CHAPTER TEN

Living Images of the Traditions

Ritual and Symbol

As each religious tradition has developed through the centuries with its beliefs in numinous powers and forms of salvation, in moral codes and religious leaders and sacred texts, it has expressed all this not only in verbal form but also in the language of symbol and ritual. In drawings and carvings, statues and architecture, in music and dance, drama and everyday ceremony, the religious visions of reality and life have taken on vivid forms. Ritual and symbol can be as effective as leaders and scriptures in guiding people how to live in the presence of mystery and in inspiring them to do it well.

RITUAL

Ritual is ceremonious or formalized behavior. We think of ritual also as repetitious behavior because most rituals or ceremonies are repeated time after time, but it is possible to invent a ritual to be used only once. It is the ceremoniousness that makes a behavior a ritual. It is also usually not random or spontaneous behavior (though some rituals include these elements) but structured or preplanned behavior. In 1969 Neil Armstrong might have simply hopped from the bottom rung of the ladder of the lunar landing craft onto the moon’s surface and said whatever came to mind. Instead, for that one-and-only occasion, he carefully paused, and just before his foot touched the lunar dust he recited, “One small step for [a] man; a giant leap for mankind.” He made a small ritual out of that first-time event.

Ritual is a constant part of human existence. There is something in us that makes us ceremonize every major element of life and many minor ones. From the simple formalized greetings of saying hello and asking about one another’s health, to the days of ceremony attending the death of a pope, life is filled with rituals. Birth has its rituals of “showers,” handing out cigars, and baptism. Death is thoroughly ceremonialized in funeral rites. And in between birth and death there are countless anniversaries, holidays, graduations, retirements, toasts and testimonials, formal invitations and thank you notes, rules of protocol, explicit and implicit dress codes that are more ritual than convenience. In military assemblies and athletic meets, in courtrooms and classrooms, in political conventions and show business award ceremonies, there is ritual. The list goes on and on. Why do we do this? There are three reasons. The first is to honor gods or God. The second is to make reality work right for us. The third is to make reality more real to us.

Ritual Honors Divine Beings

In most religious traditions, a major purpose of ritual is to honor one or more important numinous beings. The ancient Celts left behind evidence of worship of gods. So did the Chinese, the Sumerians, the Aztecs, and every archaic culture of the world. India still has thousands of rituals honoring various gods. Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox Christians honor Christian saints.

In the Sufi tradition it has been common to venerate the saints in rituals dedicated to them. In what is now Saudi Arabia, however, beginning in the eighteenth century, a traditionalist reformer named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (or Wahab; 1703-1791) viewed the veneration of saints by Sufis as superstitious worship. God alone is to be worshiped, say the Wahhabis still, whose interpretation rules in Saudi Arabia. Similarly in the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century in Europe, John Calvin and others accused Roman Catholics of treating saints as though they were gods deserving of rituals. Both Catholics and Sufis claim that rituals to honor their saints are acts of veneration or reverence but not worship.

Religious people commonly assume that the numinous beings are pleased by the honor paid to them in rituals. This is clearest in those cases where the purpose of ritual is to persuade the saint to intercede with God for a favor, or to persuade the gods to offer help, or to move God to be merciful. This assumption makes most sense in archaic religion. The gods are quite susceptible to flattery or gifts, and are even rather sensitive about their honor. The ancient sky god of the Aryans in South Central Asia decreed that only if there is a sacrifice of a horse once a year in the spring will the god guide his followers to victory in battles. In other cases the ritual of an archaic religion is simply well-suited to catch the god’s attention. In ancient Canaan the worshiper of the fertility god Baal and his consort Astarte would celebrate annual spring rites that centered on sexual activity, especially in the temples and shrines.
Baal and Astarte had to initiate the fertility of the year by sexual intercourse. Their worshiper could catch the attention of these gods and reawaken their interest in fertility by human sexual ritual activity that reminded the gods what to do. In general just the showiness and ceremony of ritual might impress the gods and flatter them, and the sacrifice offered as part of the rituals adds an extra incentive to the gods to take care of human needs.

The theologians of historic or classical religions, however, argue that God is neither vain nor in need of attention. Nor does God need reminders of the divine responsibilities. God is thought of as all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, the Creator on whom absolutely everything depends. Anthropomorphic limitations such as need, vanity, or forgetfulness are simply out of place when speaking of the Divine Mystery. The main value of rituals, the theologians may argue, is to have a positive effect on the participants, as we will see shortly, not because God feels a need to be honored or is flattered by such attention.

**Ritual Makes Reality Work Right**

Ritual is often magical. The right words said in the proper way while doing the correct thing with the required precise objects control numinous powers. To get rid of warts you must stand in a graveyard at precisely midnight with a dead cat with a rope tied to its tail. Whirl the cat around your head exactly three times and say without stuttering: "Cat follow devil; warts follow cat." Within three days your warts will begin to dry up, provided that you have correctly followed the ritual prescription.

