbol, like *God*, which moves through all the positions on the spectra. Yet what does remain constant in all the religions, characteristic of all the positions on the spectra, is the sense that the religious “object” symbolized is holy or sacred.<sup>13</sup>

The elementary limitation with saying that religion is the human response, individually and collectively, to the divine and its analogues is that nothing at all is said in that about the human response. Of course, religions differ in their responses, including in what they take the divine to be, as has been noted. Some scholars, often associated with history of religions or with deconstruction or both, go so far as to argue that the category of *religion* is not only parochial but useless: what we should study are religions, not religion. Surely we need to be wary of any attempt to define a single essence of religion. Nevertheless, every reflective thinker about the religions, from social scientists to mystics to ecclesiastical bureaucrats, agrees on three main classes of religious responses: rituals, spiritual practices aimed at perfection or approximation to the holy, and intellectual representations of what the religion is about. These can be spelled out briefly here and illustrated copiously later.

Rituals can be collective or personal, elaborately cultic or more diffuse as in philosophical Daoism. There is much scholarly debate about just what rituals are about.<sup>14</sup> At least one of the most important features

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13. *The Sacred* has become a binary notion in contrast with the *Profane* because of its technical employment in the classificatory systems of Durkheim, Eliade, and others. *Holiness* is a vaguer and hence more useful notion here, insofar as it can mean *sacred* in the dichotomous sense but also indicate a dimension of everything. See Tillich's *Systematic Theology III*, pp. 98–110.

14. Indeed, ritual has become a popular topic lately. A classic anthropological work is Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*. Jonathan Z. Smith's *To Take Place* is a history of religions theory about ritual. Francis X. Clooney's *Thinking Ritually* is a groundbreaking study of Purva Mimamsa, the Hindu school focusing on ritual. Tom F. Driver's *The Magic of Ritual* is a theological analysis of ritual as it functions, or ought to function, in Western societies. The ancient philosopher who best understood ritual was Xunzi.

is that they epitomize symbolically and rehearse the “work” to be done in order to relate rightly to life relative to the sacred. In paleolithic times the problem was food, and rituals had to do with the hunt and fertility. At the dawn of civilization the problem was ordering larger-than-clan societies, and rituals had to do with order and lordship. Part of ritual’s intent is defined by the pervasive felt problematic situation of the people and part by the role of the sacred in this.<sup>15</sup>

The second class of religious responses is the efforts and practices separate from ritual that aim for greater holiness or perfection on the part of individuals particularly and also of groups. These include prayer and meditation, fasting, religious quests, and a host of more exotic practices. But they also include the vast tissue of practices involved in communal religious life. From monasteries to very loose consciousness of the religious dimensions of ordinary life, including societies’ reactions to specific historical phenomena—floods, barbarians, exemplars of virtue and vice—religious responses include the organization of life to “relate appropriately” to the sacred.

The third class of religious responses is the development (and sometimes criticism) of representations of the sacred and of strategies or postures to relate to it. These intellectual responses might be mythic or take some other form such as theology or commentary on sacred texts and objects. They express how religious people try to think about the sacred and its bearing on life. Here is the direct source of religious symbols *per se*. But religious thinking is expressed throughout rituals and spiritual practices as well as throughout other kinds of religious responses that might not be as common as these three. Religious symbols for thinking about the divine shape many relatively unthinking religious activities.

A provisional understanding of religion (not a formal definition), then, is that it is the responses in rituals, spiritual practices, and representations to the holy or sacred and its bearing on life. Religion might include other

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15. I have discussed ritual, cosmologies, and spiritual practices as defining characteristics of religion in *Soldier, Sage, Saint*, chapter 1, and *Behind the Masks of God*, chapter 10. The Greek root of the word *liturgy* meant *public service*, including but not limited to *public service to the Gods*. For this reason I play upon ritual as the “work” of setting things right for the people in the cosmos. The Chinese word for what we would translate as *ritual* (*li*), means not only ceremony but also gift or present, connoting the establishment of a relationship through an action directed at the acknowledgment of someone else. The ancient Confucians argued that the rituals by which people give proper acknowledgment to one another, to nature, and to the divinities themselves constitute civilization with its social habits. I have discussed this sense of ritual at length in *Normative Cultures*, chapter 7.

important features, and religions surely have many important features that are not common to them all. This understanding, however, gives a preliminary context in which to ask about religious symbols. Reference to the sacred in religious symbols will be advanced beyond the stage of preliminary discussion in the analysis below where it will be argued that religious symbols refer directly or indirectly to borderline or worldmaking things, to things having to do with the very worldliness of the world, thus referring always jointly to the finite border and to the infinite within which the border is constituted. This is related to the personalizing/form-transcending spectra where the former contexts for symbols emphasize the location within the world of the person or group at which the borderline situation is encountered and where the latter contexts on the spectra relate to the borders themselves and what lies beyond them. If this argument has plausibility, then the onus of justifying transcendent references to divinity will be greatly lessened. In fact, the difficulty will be to show that merely sacred things such as rocks and trees can be religious symbols in the sense of having the infinite side of the contrast. They can, if they help define worldliness for a person or people.

