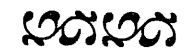


# Genealogies of Religion



DISCIPLINE AND REASONS  
OF POWER IN CHRISTIANITY  
AND ISLAM

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## INTRODUCTION

The essays brought together in this volume deal with historical topics that vary in time and place, ranging from the rites of medieval European monks to the sermons of contemporary Arab theologians. What links them all together is the assumption that Western history has had an overriding importance—for good or ill—in the making of the modern world, and that explorations of that history should be a major anthropological concern. It has sometimes been noted that peoples from non-Western countries feel obliged to read the history of the West (but not each other's histories) and that Westerners in turn do not feel the same need to study non-Western histories. The history of modern Western thought, for example, can be (and is) written on its own, but not so the history of contemporary Arab thought. One opposition between the West and the non-West (and so a mode of connection between them) is constructed historically by these asymmetrical desires and indifferences.

My anthropological explorations into Christian and post-Christian history are therefore motivated by the conviction that its conceptual geology has profound implications for the ways in which non-Western traditions are now able to grow and change. More particularly, I hold that anthropologists who would study, say, Muslim beliefs and practices will need some understanding of how "religion" has come to be formed as concept and practice in the modern West. For while religion is integral to modern Western history, there are dangers in employing it as a normalizing concept when translating Islamic traditions.

The genealogy of religion is a central theme in my essays. Thus, chapters 1 and 2 sketch the emergence of religion as a modern historical

object. In the next two chapters I approach the problem obliquely, by discussing in turn two elements in medieval Christianity that are no longer generally accepted by modern religion: the productive role of physical pain and the virtue of self-abasement. From the point of view of theological modernism, as well as of secular morality, they are both archaic ("uncivilized") conditions. Chapters 5 and 6 address aspects of the asymmetry between Western and non-Western histories: the former deals with problems of anthropological translation, the latter with the limitations of a non-Christian religious tradition when juxtaposed with the Enlightenment doctrine of critical reason. They deal with translation in a double sense: interpreting from one language into another, and conveying sacred relics from one shrine to another. The two final chapters (7 and 8) were written at the height of the so-called Rushdie affair in response to the angry positions then taken up in the name of liberalism about religious intolerance. All the chapters thus deal with fragments of the West's religious history, because I assume that the West's definition of itself—and therefore its engagement with non-Western cultures—includes that history.

Among anthropologists, "history" is a notion that few would now dare to despise. On the contrary, all of us solemnly acknowledge it. But what kind of history? More often than not, it is history in the active voice: everywhere, local people are "making their own history," "contesting" it, "borrowing" meanings from Western dominators, and "reconstructing" their own cultural existence.<sup>1</sup> This notion of history emphasizes not only the unceasing work of human creators but also the unstable and hybrid character of their creation. In some versions, therefore, the determining character of "world system" and "dependent structure" is rejected; in others, what is repudiated are claims about "authenticity," "a different people," "a unitary culture," "tradition," and so on. Intelligent and influential people writing today are committed to this view of history making. Nevertheless, I

1. As J. and J. Comaroff (1991, 18) put it in the introduction to their fascinating account of missionaries and colonialism in nineteenth-century South Africa: "Here, then, was a process in which signifiers were set afloat, fought over, and recaptured on both sides of the colonial encounter. What is more, this encounter led to the objectification of 'the' culture of the colonized in opposition to that of whites. . . . While signs, social relations, and material practices are constantly open to transformation—and while meaning may indeed *become* unfixed, resisted, and reconstructed—history everywhere is actively made in a dialectic of order and disorder, consensus and contest" (emphasis in original).

remain skeptical. So I shall begin by rehearsing briefly what I find to be unconvincing about it, and at the same time sketch—through a process of resistance—alternative conceptions that orient the following chapters, even though most of these conceptions are not treated explicitly in them.

Early in his recent Radcliffe-Brown lecture,<sup>2</sup> Marshall Sahlins (1988, 2–3) declared his intention "to join the anthropological chorus of protest against the idea that the global expansion of Western capitalism, or the World System so-called, has made the colonized and 'peripheral' peoples the passive objects of their own history and not its authors, and through tributary economic relations has turned their cultures likewise into adulterated goods."

Sahlins proceeds to chide Eric Wolf for reducing the histories of non-European peoples to the history of global capitalism, despite Wolf's proclaimed wish to make non-Europeans the authors of their own history. The trouble with Wolf, Sahlins tells us, is his attachment to economic Marxism. If only we had a more sophisticated Marxist understanding of production as a *cultural* process, we would at once see the falsity of assuming that "the world expansion of capitalism brings all other cultural history to an end" (6).

Sahlins's histories of the British opening up of imperial China, the European commercial penetration into Hawaii, and the Kwakiutl appropriation of European goods are intended to show how each encounter was guided by the cultural logic of the local people concerned. Sahlins's narratives are learned and persuasive—although a rigorous Marxist might want to point out that he draws his examples from the early phases of European expansion, which makes it easier to identify capitalism with exchange and consumption rather than with the transformation of production and the reorganization of power relations.<sup>3</sup>

2. This lecture elaborates an argument presented in Sahlins 1985.

3. Marx himself would say that the buying and selling of commodities is as old as recorded history; that the distinctive feature of modern capitalism, by contrast, was the buying and selling of labor power and the consequent penetration of capital into the production process in the unceasing drive for profit at home and abroad; that at home this process required reform of the law, new factory discipline, and technological innovation, while abroad it fueled trade, colonization, and imperial reconstruction. One might, of course, want to shrug off what Marx said about industrial capitalism, but that would not be consistent with also wanting to invoke his authority—as Sahlins in fact does. Incidentally, a useful discussion from a neo-Marxist perspective of the incorpora-

I have no wish to defend economistic Marxism here—or Wolf, for that matter.<sup>4</sup> What worries me is that the arguments espoused by this “anthropological chorus” (now joined by a chorus of historians) are not as clear as they might be. Thus, when Sahlins protests that local peoples are not “passive objects of their own history,” it should be evident that this is not equivalent to claiming that they are its “authors.” The sense of author is ambiguous as between the person who produces a narrative and the person who authorizes particular powers, including the right to produce certain kinds of narrative. The two are clearly connected, but there is an obvious sense in which the author of a biography is different from the author of the life that is its object—even if it is true that as an individual (as an “active subject”), that person is not entirely the author of his own life. Indeed, since everyone is in some degree or other an object for other people, as well as an object of others’ narratives, no one is ever entirely the author of her life. People are never only active agents and subjects in their own history. The interesting question in each case is: In what degree, and in what way, are they agents or patients?

“Western capitalism,” Sahlins observes, “has loosed on the world enormous forces of production, coercion and destruction. Yet precisely because they cannot be resisted, the relations and goods of the larger system also take on meaningful places in local schemes of things” (4). If that is so, then local peoples have to be seen in a crucial sense as “the passive objects of their own history and not its authors.” Their authorship consists merely in adjusting consciously to those forces and giving that adjustment a meaning. But in that sense they are no different from local peoples in Western societies for whom the relations and goods of “the larger system” also take on meaningful places in the local scheme of things. To take an extreme example: even the inmates of a concentration camp are able, in this sense, to live by their own cultural logic. But one may be forgiven for doubting that they are *therefore* “making their own history.”

tion of the Ottoman Empire into the world economy is Islamoglu-Inan’s (1987) collection. In her introduction, she outlines a framework in which the transformation of Ottoman structures can be understood with reference to the changing options available to local actors as a consequence of European economic and cultural penetration. Although she rejects the idea that inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire were the passive objects of their history, she does not find it necessary to resort instead to the idea of “cultural logic.”

4. My discussion of Wolf 1982 appeared in Asad 1987.

To the extent that what Sahlins calls the larger system determines the conditions within which things take on meaningful places, all peoples can be said to be the passive objects of their own history and not its authors. And that is precisely what Sahlins sometimes seems to be saying: “Not to suggest, then, that we ignore the modern juggernaut, only that its historical course be viewed as a cultural process” (4). But why essentially as a cultural process? One could put it this way, perhaps: the main story line is authored by the capitalist juggernaut, and local peoples provide their own interpretations in local performances. Yet even here we are offered the thought that world capitalism is the primary agent, local peoples at best the secondary ones.

In a widely read review article on contemporary anthropological theory (which must be included in the anthropological chorus Sahlins alludes to), Sherry Ortner (1984) has written feelingly against this very view: “Whether it be the hidden hand of structure or the juggernaut of capitalism that is seen as the agent of society/history, it is certainly not in any central way real people doing real things” (144). Her suggestion seems to be that “Western capitalism” is an abstraction (a mere fiction, to be signaled by quaint metaphors or ironic quotation marks) which does not, therefore, determine the lives of “real people doing real things.” This theoretical objection is not Ortner’s only complaint, nor is it always compatible with others she makes.

“Specifically,” she says at one point, “I find the capitalism-centered view of the world questionable, to say the least, *especially for anthropology*” (142, emphasis added). We should not assume, she goes on, either that everything anthropologists encounter in the field must already have been affected by the capitalist world system or that everything is best explained as a response to the latter. Now this in itself is an empirical point about the extent of capitalist influence throughout the world. But it is based on the assumption that “world capitalism” exists and that its effects can be confirmed or denied in the places where anthropologists work. It therefore also presupposes the theoretical problem of identifying world capitalism—whether as something prior to, or as inclusive of, its local effects. It suggests, especially for anthropology, that some theoretical idea of world capitalism is necessary if its historical consequences are to be recognized.

There is, however, yet another sense of disquiet that Ortner has about the capitalism-centered world-view, this time related to the spe-



cial role that a fieldwork-defined anthropology can play in the academy—a site that it shares with other human sciences:

The attempt to view other systems from ground level is the basis, perhaps the only basis, of anthropology's distinctive contribution to the human sciences. It is our capacity, largely developed in fieldwork, to take the perspective of the folks [among whom we research], that allows us to learn anything at all—even in our own culture—beyond what we already know. . . . It is our location “on the ground” that puts us in a position to see people not simply as passive reactors to and enactors of some “system,” but as active agents and subjects in their own history. (143)

The ethnographer may come from another system (say, a major capitalist country), but her task is to observe and describe the practices of people “on the ground,” not to intervene in what she sees.

For Ortner, there is, therefore, a sense in which anthropology's viewpoint is complementary to that of the sciences that study world capitalism, since it directs the attention of researchers at a different level of other systems. However, if anthropology's distinctive contribution requires it to take a *ground level* view of things, it is difficult to see how confining oneself to that level is sufficient to determine in what degree and in what way other levels become relevant.

The difficulty with this kind of talk is that it employs two different images simultaneously—one having to do with “real people” (which implies that systems are unreal), and the other with “ground level” (which concedes that there are other levels but claims that the latter are dependent on the former rather than the other way around). The two images are then used to define the theoretical autonomy as well as the distinctive contribution of fieldwork-based anthropology.

The fact is that all the human sciences deal with real people (even psychiatry deals with real people thinking/feeling unreal things). It is an old empiricist prejudice to suppose that things are real only when confirmed by sensory data, and that therefore people are real but structures and systems aren't. There are systematic features of human collectivities that are real enough even though you can't see them directly—for example, life expectancies, crime ratios, voting patterns, and rates of productivity. (You can see them once they are represented as tables, graphs, and maps, on a sheet of paper or a computer screen: here seeing and manipulating are closely connected.) Various kinds of

*This seems to miss the point*

social practice are inconceivable without such representations. Governments, businesses, churches, and other social bodies in the contemporary world cannot do without them—even in places as “peripheral” as Papua New Guinea. But note that the issue here is not whether a local culture is pure or derivative, unitary or contested. Nor is it being proposed that there is a super causality (the historical law of capitalism) that determines how everybody on the ground must live. I am concerned with how systematicity (including the kind that is essential to what is called capitalism) is apprehended, represented, and used in the contemporary world. When quantitative data relating to a local population are aggregated, analyzed, and manipulated, the results can be used to inform particular kinds of systematic practice directed at that population. The representation of the data also becomes essential to a distinctive style of argument by which such practices are justified or criticized.<sup>5</sup> The system with which I am concerned here therefore relates to a mode of human agency (“real people doing real things”), one that conditions other people's lives. The immediate objective of *this* agency, however, is not to cause individual actors to behave in one way rather than another. It is to change aggregate human conditions (distributions, trends, etc.) that are profitable or useful—in, for example, matters of landed property, disease, and literacy. Its systematicity lies, therefore, in probabilities, not causalities (Hacking 1990). But it is a kind of systematicity (and, therefore, of power) that is not easily grasped through what is typified as anthropological fieldwork. For although it represents people and their activities at ground level, it does not mirror them.

In fairness, it should be said that Ortner may not really subscribe to the empiricist prejudice I have adverted to, in spite of the language she uses. Probably all she wants to say, somewhat like Sahlins, is that world capitalism has not homogenized the cultures of local peoples. And that, I repeat, is *prima facie* a reasonable claim, although it doesn't tell us whether, and if so how, local peoples make their own history.

The term *local peoples*—now increasingly used by ethnographers instead of the older *primitive*, *tribal*, *simple*, *preliterate*, and so on—can

5. This is an extension of Ian Hacking's concept of “styles of reasoning” (in turn borrowed and developed from recent historians of science), which create, as he puts it, “the possibility for truth and falsehood.” Thus, the emergence of statistical reasoning has brought into being new propositions as candidates for true-or-false judgments. See Hacking 1982.

be misleading in an interesting way and calls for some unpacking. In a literal sense, of course, all people most of the time are "local" in the sense of being locatable. Since anthropologists now generally claim that their distinctiveness rests on a method (fieldwork) rather than an object (non-European cultures), this sense recommends itself to them: fieldwork defines privileged access to the local.<sup>6</sup> Yet not everyone who is local in this sense has the same opportunity for movement, or the same practical *reach*: national politicians in the Sudanese capital and nomads and peasants in the provinces; corporation directors in an Australian metropolis and mineworkers in the New Guinean Highlands; generals in the Pentagon and front-line soldiers in the gulf, and so on. They are all locatable, but not equally so by each other.

↓  
local/universal  
↑  
To say of people that they are local is to imply that they are attached to a place, rooted, circumscribed, limited. People who are not local are thought of either as displaced, uprooted, disoriented—or more positively as unlimited, cosmopolitan, universal, belonging to the whole world (and the world belonging to them). Thus, Saudi theologians who invoke the authority of medieval Islamic texts are taken to be local; Western writers who invoke the authority of modern secular literature claim they are universal. Yet both are located in universes that have rules of inclusion and exclusion. Immigrants who arrive from South Asia to settle in Britain are described as uprooted; English officials who lived in British India were not. An obvious difference between them is power: the former become subjects of the Crown, the latter its representatives. What are the discursive definitions of authorized space? Everyone can relate themselves (or is allocated) to a multiplicity of spaces—phenomenal and conceptual—whose extensions are variously defined, and whose limits are variously imposed, transgressed, and reset. Modern capitalist enterprises and modernizing nation-states are the two most important powers that organize spaces today, defin-

6. In his brief sketch of the history of anthropological fieldwork, Evans-Pritchard (1951, 74) wrote: "We have now reached the final, and natural, stage of development, in which observations and the evaluation of them are made by the same person and the scholar is brought into direct contact with the subject of his study. Formerly the anthropologist, like the historian, regarded documents as the raw material of his study. Now the raw material was social life itself." Most contemporary anthropologists have come to identify fieldwork with direct access to "social life itself," thereby underwriting the eye's epistemological sovereignty. "Documents" are not regarded as part of social life itself but as (unreliable) evidence of it—not as elements that enable or prevent or subvert social events, only as (incomplete) traces that record them.

ing, among other things, what is local and what is not. Being locatable, local peoples are those who can be observed, reached, and manipulated as and when required. Knowledge *about* local peoples is not itself local knowledge, as some anthropologists have thought (Geertz 1983). Nor is it therefore simply universal in the sense of being accessible to everyone.

Anthropologists such as Sahlins and Ortner assume that the thesis of agency and creativity in the non-European world requires that the idea of cultural autonomy be defended. More recently, a very different argument has been advanced for that thesis. Among anthropologists, James Clifford is its most eloquent exponent:

This century has seen a drastic expansion of mobility, including tourism, migrant labor, immigration, urban sprawl. More and more people "dwell" with the help of mass transit, automobiles, airplanes. In cities on six continents foreign populations have come to stay—mixing in but often in partial, specific fashions. The "exotic" is uncannily close. Conversely, there seem no distant places left on the planet where the presence of "modern" products, media, and power cannot be felt. An older topography and experience of travel is exploded. One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth. . . . "Cultural" difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence. A whole structure of expectations about authenticity in culture and in art is thrown in doubt. (Clifford, 1988, 13–14)

In this vision of a fractured, fluid world, all human beings live in the same cultural predicament.<sup>7</sup> There is no single, privileged narrative of

7. Thomas (1991) has made similar points, although he does not hold to quite the same position as Clifford. He attacks ethnographic discourse for its attachment to "exoticism" and for "suppressing mutual entanglement and the perspectival and political fracturing of the cultures of both observers and observed." Like Clifford, he does not deny the existence of cultural differences but condemns "ethnographic representations of stable and unitary cultures" (309). There is some hesitation in the position Thomas wants to take, however. Thus, he concedes that "anthropology has dealt effectively with implicit meanings that can be situated in the coherence of one culture" but pleads that "contemporary global processes of cultural circulation and reification demand an interest in meanings that are explicit and derivative." This seems to imply that unitary-culture monographs may be successful at representing some things but not others. Yet

the modern world, and therefore the history of global capitalism is rejected. Everyone is *dislocated*; no one is rooted. Because there is no such thing as authenticity, borrowing and copying do not signify a lack. On the contrary, they indicate libidinal energies and creative human agency. For everyone, Clifford insists, cultural identity is mixed, relational, inventive.

Not all readers will find such representations of modern history (of which there are many within as well as outside anthropology) acceptable. What is striking, however, is the cheerfulness with which this predicament of culture is proffered. Indeed, in spite of frequent references to unequal power (which is explored only in the context of fieldwork and ethnography), we are invited to celebrate the widening scope of human agency that geographical and psychological mobility now afford.