We have seen that it is not just ordinary magical rituals that are useful. There are great magical, mana-filled rituals of immense importance such as the Aztecs and the Brahmins enacted to keep the universe working right. There is a special Taoist ritual of cosmic renewal still performed in Taiwan about every sixty years. This is the Chiao ritual, a nine-day series of ceremonies to renew the power of life. The sun, the highest form of yang, must be born again each year with the help of appropriate ceremonies. Every long generation of sixty years all yang-power must be given rebirth also through Chiao. Then babies will continue to be born, the crops will grow, the village will be healthy, and there will be enough good luck for everyone. To achieve all this, everything must be done with exact correctness. No one is to wear either leather or wool materials taken from animals. The spirits must all be formally invited so that they do not get upset and disturb the ceremony. Each family, clan, and village must contribute its traditional elements, whether soap, swords, scissors, or scales. The Taoist priests will then follow the prescribed forms that have been handed on for generations and create a perfect sequence of ceremonies to renew the cosmic power of yang.

Belief in the magic of ritual power is alive today in many places. Every little ritual we ordinarily call superstition is an example of this. The person who spills salt tosses a pinch over the left shoulder to avoid bad luck. Even some historic religious rituals are still occasionally considered as magical. One person administers the rites of baptism with an extreme carefulness to get the words and actions exactly right, out of a fear that if it is not done with exact correctness, then somehow it will not have its effect. Another person is upset because the traditional wording of the Eucharistic ceremony or the Bar Mitzvah ceremony has been changed, as though there were a magical power inherent in using the exact words that had been handed down for generations.

There are many rituals with the power to make reality work right not because of magic in them but because they are well-suited to influence the gods or God who controls reality. In some cases the god has decreed certain rituals.

**Ritual Makes Reality More Real to People**

There are many nonreligious rituals. Wedding anniversaries have no magical power; retirement ceremonies do not influence the gods. These and countless other rituals are important without exerting any control over numinous realities. These nonreligious rituals provide us with a clue that the importance of ritual lies not only in their power to influence external reality, or to influence holy and divine beings. It has another power as well, that of influencing human consciousness, of interpreting and supporting a pattern of life.

As Chapter Seven explained, human life is not lived as the lives of animals are. Human life is enacted; it is drama that follows a script that culture has written. It is a way of living based on human biological nature in many ways, but is largely composed of themes, styles, patterns invented by the human mind and incorporated into our culture. It provides us with a set of values and larger perspectives that tell us who we are, where we fit, and what our purpose is. The life we live is but one of the many ways that are workable for dealing with reality. This life is our interpretation of how to live, of human existence, of what the meaning and purpose of life are. People disagree on which interpretations are more accurate, which are human inventions and which are based on divine guidance, but they are all interpretations.

As we saw earlier, our life does not seem like an interpretation. Instead, it seems natural, just the way things are and should be. That is a sign that our culture, like other cultures, has successfully performed its function of giving us roles, rules, values, mental concepts through language, and so forth, that we can incorporate as part of our way of being a human person. If the rituals are religious, centered on stories of the gods or on human relations to an Ultimate, the rituals may fill a participant with a sense of awe or reverence.
This adds an extra sense of legitimacy to the ideas, values, and practices which the ritual represents. The beliefs are more clearly true, the values correct, the practices proper because of their association with the numinous. Identity and belonging are fortified.

Primitive cultures rely heavily on ritual because there are no alternatives to it, no schools, and no written records. The rituals associated with birth, puberty, marriage, hunting, and death all contain guides to the individual on how to act and think about themselves. The rituals are occasions to retell and re-enact the folktales of the ancient figures and ancestors who made reality and its rules. For primitive people rituals usually contain reality. Most of the stories told in ritual are real life and not just stories. They are reality as it is now, and probably also reality as it was at the origins, repeated and commemorated.

For archaic or historic people, religious ritual can be somewhat more distinct from life in general, but it still is a representation and interpretation of life. On the island of Bali, for example, in the long chain of islands of Indonesia, the people have been Hindu since about the seventh century CE. A central feastday in the Balinese year is the celebration about Prince Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu. His story is told in the Ramayana, one of the great classics of Hindu literature. According to the sacred story, a demon abducted Rama’s wife Sita. Rama joined forces with the king of the monkeys and pursued the demon to Sri Lanka. With the help of the monkeys Rama defeated the demon and rescued his wife. This story is acted out on Bali in a great live drama in honor of Rama. With special clothing, face masks, and lights, the Balinese bring the demon, monkeys, Rama, and Sita to life before their eyes and those of their children. Through this drama every new generation comes to know about the nature of heroism, about love between husband and wife, about the evil of demons, and about many other things. The ritual thereby tells the community what reality is like and makes it more emphatically real to them.