The cultural contexts for religious symbols, namely rituals, spiritual practices, and representations, will also be discussed at much greater length below. Ritual, however, usually will be treated within a more generic head, that of the roles of religious symbols to organize life. Ritual practice is the paradigmatic sense of life organized around religious symbols and yet both the whole of the life of a religious community and the wider non-religious community are affected and shaped by religious symbols. In the course of this book, therefore, some of these preliminary orienting assumptions will be given greater justification and plausibility.

From what has been said so far, it is apparent that the study of religious symbols, or at least this study, is normative as well as descriptive. Actually, there is no such thing as a purely descriptive study. Even empirical word-pictures of things, or simple classificatory schemes, bear the values involved in taking the descriptive terms and classifications to be the important things to know about what is described.<sup>16</sup> Describers should be prepared to give reasons why their descriptive selections are the important ones, which reveals the normativeness of their descriptions. Analytical studies of symbols too have their weighted terms for

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16. That description is value-laden need not be construed as a fault. In *Normative Cultures*, chapters 1 and 2, I analyze this problem in detail.

analysis, for functional divisions, and for the timing of when to analyze what in what order.

That all studies are normative has a deeper reason as well, namely, one based on the nature of definition. The fashionable critique of essences does not prove that things lack identifiable form but that what forms are selected to define and describe them reflects judgments about what forms *in them* are important or valuable to describe. The importances come not alone from the interest of the describer or definer but lie within the character of the thing if the definition and description are to be true to the thing. How the importances function in the thing is very important to know about it. Therefore, we should be wary of attempting to define or identify things such as religious symbols in a Platonic way by reference to some ideal form, for instance, "a religious symbol is a symbol that genuinely communicates God or divine things to the interpreter." If this line is taken, then many things that anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and ordinary people take to be religious symbols will not be such if they are old-fashioned, misunderstood, dead, demonic, idolatrous, or plain ignored. Also, while saying that most symbols used in religion are not really religious symbols (because today is not a religious time), this Platonic line, which was followed by Tillich in a surprising gaff, will lead to proclaiming just about anything and everything to be a religious symbol if someone somewhere is spurred to see the "depth dimension" in it.<sup>17</sup> Far better it is to say that religious symbols are the symbols found in the rituals, spiritual practices, and reflections of religions that have the sacred or divine as their direct or indirect object. Where they fail to communicate because they are ignored, dead, misunderstood, or untimely, and where they miscommunicate because they are demonic or idolatrous, those very adjectives can be appended to them as religious symbols, various ways of being bad religious symbols. Meanwhile, we recognize that part of the analysis of religious symbols is to say when and how they symbolize well, and in what senses.

## I.2. SYMBOLS AND SALVATION

The understanding of religious symbols to be advocated here is presented in part as a corrective to other approaches, particularly to one. That is the family of positions saying that religious symbols are all fictions as far as their symbolic function goes, and that their function in religions is as

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17. See his *Systematic Theology III*, pp. 111 ff.

instruments of salvation (or as instruments of something wholly unreligious, thus reducing the religious to something else). This is a powerful position because there is a profound truth in both of its clauses, at least for many symbols. First, many religious symbols are indeed fictions, often fantastic works of poetic imagination. Second, many if not all religious symbols are used at one time or another for soteriological purposes.

Consider the point that at least some if not all religious symbols are fictions of poetic imagination (perhaps all those that are not are dull and unpoetic!). Indeed, poetry is too tame among modes of creative imagination. Many religious symbols are, or were in their original models, clearly works of deranged, intoxicated imaginations. Whether the intoxication is by inspiration of divine or demonic spirits, or by some vegetable product drunk, eaten, or smoked, or by deprivation or pain, is not to the point of the symbols' fictitious character. One thinks of fantastic visual images, from the man-beast paintings in the caves at Lascaux to Tibetan mandalas to African masks to William Blake's etchings to the religious murals and paintings of Marc Chagall.

Even so-called illustrative art, such as paintings and sculptures of Brahma, Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Mary, Siva, or any pantheon, is fictional in the sense that no one knew what the original subject actually looked like, if there were originals. Music is obviously fictional. Architectural religious symbols might have some iconic elements, such as high vaulted ceilings pointing to heaven or stupas recalling worshippers to the organs of origin, but still there is much fiction in architecture. As to texts, although some might appear to be "literally" about their subjects, no one doubts the poetic side in the mythopoeic imagination. Not only myths but religious histories such as the books of history in the Jewish Canon are also fictional, though perhaps in widely different genres of fiction. Many religious symbols are ancient time out of mind and, because we cannot imagine individual authors of them, or even authorship as such, it sounds strange to call them fictions: nobody "made them." Still, they are products of human imagination and do not represent anything in a literal way.