Hannah Arendt had a very different response to mobility in her famous analysis of European totalitarianism, first published in the 1950s. There she spoke of "uprootedness and superfluity which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time" (Arendt 1975, 475).

Arendt's sense of deep pessimism may be put down to someone who had herself experienced the horrors of Nazism, and her analysis of totalitarianism may be criticized for some oversimplifications. She is, nevertheless, aware of a problem that has escaped the serious attention of those who would have us celebrate human agency and the decentered subject: the problem of understanding how dominant power realizes itself through the very discourse of mobility. For Arendt is very clear that mobility is not merely an event in itself, but a moment

he also wants to say that they never were valid: "It's not clear that the unitary social system ever was a good model for anthropological theory, but the shortcomings are now more conspicuous than ever." The universal existence of cultural borrowings and accretions demands a different approach, as in the study of creoles: "Derivative *lingua franca* have always offended those preoccupied with boundaries and authenticity, but they offer a resonant model for the uncontained transpositions and transcultural meanings which cultural enquiry must now deal with" (317). Thomas has put his finger on an area of unclarity that has long disturbed anthropology: how to represent historical differences and connections in a world where social identities change. Leach, it may be recalled, made a famous attempt to resolve this problem by drawing on the neo-Kantian philosopher Vaihinger and speaking of "scientific fictions."

in the subsumption of one act by another. If people are physically and morally uprooted, they are more easily moved, and when they are easy to move, they are more easily rendered physically *and* morally superfluous.

From the point of view of power, mobility is a convenient feature of the act subsumed, but a necessary one of the subsuming act. For it is by means of geographical and psychological movement that modern power inserts itself into preexisting structures. *That* process is necessary to defining existing identities and motives as superfluous, and to constructing others in their place. Meanings are thus not only created, they are also redirected or subverted—as so many novels about indigent life in the colonies have poignantly depicted.

The positive connection between mobility and modernity is fairly well established in sociological literature. I take one instructive example. In 1958, Daniel Lerner published an academic bestseller on modernization in the Middle East entitled *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Its thesis was that modernity in the West had depended principally on "the mobile personality"—that is, on a type of person eager to move, to change, and to invent. Empathy was said to be central to that personality, and Lerner (1958, 50) defined it as "the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow's situation." Only the mobile personality, he contended, was able to relate creatively to the modern condition. Many of us in Middle East studies criticized it in the 1960s and 1970s for its inadequate scholarship and careless methodology. However, the most illuminating engagement with that book was undertaken in 1980 by a student of sixteenth-century English literature. In chapter 6 of his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt developed the brilliant insight that "what Professor Lerner calls 'empathy,' Shakespeare calls 'Iago'" (225). He proposed that the idea shared by Lerner's "empathy" and Shakespeare's Iago was *improvisation*: "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario." I quote in full:

The spur-of-the-moment quality of improvisation is not as critical here as the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established. Indeed, as Castiglione and others in the Renaissance well understood, the impromptu character of an improvisation is itself often a calculated mask, the product of careful preparation. Conversely, all plots, literary and behavioral, inevitably have their origin in a moment prior

to formal coherence, a moment of experimental, aleatory impulse in which the available, received materials are curved toward a novel shape. We cannot locate a point of pure premeditation or pure randomness. What is essential is the Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage. . . . Professor Lerner is right to insist that this ability is a characteristically (though not exclusively) Western mode, present to varying degrees in the classical and medieval world and greatly strengthened from the Renaissance onward; he misleads only in insisting further that it is an act of imaginative generosity, a sympathetic appreciation of the situation of the other fellow. For when he speaks confidently of the "spread of empathy around the world," we must understand that he is speaking of the exercise of Western power, power that is creative as well as destructive, but that is scarcely ever wholly disinterested or benign. (227–28)

The point I want to draw out from this perceptive account of Western power relates not to the moral status of its intentions but to its transforming work. In any case, the European wish to make the world in its own image is not necessarily to be disparaged as ungenerous. If one believes oneself to be the source of salvation, the wish to make others reflect oneself is not unbenign, however terrible the practices by which this desire is put into effect. Besides, in a tradition that connects pain with achievement, the inflicting of suffering on others is not in itself reprehensible: it is to be condemned only when it is gratuitous—where the pain as means is out of proportion to an objective end (hence, the subjective enjoyment of pain is regarded as both immoral and pathological).

But the question I want to raise here is this: to the extent that such power seeks to normalize other people's motivations, whose history is being made? Note that my question is not about the authenticity of individual agency but about the structure of normal personhood (normal in both the statistical and the medical sense) and the techniques for securing it. I ask whether improvisation becomes irrelevant when the agents are non-Europeans acting within the context of their own politically independent state to implement a European project: the continuous physical and moral improvement of an entire governable population through flexible strategies. Whose improvised story do these agents construct? Who is its author, and who its subject?

The idea that cultural borrowing must lead to total homogeneity and to loss of authenticity is clearly absurd, but the idea of projects' having translatable historical structures should not be confused with it. When a project is translated from one site to another, from one agent to another, versions of power are produced. As with translations of a text, one does not simply get a reproduction of identity. The acquisition of new forms of language from the modern West—whether by forcible imposition, insidious insertion, or voluntary borrowing—is part of what makes for new possibilities of action in non-Western societies. Yet, although the outcome of these possibilities is never fully predictable, the language in which the possibilities are formulated is increasingly shared by Western and non-Western societies. And so, too, the specific forms of power and subjection.

Choices and desires make actions before actions can make "history." But predefined social relations and language forms, as well as the body's materiality, shape the person to whom "normal" desires and choices can be attributed. That is why questions about what it is possible for agents to do must also address the process by which "normal persons" are constituted. Meanings are never simply generated by a cultural logic; they belong variously to conventional projects, occasional intentions, natural events, and so on (see Grice 1989). For theologians such as Augustine and al-Ghazali, they also relate to all-encompassing divine purposes. The medieval Christian monk who learns to make the abbot's will into his own learns thereby to desire God's purposes. In an important sense, the meaning of his actions is what it is by virtue of their being part of a transcendent project. (And so, too, the actions of all agents are part of transcendent temporal structures. The fact that the further significance of actions becomes apparent only when a certain time has elapsed is one to which working historians are likely to be more sensitive than working ethnographers.)

Even among nonbelievers, few would claim that the human agent is sovereign, although post-Enlightenment moral theory insists that she ought to be autonomous. This theory has long been criticized by conservative as well as socialist writers. Moral considerations apart, it is evident that the increasingly sophisticated division of labor and the consumer culture of modern capitalism renders individual autonomy less and less feasible as a practical possibility. More recently, some radical critics (particularly those concerned with third world studies) have

drawn on poststructuralist ideas to attack the Enlightenment idea of autonomy. A thoughtful example is the Indianist Rosalind O'Hanlon, who questions the "liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency" in a review of the work of the *Subaltern Studies* group of historians (O'Hanlon 1988). The starting point for the latter was their dissatisfaction with the "elite historiography" of India, which denied subordinate peoples a consciousness of their own, and hence the capacity to make their own history. Orientalist and functionalist anthropologies of India were also condemned for their alleged essentialism.<sup>8</sup> (Note the first assumption of the "history-making" thesis: that history is not made unless significant change occurs. It is not sufficient for events to succeed one another; something substantial must be transformed.)

O'Hanlon sympathizes with the Subaltern historians' wish to recover suppressed histories but points to the theoretical danger such an agenda conceals of slipping into "essentialist humanism." One must reject, she says,

the myth . . . of the self-constituting subject, that a *consciousness or being* which has an origin outside itself is no being at all. From such a rejection, we can proceed to the idea that though histories and identities are necessarily *constructed and produced from many fragments*, fragments which do not contain the signs of any essential belonging inscribed in them, this does not cause the history of the subaltern to dissolve once more into invisibility. This is firstly because we apply exactly the same decentering strategies to the monolithic subject-agents of elite historiography; and second, because it is the creative practice of the subaltern which now becomes the focus of our attention, his ability to appropriate and mould cultural materials of almost any provenance to his own purposes, and to discard those . . . which no longer serve them. (197; emphases added)

O'Hanlon's criticism reaches its target, although occasionally at the cost of reproducing the ambiguity in the different senses of "authoring" that I touched on earlier. Thus, to decenter "subject-agents"

8. And yet some of the Subaltern historians have invoked structural-functionalist ethnographies (of places other than India) to develop their own comparative ideas. (See, for example, the interesting contributions by Pandey and Chatterjee, in Guha and Spivak 1988.) What this indicates is that no ethnographies are *essentially* essentialist, that like all verbal representations they can be broken up, appropriated, and re-presented in the service of different intentions.

of elite historiography is not at all identical with subverting people in positions of governmental authority. The idea of self-constitution is not merely a historiographical option but a liberal humanist principle that has far-reaching moral, legal, and political implications in modern/modernizing states. That is why we find O'Hanlon—as a progressivist—obliged to reintroduce that principle in order to authenticate the subaltern subject. For how else could the subaltern's *authentic* purposes ("his own purposes") be distinguished from those of his master's if not through the struggle for self-constitution? (Note the second assumption of the history-making thesis: that an agent cannot make his "own" history unless he is autonomous. It is not enough that he acts purposively; his purposes must be in conflict with others'.)

The essence of the principle of self-constitution is "consciousness." That is, a metaphysical concept of consciousness is essential for explaining how the many fragments come to be construed as parts of a single self-identifying subject. Yet if we set aside the Hegelian concept of consciousness (the teleological principle starting from sense-certainty and culminating in Reason) and the Kantian concept of the transcendental subject, which Hegel rewrote as consciousness, it will have to be admitted that consciousness in the everyday psychological sense (awareness, intent, and the giving of meaning to experiences) is inadequate to account for agency. One does not have to subscribe to a full-blown Freudianism to see that instinctive reaction, the docile body, and the unconscious work, in their different ways, more pervasively and continuously than consciousness does. This is part of the reason why an agent's act is more (and less) than her consciousness of it.

Another part has to do with the subsumability of her acts into the projects of other agents: beyond a certain point, an act no longer belongs exclusively to its initiator. It is precisely because this fact is overlooked that the historical importance of consciousness is exaggerated in the literature that takes consent and repression to be the two basic conditions of political domination. For to explain the latter in terms of these conditions, whether singly or in combination, is to resort to explanation exclusively in terms of consciousness. It is, consequently, to ignore the politically more significant condition that has to do with the objective distribution of goods that allows or precludes certain options. The *structures* of possible actions that are included and

excluded are therefore logically independent of the consciousness of actors.<sup>9</sup>

Another way of putting this is to say that the systematic knowledge (e.g., statistical information) on which an agent must draw in order to act in ways that "make history" is not subjective in any sense. It does not imply "the self." The subject, on the other hand, is founded on consciousness of self. My argument, in brief, is that contrary to the discourse of many radical historians and anthropologists, *agent* and *subject* (where the former is the principle of effectivity and the latter of consciousness) do not belong to the same theoretical universe and should not, therefore, be coupled.

N.B. Gyan Prakash is a talented Subalternist who appears to have read and approved of O'Hanlon's critique. In an invigorating essay on "post-Orientalist" historiography of India (Prakash 1990), he argues for a more radical poststructuralist position intended to supersede conventional ethnography and historiography.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologists drawn to the idea of "real people making their own history" will want to read this provocative piece, because it exposes metaphysical traces in historical narration that, he argues, reproduce the capitalist-centered view of the world.

Prakash is against "foundational" history, by which he means two things: (1) a history whose subject (individual, class, or structure) is taken to be irreducible, and (2) teleological history—for example, a historical narrative of (aborted, delayed, or distorted) capitalism. Foundationalism in these two forms is rejected in order to widen the space for "excluded histories."

While narrative history does not have to be teleological,<sup>11</sup> it does presuppose an identity ("India," say) that is the subject of that narrative. Even when that identity is analyzed into its heterogeneous parts (class, gender, regional divisions, etc.), what is done, surely, is to reveal

9. I have argued this point with reference to ethnographic material in Asad 1970 and 1972, and more generally in Asad 1987.

10. Prakash's name is acknowledged in O'Hanlon's (1988) text, among others. This does not prove anything about influence, of course; it only suggests a measure of agreement, which is confirmed in note 34 of Prakash 1990. That agreement was short-lived, however. In a subsequent polemic, coauthored with D. Washbrook (O'Hanlon and Washbrook 1992) and directed against Prakash, O'Hanlon retreats to a more conventional Marxism, while in his rejoinder Prakash (1992) takes up a more defiant Derridean position.

11. An early criticism of teleological histories is Butterfield 1931.

its constitution, not to dissolve its unity. The unity is maintained by those who speak in its name, and more generally by all who adjust their existence to its (sometimes shifting) requirements. The claim of many radical critics that hegemonic power necessarily suppresses difference in favor of unity is quite mistaken. Just as mistaken is their claim that that power always abhors ambiguity. To secure its unity—to make its own history—dominant power has worked best through differentiating and classifying practices. India's colonial history furnishes ample evidence of this. In this context power is constructive, not repressive. Furthermore, its ability to select (or construct) the differences that serve its purposes has depended on its exploiting the dangers and opportunities contained in ambiguous situations. And ambiguity—as we saw in Greenblatt's example—is precisely one of the things that gives "Western power" its improvisational quality.

By a curious irony, Prakash's rejection of "the modernization narrative" on the grounds that it is teleological indirectly reveals something about the sense of the phrase "making one's own history," which many anthropologists also employ. For while the expression indicates a disapproval of historical narratives of the non-West in which Europe is too prominent (as actor or as norm), it also conceals a concept of history making that is parasitic on those very narratives.

If the modernizing project is more than merely an accumulating narrative of India's past, if we understand it as the project of constructing "India" (an integrated totality defined according to progressive principles), which requires the continuous calculation of India's future, then teleology is precisely what that project must reflect. (A project is, after all, by definition teleological.) The career of the Indian nation-state is itself part of that project. To say this is to say something not merely about those who ruled India in the effort to change it in a particular direction but also about those who struggled against them. The struggle is carried out more often than not in a new language initiated by the European Enlightenment: liberty, equality, reason, progress, human rights, and so forth, and (more important) within new political-legal spaces built up under British colonialism. To recount the career of the Indian nation-state is to try to understand how and why the modernization project succeeds or fails in particular times and places—and how it constructs and redefines itself as a project. One may wish to oppose that project, and hence to redescribe it in terms that its supporters would reject, *but it must be understood as a teleology*,



whose desired future, in important respects, is foreshadowed in the present of Western liberal capitalist states. It does not follow that the project is driven by lawlike forces, that its ultimate success is inevitable or that it cannot be reformulated.

However, to those who have been taught to regard essentialism as the gravest of intellectual sins, it is necessary to explain that certain things are *essential* to that project—as indeed there are to “India” as a nation-state. To say this is not equivalent to saying that the project (or “India”) can never be changed; it is to say that each historical phenomenon is determined by the way it is constituted, that some of its constitutive elements are essential to its historical identity and some are not. It is like saying that the constitutive rules of a game define its essence—which is by no means to assert that that game can never be subverted or changed; it is merely to point to what determines its essential historical identity, to imply that certain changes (though not others) will mean that the game is no longer the same game.

The project of modernization (Westernization), including its aim of material and moral progress, is certainly a matter of history making. But it is a project whose innumerable agents are neither fully autonomous nor fully conscious of it. Indeed, in a crucial sense it is that project, inaugurated in Europe over two centuries ago, that articulates our concept of human beings making history. For that project was intertwined with a new experience of historical time, and thus with a novel conception of historicity—historical time divided into three great periods (Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity), accelerating forward into an open future. The West defines itself, in opposition to all non-Western cultures, by its modern historicity. Despite the disjunctions of modernity (its break with tradition), “the West” therefore includes within itself its past as an organic continuity: from “the Greeks and Romans” and “the Hebrews and Early Christians,” through “Latin Christendom,” “the Renaissance,” and “the Reformation,” to “the universal civilization” of modern Europeans. Although it is spatially discontinuous and internally diverse, “the West” is not a mere Hegelian myth, not a mere representation ready to be unmasked by a handful of talented critics. For good or ill, it informs innumerable intentions, practices, and discourses in systematic ways. This is not to say that there is an integrated Western culture, or a fixed Western identity, or a single Western way of thinking, but that a singular collective identity defines itself in terms of a unique historicity in con-

trast to all others, a historicity that shifts from place to place—Greece, Rome, Latin Christendom, the Americas—until it embraces the world.

It was in Europe’s eighteenth century that the older, Christian attitudes toward historical time (salvational expectation) were combined with the newer, secular practices (rational prediction) to give us our modern idea of progress (Koselleck 1988, 17). A new philosophy of agency was also developed, allowing individual actions to be related to collective tendencies. From the Enlightenment philosophes, through the Victorian evolutionist thinkers, to the experts on economic and political development in the latter half of the twentieth century, one assumption has been constant: to make history, the agent must create the future, remake herself, and help others to do so, where the criteria of successful remaking are seen to be universal. Old universes must be subverted and a new universe created. To that extent, history can be made only on the back of a universal teleology. Actions seeking to maintain the “local” status quo, or to follow local models of social life, do not qualify as history making. From the Cargo Cults of Melanesia to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, they merely attempt (hopelessly) “to resist the future” or “to turn back the clock of history.”