In the spring Jews celebrate a long-ago event of passing over from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan. At an evening meal called the Seder, Jews recall this Passover in ritual form. The table is set with special tableware and some unusual food, such as unleavened bread and bitter herbs, in memory of the food the Hebrews had when escaping from Egypt. The youngest child ritualistically asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The head of the family begins to tell the story: “When we were slaves in Egypt....” The combination of various symbols and stories re-creates in the minds of those at table the events of past centuries that made the Jews the people of Yahweh. The story is told not only about ancestors who experienced all these events; it is a story that says, “When we were slaves.” It brings the children into an identification with the past. When these children grow up, they will talk to their own children about the times “when we were slaves.” Through the ritual every child comes to know what the reality of being a Jew is, and that reality becomes increasingly real through repetition in ritual each year.

Islam structures each day around ritual prayers. Five times daily the Muslim pauses from ordinary activities, ritually cleanses hands and feet and lips, faces towards the holy shrine at Mecca, and prays. It is prayer to praise Allah for his mercy and compassion. Above all, it is prayer that accepts Allah’s will. Through daily prayers, through the daytime fast in the month of Ramadan, and through the activities of the pilgrimage to Mecca which every Muslim hopes to make at least once in a lifetime, the beliefs and values of the Islamic tradition are reaffirmed. These rituals confirm the reality of Allah as the merciful and all-powerful God. They confirm the reality of submission to Allah that makes a person part of the Muslim community. These rituals thereby help create the social reality that is the House of Islam. Christianity has a ritual that explicitly retells the story and purpose of the whole universe. That is the traditional Easter service that recounts the biblical story of God’s creation of the world and the first man and woman. It tells of the first sin and the expulsion from the garden of Eden into a world of pain and fear and death. The generations down to the time of the Patriarch Abraham are listed, the story of the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt, and the expectation of a Messiah. The birth and life of Jesus are quickly retold, recalling his trial and sacrificial death on a cross. Then at dawn the story of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is celebrated. The promise of eternal life for all humankind and the messianic fulfillment of the entire universe are proclaimed with joy. Through rituals like this the Christian comes to perceive all of life in a certain way.

Ritual sometimes also includes a ceremony of dedication to the reality it portrays. A standard American marriage ritual is a clear example of this. It reminds people of what marriage is, a bond between two persons “until death do you part.” This marriage rite also asks whether the two persons promise to maintain this bond. The marriage is formed by the act of commitment in the words, “I do.”

The element of dedication or commitment can be less explicit but still real. In the New Hebrides in the southwest Pacific, a woman has two teeth torn out of her mouth to show she is married. College fraternities today exact a price from their pledges. The applicants for membership must suffer indignities and do physical labor to earn acceptance. Whether the cost is two teeth, psychological trials, or manual labor, this sort of ritual does not merely keep a person conscious of the new form of reality he or she is entering, but also requires a spirit of dedication or commitment from the person. This dedication to the reality that is re-presented in the ritual makes the reality
The Separation of Magic from Ritual

When religious traditions become historic they try to eliminate the magical use of ritual. An absolute God or infinite Brahman is totally beyond the power of magic. Such a deity cannot be affected by any mana-like power inherent in any rituals. Moreover, in historic religions the universe is controlled by a universal and all-powerful numinous reality. The belief that there are little numinous powers that human beings can manipulate in magical rituals is a belief that might challenge the omnipotence of God, that might suggest there are some things that are not under the control of Allah, for example. For reasons like this, the historic religions tend to oppose belief in magic.

Yet belief in magic comes easily to human beings. Traditional rituals, performed with reverence and treated as sacred, evoke a sense of awe in the participants, a sense that there is real power in the ritual actions. Buddhists in Thailand are tempted to believe that a priestly blessing bestowed on medals bearing the Buddha’s image endows those medals with powerful luck. Catholics in St. Louis are tempted to believe that the baptism ceremony has a magical influence on the inner soul of an infant. If the words and actions are done just right, the divine power flows into the medal or child, the believer is likely to think.

The Buddhist priests of Thailand insist that the medal-blessing ceremony does not bestow special good-luck powers on the medals. It is an educational ceremony, they say, that recalls to people’s minds the understanding of life that the Buddha attained in his enlightenment. The Baptist movement in Christianity has tried to guard against a magical interpretation of baptism by making it a ritual for adults, not infants. Adults can participate in the ritual as an act of conscious acceptance of a Christian life.

There is a continuing struggle by historic (and modern) religion to avoid magical use of ritual. Islam typifies this in its insistence that external observance of the ritual cleansings and prayers does not fulfill the religious requirement. It is the inner intention to acknowledge, praise, thank, and obey Allah that makes the ritual worthwhile. The Catholic Church has been emphasizing in recent years that its sacraments (central rituals) are not automatic external routines for producing a kind of divine energy called grace, as some Catholics tend to think. The sacraments are carriers of meaning and have their effect through people’s consciousness and faith. They require personal attention and dedication to be efficacious. Magic requires only that the external operations be exactly correct. This controls mana-like power. Nonmagical ritual does not control such power; its influence is on the consensual of the people involved, so their personal involvement is necessary.