As to religious symbols being instruments of salvation, or at least being used for that purpose whether they work or not, the difficulty is to find any exceptions. Perhaps some very dry and abstruse ideas in theology are relevant only to some narrow intellectual truth about a divine matter, the understanding of which makes no palpable difference to religious living. Other than that, religious symbols, however they symbolize and have perhaps an intellectual meaning, are taken up as shapers of religious living. The interesting questions are not about whether they have

instrumental use but about how they are used, the conditions for their effectiveness, the practical interactions of symbols with one another and with other parts of life. I will have more to say about this in chapters 4 through 6. Even in the case of very abstract theological and philosophical conceptual symbols, I am convinced that some thinkers do use them as instruments for engaging the divine in transformative enlightenment.

The position I oppose here conjoins those points to say that the symbolic or representational function of religious symbols is unimportant and that they are misleading if interpreted symbolically. Rather they are to be understood in terms of their functional use within religions for religions' own ends, collectively, and perhaps honorifically, called "salvation" "enlightenment," or "attunement." There are several variants of this position.

One variant believes that there are no religious objects, that religion is false regarding its cognitive assumptions, and that therefore religious symbols cannot symbolize anything truly. What they mean to symbolize is simply not there. But their meanings can be foisted upon people who are then used for exploitative purposes.<sup>18</sup> The people themselves are deluded. Perhaps the delusion is self-delusion, which is how many secular people view religious people today; perhaps the delusion is perpetuated by a manipulative class. In either case, the use of religious symbols should be looked on with some cynicism, according to this position. Even if religious practice has some good side benefits, such as supporting family life, national pride, or a work-ethic, people are deluded to believe that there is any such thing as divinity, salvation, enlightenment, or spiritual uplifting about which religious symbols purport to inform practitioners in their symbolic function.

Another variant of this position, at the opposite extreme, holds that there really and truly is such a thing as salvation but that it is merely a peculiar state of affairs or kind of awareness, without reference to anything holy or transcendent. All religious symbols, and practices such as chanting mantras, have value only insofar as they serve the culture leading to the soteriological end. This variant is a borderline case, barely representing a religion at all, though it is affirmed by some Zen Buddhists preaching to Americans (possibly because they think Americans are supposed to be pragmatic!).<sup>19</sup>

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18. Long before Marx, Glaucon and Adeimantos argued this case to Socrates in Book II of Plato's *Republic*.

19. See Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

This position is more intelligible in its near neighbor which says that, although there are many transcendent and sacred things to be symbolized, including miracles, transfigurations, and objects with sacred powers, attention to symbolizing these things often gets in the way of true religious ends. Enlightenment or salvation requires becoming free from the compulsion to symbolize, as well as from other compulsions. This is the position of more orthodox Zen Buddhists in Japan, Korea, and China.<sup>20</sup> Their legends are fantastic, their art imaginative, and their theology highly intellectual, often dependent on the metaphysics of Hua-yen Buddhism. Religious symbolism is just fine and may in fact at times be soteriologically instrumental; but often enough it stands in the way of enlightenment to the suchness and emptiness of the world. Perhaps the way to describe this position is that, although some symbols function religiously as means to salvation, other symbols, or the same symbols for other people or in other circumstances, cease to be religious even though they are “about” religious subjects. At any rate, the Zen Buddhist concern is only for the soteriologically instrumental use of things, and of symbols only if the symbols do not get in the way but function as skillful means.

In between these extremes are many variants. Most derive from the historical and social sciences that are interested principally in the ways symbols function within religion regardless of direct representational value. Intellectual historians, for instance, can say what people took the symbols to mean and discuss how those meanings functioned in religious history without inquiring into whether the meanings were valid, or in what sense they might be valid. They might be concerned, for instance, with how certain symbols strengthened or weakened a religion’s connections with civil authority. They might also be concerned with the moral or aesthetic functions of symbols, whether they helped or hindered care for the poor or the stimulation of innovative artistic activity. In these instances some historians are quite willing to make normative moral and aesthetic judgments, but not theological judgments about the validity of religious symbols regarding what they purport to symbolize.<sup>21</sup>

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20. On the distinction between immediate enlightenment or samadhi and that mediated by upaya, see Daniel Stevenson’s “Samadhi in Early T’ien-t’ai Buddhism”; for the issue in Zen, see Carl Bielefeldt’s “Ch’ang-lu Tsung-tse’s *Tso-ch’an* and the ‘Secret’ of Zen Meditation.”

21. Interesting recent examples of historical studies are Judith Herrin’s *The Formation of Christendom* (1987), Thomas F. Mathews’ *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (1993), and Samuel Hugh Moffett’s *A History of Christianity in Asia* (1992). These are all important books honored with lavish scholarly praise. Herrin’s and

Moffett's are definitive comprehensive surveys of their fields for our generation. Mathews' overturns the previously definitive view of early Christian art that it sought to emulate imperial rule in its representations of the authority and work of Christ; Mathews shows, to the contrary, that Christian art turned away from imperial analogies at each strategic opportunity to make the connection.

Herrin says at the outset that she is not a believer (in Christianity or anything else religious, presumably). Her statement of her historical approach is worth quoting.