Anthropology is thus inserted into modern history in two ways: first, through the growth in Europe’s political, economic, and scientific powers, which has provided anthropologists with their means of professional existence and their intellectual motive; and second, through the Enlightenment schematization of progressive time that has provided anthropology with its conceptual site: modernity. It is not just that anthropology is a modern creation born out of Europe’s encounter with non-Europeans. It is that the major ideas it uses to grasp its subjects (nonmodern, local, traditional) are often dependent on its contrastive sense of the modern.<sup>12</sup>

Modern anthropology’s theoretical focus on human diversity has its roots in Renaissance Europe’s encounter with “the savage.” That brutal encounter in Africa and the New World produced disturbing theological problems for reflective Christians: How to explain the variety of human beings, given the Mosaic account of Creation? This was the primary question that animated scholars who read the exotic

12. Two outstanding examples of studies by anthropologists in which such ideas have been critically examined are Steiner 1956 and Schneider 1984.

descriptions by explorers, and the great range of religious belief and practice among other peoples was the primary object of their attention.<sup>13</sup>

It is often said that the Renaissance “discovered man,”<sup>14</sup> but that discovery was in effect a psychological reconstruction of European individuality. The accounts of savages by explorers returning from Africa and the New World produced a very different phenomenon<sup>15</sup>—a man whose kinship to Christian Europeans was highly problematic. Some writers even held that he was not quite human. The eventual solution adopted in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, according to Margaret Hodgen, was a synthesis of two old ideas: the chain of being and the genetic principle. In this way, “a spatial arrangement of forms [was converted] into an historical, developmental, or evolutionary series” (Hodgen 1964, 389–90). A common human nature was thus accorded to all human beings, but one that was assumed to exist in various stages of maturity and enlightenment. A prehistoric period was added to the historical triad—the time of “primitive” man. And just as some contemporaneous “local peoples” could be assigned to the prehistoric period, others were placeable in the medieval. The early preoccupation with saving the biblical story of man’s Creation and Fall gave way to a new concern with narrating the secular story of European world hegemony in developmental terms.<sup>16</sup> As a result of developments in Higher Criticism, a problem of *Chris-*

13. See the absorbing study by Hodgen (1964).

14. Thus, Burckhardt’s classic (1950); part 4 is entitled “The Discovery of the World and of Man.”

15. It was not only verbal accounts that the explorers brought back: “When Christopher Columbus dropped anchor in the Tagus River at the port of Lisbon on the fateful day of his return to the Old World, he brought with him seven kidnapped Indians of the so-called Taino culture of the Arawack linguistic group. . . . During the years which followed, Indians captured by other explorers were exhibited in other capitals of Europe. . . . The first Indians to appear in France were brought by Thomas Aubert in 1506. Taken to Rouen, they were described in a Paris chronicle as sooty in color, black-haired, possessing speech but no religion. . . . In 1565, during a festival in Bordeaux, 300 men at arms conducted a showing of captives from twelve nations, including Greece, Turkey, Arabia, Egypt, America, Taprobane, the Canaries, and Ethiopia. Outside the city wall, in the midst of an imitation Brazilian landscape, a veritable savage village was erected with several hundred residents, many of whom had been freshly abducted from South America” (Hodgen 1964, 111–12).

16. Not entirely secular, though. See Bowler 1989 for the way the idea of “progressive evolution”—biological as well as social—responded to Christian sensibilities in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

*tian* theology has virtually evaporated, but some of the ideas generated to address it remain in secular disciplines, formed in pursuit of a new universality.

Of course, significant mutations have occurred in the historical schemata for classifying and explaining human diversity during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. But there have been continuities, too, including historical periodization and direction. Another continuity, as George Stocking notes, was the assumption of a single human nature underlying cultural plurality (Stocking 1987, 313). In practice, however, anthropology and orientalism between them dealt conceptually with existing “local peoples” left behind in the progressive evolution of modern (European) “civilization,” while a number of specialist disciplines dealt with the latter.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the idea of a single nature for all humans appeared to concede that some are evidently “more mature” than others.

It has become a truism to say that most anthropologists in Britain and the United States were antievolutionist—and therefore relativist—in the first half of the twentieth century. Some historians of the discipline have connected this to the general mood of disillusion with the idea of progress prevailing in the West after World War I.<sup>18</sup>

This view is not entirely accurate, however—at any rate for British social anthropology. Neither Malinowski (1945, 1–2; 1938) nor Radcliffe-Brown (1952) rejected the idea of higher and lower cultures and of the upward development of the latter. Godfrey and Monica Wilson (1945) saw no difficulty in presenting the evolution of relations and ideas in Africa “from primitive to civilized”; nor did Max Gluckman in depicting the adoption of “White culture” by Africans as “progressive.”<sup>19</sup> Lucy Mair spoke unapologetically of the effects of Euro-

17. E. B. Tylor (1893, 805) delineated the region to which orientalists and anthropologists primarily applied themselves: “In the large definition adopted by this Congress, the Oriental world reaches its extreme limits. It embraces the continent of Asia, stretching through Egypt over Africa, and into Europe over Turkey and Greece, while extending in the far East from group to group of ocean islands, where Indonesia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia lead on to the continent of Australia and its outlier, Tasmania. Immense also is the range of time through which the culture-history of this Oriental region may be, if often but dimly, traced.”

18. See, for example, the fine study by Kuklick (1991), though it should be borne in mind that this disenchantment did not significantly affect those responsible for the government of colonial peoples. There the effort at the material and moral improvement of non-European subjects continued in full force.

19. Exemplifying the interdependence of cause and effect in processes of social change,



pean colonial rule in Africa as "the spread of civilization,"<sup>20</sup> and Mary Douglas reaffirmed the importance of an evolutionary perspective.<sup>21</sup> So too, some in ways more explicit and others in ways less so, did the scores of anthropologists who attended to problems of particular social change in the non-Western world. Their lack of interest in tracing the development of Culture as a human universal, and their attachment to the idea of social systems in (temporary) equilibrium, did not mean the rejection of progressive evolution in every form. Indeed, it could be argued that there was less concern with demonstrating the principle of a common human nature, and more with describing "normal" historical developments in various parts of the non-European world.

The major point, at any rate, is that whether they were concerned with customary beliefs and practices or with contemporary social and cultural changes, anthropologists saw themselves—and were seen by others—as dealing typically with nonmodern lives. Certainly, if anthropology was expected to deal with political, economic, religious, legal, medical, poetic, and historical events, it was only when these objects of modern disciplines were situated in a nonmodern social totality. Like other modern writers on the nonmodern world, anthropologists used a dual modality of historical time, which enabled them

Gluckman (1958, 75) could observe quite unselfconsciously that "progressive intelligent men tend to find scope for their ability in education and Christianity, and Christians, freed from intellectually clogging beliefs and some suspicion of the Whites, tend to progress in the acceptance of White culture." In respect to whole societies, too, Gluckman was a progressivist: "In this respect a study of Lozi law, as of law in most simple societies, validates Maine's most widely accepted generalization, 'that the movement of progressive societies has hitherto been a movement from *Status* to *Contract*' i.e. that early law is dominantly the law of status" (Gluckman 1955, 28).

20. "The [European] individuals who put these policies into practice were sustained in the difficulties of their task, and in over-ruling opposition, by the dogma that civilization was a blessing that its possessors ought to spread; just as they civilized their own children by obliging them to do things they did not want to, and sometimes by punishing them severely. And nobody today is saying that they ought not to have spread civilization; today's complaint is that they did not spread enough of it, or the right parts" (Mair 1962, 253).

21. "The right basis for comparison is to insist on the unity of human experience and at the same time to insist on its variety, on the differences that make comparison worth while. The only way to do this is to recognise the nature of historical progress and the nature of primitive and of modern society. Progress means differentiation. Thus primitive means undifferentiated; modern means differentiated. Advance in technology involves differentiation in every sphere, in techniques and materials, in productive and political roles. . . . Differentiation in thought patterns goes along with differentiated social conditions" (Douglas 1966, 77–78).

to represent events as at once contemporaneous and noncontemporaneous (Koselleck 1988, 249)—and thus some conditions as more progressive than others.

It has been said that this focus has made anthropology a marginal discipline in comparison to those that deal with modern civilization itself, "culturally marginal to its own society as well as to the groups that were the subject of ethnographic fieldwork" (Stocking 1987, 289). The rejection of anthropology by Westernizing elites in former colonial countries is well known, and the reasons for it are not hard to understand. But the assumption that anthropology is culturally marginal to modern European society needs to be reexamined. It is true that anthropological theories have contributed very little to the formation of theories in politics, economics, and other social sciences. And yet, paradoxically, aspects of anthropology's discourse on the nonmodern—those addressing "the primitive," "the irrational," "the mythic," "the traditional"—have been of central importance to several disciplines. Thus, psychoanalysis,<sup>22</sup> theological modernism,<sup>23</sup> and modernist literature,<sup>24</sup> among others, have continually turned for support to anthropology in their attempts to probe, accommodate, celebrate, or qualify the essence of modernity.

Anthropology, then, appears to be involved in definitions of the West while Western projects are transforming the (preliterate, pre-capitalist, premodern) peoples that ethnographers claim to represent. Both processes need to be studied systematically. To understand better the local peoples "entering" (or "resisting") modernity, anthropology must surely try to deepen its understanding of the West as something more than a threadbare ideology. To do that will include at-

22. Freud's major interest in the primitive is too well known to be rehearsed here.

23. Theological modernism, strictly speaking, refers to an intellectual trend in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholicism concerning methods of interpreting Scripture: see Vidler 1961, chap. 16. However, I use it here to indicate the general movement among liberal Christians to apply to the Scriptures approaches in keeping with the findings of anthropology and historical methodology. For a review of biblical scholarship that has drawn on successive theories in anthropology since the nineteenth century, see Rogerson 1978.

24. The importance of Frazer for literary modernism is amply documented. See, for example, T. S. Eliot's references to him, as well as to other anthropological writers, in his notes to "The Waste Land." The attempt by modern aesthetics to recapture the freshness of "childhood perception" and to make new beginnings (de Man 1983, 157) led at once to an appropriation of a concept of the primitive and to a rejection of a concept of tradition.

tempting to grasp its peculiar historicity, the mobile powers that have constructed its structures, projects, and desires. I argue that religion, in its positive and negative senses, is an essential part of that construction.

The following chapters engage with fragments of Western history approached as genealogies, archaisms, translations, and polemics. They are intended as a contribution to a historical anthropology that takes the cultural hegemony of the West as its object of inquiry. More precisely, they explore ways in which Western concepts and practices of religion define forms of history making.

## Genealogies



THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF RELIGION AS  
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
CATEGORY

In much nineteenth-century evolutionary thought, religion was considered to be an early human condition from which modern law, science, and politics emerged and became detached.<sup>1</sup> In this century most anthropologists have abandoned Victorian evolutionary ideas, and many have challenged the rationalist notion that religion is simply a primitive and therefore outmoded form of the institutions we now encounter in truer form (law, politics, science) in modern life. For these twentieth-century anthropologists, religion is not an archaic mode of scientific thinking, nor of any other secular endeavor we value today; it is, on the contrary, a distinctive space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to any other. From this it seems to follow that the essence of religion is not to be confused with, say, the essence of politics, although in many societies the two may overlap and be intertwined.

In a characteristically subtle passage, Louis Dumont has told us that medieval Christendom was one such composite society:

I shall take it for granted that a change in relations entails a change in whatever is related. If throughout our history religion has developed (to a large extent, with some other influences at play) a revolution in social values and has given birth by scissiparity, as it were, to an autonomous world of political institutions and speculations, then surely religion itself will have changed in the process. Of some important

1. Thus, Fustel de Coulanges 1873. Originally published in French in 1864, this was an influential work in the history of several overlapping disciplines—anthropology, biblical studies, and classics.

and visible changes we are all aware, but, I submit, we are not aware of the change in the very nature of religion as lived by any given individual, say a Catholic. Everyone knows that religion was formerly a matter of the group and has become a matter of the individual (in principle, and in practice at least in many environments and situations). But if we go on to assert that this change is correlated with the birth of the modern State, the proposition is not such a commonplace as the previous one. Let us go a little further: medieval religion was a great cloak—I am thinking of the Mantle of Our Lady of Mercy. Once it became an individual affair, it lost its all-embracing capacity and became one among other apparently equal considerations, of which the political was the first born. Each individual may, of course, and perhaps even will, recognise religion (or philosophy), as the same all-embracing consideration as it used to be *socially*. Yet on the level of social consensus or ideology, the same person will switch to a different configuration of values in which autonomous values (religious, political, etc.) are seemingly juxtaposed, much as individuals are juxtaposed in society. (1971, 32; emphasis in original)

According to this view, medieval religion, pervading or encompassing other categories, is nevertheless *analytically* identifiable. It is this fact that makes it possible to say that religion has the same essence today as it had in the Middle Ages, although its social extension and function were different in the two epochs. Yet the insistence that religion has an autonomous essence—not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense—invites us to define religion (like any essence) as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon. It may be a happy accident that this effort of defining religion converges with the liberal demand in our time that it be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life. This definition is at once part of a strategy (for secular liberals) of the confinement, and (for liberal Christians) of the defense of religion.

Yet this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history. The attempt to understand Muslim traditions by insisting that in them religion and politics (two essences modern society tries to keep conceptually and practically apart) are coupled must, in my view, lead to failure. At its most dubious, such attempts encourage us to take up an a priori posi-

tion in which religious discourse in the political arena is seen as a disguise for political power.

In what follows I want to examine the ways in which the theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power. I shall do this by exploring a universalist definition of religion offered by an eminent anthropologist: Clifford Geertz's "Religion as a Cultural System."<sup>2</sup> I stress that this is not primarily a critical review of Geertz's ideas on religion—if that had been my aim I would have addressed myself to the entire corpus of his writings on religion in Indonesia and Morocco. My intention in this chapter is to try to identify some of the historical shifts that have produced our concept of religion as the concept of a transhistorical essence—and Geertz's article is merely my starting point.

It is part of my basic argument that socially identifiable forms, preconditions, and effects of what was regarded as religion in the medieval Christian epoch were quite different from those so considered in modern society. I want to get at this well-known fact while trying to avoid a simple nominalism. What we call religious power was differently distributed and had a different thrust. There were different ways in which it created and worked through legal institutions, different selves that it shaped and responded to, and different categories of knowledge which it authorized and made available. Nevertheless, what the anthropologist is confronted with, as a consequence, is not merely an arbitrary collection of elements and processes that we happen to call "religion." For the entire phenomenon is to be seen in large measure in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained. My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.

A universal (i.e., anthropological) definition is, however, precisely what Geertz aims at: A *religion*, he proposes, is "(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with

2. Originally published in 1966, it was reprinted in his widely acclaimed *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (90). In what follows I shall examine this definition, not only in order to test its interlinked assertions, but also to flesh out the counterclaim that a transhistorical definition of religion is not viable.

### The Concept of Symbol as a Clue to the Essence of Religion

Geertz sees his first task as the definition of symbol: "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'" (91). But this simple, clear statement—in which *symbol* (any object, etc.) is differentiated from but linked to *conception* (its meaning)—is later supplemented by others not entirely consistent with it, for it turns out that the symbol is not an object that serves as a vehicle for a conception, *it is itself the conception*. Thus, in the statement "The number 6, written, imagined, laid out as a row of stones, or even punched into the program tapes of a computer, is a symbol" (91), what constitutes all these diverse representations as versions of the same symbol ("the number 6") is of course *a conception*. Furthermore, Geertz sometimes seems to suggest that even as a conception a symbol has an intrinsic connection with empirical events from which it is merely "theoretically" separable: "the symbolic dimension of social events is, like the psychological, itself theoretically abstractable from these events as empirical totalities" (91). At other times, however, he stresses the importance of keeping symbols and empirical objects quite separate: "there is something to be said for not confusing our traffic with symbols with our traffic with objects or human beings, for these latter are not in themselves symbols, however often they may function as such" (92). Thus, "symbol" is sometimes an aspect of reality, sometimes of its representation.<sup>3</sup>

These divergencies are symptoms of the fact that cognitive ques-

3. Compare Peirce's more rigorous account of *representations*. "A representation is an object which stands for another so that an experience of the former affords us a knowledge of the latter. There must be three essential conditions to which every representation must conform. It must in the first place like any other object have qualities independent of its meaning. . . . In the 2nd place a representation must have a real causal connection with its object. . . . In the third place, every representation addresses itself to a mind. It is only in so far as it does this that it is a representation" (Peirce 1986, 62).

tions are mixed up in this account with communicative ones, and this makes it difficult to inquire into the ways in which discourse and understanding are connected in social practice. To begin with we might say, as a number of writers have done, that a symbol is not an object or event that serves to carry a meaning but a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts,<sup>4</sup> having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance.<sup>5</sup> If we define symbol along these lines,<sup>6</sup> a number of questions can be raised about the conditions that explain how such complexes and concepts come to be formed, and in particular how their formation is related to varieties of practice. Half a century ago, Vygotsky was able to show how the development of children's intellect is dependent on the internalization of social speech.<sup>7</sup> This means that the formation of what we have here called "symbols" (complexes, concepts) is conditioned by the social relations in which the growing child is involved—by the social activities that he or she is permitted or encouraged or obliged to undertake—in which other symbols (speech and significant movements) are crucial. The conditions (discursive and nondiscursive) that explain how symbols come to be constructed, and how some of them are established as natural or authoritative as opposed to others, then become an important object of anthropological inquiry. It must be stressed that this is not a matter of urging the study of the origin and function of symbols in addition to their meaning—such a distinction is not relevant here. What is being argued is that the authoritative status of representations/discourses is dependent on the

4. Vygotsky (1962) makes crucial analytical distinctions in the development of conceptual thought: heaps, complexes, pseudoconcepts, and true concepts. Although, according to Vygotsky, these represent stages in the development of children's use of language, the earlier stages persist into adult life.

5. Cf. Collingwood (1938, bk. 2) for a discussion of the integral connection between thought and emotion, where it is argued that there is no such thing as a universal emotional function accompanying all conceptualization/communication: every distinctive cognitive/communicative activity has its own specific emotional cast. If this view is valid, then the notion of a generalized religious emotion (or mood) may be questioned.

6. The argument that symbols *organize practice*, and consequently the structure of cognition, is central to Vygotsky's genetic psychology—see especially "Tool and Symbol in Child Development," in Vygotsky 1978. A cognitive conception of symbols has recently been revived by Sperber (1975). A similar view was taken much earlier by Lienhardt (1961).

7. "The history of the process of the *internalization of social speech* is also the history of the socialization of children's practical intellect" (Vygotsky 1978, 27). See also Luria and Yudovich 1971.

appropriate production of other representations/discourses; the two are intrinsically and not just temporally connected.

