Introduction to Part Eight:
Religion as Symbolism

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There is more to human life than meets the eye. More to oneself; more to one's neighbour; more to the world that surrounds us. There is more to the past out of which we come; and especially, it would seem, more to the present moment, maybe even infinitely more. There is more to the interrelationships that bind us together as persons. And the further we probe, we have always found, the deeper the mystery, or the reward, or the involvement. It is this "more," perhaps, that provides at least one of the bases for human religion. We have seldom been content to be "superficial," to remain on the surface, to imagine that reality does not transcend our finite grasp; and throughout most of our history on this planet we have ordered our lives, both personal and cultural, in terms of that transcendence.

Yet how is one to point to what one does not visually see? How to resort to a milieu beyond all space? How to talk or to think about what transcends not only words but the reach of the mind? How even to feel about what one does not touch? Man's inherent and characteristic capacity to do these things finds expression through his special relation to symbols. These have proven over the centuries sometimes more, sometimes less, adequate to such a task, but in any case indispensable, and ubiquitous. Such symbols, it turns out, have the power not merely to express man's otherwise inchoate awareness of the richness of what lies under the surface, but also to nurture and to communicate and to elicit it. They have an activating as well as a representational quality, and an ability to organize the emotions and the unconscious as well as the conscious mind, so that into them we may pour the deepest range of our humanity and from them derive an enhancement of the personality. Without the use of symbols, including religious symbols, man would be radically less than human.

Quite diverse types of things have served the purpose: a beaver, the sky, a ceremonial procedure, silence; erotic love, or austere asceticism; the Qur'ān; a historical figure; reason. The variety has been immense, different groups having chosen different things to serve them as symbols, not all equally successful. Virtually universal, however, is that peoples have found it possible to designate some item from within the visible world and to sacralize it in such a way that it becomes then for them the symbol or locus of the invisible, the transcendent. In Japan, a simple open gateway (*torii*) marks off the shrine precincts: one passes through it, leaving behind psychologically, symbolically, the humdrum ordinary world to enter the sacred space of the temple; and after worship, one again moves through the gate in the other direction, to reenter now the realm of everyday life, but as a renewed person. Virtually all peoples have set aside some portion of what outsiders would regard as ordinary terrain to serve for them as sacred space, erecting in it temple, church, or shrine whereby is then represented for them, often with great force, quite another dimension of reality.

Similarly with time: the Jew, for instance, sets apart one day in seven, whereby the other six days symbolize the mundane world with its bitter imperfections, perhaps its devastating pain, and at best its transient successes, while the Sabbath creatively represents the inviolate splendour of transcendence—with which therefore the other six days, however bleak, cannot keep him out of touch. Every people has its festivals, weekly or seasonal or occasional, its sacred times when life in its empirical and work-a-day aspects is transcended and life in its timeless dimension is reaffirmed, reactivated: moments when truth, significance, worth are recognized and cultivated—and carried back then into the ordinary world.

We are somehow aware, if only through imaginative vision or sensibility or our special capacity for hope, not only of what is but also of what ought to be. We have sensed that the *status quo* (nowadays, the *fluxus quo*) is not the final truth about man or the world. We have felt, to take one example, that social justice and concord, personal righteousness, health, joy stand over against the current observable condition of strife, loneliness, wickedness, poverty, and sorrow not as fancy against truth, wishful and irrational dreaming against reality, but in some fashion *vice versa*—as a norm by which the present imperfect world is judged, in some sense a truth in relation to which empirical actuality is in some sense an error. This too has been affirmed symbolically. One rather common way of doing so has been by representing a more perfect world elsewhere. Some have located their utopias chronologically in the past ("Once upon a time"; or Golden Age theories, as in Greece and India); or in the future (millennialisms, a coming just ruler, secular ideas of progress, a life after death); or geographically, somewhere else (the medieval Irish "Isle of the Blessed" in the then inaccessible Western Sea); or high above the sky (heaven, the heaven of heavens); or in a domain beyond time (Paradise); or in another realm than this universe (a metaphysical order, idealist realities).