Belief is often taken for granted as a given fact, whose characteristics can be assumed at all levels of society, the most sophisticated and the least educated. Rather than make that assumption, I prefer to try and examine the meanings of belief for early medieval believers. This is a delicate business not only because of the inherent difficulty of grasping the significance of faith for people so distant from us, but also because medieval religion is sometimes conceived, and criticised, as the chief support of an unchanging and fixed social order. While beliefs certainly did unite and restrict medieval Christendom, they seem to me infinitely more complex than they are often thought. There are a great many subversive aspects to belief, and medieval culture was more varied than ecclesiastical leaders cared to admit. *So I make no apology for studying religion from the viewpoint of a non-believer; the history of faith is far too important to be left to adherents alone.* (pp. 7–8, my italics)

Much of what she means by "belief" is the taking of Christian symbols to be true; her text analyzes creedal controversies in detail for their political significance but little for their theological significance. Note her strong approval of diversity. This is not merely a matter of setting the record straight in the face of later medieval attempts to read greater unity into early Christianity than existed; if that were her point she simply would have objected to the later medievals as being factually mistaken, perhaps because of their own biased beliefs. No, her objection is to the possibility of "adherents" being able to grasp what is "far too important" in the history of faith to be readily available to the believers' own eye, presumably cultural richness and diversity. Of course she does not suggest that believers could not obtain the objectivity to be good historians; only that if they do it is because they rise above the historical vision of believers alone. Her moral and cultural points are subtly made with massive and persuasive erudition.

Mathews has no similar forthright statement of faith or non-faith. One suspects, however, great sympathy with the early (and late) Christian movement. His negative argument against the received imperial interpretation is framed as a devastating review of the evidence and non-evidence. The positive argument for his own interpretation of early Christian art is consciously guided by the theological principle that power-orders are to be reversed, the high brought low, the lowly elevated to spiritual power. That point is unusually consonant with contemporary liberal Christianity. In matters where contemporary religious consciousness would be offended, for instance in the symbols of Jesus as a magician, Mathews is scrupulously non-committal about their symbolic validity, dealing only with their symbolic meaning for potential Christians.

Moffett is a Christian seminary professor and was a missionary teacher in Korea; there is little doubt that he holds at least some of the major Christian symbols to be valid under some interpretation or other. His handling of evidence is no less objective than



Historical studies powerfully shape the way reading people think about symbols, even those who are professionally religious such as seminarians and clergy, and the view that religious symbols play important historical roles but have no important symbolic meaning as regards their validity is widespread.

Social scientists employing synchronic models might on average, in comparison with historians, be more convinced that the full treatment of religious symbols lies in their functioning within religion and the larger society and more hostile to the suggestion that questions of validity are important. Much of this stems from the fact that synchronic social science models are supposed to be reductive, that is, to explain only what can be explained by their constants and variables; this is their virtue. If some other considerations can be left out without altering the roles displayed by religious symbols within the model, so much the better for the model. Many social scientists construe a high degree of cultural (and thus religious) alienation to be a required if not inevitable affect of scientific practice. Social scientists who do affirm the importance of questions of the validity of religious symbols often do so by extending their discipline to include theology.<sup>22</sup> Social scientific approaches to religious symbols are also widespread in their influence.

What are we to make of these different expressions of the position that religious symbols are instruments of salvation but not (in any interesting way) more than fictions regarding what they are supposed to sym-

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Herrin's or Mathews's (though the evidence is often different in kind). Like them he does not discuss the validity of the symbols, for instance whether Nestorianism might be true, but only their historical roles. His discussion of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century decline of Christianity in Asia in the last chapter is dispassionate, unromantic, and almost ruthless in its dissection of contributory causes. Yet the penultimate paragraph of the book is the following:

There are times when history can only be described, not explained, and perhaps the history of Christianity in Asia is best left as one of the mysteries of the providence of God, whose ways, as seen from a Christian perspective, are not our ways; nor are his purposes ever entirely made known. But from that same Christian perspective, history does not end with despair but with hope.

22. Peter Berger is the outstanding example in our time. His work in sociology of knowledge applied to religion has defined the field of sociology of religion. Yet he has also written influential theology books informed by his sociology. In religion he is a Lutheran Christian with a very strong devotion to high liturgy; in theology he is close to the twentieth-century liberal Protestant emphasis on experiential foundations for religious belief.

bolize? The first and most obvious thing to say is that we should learn as much as possible from the various functions they reveal religious symbols to have in religion and society, both toward salvation and toward other ends. No point at all is to be gained by rejecting their positive contributions just because they neglect the important question of the validity of symbols.