Systems of symbols, says Geertz, are also *culture patterns*, and they constitute "extrinsic sources of information" (92). Extrinsic, because "they lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism as such in that inter-subjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born" (92). And sources of information in the sense that "they provide a blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to themselves can be given a definite form" (92). Thus, culture patterns, we are told, may be thought of as "models for reality" as well as "models of reality."<sup>8</sup>

This part of the discussion does open up possibilities by speaking of modeling: that is, it allows for the possibility of conceptualizing discourses in the process of elaboration, modification, testing, and so forth. Unfortunately, Geertz quickly regresses to his earlier position: "culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect," he writes; "they give meaning, that is objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves" (1973, 93). This alleged dialectical tendency toward isomorphism, incidentally, makes it difficult to understand how social change can ever occur. The basic problem, however, is not with the idea of mirror images as such but with the assumption that there are two separate levels—the cultural, on the one side (consisting of symbols) and the social and psychological, on the other—which interact. This resort to Parsonian theory creates a logical space for defining the essence of religion. By adopting it, Geertz moves away from a notion of symbols that are intrinsic to signifying and organizing practices, and back to a notion of symbols as meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self ("social and psychological reality").

This is not to say that Geertz doesn't think of symbols as "doing" something. In a way that recalls older anthropological approaches to ritual,<sup>9</sup> he states that religious symbols act "by inducing in the wor-

8. Or, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952, 181) put it much earlier, "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols."

9. If we set aside Radcliffe-Brown's well-known preoccupation with social cohesion, we may recall that he too was concerned to specify certain kinds of psychological states said to be induced by religious symbols: "Rites can be seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments (which control the behaviour of the individual in his relation to others). Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social

shipper a certain distinctive set of dispositions (tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, proneness) which lend a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience" (95). And here again, symbols are set apart from mental states. But how plausible are these propositions? Can we, for example, predict the "distinctive" set of dispositions for a Christian worshiper in modern, industrial society? Alternatively, can we say of someone with a "distinctive" set of dispositions that he is or is not a Christian?<sup>10</sup> The answer to both questions must surely be no. The reason, of course, is that it is not simply worship but social, political, and economic institutions in general,<sup>11</sup> within which individual biographies are lived out, that lend a stable character to the flow of a Christian's activity and to the quality of her experience.

Religious symbols, Geertz elaborates, produce two kinds of dispositions, *moods* and *motivations*: "motivations are 'made meaningful' with reference to the ends towards which they are conceived to conduce, whereas moods are 'made meaningful' with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring" (97). Now, a Christian might say that this is not their essence, because religious symbols, even when failing to produce moods and motivations, are still religious (i.e., true) symbols—that religious symbols possess a truth independent of their effectiveness. Yet surely even a committed Christian cannot be unconcerned at the existence of truthful symbols that appear to be largely powerless in modern society. He will rightly want to ask: What are the conditions in which religious symbols can actually produce religious dispositions? Or, as a nonbeliever would put it: How does (religious) power create (religious) truth?

function when, and to the extent that, they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of society depends" (1952, 157).

10. Some ways in which symbolization (discourse) can *disguise lack of distinctiveness* are well brought out in MacIntyre's trenchant critique of contemporary Christian writers, where he argues that "Christians behave like everyone else but use a different vocabulary in characterising their behaviour, and also to conceal their lack of distinctiveness" (1971, 24).

11. The phenomenon of declining church attendance in modern industrial society and its progressive marginalization (in Europe, at least) to those sectors of the population not directly involved in the industrial work process illustrates the argument that if we must look for causal explanations in this area, then socioeconomic conditions in general will appear to be the independent variable and formal worship the dependent. See the interesting discussion in Luckman 1967, chap. 2.



The relation between power and truth is an ancient theme, and no one has dealt with it more impressively in Christian thought than St. Augustine. Augustine developed his views on the creative religious function of power after his experience with the Donatist heresy, insisting that coercion was a condition for the realization of truth, and discipline essential to its maintenance.

For a Donatist, Augustine's attitude to coercion was a blatant denial of Christian teaching: God had made men free to choose good or evil; a policy which forced this choice was plainly irreligious. The Donatist writers quoted the same passages from the Bible in favour of free will, as Pelagius would later quote. In his reply, Augustine already gave them the same answer as he would give to the Pelagians: the final, individual act of choice must be spontaneous; but this act of choice could be prepared by a long process, which men did not necessarily choose for themselves, but which was often imposed on them, against their will, by God. This was a corrective process of "teaching," *eruditio*, and warning, *admonitio*, which might even include fear, constraint, and external inconveniences: "Let constraint be found outside; it is inside that the will is born."

Augustine had become convinced that men needed such firm handling. He summed up his attitude in one word: *disciplina*. He thought of this *disciplina*, not as many of his more traditional Roman contemporaries did, as the static preservation of a "Roman way of life." For him it was an essentially active process of corrective punishment, "a softening-up process," a "teaching by inconveniences"—a *per molestias eruditio*. In the Old Testament, God had taught his wayward Chosen People through just such a process of *disciplina*, checking and punishing their evil tendencies by a whole series of divinely-ordained disasters. The persecution of the Donatists was another "controlled catastrophe" imposed by God, mediated, on this occasion, by the laws of the Christian Emperors. . . .

Augustine's view of the Fall of mankind determined his attitude to society. Fallen men had come to need restraint. Even man's greatest achievements had been made possible only by a "straight-jacket" of unremitting harshness. Augustine was a great intellect, with a healthy respect for the achievements of human reason. Yet he was obsessed by the difficulties of thought, and by the long, coercive processes, reaching back into the horrors of his own schooldays, that had made this

intellectual activity possible; so "ready to lie down" was the fallen human mind. He said he would rather die than become a child again. Nonetheless, the terrors of that time had been strictly necessary; for they were part of the awesome discipline of God, "from the schoolmasters' canes to the agonies of the martyrs," by which human beings were recalled, by suffering, from their own disastrous inclinations. (Brown 1967, 236–38)

Isn't Geertz's formula too simple to accommodate the force of this religious symbolism? Note that here it is not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power—ranging all the way from laws (imperial and ecclesiastical) and other sanctions (hellfire, death, salvation, good repute, peace) to the disciplinary activities of social institutions (family, school, city, church) and of human bodies (fasting, prayer, obedience, penance). Augustine was quite clear that power, the effect of an entire network of motivated practices, assumes a religious form because of the end to which it is directed, for human events are the instruments of God. It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth.<sup>12</sup> Particular discourses and practices were to be systematically excluded, forbidden, denounced—made as much as possible unthinkable; others were to be included, allowed, praised, and drawn into the narrative of sacred truth. The configurations of power in this sense have, of course, varied profoundly in Christendom from one epoch to another—from Augustine's time, through the Middle Ages, to the industrial capitalist West of today. The patterns of religious moods and motivations, the possibilities for religious knowledge and truth, have all varied with them and been conditioned by them. Even Augustine held that although religious truth was eternal, the means for securing human access to it were not.

### From Reading Symbols to Analyzing Practices

One consequence of assuming a symbolic system separate from practices is that important distinctions are sometimes obscured, or even explicitly denied. "That the symbols or symbol systems which

12. This was why Augustine eventually came around to the view that insincere conversion was not a problem (Chadwick 1967, 222–24).

induce and define dispositions we set off as religious and those which place these dispositions in a cosmic framework are the same symbols ought to occasion no surprise" (Geertz, 98). But it does surprise! Let us grant that religious dispositions are crucially dependent on certain religious symbols, that such symbols operate in a way integral to religious motivation and religious mood. Even so, the symbolic process by which the concepts of religious motivation and mood are placed within "a cosmic framework" is surely quite a different operation, and therefore the signs involved are quite different. Put another way, theological discourse is not identical with either moral attitudes or liturgical discourses—of which, among other things, theology speaks.<sup>13</sup> Thoughtful Christians will concede that, although theology has an essential function, theological discourse does not necessarily induce religious dispositions, and that, conversely, having religious dispositions does not necessarily depend on a clear-cut conception of the cosmic framework on the part of a religious actor. Discourse involved in practice is not the same as that involved in speaking about practice. It is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge.

Geertz's reason for merging the two kinds of discursive process seems to spring from a wish to distinguish in general between religious and secular dispositions. The statement quoted above is elaborated as follows: "For what else do we mean by saying that a particular mood of awe is religious and not secular, except that it springs from entertaining a conception of all-pervading vitality like mana and not from a visit to the Grand Canyon? Or that a particular case of asceticism is an example of a religious motivation except that it is directed toward the achievement of an unconditioned end like nirvana and not a conditioned one like weight-reduction? If sacred symbols did not at one and the same time induce dispositions in human beings and formulate . . . general ideas of order, then the empirical differentia of religious activity or religious experience would not exist" (98). The argument that a particular disposition is religious partly because it occupies a concep-

13. A modern theologian puts it: "The difference between the professing, proclaiming and orienting way of speaking on the one hand, and descriptive speech on the other, is sometimes formulated as the difference between 'speaking about' and 'speaking to.' As soon as these two ways of speaking are confused, the original and unique character of religious speech, so it is said, is corrupted so that reality-for-the-believer can no longer 'appear' to him as it appears in professing speech" (Luijpen 1973, 90–91).

tual place within a cosmic framework appears plausible, but only because it presupposes a question that must be made explicit: how do authorizing processes represent practices, utterances, or dispositions so that they can be discursively related to general (cosmic) ideas of order? In short, the question pertains to the authorizing process by which "religion" is created.

The ways in which authorizing discourses, presupposing and expounding a cosmology, systematically redefined religious spaces have been of profound importance in the history of Western society. In the Middle Ages, such discourses ranged over an enormous domain, defining and creating religion: rejecting "pagan" practices or accepting them;<sup>14</sup> authenticating particular miracles and relics (the two confirmed each other);<sup>15</sup> authorizing shrines;<sup>16</sup> compiling saints' lives,

14. The series of booklets known as Penitential manuals, with the aid of which Christian discipline was imposed on Western Europe from roughly the fifth to the tenth centuries, contains much material on pagan practices penalized as un-Christian. So, for example, "The taking of vows or releasing from them by springs or trees or lattices, anywhere except in a church, and partaking of food or drink in these places sacred to the folk-deities, are offenses condemned" (quoted in McNeill 1933, 456). (For further details, see McNeill and Gamer 1938.) At the same time, Pope Gregory the Great (A.D. 540–604) "urged that the Church should take over old pagan temples and festivals and give them a Christian meaning" (Chadwick 1967, 234). The apparent inconsistency of these two attitudes (rejection or incorporation of pagan practices) is less important than the systematic exercise of Church authority by which meaning was assigned.

15. "On the one hand, then, bishops complained of crude and too-avid beliefs in unauthorized and unexamined wonders and miracles, while on the other theologians (possibly also these same bishops) tried to come to terms with the matter. Although they attempted to define miracle by appeals to universal natural law, such definitions were not entirely successful, and in specific, individual cases, common sense was a better guide than medieval cosmology. When papal commissioners sat down to hear testimony about Thomas Cantilupe's miracles at London and Hereford in 1307 they had in front of them a schedule of things to ask about such wondrous events: they wanted to know, for example, how the witness came to learn of the miracle, what words were used by those who prayed for the miracle, whether any herbs, stones, other natural or medicinal preparations or incantations had accompanied the miracle; the witness was expected to say something about the age and social situation of the person experiencing the miracle, where he came from and of what family; whether the witness knew the subject before as well as after the miracle, what illness was involved, how many days he had seen the ill person before the cure; whether the cure was complete and how long it took for completion. Of course witnesses were also asked what year, month, day, place and in whose presence the wonderful event itself occurred" (Finucane 1977, 53).

16. By being authorized, shrines in turn served to confirm ecclesiastical authority: "The bishops of Western Europe came to orchestrate the cult of the saints in such a way as to base their power within the old Roman cities on these new 'towns outside the town.' Yet it was through a studiously articulated relationship with great shrines that



both as a model of and as a model for the Truth;<sup>17</sup> requiring the regular telling of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds to a priestly confessor and giving absolution to a penitent;<sup>18</sup> regularizing popular social movements into Rule-following Orders (for example, the Franciscans), or denouncing them for heresy or for verging on the heretical (for example, the Beguines).<sup>19</sup> The medieval Church did not attempt to establish absolute uniformity of practice; on the contrary, its authoritative discourse was always concerned to specify differences, gradations, exceptions. What it sought was the subjection of all practice to a unified authority, to a single authentic source that could tell truth from falsehood. It was the early Christian Fathers who established the principle that only a single Church could become the source of authenticating discourse.<sup>20</sup> They knew that the "symbols" embodied in the

lay at some distance from the city—St. Peter's, on the Vatican Hill outside Rome, Saint Martin's, a little beyond the walls of Tours—that the bishops of the former cities of the Roman Empire rose to prominence in early medieval Europe" (Brown 1981, 8).

17. The life of St. Antony by Athanasius was the model for medieval hagiographies, and the Antonine sequence of early life, crisis and conversion, probation and temptation, privation and renunciation, miraculous power, together with knowledge and authority, was reproduced again and again in that literature (Baker 1972, 41).

18. The Lateran Council of 1215 declared that annual private confession should be mandatory for all Christians: "Every *fidelis* of either sex shall after the attainment of years of discretion separately confess his sins with all fidelity to his priest at least once in the year: and shall endeavour to fulfil the penance imposed upon him to the best of his ability, reverently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter: unless it happens that by the counsel of his own priest for some reasonable cause, he hold that he should abstain for a time from the reception of the sacrament: otherwise let him during life be repelled from entering the church, and when dead let him lack Christian burial. Wherefore let this salutary statute be frequently published in churches, lest any assume a veil of excuse in the blindness of ignorance" (quoted in Watkins 1920, 748–49).

19. For a brief introduction to the varying reaction of ecclesiastical authority to the Franciscans and the Beguines, see Southern 1970, chaps. 6, 7. "Beguines" was the name given to groups of celibate women dedicated to the religious life but not owing obedience to ecclesiastical authority. They flourished in the towns of western Germany and the Low Countries but were criticized, denounced, and finally suppressed in the early fifteenth century.

20. Thus, Cyprian: "If a man does not hold this unity of the Church, does he believe himself to hold the faith? If a man withstands and resists the Church, is he confident that he is in the Church? For the blessed Apostle Paul has the same teaching, and sets forth the sacrament of unity, when he says, 'There is one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.' This unity we ought firmly to hold and defend, especially we who preside in the Church as bishops that we may prove the episcopate also to be itself one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brethren by falsehood; let no one corrupt the truth of our faith by faithless transgression" (quoted in Bettenson 1956, 264).

practice of self-confessed Christians are not always identical with the theory of the "one true Church," that religion requires authorized practice and authorizing doctrine, and that there is always a tension between them—sometimes breaking into heresy, the subversion of Truth—which underlines the creative role of institutional power.<sup>21</sup>

The medieval Church was always clear about why there was a continuous need to distinguish knowledge from falsehood (religion from what sought to subvert it), as well as the sacred from the profane (religion from what was outside it), distinctions for which the authoritative discourses, the teachings and practices of the Church, not the convictions of the practitioner, were the final test.<sup>22</sup> Several times before the Reformation, the boundary between the religious and the secular was redrawn, but always the formal authority of the Church remained preeminent. In later centuries, with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the moods and motivations of the individual believer. Discipline (intellectual and social) would, in this period, gradually abandon religious space, letting "belief," "conscience," and "sensibility" take its place.<sup>23</sup> *But theory would still be needed to define religion.*

21. The Church always exercised the authority to read Christian *practice* for its religious truth. In this context, it is interesting that the word *heresy* at first designated all kinds of errors, including errors "unconsciously" involved in some activity (*simoniaca haerisis*), and it acquired its specific modern meaning (the verbal formulation of denial or doubt of any defined doctrine of the Catholic church) only in the course of the methodological controversies of the sixteenth century (Chenu 1968, 276).

22. In the early Middle Ages, monastic discipline was the principal basis of religiosity. Knowles (1963, 3) observes that from roughly the sixth to the twelfth centuries, "monastic life based on the Rule of St. Benedict was everywhere the norm and exercised from time to time a paramount influence on the spiritual, intellectual, liturgical and apostolic life of the Western Church. . . . the only type of religious life available in the countries concerned was monastic, and the only monastic code was the Rule of St. Benedict." During the period the very term *religious* was therefore reserved for those living in monastic communities; with the later emergence of nonmonastic orders, the term came to be used for all who had taken lifelong vows by which they were set apart from the ordinary members of the Church (Southern 1970, 214). The extension and simultaneous transformation of the religious disciplines to lay sections of society from the twelfth century onward (Chenu 1968) contributed to the Church's authority becoming more pervasive, more complex, and more contradictory than before—and so too the articulation of the concept and practice of lay religion.

23. Thus enabling the Victorian anthropologist and biblical scholar Robertson Smith to say that in the age of scientific historiography, "it will no longer be the results of

## The Construction of Religion in Early Modern Europe

It was in the seventeenth century, following the fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman church and the consequent wars of religion, which tore European principalities apart, that the earliest systematic attempts at producing a universal definition of religion were made. Herbert's *De veritate* was a significant step in this definitional history. "Lord Herbert," writes Willey,

differs from such men as Baxter, Cromwell, or Jeremy Taylor mainly in that, not content with reducing the creed to the minimum number possible of fundamentals, he goes behind Christianity itself, and tries to formulate a belief which shall command the universal assent of all men as men. It must be remembered that the old simple situation, in which Christendom pictured itself as the world, with only the foul paynim outside and the semi-tolerated Jews within the gates, had passed away for ever. Exploration and commerce had widened the horizon, and in many writers of the century one can see that the religions of the East, however imperfectly known, were beginning to press upon the European consciousness. It was a pioneer-interest in these religions, together with the customary preoccupation of Renaissance scholars with the mythologies of classical antiquity, which led Lord Herbert to seek a common denominator for all religions, and thus to provide, as he hoped, the much-needed eirenicon for seventeenth-century disputes. (1934, 114)

Thus, Herbert produced a substantive definition of what later came to be formulated as Natural Religion—in terms of beliefs (about a supreme power), practices (its ordered worship), and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life)—said to exist in all societies.<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on belief meant that henceforth

theology that we are required to defend, but something prior to theology. What we shall have to defend is not our Christian knowledge, but our Christian belief" (1912, 110). Christian belief is no longer expected to fasten on the Bible as divine revelation but as "the record of divine revelation—the record of those historical facts in which God has revealed himself to man" (1912, 123). Therefore, the principles of historical interpretation were no longer strictly Christian, only the beliefs which that interpretation served.