However it be symbolized and articulated, a moral dimension to human life has been perceived and affirmed. Man has been aware not only of the profitable and the disadvantageous but also of the better and the worse, and has been inspired by some power to pursue the better; he has known that some actions are right, some wrong, and that it matters. At most times and most places, morality has been an integral part of the religious complex (although situations have on occasion arisen when the two have become historically dislocated—when a given form of religion has seemed not good; or to put it another way, when man's sense of what is worthwhile, and the inherited symbols by which worth used to be formulated, have no longer converged).

If the panorama of man's religious life is, in its outward form, selected mundane data symbolizing the more than mundane, then the task of the student of religion is to know those data but to consider them not in themselves but in their role in our lives. Our concern is not primarily the doctrines and scriptures and prayers and rites and institutions; but rather, what these do to us. Not the tribal dance, so much as what happens to the African dancing; not the caste system, so much as what kind of person the Hindu becomes within it, or without it; not the events at Sinai, so much as what role the recounting of these events has played in both Jewish and Christian life over the centuries since; not the Qur'ān, so much as what the Qur'ān means to a Muslim.

In illustration, let us consider as an example a statue of the Buddha, and take note specifically of one small part of it, the pose of the right hand. Among several such stylized poses used throughout the Buddhist world, we may choose just one, the *abhaya mudra* ("fearlessness pose"), in which the right arm is somewhat raised, that hand held straight up, palm facing out. Over and above the more universal significance of such a gesture (power, authority, benediction), in the Buddhist case this represents also an incident from the life of the Buddha, in which reputedly a wild elephant charging him and his group was stopped in its tracks when the Teacher raised his hand so, and became tame. The gesture gives artistic expression, then, to the Buddha's fearlessness in the face of the threat, and also to his conferring of fearlessness, and of grounds for fearlessness, on his disciples: his serene triumph over danger.

To say that this particular feature of sculpture symbolizes for Buddhists the overcoming of fear is to indicate not merely that it depicts an event in someone else's life, but also that it effects a change in one's own—since, to repeat, symbols not only represent but activate. The animal in its fury in the remembered anecdote may itself be taken as symbolic, representative of the pressures and assaults of life, which faith in the Buddha gives one the inner resources to withstand: the passions, for instance, to which such faith bestows on one the power quietly to say "no." To understand this particular item in the religious life of Buddhists, accordingly, is to know the history of how a Japanese emperor or a Thai merchant or a Chinese peasant through contemplating it in some nearby temple has had his life transformed, his fear removed, his personality healed. A parallel may be observed of the role in the lives of Christians, over the centuries, of the story of Christ's stilling of the tempest. His words, "Peace, be still!" read in the Lesson, and the portrayal of the scene in stained-glass windows, have served to symbolize, for people of faith, on the one hand Christ's power over the elements in his own life, and on the other hand the power that their faith in Him has in their lives, they have then found, to confer peace, to quell storms.

A special sort of symbolization, developed characteristically in, for instance, the Western world but by no means only there, has been the conceptual. A few recent philosophers have itched to legislate that concepts must be used to refer only to the sensible or phenomenal world; that it is illegitimate to use them symbolically to refer to a transcendent order. It would be manifestly stultifying to apply so austere a restriction to art or to most other human pursuits, apart from the natural sciences (from which these persons have learned it). Such an orientation has seemed to work rather well with the "objective" world—better, with the objective facets of the world (at least, until one raises moral questions about atomic bombs or ecology); but it appears stubbornly to misunderstand life in its distinctively human form.