The Origin of Ritual

Ritual is clearly very useful in affirming the reality and significance of the way of life of a society. But almost no religious people give that as the reason why they ritualize. It is much more usual to claim that a religious tradition says that the rituals were established in the beginning by divine instructions or inspiration or example of a religious leader. This does not explain, however, why people also ritualize all sorts of nonreligious aspects of life, and add new rituals in the religious tradition as the centuries pass.

In earlier chapters we have seen some theories about why people have felt that ritual is useful. Water poured on the ground is similar to rain falling upon the ground. A water-pouring ceremony might easily appear to be useful for inducing rainfall. A voodoo doll made from clothing, hair, and fingernail clippings of a certain person is likely to be able to affect that person in an invisible way. This explains why certain symbols are chosen; it does not explain why the symbols have to be ritualized very precisely.

No one seems to have a sure explanation for our tendency to ritualize. Some have reasoned that we are born with an inclination to ritualize. Most animal species have some ritual behaviors, especially mating behavior. Perhaps there is a genetic tendency to ceremonialize. Others have noted that children ritualize as a way of learning. They watch adults do all sorts of things with ease: carry water in a cup, trim leaves off a plant, make toys roll across the floor. When children try to do the same, they spill, break, or overturn whatever they are handling. They learn that many things must be done exactly right and with care. Each movement of foot, hand, eye must be carefully coordinated. From controlled sequence of acts comes ability to accomplish things correctly. Perhaps such experiences leave even us adults with a
lingering sense that if only a person learns the exactly correct actions in the correct sequences and does them with a ceremonious care, then almost magical results occur.

Ritual serves to make people feel they have techniques for taming the wild powers in us and the universe. Many experiences produce chaotic emotions. Grief over the death of a child is channeled in manageable forms by funeral rites. The powers of madness in certain drugs can be controlled by restricting the drug to religious ceremonial times. The ancient Aryans used the drug soma (or haoma) as part of religious ritual. A native American religious movement uses peyote in its ritual. The controlled patterns of ritual safely contain the awesome power of the numinous. The Yanomamó of Brazil and Venezuela inhale a hallucinogenic powder made from the bark of the ebene tree. It helps them see or get in touch with certain spirits, which sometimes make them behave so wildly they have to be restrained.

It is interesting that dancing and use of rhythms in speech are appealing to all of us as children and even as adults. Perhaps patterned and rhythmic behavior came first in human cultural development and eventually acquired mythic explanations to make sense out of them. This could be how rituals originated. First people danced. Then they began to tell a story in order to explain why they danced.

**Legalistic Ritual**

The legalistic use of ritual is closely allied to belief in magic. Legalism in morality is obedience to the letter of the law instead of its spirit. Legalism in ritual is obedience to the external forms of the ritual instead of participation in the meaning of the ritual. There are religious believers who maintain that their ritual is not magical, but who are still concerned mainly with the external correctness of the ritual rather than its inner meaning. In every religious group there seem to be those who dare not change ritual patterns, or the letter of any religious laws, for that matter, no matter how reasonable it might be to do so. It is a kind of taboo use of ritual, where ritual is done out of obedience to commands and out of a fear of punishment or chaos that would result from doing the ritual incorrectly.

But to adhere closely to traditional patterns is not necessarily legalistic. The Amish who retain old-style dress do so out of a sense of identity with their community. The Orthodox Jewish male who refuses to shave may find this a way of preserving a sense of continuity with tradition. The Catholic who does not eat meat on Friday may act out of a sense that it is good to retain some personal reminder of older ways. Yet among Amish, Jews, Catholics, and all groups of religious people, it is possible to find many who cling to traditional patterns of behavior almost compulsively with little sense of their meaning. Such behavior can be motivated by the human need for security, identity, and belonging, but ritual practices that emphasize external conformity to codes of dress and behavior can empty those rituals of their meaning. Legalism appears to support ritual by maintaining its externals, but legalism can actually kill ritual by depriving it of its inner life. Religious ritual has its strongest effect where its inner meaning is given full attention.

**Rituals as Part of the Long Transformation**

All of us are tempted to believe that the routine performance of some ritual procedure will give us easy access to what we desire, as though by magic. We want to lose weight without dieting and grow strong without exercise. In religious matters, too, we often want easy and automatic paths to moral rightness or life in paradise. From childhood through adolescence, though, we slowly grow in the awareness that dedication and effort are needed, that there is no easy shortcut through magic or merely external observances to get what we want. People who belong to historic religious traditions still might like to believe that prayers or rituals will slice through the obstacles to happiness. This is a normal human tendency. But what we come to learn as adults is that the path to achieving meaningful personal growth is arduous and involves a long process of transformation of ideas, values, and emotional perspectives.