24. When Christian missionaries found themselves in culturally unfamiliar territory, the problem of identifying "religion" became a matter of considerable theoretical difficulty and practical importance. For example, "The Jesuits in China contended that the reverence for ancestors was a social, not a religious, act, or that if religious, it was

religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science (Harrison 1990).

The idea of scripture (a divinely produced/interpreted text) was not essential to this "common denominator" of religions partly because Christians had become more familiar, through trade and colonization, with societies that lacked writing. But a more important reason lies in the shift in attention that occurred in the seventeenth century from God's words to God's works. "Nature" became the real space of divine writing, and eventually the indisputable authority for the truth of all sacred texts written in merely human language (the Old Testament and the New). Thus:

Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* popularized a new version of Christianity by reducing its doctrine to the lowest common denominator of belief in Jesus as the Messiah, whose advent had been foretold in the prophecies of the Old Testament. Even this reduced creed was to be measured against the background of Natural Religion and of the Religion of Natural Science, so that Revelation in addition to being required to justify itself by Locke's standard, had to present itself as a republication of Natural Religion. For a time indeed the Word of God assumed a secondary position to his works as set forth in the created universe. For whereas the testimony of the latter was universal and ubiquitous, the evidence of Revelation was confined to sacred books written in dead languages, whose interpretation was not agreed even amongst professed Christians, and which related moreover to distant events which had occurred in remote times and in places far removed from the centres of learning and civilization. (Sykes 1975, 195–96)

hardly different from Catholic prayers for the dead. They wished the Chinese to regard Christianity, not as a replacement, not as a new religion, but as the highest fulfillment of their finest aspirations. But to their opponents the Jesuits appeared to be merely lax. In 1631 a Franciscan and a Dominican from the Spanish zone of Manila travelled (illegally, from the Portuguese viewpoint) to Peking and found that to translate the word *mass*, the Jesuit catechism used the character *tsi*, which was the Chinese description of the ceremonies of ancestor-worship. One night they went in disguise to such a ceremony, observed Chinese Christians participating and were scandalized at what they saw. So began the quarrel of 'the rites,' which plagued the eastern missions for a century and more" (Chadwick 1964, 338).

In this way, Natural Religion not only became a universal phenomenon but began to be demarcated from, and was also supportive of, a newly emerging domain of natural science. I want to emphasize that the idea of Natural Religion was a crucial step in the formation of the modern concept of religious belief, experience, and practice, and that it was an idea developed in response to problems specific to Christian theology at a particular historical juncture.

By 1795, Kant was able to produce a fully essentialized idea of religion which could be counterposed to its phenomenal forms: "There may certainly be different historical *confessions*," he wrote,

although these have nothing to do with religion itself but only with changes in the means used to further religion, and are thus the province of historical research. And there may be just as many religious *books* (the Zend-Avesta, the Vedas, the Koran, etc.). But there can only be *one religion* which is valid for all men and at all times. Thus the different confessions can scarcely be more than the vehicles of religion; these are fortuitous, and may vary with differences in time or place. (Kant 1991, 114)

From here, the classification of historical confessions into lower and higher religions became an increasingly popular option for philosophers, theologians, missionaries, and anthropologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As to whether any particular tribe has existed without any form of religion whatever was often raised as a question,<sup>25</sup> but this was recognized as an empirical matter not affecting the essence of religion itself.

Thus, what appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order (expressed through either or both rite and doctrine), that it has generic functions/features, and that it must not be confused with any of its particular historical or cultural forms, is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history. From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized.<sup>26</sup> In this movement we have not merely an increase in religious toleration, cer-

25. For example, by Tylor in the chapter "Animism" in part 2 of *Primitive Culture*.

26. Phases in the gradual evacuation of specificity from public religious discourse in the eighteenth century are described in some detail in Gay 1973.

tainly not merely a new scientific discovery, but the mutation of a concept and a range of social practices which is itself part of a wider change in the modern landscape of power and knowledge. That change included a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject. To understand this mutation it is essential to keep clearly distinct that which theology tends to obscure: the occurrence of events (utterances, practices, dispositions) and the authorizing processes that give those events meaning and embody that meaning in concrete institutions.

### Religion as Meaning and Religious Meanings

The equation between two levels of discourse (symbols that induce dispositions and those that place the idea of those dispositions discursively in a cosmic framework) is not the only problematic thing in this part of Geertz's discussion. He also appears, inadvertently, to be taking up the standpoint of theology. This happens when he insists on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes by which meanings are constructed. "What any particular religion affirms about the fundamental nature of reality may be obscure, shallow, or, all too often, perverse," he writes, "but it must, if it is not to consist of the mere collection of received practices and conventional sentiments we usually refer to as moralism, affirm something" (98-99).

The requirement of affirmation is apparently innocent and logical, but through it the entire field of evangelism was historically opened up, in particular the work of European missionaries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The demand that the received practices must *affirm something about the fundamental nature of reality*, that it should therefore always be possible to state meanings for them which are not plain nonsense, is the first condition for determining whether they belong to "religion." The unevangelized come to be seen typically either as those who have practices but affirm nothing, in which case meaning can be attributed to their practices (thus making them vulnerable), or as those who do affirm something (probably "obscure, shallow, or perverse"), an affirmation that can therefore be dismissed. In the one case, religious theory becomes necessary for a correct reading of the mute ritual hieroglyphics of others, for reducing their practices to texts; in the other, it is essential for judging the validity of their cosmological utterances. But always, there must be something that

exists beyond the observed practices, the heard utterances, the written words, and it is the function of religious theory to reach into, and to bring out, that background by giving them meaning.<sup>27</sup>

Geertz is thus right to make a connection between religious theory and practice, but wrong to see it as essentially cognitive, as a means by which a disembodied mind can identify religion from an Archimedean point. The connection between religious theory and practice is fundamentally a matter of intervention—of constructing religion in the world (not in the mind) through definitional discourses, interpreting true meanings, excluding some utterances and practices and including others. Hence my repeated question: how does theoretical discourse actually define religion? What are the historical conditions in which it can act effectively as a demand for the imitation, or the

27. The way in which representations of occurrences were transformed into meanings by Christian theology is analyzed by Auerbach in his classic study of representations of reality in Western literature and briefly summed up in this passage: "The total content of the sacred writings was placed in an exegetic context which often removed the thing told very far away from its sensory base, in that the reader or listener was forced to turn his attention away from the sensory occurrence and toward its meaning. This implied the danger that the visual element of the occurrences might succumb under the dense texture of meanings. Let one example stand for many: It is a visually dramatic occurrence that God made Eve, the first woman, from Adam's rib while Adam lay asleep; so too is it that a soldier pierced Jesus' side, as he hung dead on the cross, so that blood and water flowed out. But when these two occurrences are exegetically interrelated in the doctrine that Adam's sleep is a figure of Christ's death-sleep; that, as from the wound in Adam's side mankind's primordial mother after the flesh, Eve, was born, so from the wound in Christ's side was born the mother of all men after the spirit, the Church (blood and water are sacramental symbols)—then the sensory occurrence pales before the power of the figural meaning. What is perceived by the hearer or reader . . . is weak as a sensory impression, and all one's interest is directed toward the context of meanings. In comparison, the Greco-Roman specimens of realistic presentation are, though less serious and fraught with problems and far more limited in their conception of historical movement, nevertheless perfectly integrated in their sensory substance. They do not know the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning, an antagonism which permeates the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality" (1953, 48–49). As Auerbach goes on to demonstrate, Christian theory in the later Middle Ages invested representations of everyday life with characteristic figural meanings, and so with the possibilities for distinctive kinds of religious experience. Figural interpretation, in Auerbach's usage, is not synonymous with symbolism. The latter is close to allegory, in which the symbol is substituted for the object symbolized. In figural interpretation the representation of an event (Adam's sleep) is made explicit by the representation of another event (Christ's death) that is its meaning. The latter representation fulfills the former (the technical term, Auerbach tells us, was *figuram implere*)—it is *implicit* in it.

prohibition, or the authentication of truthful utterances and practices? How does power create religion?

What kinds of affirmation, of meaning, must be identified with practice in order for it to qualify as religion? According to Geertz, it is because all human beings have a profound need for a general order of existence that religious symbols function to fulfill that need. It follows that human beings have a deep dread of disorder. "There are at least three points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*—threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capabilities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight" (100). It is the function of religious symbols to meet perceived threats to order at each of these points (intellectual, physical, and moral): "The Problem of Meaning in each of its intergrading aspects . . . is a matter of affirming, or at least recognizing, the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole. And it is in terms of religious symbolism, a symbolism relating man's sphere of existence to a wider sphere within which it is conceived to rest, that both the affirmation and the denial are made" (108).

Notice how the reasoning seems now to have shifted its ground from the claim that religion must affirm something specific about the nature of reality (however obscure, shallow, or perverse) to the bland suggestion that religion is ultimately a matter of having a positive attitude toward the problem of disorder, of affirming simply that in some sense or other the world as a whole is explicable, justifiable, bearable.<sup>28</sup> This modest view of religion (which would have horrified the early Christian Fathers or medieval churchmen)<sup>29</sup> is a product of the only legitimate space allowed to Christianity by post-Enlightenment society, the right to individual *belief*: the human condition is full of

28. Cf. Douglas (1975, 76): "The person without religion would be the person content to do without explanations of certain kinds, or content to behave in society without a single unifying principle validating the social order."

29. When the fifth-century bishop of Javols spread Christianity into the Auvergne, he found the peasants "celebrating a three-day festival with offerings on the edge of a marsh. . . . 'Nulla est religio in stagno,' he said: There can be no religion in a swamp" (Brown 1981, 125). For medieval Christians, religion was not a universal phenomenon: religion was a site on which universal truth was produced, and it was clear to them that truth was not produced universally.

ignorance, pain, and injustice, and religious symbols are a means of coming positively to terms with that condition. One consequence is that this view would in principle render any philosophy that performs such a function into religion (to the annoyance of the nineteenth-century rationalist), or alternatively, make it possible to think of religion as a more primitive, a less adult mode of coming to terms with the human condition (to the annoyance of the modern Christian). In either case, the suggestion that religion has a universal function in belief is one indication of how marginal religion has become in modern industrial society as the site for producing disciplined knowledge and personal discipline. As such it comes to resemble the conception Marx had of religion as ideology—that is, as a mode of consciousness which is other than consciousness of reality, external to the relations of production, producing no knowledge, but expressing at once the anguish of the oppressed and a spurious consolation.

Geertz has much more to say, however, on the elusive question of religious meaning: not only do religious symbols formulate conceptions of a general order of existence, they also clothe those conceptions with an aura of factuality. This, we are told, is “the problem of belief.” *Religious belief* always involves “the prior acceptance of authority,” which transforms experience: “The existence of bafflement, pain, and moral paradox—of the Problem of Meaning—is one of the things that drives men toward belief in gods, devils, spirits, totemic principles, or the spiritual efficacy of cannibalism, . . . but it is not the basis upon which those beliefs rest, but rather their most important field of application” (109). This seems to imply that religious belief stands independently of the worldly conditions that produce bafflement, pain, and moral paradox, although that belief is primarily a way of coming to terms with them. But surely this is mistaken, on logical grounds as well as historical, for changes in the object of belief change that belief; and as the world changes, so do the objects of belief and the specific forms of bafflement and moral paradox that are a part of that world. What the Christian believes today about God, life after death, the universe, is not what he believed a millennium ago—nor is the way he responds to ignorance, pain, and injustice the same now as it was then. The medieval valorization of pain as the mode of participating in Christ’s suffering contrasts sharply with the modern Catholic perception of pain as an evil to be fought against and overcome as Christ the Healer did. That difference is clearly related to the post-Enlightenment secu-

larization of Western society and to the moral language which that society now authorizes.<sup>30</sup>

Geertz’s treatment of religious belief, which lies at the core of his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world: “The basic axiom underlying what we may perhaps call ‘the religious perspective’ is everywhere the same: he who would know must first believe” (110). In modern society, where knowledge is rooted either in an a-Christian everyday life or in an a-religious science, the Christian apologist tends not to regard belief as the conclusion to a knowledge process but as its precondition. However, the knowledge that he promises will not pass (nor, in fairness, does he claim that it will pass) for knowledge of social life, still less for the systematic knowledge of objects that natural science provides. Her claim is to a particular state of mind, a sense of conviction, not to a corpus of practical knowledge. But the reversal of belief and knowledge she demands was not a basic axiom to, say, pious learned Christians of the twelfth century, for whom knowledge and belief were not so clearly at odds. On the contrary, Christian belief would then have been built on knowledge—knowledge of theological doctrine, of canon law and Church courts, of the details of clerical liberties, of the powers of ecclesiastical office (over souls, bodies, properties), of the preconditions and effects of confession, of the rules of religious orders, of the locations and virtues of shrines, of the lives of the saints, and so forth. Familiarity with all such (religious) knowledge was a precondition for normal social life, and belief (embodied in practice and discourse) an orientation for effective activity in it—whether on the part of the religious clergy, the secular clergy, or the laity. Because of this, the form and texture and function of their beliefs would have been different from the form and texture and function of contemporary belief—and so too of their doubts and their disbelief.

30. As a contemporary Catholic theologian puts it: “The secularistic challenge, even though separating many aspects of life from the religious field, brings with it a more sound, interpretative equilibrium: the natural phenomena, even though sometimes difficult to understand, have their cause and roots in processes that can and must be recognized. It is man’s job, therefore, to enter into this cognitive analysis of the meaning of suffering, in order to be able to affront and conquer it. The contemporary condition of man, of the believer on the threshold of the third millennium, is undoubtedly more adult and more mature and allows a new approach to the problem of human suffering” (Autiero 1987, 124).



The assumption that belief is a distinctive mental state characteristic of all religions has been the subject of discussion by contemporary scholars. Thus, Needham (1972) has interestingly argued that belief is nowhere a distinct mode of consciousness, nor a necessary institution for the conduct of social life. Southwold (1979) takes an almost diametrically opposed view, asserting that questions of belief do relate to distinctive mental states and that they are relevant in any and every society, since "to believe" always designates a relation between a believer and a proposition and through it to reality. Harré (1981, 82), in a criticism of Needham, makes the more persuasive case that "belief is a mental state, a grounded disposition, but it is confined to people who have certain social institutions and practices."

At any rate, I think it is not too unreasonable to maintain that "the basic axiom" underlying what Geertz calls "the religious perspective" is *not* everywhere the same. It is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion.<sup>31</sup>

### Religion as a Perspective

The phenomenological vocabulary that Geertz employs raises two interesting questions, one regarding its coherence and the other concerning its adequacy to a modern cognitivist notion of religion. I want to suggest that although this vocabulary is theoretically incoherent, it is socially quite compatible with the privatized idea of religion in modern society.

Thus, "the religious perspective," we are told, is one among several—common-sense, scientific, aesthetic—and it differs from these as follows. It differs from the *common-sense* perspective, because it "moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them, and [because] its defining concern is not action upon those wider realities but acceptance of them, faith in them." It is unlike the *scientific* perspective, because "it questions the realities of everyday life not out of an institutionalized scepticism which dissolves the world's givenness into a swirl of probabilistic hypotheses, but in terms of what it takes to be wider, nonhypothetical truths." And it is distinguished from the *aesthetic* perspective, because "instead of ef-

31. I have attempted a description of one aspect of this process in Asad 1986b.

fecting a disengagement from the whole question of factuality, deliberately manufacturing an air of semblance and illusion, it deepens the concern with fact and seeks to create an aura of utter actuality" (112). In other words, although the religious perspective is not exactly rational, it is not irrational either.

It would not be difficult to state one's disagreement with this summary of what common sense, science, and aesthetics are about.<sup>32</sup> But my point is that the optional flavor conveyed by the term *perspective* is surely misleading when it is applied equally to science and to religion in modern society: religion is indeed now optional in a way that science is not. Scientific practices, techniques, knowledges, permeate and create the very fibers of social life in ways that religion no longer does.<sup>33</sup> In that sense, religion today *is* a perspective (or an "attitude," as Geertz sometimes calls it), but science is not. In that sense, too, science is not to be found in every society, past and present. We shall see in a moment the difficulties that Geertz's perspectivism gets him into, but before that I need to examine his analysis of the mechanics of reality maintenance at work in religion.

Consistent with previous arguments about the functions of reli-

32. Philosophical attempts to define science have not reached a firm consensus. In the Anglo-Saxon world, recent arguments have been formulated in and around the works of Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, Hacking, and others; in France, those of Bachelard and Canguilhem. One important tendency has been to abandon the attempt at solving what is known in the literature as the demarcation problem, which is based on the assumption that there must be a single, essential, scientific method. The idea that the scientist "dissolves the world's givenness into a swirl of probabilistic hypotheses" is as questionable as the complementary suggestion that in religion there is no scope for experimentation. On this latter point, there is massive evidence of experiment, even if we went no farther than the history of Christian asceticism. Equally, the suggestion that art is a matter of "effecting a disengagement from the whole question of factuality, deliberately manufacturing an air of semblance and illusion" would not be taken as self-evident by all writers and artists. For example, when the art critic John Berger argues, in his brilliant essay "The Moment of Cubism," that cubism "changed the nature of the relationship between the painted image and reality, and by so doing expressed a new relationship between man and reality" (1972, 145), we learn something about cubism's concern to redefine visual factuality.

33. In case some readers are tempted to think that what I am talking about is not science (theory) but technology (practical application), whereas Geertz is concerned only with the former, I would stress that any attempt to make a sharp distinction between the two is based on an oversimplified view of the historical practice of both (cf. Musson and Robinson 1969). My point is that science and technology *together* are basic to the structure of modern lives, individual and collective, and that religion, in any but the most vacuous sense, is not.

gious symbols is Geertz's remark that "it is in ritual—that is, consecrated behavior—that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated" (112). The long passage from which this is taken swings back and forth between arbitrary speculations about what goes on in the consciousness of officiants and unfounded assertions about ritual as imprinting. At first sight, this seems a curious combination of introspectionist psychology with a behaviorist one—but as Vygotsky (1978, 58–59) argued long ago, the two are by no means inconsistent, insofar as both assume that psychological phenomena consist essentially in the consequence of various stimulating environments.