The second and more important thing to say is that a distinction needs to be made, with differential responses, between simple neglect to raise the question of validity and neglect in principle stemming from systematic reductionism. With regard to the former, it might be the case that the discipline approaching religious symbols is simply not much good at dealing with questions of validity which it should therefore set aside. In regard to the latter, however, there is no reason in principle why historians, or even sociologists for that matter, could not expand their discipline to enter into careful theological evaluations of religious symbols just as they move into normative morals, politics, and aesthetics. Peter Berger and Robert Bellah, both sociologists of religion, have done just that.<sup>23</sup> Some might believe that normative ethics, politics, and aesthetics are easier than theology because they do not deal with the transcendent or because there is a consensus around the former but not the latter; those are doubtful beliefs, however, as scholars of ethics, political theory, and art would be the first to say.

Reductive rejections of issues about the validity of religious symbols need to be recognized for what they are. How and why the questions of validity are not raised need to be determined in each case. It needs also to be asked whether the principles of reduction make their positive conclusions deceptive when they are reintegrated with less reductive studies that do include questions of validity. Finally, questions need to be raised about how to combine reductive studies with one another, each reducing in different ways, and with studies that approach the questions of validity. Although the present essay will not undertake that higher level issue, it should be borne in mind.

In discussing the “fictions only” views of religious symbols the question of the symbols’ validity has emerged as extremely important. Certainly for religious people the question of validity is uppermost, especially in this time of religious change and alienation. But for inquirers

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23. Although their approaches are very different, both are concerned with the roles of alienation in modernity that inhibit religious commitment and conviction. See their works listed in the bibliography.

after the truth, which surely we are if we are studying symbols, the question of the truth of the symbols simply cannot be ignored. As remarked earlier, the study of religious symbols includes normative dimensions. Also emergent from the discussion of the variants on the “fictions only” position is a sensed need for some distinctions that can guide subsequent discussion through the pitfalls of questions of validity. Six topics can be singled out for mention here, each to be expanded upon below.

First is the topic of a religious symbol’s *meanings*. Religious symbolic meaning is accessible in at least one sense to any discipline equipped to study what a symbol intends to assert of its object. The analytical and phenomenological study of meanings can go on without raising the question of whether there is an object or situation to which the symbol refers. Actually, the question of meaning is more complex than this, as will become apparent below. The above point holds for what will be called “network meaning,” that meaning which consists in the network of assumptions and inferences around the symbol. As children learn languages, so can scholars learn network meaning. Network meaning is coded and involves the issues mentioned earlier of extensional reference and interpretants, in contrast to intentional reference and interpretants. “Content meaning” is more difficult to access because it involves experiencing the content of the symbol’s meaning, not just moving through its semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic networks. More on this in chapter 3.

The second topic, obviously, is the *reference* of religious symbols. To what do such symbols refer and how? Do their objects of reference exist? The preliminary definition of religious symbols in the previous section employed the notion of reference to the sacred or divine.

Religious symbols do not refer at all, of course, unless someone uses them to interpret reality. The third topic is *interpretation*. Interpretation is what puts symbols into play. This is the domain of intentional reference and interpretation. Sometimes we elide reference and interpretation into coded meaning, assuming that meanings mean to assert something of their objects and that the interpretations of the objects through the symbols is implicit in their meanings. But as we have seen, meanings can be analyzed without raising the questions of reference, even under the assumption that religious symbols do not refer to anything. It is also apparent that the interpretations of religious symbols are dependent on contexts in ways meanings are not; in fact, if meanings were not common to different contexts we would not recognize that they are different interpretations of the same symbol. Chapter 4 will discuss this in more detail.

Meaning, reference, and interpretation together lead to the fourth topic, *engagement*. Religious symbols, under a given interpretation, either do or do not engage the interpreters with that to which they refer.<sup>24</sup> If they do, the symbol is a living one. If they do not, the symbol is dead. A religious symbol might have the capacity to refer to a real object; but if it is not properly interpreted, the symbol will be dead. It might be interpreted so as to have great power and influence within the interpreters' lives and yet not refer to anything real; it will still be dead or demonic as a religious symbol however powerful it is psychologically, politically, or in some other way. Symbols are alive if they engage their interpreters with their objects. The symbolic function of religious symbols is to engage people with the sacred or the divine.

But engagements also should be true, and *truth* is the fifth topic. Stated in a preliminary way, religious symbols are true when their meanings accurately describe or evaluate what they refer to and communicate this into the experience of the interpreters. Truth thus is the accurate carryover of the nature of the religious object, in the respect interpreted, into the interpreters by the vehicle of the meanings in the interpreters' symbols; chapter 7 will explore this in more detail. Religious symbols can be false by being idolatrous, that is, identifying their referent with the meaning of some finite, non-divine, or profane thing and not indicating how that meaning does not apply quite adequately. The historical dialectic concerning idolatry is what, in the history of religions, has moved religious symbolism from simple reference to spooky things as sacred to the characterization of the sacred in terms of some special bearing of that which is not just another object within the world. Critique of idolatry is what spreads the personalizing/form-transcending spectra from the former to the latter end. More of this below. Religious symbols also can be false by being demonic, that is, engaging the religious object with the interpreter so that the object's nature becomes falsely ingredient in the interpreter. Instead of the interpreter having the divine carried over, according to the respects in which interpretation is made, the interpreter receives a biased element of the divine that perverts the divine nature. History is full of divinely charismatic villains and religions sometimes have difficulty identifying their own demonic aberrations.