This transformation is supported by rituals that function not magically or merely externally but as interpretations of life. The rituals describe the worthwhile goals, keeping them before people as incentives, and they reaffirm that there is a path to the goals. They offer encouragement, reminding people of the trials and pains that accompany all developments; they encourage people to make the religious vision the guiding center of their lives. The rituals will have these effects to some extent even on people who think of them as magical, but this belief in magic can also distract them from trying to learn from the rituals and from making a personal effort to grow into the reality the religious tradition offers as a path of salvation.

**Symbols**

Rituals are just one form of symbol. Many symbols and symbolic actions together make up rituals, but symbol is nonetheless a broader category than ritual. Every ritual is a symbol, though a complex one, and there are other symbols besides ritual ones.

In ordinary English, a symbol is something that stands for something else. Those who write about religion like to make distinctions between signs and symbols and other representations. We can overlook all those subtleties here. A symbol re-presents something more than itself. It is a word, picture, ges-
ture, action, object, drama, ritual that brings to people's consciousness something additional. Like ritual forms of symbol, all symbols are meaning-carriers; they too make reality more real. They are not "merely" symbols in the place of the real thing; they are a kind of presence of the real thing, as various examples here will illustrate.

Some symbols are great art. Museums are filled with great art of religious origin. The eighth-century Great Mosque of Damascus is considered a stunning piece of architecture. Michelangelo's early sixteenth-century Pieta, a sculpture of Mary holding the body of her son Jesus just after being taken down from the cross, envelops the onlooker in her massive sorrow. On the other hand, some symbols are rather crude, simple paintings or carvings done without artistry or taste. Yet they too can convey ideas or evoke feelings and help to make present some sacred reality.

Kinds of Symbols
There are all kinds of symbols, some rather ordinary. In a sense each word we read is a set of symbolic marks that represent various sounds. These marks and the sounds they stand for re-present to your mind some ideas. Some symbols evoke strong emotional responses: the national flag inspires feelings of patriotism. Some symbols are as simple as a handshake; others are as complex as the coronation of the Queen or King of England. The stop sign on the corner is the symbolic presence of the police power of the government. For that matter, the government in a democracy is the symbolic presence of the choices of the people.

Presence-through-symbol can be limited: a letter from a friend is a mode of presence of the friend. The friend is far away, yet her thoughts are there in front of you in written form. Her care and humor are present to you in her words. The presence-through-symbol can be a strong and close one: every person's body is a symbol of the invisible personality within. Each of us has an inner self that is always out of view. Yet we can say to one another, "I see you; I hear you; I understand you." That is because bodily motions, such as the sound waves made by voice and lips, all make present to others our inner self. The body is the symbol of the inner self because it really is the presence of that self. The only way any one of us is present to others is in and through bodily expressions. It is worth learning skills to express oneself well in order to make our inner self present to others, and to be a good conversationalist in order to draw out and discover the inner selves of others.

Religious traditions say that there is an invisible numinous reality that influences or controls things. Invisible realities can be perceived only by some visible re-presentation, by a symbol. The signs ofnuminous power are all symbols of the numinous; they are all modes of presence of the numinous.

The tree in the forest is a symbol of the wood-nymph that lives in the tree and makes it grow. All green growing things are symbols of the fertility-power of the goddess Demeter. The bright, dry, hot, and lively things of the world are all presences of yang-power and are therefore symbols of yang. All dark, moist, cool, and quiet things are symbols and presences of yin. If the whole universe is created and sustained by God, then the whole universe is the symbol and presence of God's power and creativity. If God is the absolute fullness of what we know as "personness," then every person is a symbol and presence of God.

As you perhaps suspect, everything is or can be a symbol. For a reality to function as a symbol, it must be recognized as a symbol. Human consciousness makes things symbolic by relating one thing to another. Water is just water until the human mind links it to other aspects of reality. Then it becomes a symbol and presence of life, of cleansing, of death, or of chaos, depending on how a person views it. For the people of the Nile, the river is the blessed source of life. For those who live near the North Atlantic, the waters of the ocean may be a symbol of death and chaos because ocean storms destroy and kill.

Core Symbols
Some symbols are central to their religious traditions, so much so that other symbols revolve around them as satellites. These core symbols re-present most of what is in the tradition. In some forms of Buddhism the simple sentence, "The jewel is in the lotus," is a core symbol. One Chinese Buddhist declared that this saying contained the complete essence of Buddhist truths, and wrote extensive commentaries on it as the "Lotus Sutra" (or lotus sayings). Outsiders have a difficult time imaging how these words could contain the whole of any religious tradition, but one who lives by the religious tradition can find a wealth of meaning there. For a Buddhist the lotus, a water lily, is a symbol of human existence because though its roots are buried in the mud and it must slowly grow upward through the murky waters, eventually it breaks out into the air above where it blossoms. Each person is like the lily growing from mud and through murkiness until release into nirvana.