Geertz postulates the function of rituals in generating religious conviction ("In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it" [114]), but how or why this happens is nowhere explained. Indeed, he concedes that such a religious state is not always achieved in religious ritual: "Of course, all cultural performances are not religious performances, and the line between those that are, and artistic, or even political, ones is often not so easy to draw in practice, for, like social forms, symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes" (113). But the question remains: What is it that ensures the participant's taking the symbolic forms in the way that leads to faith if the line between religious and nonreligious perspectives is not so easy to draw? Mustn't the ability and the will to adopt a religious standpoint be present prior to the ritual performance? That is precisely why a simple stimulus-response model of how ritual works will not do. And if that is the case, then ritual in the sense of a sacred performance cannot be the place where religious faith is attained, but the manner in which it is (literally) played out. If we are to understand how this happens, we must examine not only the sacred performance itself but also the entire range of available disciplinary activities, of institutional forms of knowledge and practice, within which dispositions are formed and sustained and through which the possibilities of attaining the truth are marked out—as Augustine clearly saw.

I have noted more than once Geertz's concern to define religious symbols according to universal, cognitive criteria, to distinguish the religious perspective clearly from nonreligious ones. The separation of religion from science, common sense, aesthetics, politics, and so on, allows him to defend it against charges of irrationality. If religion has a distinctive perspective (its own truth, as Durkheim would have said)

and performs an indispensable function, it does not in essence compete with others and cannot, therefore, be accused of generating false consciousness. Yet in a way this defense is equivocal. Religious symbols create dispositions, Geertz observes, which seem uniquely realistic. Is this the point of view of a reasonably confident agent (who must always operate within the denseness of historically given probabilities) or that of a skeptical observer (who can see through the representations of reality to the reality itself)? It is never clear. And it is never clear because this kind of phenomenological approach doesn't make it easy to examine whether, and if so to what extent and in what ways, religious experience relates to something in the real world that believers inhabit. This is partly because religious symbols are treated, in circular fashion, as the precondition for religious experience (which, like any experience, must, by definition, be genuine), rather than as one condition for engaging with life.

Toward the end of his essay, Geertz attempts to connect, instead of separating, the religious perspective and the common-sense one—and the result reveals an ambiguity basic to his entire approach. First, invoking Schutz, Geertz states that the everyday world of common-sense objects and practical acts is common to all human beings because their survival depends on it: "A man, even large groups of men, may be aesthetically insensitive, religiously unconcerned, and unequipped to pursue formal scientific analysis, but he cannot be completely lacking in common sense and survive" (119). Next, he informs us that individuals move "back and forth between the religious perspective and the common-sense perspective" (119). These perspectives are so utterly different, he declares, that only "Kierkegaardian leaps" (120) can cover the cultural gaps that separate them. Then, the phenomenological conclusion: "Having ritually 'leapt' . . . into the framework of meaning which religious conceptions define, and the ritual ended, returned again to the common-sense world, a man is—unless, as sometimes happens, the experience fails to register—changed. *And as he is changed, so also is the common-sense world*, for it is now seen as but the partial form of a wider reality which corrects and completes it" (122; emphasis added).

This curious account of shifting perspectives and changing worlds is puzzling—as indeed it is in Schutz himself. It is not clear, for example, whether the religious framework and the common-sense world, between which the individual moves, are independent of him or not.

Most of what Geertz has said at the beginning of his essay would imply that they are independent (cf. 92), and his remark about common sense being vital to every man's survival also enforces this reading. Yet it is also suggested that as the believer changes his perspective, so he himself changes; and that as he changes, so too is his common-sense world changed and corrected. So the latter, at any rate, is not independent of his moves. But it would appear from the account that the religious world *is* independent, since it is the source of distinctive experience for the believer, and through that experience, a source of change in the common-sense world: there is no suggestion anywhere that the religious world (or perspective) is ever affected by experience in the common-sense world.

This last point is consistent with the phenomenological approach in which religious symbols are *sui generis*, marking out an independent religious domain. But in the present context it presents the reader with a paradox: the world of common sense is always common to all human beings, and quite distinct from the religious world, which in turn differs from one group to another, as one culture differs from another; but experience of the religious world affects the common-sense world, and so the distinctiveness of the two kinds of world is modified, and the common-sense world comes to differ, from one group to another, as one culture differs from another. The paradox results from an ambiguous phenomenology in which reality is at once the distance of an agent's social perspective from the truth, measurable only by the privileged observer, and also the substantive knowledge of a socially constructed world available to both agent and observer, but to the latter only through the former.<sup>34</sup>

34. In the introduction to his 1983 collection of essays, Geertz seems to want to abandon this perspectival approach: "The debate over whether [art] is an applicable category in 'non-Western' or 'pre-Modern' contexts has, even when compared to similar debates concerning 'religion,' 'science,' 'ideology,' or 'law,' been peculiarly unrelenting. It has also been peculiarly unproductive. Whatever you want to call a cave wall crowded with overlapping images of transfigured animals, a temple tower shaped to a phallus, a feathered shield, a calligraphic scroll, or a tattooed face, you still have *the phenomenon* to deal with, as well as perhaps the sense that to add kula exchange or the Doomsday Book would be to spoil the series. The question is not whether art (or anything else) is universal; it is whether one can talk about West African carving, New Guinea palm-leaf painting, quattrocento picture making, and Moroccan versifying in such a way as to cause them to shed some sort of light on one another" (1983, 11; emphasis added). The answer to this question must surely be: yes, of course one should try to talk about disparate things in relation to one another, but what exactly is the purpose of

## Conclusion

Perhaps we can learn something from this paradox which will help us evaluate Geertz's confident conclusion: "The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up *the religion proper*, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes" (125; emphasis added). How sensible this sounds, yet how mistaken, surely, it is. If religious symbols are understood, on the analogy with words, as vehicles for meaning, can such meanings be established independently of the form of life in which they are used? If religious symbols are to be taken as the signatures of a sacred text, can we know what they mean without regard to the social disciplines by which their correct reading is secured? If religious symbols are to be thought of as the concepts by which experiences are organized, can we say much about them without considering how they come to be authorized? Even if it be claimed that what is experienced through religious symbols is not, in essence, the social world but the spiritual,<sup>35</sup> is it possible to assert that conditions in the social world have nothing to do with making that kind of experience accessible? Is the concept of religious training entirely vacuous?

The two stages that Geertz proposes are, I would suggest, one. Religious symbols—whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion—cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial. My argument, I must stress, is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truth—

constructing a series whose items can all easily be recognized by cultivated Westerners as instances of *the phenomenon* of art? Of course, any one thing may shed light on another. But is it not precisely when one abandons conventional perspectives, or pre-established series, for opportunistic comparison that illumination (as opposed to recognition) may be achieved? Think of Hofstadter's splendid *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979), for instance.

35. Cf. the final chapter in Evans-Pritchard 1956, and also the conclusion to Evans-Pritchard 1965.



fulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces. The anthropological student of *particular* religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as "religion" into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character.

A final word of caution. Hasty readers might conclude that my discussion of the Christian religion is skewed towards an authoritarian, centralized, elite perspective, and that consequently it fails to take into account the religions of heterodox believers, of resistant peasants, of all those who cannot be completely controlled by the orthodox church. Or, worse still, that my discussion has no bearing on nondisciplinarian, voluntaristic, localized cults of noncentralized religions such as Hinduism. But that conclusion would be a misunderstanding of this chapter, seeing in it an attempt to advocate a better anthropological definition of religion than Geertz has done. Nothing could be farther from my intention. If my effort reads in large part like a brief sketch of transmutations in Christianity from the Middle Ages until today, then that is not because I have arbitrarily confined my ethnographic examples to one religion. My aim has been to problematize the idea of an anthropological definition of religion by assigning that endeavor to a particular history of knowledge and power (including a particular understanding of our legitimate past and future) out of which the modern world has been constructed.<sup>36</sup>

36. Such endeavors are unceasing. As a recent, engaging study by Tambiah (1990, 6) puts it in the first chapter: "In our discussion hereafter I shall try to argue that from a general anthropological standpoint the distinctive feature of religion as a generic concept lies not in the domain of belief and its 'rational accounting' of the workings of the universe, but in a special awareness of the transcendent, and the acts of symbolic communication that attempt to realize that awareness and live by its promptings."

## 2

TOWARD A GENEALOGY  
OF THE CONCEPT OF  
RITUAL

*What the symbolic action is intended to control is primarily a set of mental and moral dispositions.*

—Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*

Every ethnographer will probably recognize a ritual when he or she sees one, because ritual is (is it not?) symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behavior of everyday life. There may be some uncertainty and disagreement over matters of explanation, but not in identifying the phenomenon as such (Skorupski 1976). But was this always the case? When did we, as anthropologists, begin to speak of "ritual"? And why did we decide to speak of it in the way we do now? In this chapter, I try to answer these questions in an exploratory way in the hope that this will help identify some conceptual preconditions for our contemporary analyses of religion. I must stress that my primary concern here is not to criticize anthropological theories of ritual, still less to propose or endorse alternatives. It is to try and discover what historical shifts might have made our contemporary concept of ritual plausible.

I begin by examining some general statements on the subject which can be found in old encyclopedias, because they provide us with clues to the shifts that are worth investigating. I then enlarge, tentatively, on points that emerge from this examination by discussing medieval and early modern developments. Finally, I comment briefly on modern anthropological writings. My general suggestion is that changes in institutional structures and in organizations of the self make possible, for better or worse, the concept of ritual as a universal category.

I emphasize again that the following notes are no more than preliminary explorations across a large terrain. They are intended as first steps

in a historical inquiry into the conditions that made ritual in its contemporary sense visible to and theorizable by modern anthropology.

### Changing Definitions

In the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in Edinburgh in 1771, there is a brief entry under "ritual": a "book directing the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies, and performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, order, or the like." In the third edition (1797), this entry is expanded to include, by analogy, a reference to religious observances in the classical world:

RITUAL, a book directing the order and manner to be observed in performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, or the like. The ancient heathens had also their rituals, which contained their rites and ceremonies to be observed in building a city, consecrating a temple or altar, in sacrificing, and deifying, in dividing the curiae, tribes, centuries, and in general, in all their religious ceremonies. There are several passages in Cato's books *De Re Rustica*, which may give us some idea of the rituals of the ancients.

The first edition also contains an entry under "rite": "RITE, among divines," it reads, "denotes the particular manner of celebrating divine service, in this or that country." Thus, although the two terms are distinguished, they are complementary.

Both entries are repeated in successive editions up to the seventh (1852). After that, there is no entry at all for "rite" or "ritual" until the eleventh edition (1910), when a completely new entry appears under the latter for the first time. It is now five columns long and divided, after an introductory passage, into named subsections: "The Magical Element in Ritual," "The Interpretation of Ritual," "Changes in Ritual," "The Classification of Rites," "Negative Rites." This article is also supplemented by a substantial bibliography, which contains references to general works by Tylor, Lang, Frazer, Robertson Smith, Hubert, and Mauss, as well as ethnographic items by Spencer and Gillen and by Cushing.

The length of the 1910 entry seems to indicate that far more was now known about "ritual" as a cultural phenomenon than was the case in the eighteenth century, but in fact what we are given here is an account of something quite new, something that the first entries did

not attempt to deal with. Although many of the exemplifications are related to concerns that flow from evolutionist assumptions, the central questions which were to occupy later anthropologists are already evident. Ritual, we learn, is found not only in Christianity or in the religions that Christianity superseded.

A crucial part of every religion, ritual is now regarded as a type of routine behavior that symbolizes or expresses something and, as such, relates differentially to individual consciousness and social organization. That is to say, it is no longer a *script* for regulating practice but a type of practice that is interpretable as standing for some further *verbally definable*, but tacit, event. ✓

The routine, repetitive character of ritual is firmly linked in the 1910 entry to psychological and sociological functions:

Ritual is to religion what habit is to life, and its *rationale* is similar, namely that by bringing subordinate functions under an effortless rule it permits undivided attention in regard to vital issues. . . . Just as the main business of habit is to secure bodily equilibrium . . . so the chief task of routine in religion is to organize the activities necessary to its stability and continuance as a social institution.

But given its essentially symbolic character, ritual is not confined to religion. The concept presented in 1910 allows that symbolic action is an integral part of ordinary life because it is essential to any system of interlocking social roles, and therefore also to the social structure as a whole:

In order that inter-subjective relations should be maintained between fellow-worshippers, the use of one or another set of conventional symbols is absolutely required; for example, an intelligible vocabulary of meet expressions, or (since this is, perhaps not indispensable) at any rate sounds, sights, actions, and so on, that have come by prescription to signify the common purpose of the religious society, and the means taken in common for the realization of that purpose. In this sense, the term "ritual," as meaning the prescribed ceremonial routine, is also extended to observances not strictly religious in character.

This emphasis on ritual as symbolic behavior that is not necessarily religious is entirely modern, although some other notions are not. Perhaps the most important difference between the concept of ritual presented here and that found in later anthropological writings hinges on the fact that more sophisticated theories of interpretation

are employed in some of the latter. But both share the idea that ritual is to be conceived essentially in terms of signifying behavior—a type of activity to be classified separately from practical, that is, technically effective, behavior. And it is this idea that the earliest entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lacks—or at any rate does not make explicit. There is, however, another idea, which is central to the 1771 entry and which becomes marginalized in the 1910 version. This is the conception of ritual as a manual.

The conception of ritual as a book directing the way rites should be performed is very much older than the eighteenth century. Rituals appeared as early as the ninth century, though only in monasteries (Sigler 1967). However, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that the word *ritual* entered English as a substantive conveying the sense either of the prescribed order of performing religious services or of the book containing such prescriptions. Significantly, in 1614 the Catholic church had just produced the first authorized version of the Roman Ritual (Cross 1974, 1189). And, of course, the term *ritual* continues to be used in certain circles to denote prayer manuals even today. But now this sense has been displaced, in the normal vocabulary of most nonreligious people, by the modern conception of ritual as enacted symbols. As such, *ritual* becomes virtually synonymous with *rite*, which may help to explain why the later editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* do not have separate entries for “rite” and “ritual” as the earliest ones do.<sup>1</sup>

The shift in the usage of “ritual” from what is literally a script (including texts to be uttered and instructions on how and by whom, as well as on the accompanying actions, etc.) to behavior, which is itself *likened* to a text, is connected with other historical changes. Among these is the nineteenth-century view that ritual is more primitive than myth—a view that neatly historicizes and secularizes the Reformation doctrine that correct belief must be more highly valued than correct practice.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the 1910 entry states:

A valuable truth insisted on by the late W. Robertson Smith . . . is that in primitive religion it is ritual that generates and sustains myth,

1. And why anthropologists commonly employ the words *rite* and *ritual* interchangeably. For a recent example, see J. S. La Fontaine 1985.

2. It was Robertson Smith's interest in biblical exegesis that gave modern anthropology its first comprehensive theory of ritual, as Franz Steiner points out (1956).

and not the other way about. Sacred lore of course cannot be dispensed with; even Australian society, which has hardly reached the stage of having priests, needs its *Oknirabata* or “great instructor.” . . . The function of such an expert, however, is chiefly to hand on mere rules for the performance of religious acts. If his lore include sacred histories, it is largely, we may suspect, because the description and dramatization of the doings of divine persons enter into ritual as a means of magical control. Similarly, the sacred books of the religions of middle grade teem with minute prescriptions as to ritual, but are almost destitute of doctrine. Even in the highest religions, where orthodoxy is a main requirement, and ritual is held merely to symbolize dogma, there is a remarkable rigidity about the dogma that is doubtless in large part due to its association with ritual forms many of them bearing the most primeval stamp. As regards the symbolic interpretation of ritual, this is usually held not to be primitive; and it is doubtless true that an unreflective age is hardly aware of the differences between “outward sign” and “inward meaning,” and thinks as it were by means of its eyes.

The semantic distinction between “outward sign” and “inward meaning” is in fact an ancient one and has been drawn on by Christian reformers throughout the ages.<sup>3</sup> As the logical precondition of the claim to have penetrated through some formal appearance to the essential reality within, this distinction has been central to theological discourse. But not only to theological discourse, for the claim that the unsophisticated who employ “outward signs” in formal behavior and speech do not understand the entire meaning being signified or expressed has served as an important principle of anthropological interpretation from Tylor onward,<sup>4</sup> although few anthropologists today would endorse the derogatory judgment contained in the final sentence of the extract quoted above.

The 1910 article does include a reference to indigenous experts, who specify procedures for the proper conduct of rites, but this matter is brushed aside as being of little interest: “The function of such an expert, however, is chiefly to hand on mere rules for the performance

3. It is sometimes mistakenly supposed by modern students of the Middle East that this distinction is a special feature of Islamic thought.

4. I refer here to Tylor's decoding of the “real meaning” of “superstitious” beliefs and practices as *survivals*.

of religious acts." What now preoccupies the writer of the entry under "ritual" is its symbolic character, the meanings attached to it, and the fact that it is a universal phenomenon. Some later anthropologists were to trace these meanings to magical attempts at dealing with the natural environment (e.g., Malinowski) or to effects that maintained the continuity of social structures (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown); yet others to cultural categories by which messages are communicated (e.g., Leach) or to religious experiences that transcend cultural categories and social structures (e.g., Turner). But all of them regard ritual as essentially a species of representational behavior, present in every culture—typically as part of its "magic" or its "religion"—and identifiable by the ethnographer prior to its meaning and effect being determined.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that symbols need to be decoded is not, of course, new, but I think it plays a new role in the restructured concept of ritual that anthropology has appropriated and developed from the history of Christian exegesis.<sup>6</sup> Anthropologists have, I would suggest, incorporated a theological preoccupation into an avowedly secular intellectual task—that is, the preoccupation with establishing as authoritatively as possible the meanings of representations where the explanations offered by indigenous discourses are considered ethnographically inadequate or incomplete.