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24. Engagement is the point that focused Tillich's interpretation of the truth of religious symbols: they must participate in what they symbolize, and correlate the interpreters' subjective responses with the revelatory material. See *Systematic Theology I*, pp. 239–240.

The sixth and final topic that has emerged from the discussion so far is that religious symbols have *consequences* beyond their interpretations. Often these are the implications traced by historians or laid out by synchronic theories of social causation. Extra-interpretive consequences are especially important in studying religious symbols because many people have pointed out that they sometimes are disastrously at odds with their interpretive intentions. Feminists have rightly accused many religions of having symbols that reinforce patriarchy, even though none of the symbols in a given religion intends that.<sup>25</sup> Religious symbols can have political consequences, as historians like to note. They can also have artistic consequences, and many other kinds. Extra-interpretive consequences are sometimes as important to study as meaning, reference, interpretation, engagement, and truth. This review of the issues to which we are pushed by consideration of the position that religious symbols are only fictions with no representational function amounts to a justification for the topical outline for this book as already sketched in the Preface.

### 1.3. SYMBOLS AND COMMUNITY

Whereas the last section discussed the family of approaches to religious symbols that regard them as fictions that might have soteriological instrumentality, this section will focus on the approaches that treat religious symbols as shapers of communities in religious respects. Like the previous, this too is an approach to understanding religious symbolism with great plausibility but to which my approach here is a corrective. We have already observed one very important sense of life-shaping, that is, the instrumental capacity of symbols to lead to fundamental attunement, enlightenment, or salvation. The theme of shaping needs generalization at this point. I shall consider two main forms of this approach here. The first is the cultural-linguistic approach to religious communities and the second deals with religions' contributions to the larger cultures within which they live.

The cultural-linguistic approach to religions has the splendid merit of being able to display how religious communities are constituted with both diachronic and synchronic dimensions. Religious symbols are what tie a community together with its past and they also, by virtue of their networked meanings, tie disparate parts and functions of the community into systematic interconnection. These, of course, are normative or ide-

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25. See for instance, the discussion in Elizabeth's Johnson's *She Who Is*.

alistic statements: when religious symbols are live and sufficient, they make these tyings-together. Most of the time the symbols are fragmented in various ways and so are the religious communities, often precisely because of the symbolic deficiencies. *Tying-together (again)* is the very meaning of the Latin roots of the word *religion, re-ligare*.

The cultural-linguistic approach, as used for instance by George Lindbeck, arises from the anthropological method developed by Clifford Geertz and others to provide *thick descriptions*.<sup>26</sup> A thick description is a phenomenological account of how the meanings of a symbol are united in the symbol itself but have connections with other symbols across a culture.<sup>27</sup> Each symbol in the network shapes and gives meaning to some part of cultural behavior, and the elements of behavior are coordinated through the network of symbolic meanings. This entails that mere physical or functional descriptions of behavior, for instance producing and exchanging goods, dancing and singing according to certain patterns, building houses and traveling about, are insufficient for analysis. We had long known that such physicalist and functionalist accounts leave out the intentionality of the people engaged in such behavior: that is not how they see, feel, understand, or orient what they are doing. But construing those behaviors as shaped by symbols introduces intentionality into the account. People engage in meaningful behaviors, because of the meanings and the motives carried by the meanings in the symbols shaping the behaviors, and these behaviors are meaningful in terms of one another because of the network character of symbolic meaning. Whereas a *thin* description might try to describe the behavior shaped by a single symbol or a functional system, a *thick* description fleshes out the interconnections of the many symbols, shaping all sorts of different kinds of behavior, networked together. A thin description in fact is merely an abbreviated one: no symbol has meaning only in itself, rather in the vast networks within which it is nested, and therefore can be described fully, with its shaped behavior, only as part of the larger nest. Even *thick* is a relative modifier of descriptions because no live cultural system can be fully described, only epitomized in its main networks of symbols.

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26. George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* focuses principally on doctrinal symbols, but most of his points hold for all religious symbols. Geertz illustrated the power and complexity of his method in a classical description of the symbolic function of cock-fighting in Bali, in his essay "Deep Play." See also Geertz' *The Interpretation of Culture*.

27. "Phenomenological account" is no innocent phrase. The essays collected in Sullivan and Rabinow's *Interpreting Social Science* spell out some of the complexities.