In Judaism the Torah is the core symbol. To the outsider a Jew explains that the Torah is the law or teaching given by God to Moses for the chosen people to live by. But the Jew finds in the Torah more than instructions for daily living. The Torah is a symbol of God's kindness and guidance; it is eternal wisdom made concrete in history; it is a call to a covenant with God; it is the presence of a divine promise for a future fulfillment; it is the primary symbol of God's presence, activity, and love. All rituals are based on the Torah. All value judgments, cultural forms, and family structures are related to Torah. This law is the center of the relationship of the Jew to God.
Other traditions have other core symbols. It is not possible to list them all here, but it is worth noting the power they can have. Because symbols are visible and concrete, they give some focus to religious beliefs and feelings. Images, statues, and stories help define the mysterious reality that is the numinous and make it easier to relate to it. The symbols of a religious tradition, in fact, usually control the consciousness of the people who follow that tradition. The symbols define and interpret reality, and the place of human existence in that reality.

**RITUAL, SYMBOL, AND THE NUMINOUS**

The numinous is the invisible and mysterious. Symbols, including ritual, give concrete form to the numinous and re-present it. Beliefs, moral codes, ritual, community forms, architecture, and theologies are ways by which religious traditions make the numinous symbolically present so that the human mind and imagination can deal with it.

The Symbol in Primitive, Archaic, and Historic Religion

In primitive religion little or no distinction is made between symbols and the numinous. The three rocks in front of the cave in Australia are not symbols of the old woman and her daughters who formed the landscape. They are the three women themselves turned into stone. When the aborigines perform the rituals that retell the stories of the beginning of things in "dream-time," these rituals are a way of actually living in the past and doing the original deeds.

Archaic religions sometimes show the same tendency. The statue of the god is the god. The Babylonians used to take the wooden statue of their god out for a walk after lunch and then tuck him in bed for a nap. In the villages of India a goddess mother is carried in procession and decorated with flowers and given fragrant incense to breathe. On the other hand, the people of archaic cultures also believe that statues and symbols are not themselves the numinous power, but rather are only representations of the power. The god may make her or his power known through the statue or temple but actually lives on the mountain top or in the sky above. The Indian villager is comfortable in throwing away an old statue of the goddess; he or she knows that the statue is a presence of the goddess but is not the actual goddess.

Historic religions are much more conscious that what is divine is not identical with what symbolizes the divine. Historic religions believe that there is one all-encompassing power throughout the whole universe, a power that is infinite, eternal, and incomprehensible. But all symbols including rituals are part of limited reality. No symbol or ritual is itself divine. No statue can be God; no ritual can capture infinite divine powers. Symbols are modes of the presence of the divine, but are not the same as the divine.

Historic religions have a strong need for symbol. A finite god can be directly present in an appearance to a person. The infinite God always is beyond the limits of any image or appearance. The person who wants to turn toward the infinite God or Brahman or Tao must rely on clues, pointers, symbols. To the Taoist the patterns of nature are the symbols of the Tao. To the Jew every person is a symbol of the supreme God. To the Buddhist silence is a symbol of infinite nirvana. Such symbols are necessary to re-present that reality which in itself is infinite and incomprehensible.

The Problem of Idolatry in Historic Religions

Symbols, however, are not just valuable; they can also be misleading or even dangerous. Symbols like statues, rituals, and doctrinal descriptions of the numinous are more appealing and comfortable to people than the infinite and eternal for which they stand in historic religion. They are concrete images the mind can more easily deal with. In this lies the danger of idolatry: treating something finite and limited as though it were infinite divinity itself, as though it were the actual ultimate and eternal reality that alone is God or Brahman or Tao.

In India there is some disparity between the religious practices of most Hindus and the belief in an absolute Brahman. The religious leaders do not worry much about that. Those who think the gods are the highest reality or who worship statues as gods, are simply less mature souls. After a few thousand more lifetimes these people will appreciate that nothing finite or temporal is of any lasting value or reality. Eventually they will begin to long for true moksha, total release into oneness with the eternal and infinite Brahma. Meanwhile, the religious leaders are indulgent toward unsophisticated god-worshippers, as wise adults are indulgent toward children who still have much to learn.

The Western tradition is somewhat stricter. The Judaic tradition explicitly forbids worship of any gods but the Lord God, Yahweh. While this may originally have been a form of monolatry, it became strict monotheism. As part of the defense of monotheism, Jewish law forbade the making of any carved images in order to prevent people from falling into worship of such images. Even today the Jewish temple or synagogue typically has no pictorial images. The symbol of God's presence there is the scroll of the Torah kept in each place of worship.

Christianity inherited at least parts of the Jewish law, including the ban on the worship of false gods. Yet early Christians lived in a Greco-Roman cultural context for the most part, one that used many pictorial images in statues, murals, and paintings. Christians used images of Jesus and his mother,
Mary, and included also pictures of various apostles and saints. Christian belief insisted that these images are symbols and have no power of their own. But not all Christians have adhered strictly to that belief.