Of course, in the case of Christianity, it is the Church that embodies

5. In a recent survey of anthropological studies on ritual in Melanesia, R. Wagner (1984, 143–55, at 143) writes: "If ritual is, in its usual definition, what Mary Douglas calls a 'restricted code' . . . then the anthropologist's job is to decipher it. But *what* is encoded and why? And what is the nature of the code and why is it formulated in that way? These questions bear upon the relational role of ritual within the subject-culture, what it *does* as communication, regulation, or whatever." In this way, the notion of ritual aims to unify an enormous variety of culturally constituted events. But because "elaborated" and "restricted" codes are mutually dependent in every communicative event, and because each type of communicative event presupposes a distinctive arrangement of meaning, feeling-tone, mode, and effectivity, and presupposes too a historically constituted self that speaks, hears, and *does* things with signs, the notion of ritual as coded action is at once too narrow and too indiscriminating.

6. Thus, for medieval Christians, Scripture could be interpreted in four different ways. This was popularly illustrated by reference to the four kinds of sense indicated by the sign *Jerusalem* in the Old Testament: "These four meanings can, if it is desired, combine with each other and the same Jerusalem can be understood in four different ways: historically as the city of the Jews, allegorically as the Church of Christ, analogically as God's heavenly city, a mother for all of us, and tropologically as the soul of each individual, which is often reproached or praised in the Scriptures under this appellation" (Piltz 1981, 30).

the authority to interpret the meanings of scriptural representations, although that authority is variously exercised according to whether the Church is more elitist or more populist. In societies that lack the notion of authoritative exegesis, however, the problem of interpreting "symbolic actions" is quite different. The most important difference relates not to greater uncertainty in the interpretation of symbols in such societies but to the fact that things have first to be construed as symbolic before they become candidates for interpretation, and in fieldwork situations it is the ethnographer who identifies and classifies symbols,<sup>7</sup> even where he or she then draws on the help of indigenous exegetes to interpret them.<sup>8</sup>

In this anthropological concept of ritual, an idea belonging to

7. A. Gell, in his analysis of the *ida* ritual among the Umedas of New Guinea (1973, 211), states: "Among my Umeda informants I found none willing to discuss the meaning of their symbols—to discuss their symbols *as* symbols 'standing for' some other thing or idea, rather than as concrete things-in-themselves. In fact I found it impossible to even pose the question of meaning in Umeda, since I could not discover any corresponding Umeda word for English 'mean,' 'stand for,' etc. Questions about symbols were taken by Umedas as questions about the *identity* rather than the *meaning* of a symbol: 'what is it?' not 'what does it mean?'" For Gell, this situation is no bar to carrying out a symbolic analysis based on the mirror theory of meaning, because he can claim to present an "observer's construct" whose validity is "external" rather than internal. But his discreet allusions to psychoanalytic method provoke the following doubt: what can the validation of "meanings" be in a situation where the ethnographer takes the part both of *analysand*, by putting visual images in words, and of *analyst*, by organizing these descriptive words into a coherent "symbolic" narrative in which *certain things stand for others*? For an illuminating discussion of the difficulties of securing symbolic interpretations in psychoanalysis, see D. P. Spence 1982.

8. D. Sperber (1975, 112) attempts to overcome the difference I refer to by arguing that symbolism should be defined in cognitive rather than communicative terms: "Symbolicity is therefore not a property either of objects, or of acts or of utterances, but of conceptual representations that describe or interpret them. Theoretical approaches that would look in objects, acts, or utterances for the properties constitutive of symbolism must be bound to fail. By contrast, an adequate theory of symbolism will describe the properties which a conceptual representation must possess to be the object of a putting in quotes and of a symbolic treatment." His overall argument employs a distinction between types of knowledge—for example, "semantic" as against "encyclopedic" knowledge—which recalls the old distinction between analytic and synthetic statements (subverted in W. O. Quine 1961 [1953]). "Symbolic knowledge," we are told, has to do with the way "encyclopedic knowledge" is organized, so that some statements (e.g., about mime) will be interpreted in a metaphorical sense, and others (e.g., about sacrifice) in a metaphysical one. It should be noted that, like other modern theorists, Sperber's preoccupation is with *propositional* knowledge (knowing that), not with *practical* knowledge (knowing how). And *propositional* knowledge (e.g., in theology, science, or law) invariably raises questions of authoritative interpretation. I return to the importance of this distinction below in my reading of Mauss's "Techniques of the Body."

premodern Christian traditions (especially monasticism) is now absent. This idea has to do with the shift in sense from a script (a text to be read and performed) to an action (a social fact to be observed and inscribed), and it can be described as follows. If there are prescribed ways of performing liturgical services, then we can assume that there exists a requirement to master the proper performance of these services. Ritual is therefore directed at the apt performance of what is prescribed, something that depends on intellectual and practical disciplines but does not itself require decoding. In other words, apt performance involves not symbols to be interpreted but abilities to be acquired according to rules that are sanctioned by those in authority: it presupposes no obscure meanings, but rather the formation of physical and linguistic skills.<sup>9</sup>

Rites as apt performances presuppose codes—in the regulative sense as opposed to the semantic—and people who evaluate and teach them.

### The Medieval Christian Concept of Moral Discipline

In the early Middle Ages, the *Rule* of Saint Benedict became established as virtually the sole program for the proper government of a monastic community and the Christian formation of its members (Lawrence 1984). “We are about to open,” states a famous sentence in the prologue to the *Rule*, “a school for God’s service, in which we hope nothing harsh or oppressive will be directed.” Although most Christians in feudal society lived outside monastic organizations, the disciplined formation of the Christian self was possible only within such communities. The ordered life of the monks was defined by various tasks, from working to praying, the most important being the singing of divine services (*Opus Dei*). Because the monk’s day was intended to be organized around the routine performance of the liturgy (Knowles 1963, 448–71), the *Rule* is often as specific about the content and timing of the service to be sung as it is about other matters. It is striking that in the *Rule*, the proper performance of the liturgy is regarded not only as integral to the ascetic life but also as one of the “instruments”

9. It is worth noting that Steiner (*Taboo*, 79) was clear that “meanings” of rites are a property of what he called “texts” (verbal accounts) and not of acts or things in themselves.

of the monk’s “spiritual craft,” which he must acquire by practice (see chap. 4, “The Instruments of Good Works”). The liturgy is not a species of enacted symbolism to be classified separately from activities defined as technical but is a practice among others essential to the acquisition of Christian virtues. In other words, the liturgy can be isolated only conceptually, for pedagogic reasons, not in practice, from the entire monastic program.

While it is true to say that the monastic program was conceived in terms of distinctive images—a school for the Lord’s service (*domini schola servitii*), a second baptism (*paenitentia secunda*)—it was practices that were to be organized by such figures. The figures were intrinsic to an inscribed program, to the language of prescription, exhortation, exegesis, and demonstration, not to the meaning of individual gestures in themselves.<sup>10</sup> In the *Rule* all prescribed practices, whether they had to do with the proper ways of eating, sleeping, working, and praying or with proper moral dispositions and spiritual aptitudes, are aimed at developing virtues that are put “to the service of God.”

The learning of virtues according to the medieval monastic program (which, though based on the *Rule*, included other textual and oral traditions) took place primarily by means of imitation. The idea of following a model seems to have become especially important in the many religious organizations that proliferated during the High Middle Ages (Bynum 1980, 1–17), but from the start it was central to the Benedictine program, which aimed at the development of Christian virtues.

The virtues were thus formed by developing the ability to behave in accordance with saintly exemplars. Acquiring this ability was a teleological process. Each thing to be done was not only to be done aptly in itself, but done in order to make the self approximate more and more to a predefined model of excellence. The things prescribed, including liturgical services, had a place in the overall scheme of training the Christian self. In this conception, there could be no radical disjunction between outer behavior and inner motive, between social rituals and individual sentiments, between activities that are expressive and those that are technical.

10. My comments on images here should not be confused with M. Jackson’s arguments for the experiential priority of bodily movements in relation to words and symbols (1983, 327–45). I want to draw attention to the teleological character of *learning to be capable*. The logical irrelevance of mental representations to the concept of skilled performance (whether physical or verbal) is argued out in J. Searle 1985.



For example, the copying of manuscripts, which occupied generations of monks, was a formally recognized type of asceticism.

Deciphering from an often poorly preserved manuscript [writes an ecclesiastical historian] a text which was often long and badly written and *reproducing it correctly* constituted a task which, however noble it was, was also hard and therefore meritorious, and medieval scribes have taken pains to inform us of this fact: the whole body is concentrated on the work of the fingers, and constant and precise attention must be exercised.

Monks described this labor of transcribing manuscripts as being "like prayer and fasting, a means of correcting one's unruly passions" (Leclercq 1977, 153-54; emphasis added). In this sense the technical art of calligraphy was, like the liturgy, one part of a monastic program and therefore expressive, like divine service; a rite, like any act of penance.

It is precisely through the concept of a disciplinary program that "outer behavior" and "inner motive" were connected. This can be seen most clearly in the case of the sacrament of confession, so central to monastic life and developed by monks in the form that was later extended to Christians at large. But that connection was sought in everything that the program prescribed. A remarkable example, much written about in monastic literature, was the cultivation of "tears of desire for Heaven" (Leclercq 1977, 72-73): because the compunction for one's sins had to accompany the desire for virtue, the ability to weep became at once the sign of the genuineness of that compunction and of the progress attained by that desire.<sup>11</sup> In this way, emotions, which are often recognized by anthropologists as inner, contingent events, could be progressively organized by increasingly apt performance of conventional behavior.

Of course, medieval monks knew, as everyone knows, that signs of a particular virtue could be displayed or read when that virtue was lacking. But that did not mean that they regarded "external" behavior as detachable from an "essential" self. On the contrary, the presence of hypocrisy, like self-deception, indicated that the learning process was incomplete—or, more drastically, that it had failed. However, the converse, *not* displaying signs of virtue even when one possessed it,

11. A comparable phenomenon has been described for sixteenth-century Spain—see W. A. Christian 1982.

was itself recommended as a means of acquiring the highest virtue of all: humility.

The monastic community was far from being the whole of medieval life, but I am not aiming at a social history of manners. My interest is in trying to draw out some concepts of apt utterance and behavior in relation to moral structures of the self, when "ritual" has not yet become a separate category of behavior—repetitive, nonrational, expressive. Given this perspective, I want to move a step beyond Lienhardt's statement in the epigraph to this chapter and ask, by what systematic practices are particular moral dispositions and capacities created and controlled?

### The Self and Its Representations: Some Renaissance Concerns

When the display of "proper" behavior is disconnected from the formation of a virtuous self and acquires the status of a tactic, it becomes the object of a different kind of theorizing—a meditation not on virtue but on power. But in this case behavioral signs need to be seen as representations conceptually detachable from what they represent; only then can they invite readings in a game of power, a game in which the "true" self is masked by its representations, and where this masking is aptly done.

A fascinating early modern attempt to conceptualize the role of representational behavior in the field of power is Bacon's "Of Simulation and Dissimulation." Bacon's world is, of course, more fluid and individualistic in comparison not only with the medieval monastic community but with society outside it. It is a world that encourages a double fragmentation—in individual roles and social arenas—which was to emerge more clearly in later centuries with the development of bourgeois society.

Bacon's essay is interesting because it takes for granted the possibility of analyzing individuated acts of representation. It does this first in distinguishing three degrees of masking: secrecy, dissimulation, and simulation. "Therefore set it downe: *That an Habit of Secrecy, is both Politick, and Morall.* And this Part, it is good, that a mans Face, give his Tongue, leaue to speak. For the Discouery, of a Mans Selfe, by the Tracts of his Countenance, is a great Weaknesse, and Betraying; By how much, it is many times more marked and beleued, then a Mans words."

But secrecy cannot be maintained without a form of behavior which protects the truth by misrepresenting it. "It followeth many times vpon *Secrecy*, by a necessity; So that, he that will be *Secret*, must be a *Dissembler*, in some degree." Now, while dissimulation is the "negative" form of misrepresentation, that is, pretending not to be what one is (feigning innocence), simulation is the "affirmative" form—appearing to be what one is not (impersonating). Both involve playing a part in a drama of power, but the former is viewed as defensive and the latter as offensive. The text therefore cautions against excessive resorting to simulation on prudential grounds: "But for the third Degree, which is *Simulation*, and false Profession; That I hold more culpable, and lesse politicke; except that it be in great and rare Matters" (Bacon 1937 [1597], 24–25). Representational behavior is theorized for a self confronting potential opponents and allies. Bacon's text enumerates the uses and dangers of these tactics and balances the demands of traditional morality with those of an uncertain world. To the extent that precise calculation is impossible in the courtly world for which Bacon writes, the political effectiveness of conventional behavior requires the devising of strategies, not the imitation of models or the following of rules. It is only here, in the hidden exercise of strategic power, that symbolic behavior becomes what I think one may now call ideological.

The emerging modern distinction underlying Bacon's comments is, of course, between mind and body. In *The Advancement of Learning*, it is employed explicitly to classify knowledge about connections between the two: "how the one discloseth the other, and how the one worketh upon the other" (Bacon 1973 [1605], 106). Knowledge of the former is useful in decoding social behavior. (In the eighteenth century it would also become useful for depicting—in painting, in words, and in theatrical performance—the subject's "character" as revealed in "attitudes," in bodily configurations.) As for knowledge of the latter, it includes the effects on the mind of bodily manipulations in medicine and in "religion or superstition":

The physician prescribeth cures of the mind in phrensies and melancholy passions; and pretendeth also to exhibit medicines to exhilarate the mind, to confirm the courage, to clarify the wits, to corroborate the memory, and the like: but the scruples and superstitions of diet and other regimen of the body in the sect of the Pythagoreans, in the

heresy of the Manicheans, and in the law of Mohomet, do exceed. So likewise the ordinances in the ceremonial law, interdicting the eating of the blood and the fat, distinguishing between beasts clean and unclean for meat, are many and strict. Nay the faith itself being clear and serene from all clouds of ceremony, yet retaineth the use of fastings, abstinences, and other macerations and humiliations of the body, as things real and not figurative. (107–8)

The rites and disciplines of medieval monasticism can now be seen as figurative and representational, not real or practical. Of course, medieval monasticism, too, made a distinction between appearance and reality.<sup>12</sup> But it linked "visible sign" indissolubly to "invisible virtue" through a program of Christian discipline. Bacon's distinction, by contrast, is between the real and the figurative. Unlike real things, the latter made statements whose essential meanings must be translated, but precisely because they are conventional statements, they may also need correction and reformulation. For figurative things (again, unlike real things) can lie—most seriously, when they seduce us into taking them to be real. Hence, Bacon is closer to the modern anthropological view, which is expressed in the sentence from the 1910 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* I quoted earlier: "As regards the symbolic interpretation of ritual, this is usually held not to be primitive; and it is doubtless true that an unreflective age is hardly aware of the difference between 'outward sign' and 'inward meaning,' and thinks as it were by means of its eyes."

In this early modern world, the moral economy of the self in a court circle was constructed very differently from the ways prescribed in the medieval monastic program. Created and re-created through dramas of manipulative power, at once personal and political, the self depended now on the maintenance of moral distance between public forms of behavior and private thoughts and feelings.<sup>13</sup> The dramas of power described by historians of the Renaissance were made possible by a sharp tension between the inner self and the outer person. But they were the product, too, of a radical reconceptualization of appro-

12. As in this observation by Hugh of St. Victor: "The eyes of infidels who see only visible things despise venerating the sacraments of salvation, because beholding in this only what is contemptible without invisible species they do not recognise the invisible virtue within and the fruit of obedience" (1951, 156).

13. S. Greenblatt (1980, 163) notes that "dissimulation and feigning are an important part of the instruction given by almost every [Renaissance] court manual."

priate behavior into representations and of skill in manipulating representations, increasingly divorced from the idea of a disciplinary program for forming the self. What kind of effects did these changes eventually have on the concept and practice of Christian rites in an increasingly de-Christianized world?

It is no accident, incidentally, that Bacon's world was one in which the words *policy* and *politic* acquired a strong Machiavellian sense. In late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays, it is well known that the politic man was one given to deception and machination. Less well known is the fact that the term *practice* (and its derivatives) had a similar sinister meaning:

The word became rather widely used in the Elizabethan age, though it never approached the popularity of *policy*. Bacon used the word, for instance, in Essay III, "Of unity in religion," when he repudiates the use of force against religious movements, "except it be in cases of overt scandal, blasphemy or intermixture of practice against the state." . . . The corresponding verb is *to practise*, also used by Bacon in a sinister sense: in the Overbury trial he spoke of ciphers as "seldom used but either by princes and their ambassadors and ministers, or by such as work or practice against, or, at least, upon, princes." (Orsini 1946, 131)

Is it necessary to insist that deception and intrigue were not invented in the Renaissance? All one is saying is that practices of representation (and misrepresentation) were now becoming the object of systematic knowledge in the service of power.

I am not suggesting, of course, that representational behavior was involved only in political strategies. In the Renaissance the masque, for example, was regarded as representational and morally educative at one and the same time. Thus, Sir Thomas Elyot, in *The Book Named the Governour* (1531), writes of dancing in general:

Now because there is no pastime to be compared to that, wherein may be found both recreation and meditation of virtue; I have among all honest pastimes, wherein is exercise of the body, noted dancing to be of an excellent utility, comprehending in it wonderful figures (which the Greeks do call Idea) of virtues and noble qualities, and especially of the commodious virtue called prudence, which Tulley

defineth to be the knowledge of things, which ought to be followed; and also of them which ought to be fled from and eschewed. (Meagher 1962, 273)

Such a conception of the formal dance, by which edifying images are allegorically presented and moral dispositions cultivated, is close to the older conception of the liturgy as part of the communal program for developing Christian virtues—even if the highest virtue envisaged now is prudence, not humility, and even if the cultivation of virtues is increasingly pushed to the margins of serious life (pastime) or at most into a preparatory segment of it (education). It is no accident that these and other comments by Elyot on formal dancing appear in a book devoted to the education of gentlemen (a process that Victorians would call "building character"). But my point here is simply that when conventional behavior is seen as being essentially representational and essentially independent of the self, the possibility is opened up of deploying it in games of power. The Renaissance masque, for all its concern with power, was a calculated display of royal authority in which the king and all his courtiers participated (Cooper 1984). But that display was in the nature of a self-assertion, not a simulation.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the representations discussed by Bacon, the masque presents no more than itself: in it power may be celebrated but is not thereby secured.