To acknowledge that societies are cultural-linguistic systems is not to imply that they are completely systematized symbolic wholes with every symbol networked with every other. Most societies in fact are congeries of different cultural-linguistic systems expressed in different ethnic groups. Moreover, cultural-linguistic systems of symbols can be more or less tight. Some can approach the extreme of total institutions in which every bit of every behavior is regulated by its symbolic roles relative to other behaviors and to the whole.<sup>28</sup> Some can approach the opposite extreme with such vagueness in the networking—the symbols can lead to any number of mutually exclusive other symbols without determinate preference—that the society's lack of social cohesion borders on fragmentation and anomie.<sup>29</sup>

The same is true of religious communities. Some are organized so tightly by religious symbols—every symbolic behavior has one and only one determinate implication for every other potentially symbolic behavior and all behaviors are shaped by the symbols of the religious system—that all of life is regulated by the complicated but univocal meanings of the religious symbols. Others are organized with only some behaviors shaped by religious symbols and with much vagueness in the network connections of those symbols to other symbolically shaped behaviors. In between are religious communities in which, say, behaviors in common worship are shaped by religious symbols of timing, liturgical order, what is sung, recitation of certain prayers, topics of preachments, collections of money and what the money can be spent on, which persons perform which roles, and the like. These communities might have religious symbolic networks that are vague with respect to what worshippers should wear, how they should breathe, what they should think about while in service, what architectural spaces are required, and the like. Other communities can shape those other behaviors with religious symbols networked together. Religious communities do not exist only in worship. They do others things such as teach, bring comfort and aid, and pursue political and moral goals in the larger community. These other behaviors can also be shaped more or less tightly by networks of religious symbols. And then of course the members of a religious community have other aspects of their lives that might be shaped very little by the network

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28. On total institutions, see Erving Goffman's *Asylums*.

29. This is the point, for instance, of Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner in their *The Homeless Mind*.

implications of their religion's symbols, such as family life at home, athletic activities, pursuits of artistic interests, economic, political, and convivial activity. Some religions have attempted to develop religious symbolic networks that would shape absolutely every aspect of life. But there is too much plenitude, variability, and density of life for this to be much more than a dream; even a brilliant rabbinate cannot provide interpretations fast enough. Often, as in the stereotype of the puritan culture, the attempt of religions to regulate everything, including one's gestures, dress, thoughts, and feelings, is taken to be odious.

Part of the pluralism of religious life today is that in most countries a given cultural-linguistic religious system shapes only a small sphere of behavior with much determinateness, leaving vague symbolic implications for the rest of life. Those other spheres of life are shared with people of different religious symbolic systems. The consequent interactions of religious systems provide opportunities for extraordinary enrichments—not just an innovative modification to a symbol within one's own cultural-linguistic religious network but sudden access to much or the whole of an entirely different religious system. Such enrichments, however, threaten the integrity of any religious system involved, for better or worse. Not every Jewish family wants a Muslim son-in-law. Perhaps in our pluralistic time one important criterion for the health of a religious symbolic system is the degree to which it is flexible in accommodating itself to other religious (and anti-religious secular) systems without losing its integrity.

Having emphasized the synchronic elements of religious symbols in their networked capacity to coordinate and give meaning to disparate behaviors, it is appropriate to add the historical dimensions of religious symbols. All symbols, of course, have a history. Even verbal symbols for newly discovered entities or traits in physics, such as *quarks* and *spin*, are plays on antecedent meanings. The same is true for the new jargon of computer use that is quickly becoming generalized in the languages of the world. Given the rapidity of technological and other kinds of change, hardly any symbol has a plain default meaning.

Religious symbols are among the most ancient kind, and often illustrate great jolts of meaningful change. Consider, for instance, the symbol of the messiah, which enters the Hebrew Bible meaning merely a person annointed for a special honor, for instance athletic or military victory, surviving another year of life, being head of the family, or whatever, including being marked as king. In 1 Samuel the prophet Samuel annointed first Saul and then David as kings over Israel. The striking shift



in meaning here is that before Saul, Israel had no king. Or, put more accurately, Yahweh, the great warrior who brought Israel out of Egypt, was himself king and acted through his prophets. See 1 Samuel 8 where Yahweh listens to the pleas of Israel for a real flesh and blood king who can lead them to war against the Philistines, and then warns them of the cultural down-side of flesh and blood kings, all before acceding to Samuel to anoint Saul. Suddenly *messiah* has accrued the meaning of a king who is a god-surrogate. Furthermore, the kingly ideal includes the powerful norms of protecting the weak, looking out for widows and orphans, and executing God's justice, as well as the conventional kingly norm of dealing with external enemies of Israel, who were, of course, also enemies of Yahweh, Israel's God. After Saul and David the next person to be called messiah in the Bible was Cyrus king of Persia, no king of Israel save as its conqueror but in fact a surrogate of Yahweh, now become the God of all nations, again protecting Israel by sending the exiles back to Jerusalem (Isaiah 45:1). *Messiah* hence meant someone executing the will of the God of all creation. With reference to Jesus, all those connotations were enfolded in a transformation of the means of rule, from military authority to faith in God that celebrated lowliness and meekness; Jesus also changed the image of the Head of heaven, which was still described as a kingdom, from warrior-king to loving, provident parent. Some shallow Christians today might think of God only as parent and of Jesus only as meek, long-suffering persuader; but they miss the depths of the symbols, those earlier layers of meaning. Meek Jesus is still Fell King; and God the Father is, underneath, the Holy One of Israel.