As an aid to preserving pure monotheism, some Christians have tried to ban all pictorial images on the grounds that finite images of holy beings such as angels or saints distract people from God, or even lead people to idolatry. In the eighth and ninth centuries in Constantinople there were many iconoclasts (image-breakers), who tried to get rid of all statues and pictures. In the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation in Europe iconoclasm became popular again, as Calvinist reformers tried to eliminate the superstition in use of statues, medals, and so forth, by simply eliminating them altogether. Similarly, in 2001 a highly traditionalist paramilitary leadership in Afghanistan destroyed giant and revered statues of the Buddha carved into mountain walls many centuries ago. To the leaders of the group, called the Taliban, these were idols; to most of the rest of the world they were ancient art.

Islam is very strict in its monotheism. Arabic religion before Muhammad had been an archaic religion worshiping many gods, in awe of many spirits and mana-filled springs and rocks and amulets. Muhammad and the Qur'an outdid the neighboring Jews and Christians in discarding all these distractions from the belief that there is but one God. Like Judaism, Islam forbids all graven images. It also takes great pains to insist that nothing be given religious reverence except Allah. The sole possible exception to this is the Qur'an, treated by most Muslims as the eternal wisdom and will of God written in human language. Shi'ite Muslims even warn against excessive reverence for the Qur'an lest this distract from full reverence towards Allah. Islamic tradition warns against any way of treating anything as reality as though it were God. The Arabic word for this is shirk, sometimes translated as "idolatry." But shirk consists of any tendency to take some aspect of reality, whether it be a person's nation or fame or success or power, and to make it the guiding goal in life. Only Allah and submission to Allah is ultimately worthy of a person's full devotion.

The Islamic tradition on this is one form of an idea that occurs in all the historic religions. We humans face endless mystery in our lives. This mystery threatens us because its mysteriousness leaves us confused and unsettled. We want to blow away the mists of mystery and find concrete descriptions of all aspects of what is real. We want specific and fully understandable answers to all the disturbing questions of life.

This means that in a sense we are born to be idolaters. We are born to want to take some clear answer and make it ultimate. We want to find something definite we can use, not merely as a clue to the purpose of life but as the ultimate purpose itself. A historic religious tradition will usually offer definite answers, providing a belief system of ideas to be accepted as true and authoritative guides to truth: leaders, scriptures, and approved methods of interpretation; a moral code that gives definite answers to how to behave; symbols and rituals that are correct and valid. Because the beliefs and rituals and moral codes and community patterns and texts are not divine in themselves they too are symbols, ways in which the numinous is re-presented. But the temptation exists to identify all these symbols as somehow eternal and divinely sacred, rather than limited ways in which the eternal and infinite is re-presented and made more concrete.

Historic religion has a special temptation to do this because this is the form of religiousness that human consciousness accepts when it acquires the ability to conceive of universal and complete perfection. The religious symbols historic religion lives by are not symbols of just limited and imperfect numinous powers but of infinite and fully perfect Reality. It is possible, then, for historic religious believers to feel that since the symbols represent what is eternal and perfect, the symbols themselves must be everlasting and unable to be surpassed or corrected.

The constant, internal tension of historic religion (and of modern religion also in its own way, as we will see) is to live by symbols that represent the infinite and incomprehensible mystery and give it a face and presence in doctrines, codes, community forms, rituals, and images, without at the same time covering up the mysteriousness that still remains.

In many cases there are no serious consequences of forgetting the infinite mysteriousness of the ultimate. People may pleasantly devote themselves to their own religious symbols as though those symbols were the totally complete, final, and utterly correct ones, but still somehow do so with a comfortable tolerance towards those who do not agree. This temptation to idolatry, however, can also produce intolerance. If the symbols are absolutely correct, then perhaps all those who disagree are enemies of the truth, whether they know it or not. One person might then condescendingly try to help the ignorant opponents of truth. But as we have seen, another person might also try to oppress, imprison, or kill them. It has happened often enough.

The historic religion tempted to idolatry can overcome that temptation by reminding itself that its symbols can never be eternal and perfect; only the Ultimate can. There is practical value, then, to the Buddhist use of silence as a symbol for nirvana, or the Western use of the poetic image that describes God as a light so bright it blinds the soul. A famous koan (saying) of Zen Buddhism in Japan is apt: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" That question gives a clue that our language and thought powers are limited in the face of mystery.

Sunni Islam faces a special challenge on this topic. Sunni traditionalists
long ago agreed that the Qur'an as we have it in Arabic is uncreated, that before it was transmitted to Muhammad it had already existed eternally in God's mind. Within Islam itself more than one school has argued against this, saying that although the ideas in the Qur'an have always existed in God's mind, the Arabic wording is created and therefore open to at least some of the limitations to which all created texts are subject. But the Sunni traditionalist interpretation has dominated Muslim thought since the tenth or eleventh centuries.

The Death of Religious Symbols

Eventually, we will be discussing skepticism about religion, and intellectual doubts about the validity of religious traditions. There is, however, another kind of loss of religiosity that is not so intellectual. That is the death of the symbols, including the death of beliefs and rituals and moral codes, because they begin to lose their power to interpret and re-present reality to people.