### Private Essences and Public Representations

In his study of drama in the English Renaissance, Edward Burns (1990) notes that "character" has always had a dual sense. On the one hand it means reputation, how one is known and understood in the world; on the other, mental or moral constitution, that hidden essence by which one's being in the world is determined. "Character," he observes,

14. S. Orgel 1975, 59–60. On the symbolism of the masques, Orgel points out that "then as now, a symbol had meaning only after it was explained. Symbols function as summations and confirmations; they tell us only what we already know, and it is a mistake to assume that the Renaissance audience, unlike a modern one, knew without being told. Even emblems that seem perfectly obvious, or those that derive from standard handbooks of symbolic imagery, were relentlessly explicated" (24). This process of explication did not simply provide authoritative meanings, it defined things as symbols.



has in fact a rather unusual history, in that its use in classical, mediaeval and renaissance writing is tied very closely to a sense of its derivation; the word is often written in its original Greek letters, and its meaning explained in terms of metaphor. In its original Greek, a character is a figure (letter or symbol) stamped onto a wax tablet. It can also be the object that stamps that figure. It thus comes to mean a readable sign in a very general sense—the mark by which something is known as what it is. It may extend to aspects of the human—marks of face and body, for example—but it always implies the reading of signs, whether those signs are purposive or not. The metaphor then tends to return us to the production and interpretation of signs in writing and reading, an emphasis which Latin writers reiterate by carefully maintaining a sense of the term's origins. (5)

In postclassical rhetoric, "character" came to refer to the use of language aimed at representing types of person or humor. Right up to and including the Renaissance, the rhetoric required the orator to study and reproduce—according to his own style—the signs that made various human types recognizable in and through discourse. "If," says Burns, "we return to the opposition I made earlier—between character as a process of knowing, and character as individual moral essence—we have a broad definition of a shift in usage. The first gives the term as the rhetoricians understood it, the second isolates that concept of human being to which the term now refers" (6).

Developing from this second sense of character is the notion of essential identity, something unique and private to each individual, an essence separating him or her from other individuals as well as from the visible significations they share. According to this later notion, a human being's moral identity must not be equated with its formal appearance. An important consequence of that is that endless interpretations of essential character—and skill in "judgment of character"—now become possible.

Thus, in a piece entitled "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," Henry Fielding (1967) urges upon his "honest and unexperienced" readers the value of learning how to read the real character of men from their faces and habitual manner:

Thus while the crafty and designing part of mankind, consulting only their own separate advantage, endeavour to maintain one constant

imposition on others, the whole world becomes a vast masquerade, where the greatest part appear disguised under false vizors and habits; a very few only showing their own faces, who become, by so doing, the astonishment and ridicule of all the rest.

But however cunning the disguise be which a masquerader wears; however foreign to his age, degree, or circumstance, yet if closely attended to, he very rarely escapes the discovery of an accurate observer; for Nature, which unwillingly submits to the imposture, is ever endeavouring to peep forth and show herself; nor can the cardinal, the friar, or the judge, long conceal the sot, the gamester, or the rake. (283)

Social critics like Fielding believed that it was possible to penetrate beyond the pretense of hypocrites (who appear in Fielding as "types": cardinal, friar, judge, etc.) into their essential moral nature precisely because "the passions of men do commonly imprint sufficient marks on the countenance" (284).

In the later eighteenth century, "passions" were distinguished from "emotions" by their greater force—and their consequent significance for social relations. Although they now became part of a mechanistic psychology, passions occupied a place comparable to medieval virtues and vices.

An internal motion or agitation of the mind, when it passeth away without desire is denominated *an emotion*; when desire follows, the motion or agitation is denominated *a passion*. A fine face, for example, raiseth in me a pleasant feeling: if that feeling vanish without producing any effect, it is in proper language an *emotion*; but if the feeling, by reiterated views of the object, becomes sufficiently strong to occasion desire, it loses its name of emotion, and acquires that of *passion*. The same holds in all the other passions.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike emotion, passion could therefore determine behavior—though only as an uncontrollable force quite unlike the teachable desires of medieval monasticism. For painters, this tendency of the passions (movements of the soul) to become externally visible made physiognomy a valuable professional aid. And they could now aspire not only

15. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1797, 3d ed., s.v. "emotion."

to depict in detail each of the typical passions by reference to recognizable characteristics<sup>16</sup> but also to penetrate, by means of readable signs, into the essential moral character of their subjects.

### "Emotion" versus "Ritual" in Anthropology

How did the idea of teaching the body to develop "virtues" through material means come to be displaced by the idea of separating internal feelings and thoughts called "emotions" from social forms/formulas/formalities? A more modest version of that question would be: How did modern anthropology arrive at the distinction between "feelings" as private and ineffable and "ritual" as public and legible? That the two are to be opposed has long been the dominant assumption in the study of ritual in modern anthropology, although there are some indications that this may be changing.<sup>17</sup>

Several decades ago, A. M. Hocart spelled out at length the idea that ritual and emotion are mutually antipathetic, that ritual is an "intellectual construction that is liable to be broken up by emotion" (Hocart 1952, 61). In his case, this idea fitted neatly into the Gibbonian attitude toward "enthusiastic religion," the emotional Christianity of classes who might be difficult to govern, as opposed to the polite, orderly, ceremonial Christianity favored by Enlightenment rulers. "We have seen," wrote Hocart, "that it is chiefly in the lower classes that emotion lets itself go, and breaks up the [ritual] structure. We have also had reason to believe that these popular movements can spread through a society and simplify the whole religion."<sup>18</sup>

Some time later, Evans-Pritchard expressed the orthodox position of British social anthropologists at the time as follows: "Only chaos would result were anthropologists to classify social phenomena by emotions which are supposed to accompany them, for such emotional

16. Thus, the first edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771) contains a separate entry under "passions, in painting," which identifies them as visual representations. Later editions contain plates displaying line drawings of a large number of passions, including "Admiration," "Scorn & Hatred," "Humility," "Desire," and so on. They are now literally *types*—whose etymology, incidentally, overlaps with that of "character."

17. For example, S. Heald 1986. This change is connected with a growing recognition that the language of emotions is intrinsic to their formation: see R. Harré 1986.

18. Hocart 1952, 65. It is interesting that in this article Hocart should cite Islam (Egyptian sufi exercises) as an example of emotion destroying ritual, and Brahmanism as the epitome of ritual constructing hierarchy.

states, if present at all, must vary not only from individual to individual, but also in the same individual on different occasions and even at different points in the same rite" (Evans-Pritchard 1965, 44).

In this and other such formulations, the distinction is apparent between the contingency of individual experience and the systematic character of language. The conception of ritual as a language by which private things become publicly accessible because they can be represented is a familiar enough notion. Here is another, more recent anthropologist:

Now, if for the purposes of exposition we draw a crude distinction between "ordinary" communicational behaviour and "ritual" behaviour (accepting of course that both kinds are equally subject to cultural conventions), then we could say (forgetting the problem of insincerity and lying) that ordinary acts "express" attitudes and feelings directly (e.g. crying denotes distress in our society) and "communicate" that information to interacting persons (e.g. the person crying wishes to convey to another his feeling of distress). But ritualized, conventionalized, stereotyped behaviour is constructed in order to express and communicate, and is publicly construed as expressing and communicating, certain attitudes congenial to an ongoing institutionalized intercourse. Stereotyped conventions in this sense act at a second or further remove; they code not intentions but "simulations" of intentions. . . . Thus *distancing* is the other side of the coin of conventionality; distancing separates the private emotions of the actors from their commitment to a public morality. (Tambiah 1979, 113–69, at 124)

There are, of course, cultural repertoires that can be brought into play only where a conceptual disjunction exists between the essential self and the means by which that self represents its feelings, intentions, and responses to others. But perhaps in such cases the distinction between "ordinary" communicational activity (including speech) and "ritual" may be less momentous than we suppose, since the guiding principle in both situations may well be prudence—including the prudence of committing oneself to a public morality.

Yet, the meaning given in the preceding quotations to the word *emotion* is evidently something like *sensations*, that is, feelings that are not only spontaneous and ephemeral but essentially internal and unique to each body. In this view, it is indeed difficult to envisage sensations

becoming the objects of (ritual) concepts and thereby changing their essentially unique and ephemeral quality.<sup>19</sup>

Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) has a more complicated account of the separation between the sensations and desires of the (individual) body, on the one hand, and the concepts and duties of the (collective) soul, on the other.

It is quite true that the elements which serve to form the idea of the soul and those that enter into the representation of the body come from two different sources that are independent of one another. One sort are made up of the images and impressions coming from all parts of the organism; the others consist in the ideas and sentiments which come from and express society. So the former are not derived from the latter. There really is a part of ourselves which is not placed in immediate dependence upon the organic factor: this is all that which represents society in us. . . . The world of representations in which social life passes is superimposed upon its material substratum; the determinism which reigns there is much more supple than the one whose roots are in the constitution of our tissues and it leaves with the actor the justified impression of the greatest liberty. . . . Passion individualizes, yet it also enslaves. Our sensations are essentially individual; yet we are more personal the more we are freed from our senses and able to think and act with concepts. (271-72)

Durkheim's view of the contradictory relation between the individual and the social *within each human being* provided a basis for his theory of ritual. For it was "the function of public festivals, ceremonies, and rites of all kinds" to "perpetually give back to the great ideals a little of the strength that the egoistic passions and daily personal preoccupations tend to take away from them." For Durkheim, the disjunctions within human beings were irreducible but not absolute. They could be mediated by ritual only because it, too, had a double character:

Collective representations originate only when they are embodied in material objects, things, or beings of every sort—figures, movements,

19. Evans-Pritchard's empiricist psychology may be contrasted with Collingwood's argument (1938) that when sensations are captured in thought (i.e., language), they cease to be fleeting, private, and nondirectional. Collingwood's writings were admired and occasionally cited by Evans-Pritchard, so it is surprising to find that neither he nor his followers at Oxford ever engaged Collingwood's views on emotions and thought.

sounds, words, and so on—that symbolize and delineate them in some outward appearance. For it is only by expressing their feelings, by translating them into signs, by symbolizing them externally, that the individual consciousnesses, which are, by nature, closed to each other, can feel that they are communicating and are in unison. (Wolff 1960, 335-36)

The place of Durkheim's concept of *homo duplex* in his sociology of ritual has been the subject of much comment. But I am not aware that anyone has pointed out how Mauss, who is usually coupled with Durkheim, attempted to move away from this concept in "Techniques of the Body." In this famous essay, Mauss insisted that "the body is man's first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man's first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body" (1979, 104). By talking about "body techniques," Mauss sought to focus attention on the fact that if we were to conceptualize human behavior in terms of learned capabilities, we might see the need for investigating how these are linked to authoritative standards and regular practice:

Hence I have had this notion of the social nature of the "*habitus*" for many years. Please note that I use the Latin word . . . *habitus*. The word translates infinitely better than "*habitude*" [habit or custom], the "*exis*," the "acquired ability" and "faculty" of Aristotle (who was a psychologist). . . . These "habits" do not vary just with individuals and their imitations; they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges. In them we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties. (1979, 101)

The concept of *habitus*<sup>20</sup> invites us to analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes, not as a medium of symbolic meanings. Hence, Mauss's wish to talk about "those people with a sense of the adaptation of all their well-co-ordinated movements to a goal, who are practised, who 'know what they are up to'" (1979, 108). This concern to identify and analyze bodily competence *at* something led him to

20. Bourdieu (1977) was later to popularize the word *habitus*, but it is strange that he gave Mauss no credit for having originated the concept.

refer to it by the Latin term *habilis* because the French *habile* did not quite convey what he was getting at. I think that Mauss wanted to talk, as it were, about the way a professional pianist's practiced hands remember and play the music being performed, not about how the symbolizing mind "clothes a natural bodily tendency" with cultural meaning.

One might say that Mauss was attempting to define an anthropology of practical reason—not in the Kantian sense of universalizable ethical rules, but in that of historically constituted practical knowledge, which articulates an individual's learned capacities. According to Mauss, the human body was not to be viewed simply as the passive recipient of "cultural imprints," still less as the active source of "natural expressions" that are "clothed in local history and culture,"<sup>21</sup> as though it were a matter of an inner character expressed in a readable sign, so that the latter could be used as a means of deciphering the former. It was to be viewed as the developable means for achieving a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement (e.g., walking), through modes of emotional being (e.g., composure), to kinds of spiritual experience (e.g., mystical states). This way of talking seems to avoid the Cartesian dualism of the mind and objects of the mind's perception.<sup>22</sup>

It is the final paragraph of Mauss's essay that carries what are perhaps the most far-reaching claims for an anthropological understanding of ritual. Beginning with a reference to Granet's remarkable studies of Taoist body techniques, he goes on: "I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied, but which were studied fully in China and India, even in very remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into 'communion with God'" (1979, 122). Thus, the possibility is opened up of inquiring into the ways in which embodied practices (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experi-

21. All these phrases come from Mary Douglas's well-known interpretation of Mauss's essay in Douglas 1970.

22. Starobinski (1982, 23) notes that "in his treatise *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes put forward a clear distinction between three different categories of perception: 'that which relates to objects external to us' (art. 23), 'that which refers to our body' (art. 24), and 'that which refers to our soul' (art. 25)." It is the second of these that constitutes the object of psychiatric speculations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and is the theme of Starobinski's intriguing historical sketch.

ence. The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies. "Consciousness" becomes a dependent concept.

Whatever may be the intellectual appeal of a phenomenology of the body, it seems to me that Mauss's approach also runs counter to the assumption of primordial bodily experiences. It encourages us to think of such experience not as an autogenetic impulse but as a mutually constituting relationship between body sense and body learning. His position fits well with what we know even of something as basic and universal as physical pain, for anthropological as well as psychological research reveals that the perception of pain threshold varies considerably according to traditions of body training—and also according to the pain history of individual bodies (Melzack and Wall 1982; Brihaye, Loew, and Pia 1987). Thus, from Mauss's perspective, an experience of the body becomes a moment in an experienced (taught) body. As in the case of medieval monastic programs, discourse and gesture are viewed as part of the social process of learning to develop aptitudes, not as orderly symbols that stand in an objective world in contrast to contingent feelings and experiences that inhabit a separate subjective one.

Why was "Techniques of the Body" not read in this way but usually as a founding text of symbolic anthropology?<sup>23</sup> Was it because "ritual" was already powerfully in place as symbolic action—that is, as visible behavioral form requiring decoding?

## Conclusion

Perhaps at least some of the differences may now be a little clearer between the conception of rites prescribed in the communal Christian program of the Middle Ages for developing virtues and the conception of symbolic behavior in societies where *discipline* is no longer considered indispensable to the formation of moral structures, but *formal manners* are regarded as essential for communicating a prudential "commitment to a public morality." For it is in the latter context, when some particular piece of observed behavior calls for some account of what it might signify, when it invites the observer to discover what truth lies hidden behind the signifying act, apart from an apparent

23. It is cited in that way in, for example, Blacking 1977 and Polhemus 1978.

commitment, that we can call it representational. Clearly, there is a fundamental disparity between a "ritual" that organizes practices aimed at the full development of the monastic self and a "ritual" that offers a *reading* of a social institution. We may speculate on the ways in which the increasing marginality of religious discipline in industrial capitalist society may have reinforced the latter concept.

At any rate, it seems that some contemporary Christian circles regard this symbolic conception of ritual with favor. Thus, a recent book by a theologian entitled *From Magic to Metaphor: A Validation of the Christian Sacraments* draws heavily on modern anthropological work. Christian ritual, it insists, is essentially not instrumental but symbolic:

Any rebuttal to our theological contentions must also critique the findings of psychology, sociology, and anthropology which support our theological convictions. The lines of convergence between a behavioral and a theological understanding of ritual's operation and meaning are too strong to dismiss one without the other. . . .

Ritual is a medium or vehicle for communicating or sustaining a particular culture's root metaphor, which is the focal point and permeating undercurrent for its worldview. Through ritual's operation, life's binary oppositions are contextualized within a culture's metaphor and "resolved" into positive meaning for a culture's individual members and the social unit as a whole. . . . A people's ritual is a code for understanding their interpretation of life.

Christian sacraments exhibit all the characteristics of ritual in general. They are normal and necessary for Christian culture. They are the medium or vehicle through which the Christian root metaphor of Christ's death-resurrection is expressed and mobilized to "positively" resolve the binary oppositions of life. (Worgul 1980, 224)

This idea of the sacraments as metaphorical representations inhabits an entirely different world from the one that gives sense to Hugh of St. Victor's theology: "Sacraments," he stated, "are known to have been instituted for three reasons: on account of humiliation, on account of instruction, on account of exercise." According to this latter conception, the sacraments are not the representation of cultural metaphors; they are parts of a Christian program for creating in its performers, by means of regulated practice, the "mental and moral dispositions" appropriate to Christians. In modern society, where Christians

adopt a wide range of moral positions and live lives that are not clearly differentiated from those of non-Christians, where discipline becomes a matter of strategic interventions and statistical calculations, it is perhaps understandable that rites should have become symbolic occasions.

And so, too, in the world beyond, which post-Enlightenment Europeans sought to penetrate and understand. "Ritual," writes an intelligent student of contemporary Islam, "is for the participant a reenactment of a profound truth. As Geertz has put it, it is realizing that religion is at the same time a model *of* and a model *for* the world. Does one need to be a Muslim in order to capture the essence of Islamic ritual?" (Denny 1985, 66). The answer to this rhetorical question is, the writer observes, no. All that is required is the attempt to understand, with "sympathy and respect as well as openness to the sources," what Islamic rituals "portray and symbolize."

Symbols, as I said, call for interpretation, and even as interpretative criteria are extended, so interpretations can be multiplied. Disciplinary practices, on the other hand, cannot be varied so easily, because learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same thing as learning to invent representations. This leads me to venture a final question: is it possible that the transformation of rites from discipline to symbol, from practicing distinctive virtues (passions) to representing by means of practices, has been one of the preconditions for the larger conceptual transformation of heterogeneous life (acting and being acted upon) into readable text?