Sometimes, of course, changes in religious symbols are not mere accruals but downright reversals, denials of previous meanings or at least of aspects of previous meanings. Feminists in all religions, for instance, hope that the patriarchal symbols or dimensions of symbols can be rejected, perhaps while sustaining other dimensions of the symbols. But even reversals bear the historical marks of the reversing.

By attending to religious symbols in their depths, religious communities can be in continuity with their past development, often with their founding. It is commonly said that only the theistic religions have a strong sense of historical consciousness in the Western sense. Nevertheless, part of the richness of religious symbols consists in the fact that they have a history. Many symbols begin as classical motifs, such as the creation story in Genesis 1, the Buddha's first sermon, or the Analects of Confucius, which then are embellished in diverse, often mutually contradictory ways, by subsequent developments of the religion. Songs,

vestments, and architecture can have motif-deep symbolic histories: the Christian house-churches of the second century became the basilicas of the third and then the cathedrals of the thirteenth. The historical careers of symbols, their impacted laying-down of many levels of development, provide a far thicker sense of community continuity than retrospective affirmations of personal allegiances across generations and centuries, and across divergent cultures.

When the question is asked what makes symbols religious in this cultural-linguistic sense, the first answer is that they are co-implicated developments of the motifs that have defined the religious community. The growing, shifting, but ever reintegrating symbolic behaviors of the community provide the scope of definition. But then we must ask what made the motifs religious in the first place, and how we can tell when the religious community has subtly been transformed into something else, for instance, a political entity cloaked in religious symbols. The answer to both of those questions is that the symbols in their networks need to have some reference to the sacred or divine. To this question we shall return.<sup>30</sup>

Allusion has been made already to the fact that sometimes the network connections of a system of religious symbols extend beyond the religious community itself into the larger community. There is a special sense in which every culture has a religious dimension constituted by certain religious symbols affecting the whole society, namely, the symbols having to do with obligatoriness. To be human is to be under obligation and one of religion's general cultural functions is to provide cultural symbols for this, in two senses. First, religions symbolize the fact that the human condition is to be obligated in the first place. They might do this in the way of the Hebrew Bible, representing human beings as in a covenant with their creator which has laws for people and obligations of other sorts for God.<sup>31</sup> Or they might do it by representations of people and nature as being either within or without attunement or harmony. There are a host of motifs in the world's diverse religions. Those motifs

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30. On the point that the cultural-linguistic approach needs also to raise questions of reference, see Maurice Wile's succinct discussion in *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*, 1992, 36–39.

31. The idea of covenant in the Hebrew Bible was actually a version of a much more widespread notion of covenant; see Robert Murray's *The Cosmic Covenant*. The Biblical covenants include those with Adam and Eve concerning the garden, with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, all of which affected the New Testament (Covenant) claim that Jesus instituted a new covenant. The idea of the covenant has been discussed by

in their original form might be lost in modern secular culture. Few Americans, for instance, trace their sense of obligation to Yahweh covenanting with Adam, Noah, Abraham, or Moses; yet the social contract theory, which undergirds modern Western consciousness, is a thickened, accrued meaning of the covenant motif. When the religious symbols of obligatedness die away completely, or become so faint as to be ineffective, the peculiar kind of relativism falls upon the land which believes that everything is permitted because nothing is obligated. The second religious contribution to the cultural sense of obligation is to provide measures for how well a culture is living up to its obligations. The specific contents of obligations are of course dependent on the specific religions involved, the larger culture which has many determinants of morality, and the exigencies of the situation. But religions have the symbolic task of recalling societies to face up to their obligations whatever they are. Standing under "prophetic judgments," as the theistic symbols have it, is as much part of the human condition as being obligated in the first place. This is why religions have so often been strong moral forces in their societies. They are distinctive not so much for the content of morality, although there are specific traditions there, as for symbols for judging whether people are living in such a way as to address their obligations. The Confucian symbols of the great as opposed to small person, the individuated rather than the alienated person, deal with this.<sup>32</sup> All the traditions have such symbols. Where they are lacking in a society, relativism in yet another sense takes hold: nobody is to be called to account.

The two ways in which religions contribute to obligatedness and judgment in society can be called civil religion.<sup>33</sup> The symbols that inform civil religion do not need to be different from those that shape practicing religious communities. Indeed, they at least must derive from common religious symbolic motifs if not from direct applications of contemporary religious symbols. Practicing religious people sometimes do not like the category of civil religion. They believe the society ought to be plainly religious or acknowledge its separate secularity. This is to mis-

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nearly every Biblical theologian but was especially important in Puritan theology. It was a primary metaphor for society for Robert Bellah in his *The Broken Covenant*. See also my *Theology Primer* which uses the idea of covenant as a metaphor for an ontological definition of the human condition, as hinted at in the remarks in the text here about obligation.

32. See my discussion of Confucianism in *The Puritan Smile*, chapter 2.

33. See Bellah's *The Broken Covenant* for a discussion of civil religion.