Any symbol can die. It might be an image that no longer conveys meaning to an observer. Most of us living in modern industrial cities no longer experience daily contact with cows, so they do not spring to mind as symbols of wealth or motherhood. A symbol also might die because the meaning it conveys, however strongly and vividly, is no longer acceptable. The image of a king still has some meaning because of all the stories about kings we are used to, but if a tradition pictures God as a king in order to suggest that God is a dictatorial ruler, some people today would find this unacceptable and insist that God should be symbolized more as a loving and creative force. Symbols can also be killed by legislation, which adheres to the use of a symbol but ignores its inner meaning. People who are pressured from external participation in a ritual may become indifferent to its significance and cease to be affected by it.

Any given symbol can be replaced by a competing symbol. A whole set of symbols associated with one community might be replaced by symbols from another source. Most cultures in the past received their symbols from religious sources. Religious tradition was the main vehicle for passing on the culture's interpretation of who we human beings are and how we are to achieve some sort of salvation in the face of the estranging elements of life. Today, television and motion pictures provide images for interpreting life. The Star Wars series of movies tells the young about heroism and justice. The Wizard of Oz lets us know that brains, heart, and courage are available to all of us. Electronic images are replacing scriptural ones.

This discussion of symbols is bringing us closer now to a topic that is often thought of as primary importance in religion: religious beliefs. The next chapter will deal with knowing and believing as aspects of religiousness. But this discussion of ritual and symbol comes first in order to make one point clear, that the beliefs and intellectual reflections on belief take place in the larger context of religious symbols and all the culture's symbols. The rituals, scriptures, revered leaders, community structures, and moral customs all together form a consciousness-context that people's minds rely on when they try to stop and consciously spell out to themselves their interpretations of life. We are able to think about life because our culture first has re-presented life to us in many ways, including religious ways.

Summary

This chapter has described ritual and other symbols. Rituals have been part of human activity since the beginning, used for their magical powers or to influence spirits or gods, but also because they tell the stories of reality in a way that help people understand how things are or should be. Rituals are symbolic, as are many aspects of religiousness. Symbols represent realities, nymous or not, so that people can apprehend what might otherwise be obscure or unknown. It often happens that people become more attached to the symbols than the realities they re-present, although at other times certain symbols lose their power and are replaced.

Religion is a symbol system that interprets reality for people, so that in the face of the mysterious dimension of reality and its power to cause estrangement, they can find instead the saving power of the incommensurable object of the basic human faith in the meaningfulness of life. That much is true of all religiousness. The next question that religions face is that of knowing how to determine just which symbol system works best. That is the topic of the next chapter, on faith and reason.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

2. Do any of the rituals or symbols you use have magical powers? If not, what is their value to you?
3. Can you think of yourself, your community, or your physical world as the symbol-presence of the innumerable, such as God? Explain.
4. An idol is a finite reality treated as though it were divine. Do people ever literally idolize success, money, or power? Explain.
5. Identify any rituals or symbols that now educate you about life in any way. Are any of them religious or provided by a religious source? Explain.
SUGGESTED READINGS

Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., et al., Religions of the World, 1983. Ch. 1 and 2 on symbols in general, their cultural importance, and some concrete examples.

Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By, 1972. Ch. 2 especially, is an influential work on the emergence of human culture through myths and their enactment in ritual.


CHAPTER ELEVEN

Believing and Knowing

The Interrelations of Faith and Reason

The relation between faith and reason depends partly on what is meant by “faith.” The religious person today is usually convinced that there is a major difference between faith and reason. People think of faith as a basis for belief precisely when reason fails. Faith is a trust, perhaps, in certain symbols, scriptures, leaders, and so forth, that goes beyond the evidence. Or it is a commitment to a religious viewpoint in spite of a lack of rational justification. Faith says, for example, that there really is a life after death even if there is no hard evidence of this. Reason, on the other hand, believes in things like gravity precisely because there is good evidence for it. At least that is how people often think about these matters.

A classic proponent of this notion of faith was the second-century Christian theologian named Tertullian (c.160-c.230). He declared that he believed that Jesus had risen physically from the dead precisely because it was not the kind of thing that was reasonable. If it were reasonable, he would not need faith to accept it. His concluding words are often quoted: “I believe because it is absurd.” He dramatized his position by asking “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”; that is, what does all the rational argumentation of the philosophers and scientists of the intellectual city of Athens have to do with the religious faith that Jerusalem stands for?

Tertullian’s position, however, is not the only one. First of all, while most people do think that faith is what a person relies on just where reason fails short, they nonetheless usually like to think that their faith is at least somewhat reasonable rather than totally disconnected from reason. Secondly, Tertullian treats faith as a mode of belief. Many centuries later, Martin Luther (1483-1546) will treat faith more as loving trust in God. Specific beliefs were still important to Luther, but now only in relation to this more basic and general trust. Where a Christian would speak of faith, a Muslim would speak precisely of “Islam,” that is, of submission to the will of God, and a Jew would...