One of the most powerful symbols in human history has, without question, been the *concept* "God." This concept, like other religious and other human symbols, has demonstrably meant different things to different persons and groups and ages; yet it is hardly too drastic an oversimplification to suggest that the concept has on the whole at least subsumed, integrated, deepened, and made operationally effective in the lives of many hundreds of millions of persons and in the life and social cohesion of many thousands of communities their awareness and their potential awareness of the entire range of transcendence with which they are surrounded or endued—of grandeur, order, meaning, aspiration, awe, hope, virtue, responsibility, rapport, integrity, worth, renewal. The highest, deepest, most comprehensive that they were capable of attaining, individually and socially, was organized, focused, and nurtured in and through this concept. (Given the distinction, observed by all believing theorists, between God and people's ideas of God, such theorists may themselves make this same point by saying that God has used the idea of God to enter people's lives; that the concept has served as a sacrament. More recent developments, with the concept "God" no longer serving so effectively, as a symbol, for many, will be touched on below.)

Although correlative conceptualizations are virtually worldwide and history-long, this particular concept was developed in its most powerful and characteristic form in the Near East and has permeated, at times dominated, the civilizations that have emerged from there to cover almost half the planet, especially the Islāmic and the Judeo-Christian. The Indian counterpart has been in many respects closely similar; in many, subtly different. China and Japan, although also employing symbolic concepts richly, have tended toward other religious and cultural patterns than this particular one.

Even so major a symbol, however, as the concept "God," however all-embracing it may seem, is in the end significant not in isolation but within a whole system of ideas, practices, values, and the like, forming a pattern of which it is no doubt the keystone but not the totality. Certainly minor symbols like the pose of the right hand in a piece of sculpture or medium ones like the ceremonial holiness of the Sabbath, however significant they have been in the lives of many millions of persons, derive their meaning and their power from each being one item within a large pattern of symbolic structures, such as the Buddhist complex or the Christian.

And even these great complexes, each of which has an elaborate and ever-changing history, constitute systems to be understood not in themselves, as structures to be looked at, but rather in terms of the ambience that they make available for men and women to live within. "In order to understand Buddhists, one must look not at something called Buddhism, but at the universe, so far as possible through Buddhist eyes." It is not the symbols themselves

that one must grasp, so much as the orientation that they induce: how the whole complex of symbols enables those who live in terms of it to see a sunset, a broken marriage, prosperity, the onset of cancer, one's election to public office.

The religious history of the Hindu community is a history, in part, of traditional ceremonial and ideological and sociological patterns. Yet in more significant part it is a history, however difficult this may be to discern, of fortitude and of quiet humaneness, of a conviction that life is worth living and death worth dying, that goals are worth striving for, that the immediate is caught up in the eternal. The Buddhist metaphors have served to kindle in the mind and heart of the Buddhist the perhaps unconscious awareness that one's own fortune is not a reason for gloating, or one's neighbour's fortune, for envy; that knowledge is more important than wealth, and wisdom than knowledge; that the world is to be appreciated and not merely exploited; that one's fellow is to be treated as an end, not merely as a means; that sorrow is not a reason for despair. Islāmic law, theology, architecture, and the rest have been symbols that at their best have crystallized and nurtured, for Muslims, the courage and serenity, the sense of order and the aspiration to justice, the forbearance, the humility, the participation in community, that the Islāmic system traditionally inspired. Christian symbols have given both form and actuality, among Christians, to many things, including for instance the ability of human suffering to become redemptive.

Of course, religious symbols and sets of symbols have been used also for mean and destructive purposes. Man's wickedness, and not only his capacity for virtue, has been expressed and even encouraged by his symbol systems, at times. Through them he has found his freedom, his transcendence of the immediately given, his ability to move beyond being merely an organism reacting to its environment; but sometimes he has used these destructively, or has become a victim of their inherent ambiguities. Nothing has turned a society into a community so effectively as religious faith: to share common symbols is about the most powerful of social cohesions. And yet few gulfs have been greater than those that separate differing religious communities, few hostilities so fierce as those between groups whose symbols differ.

Religious symbols do not raise man above the human level; only to it.

A final word about history. The history of religion has at times been mistaken for the history of its symbols; but this is superficial. The same symbols have discernibly changed their meanings over time, and indeed from person to person, and even within one person's life; also, persisting or widespread orientations and perceptions have been expressed in strikingly different symbolizations. The true history of religion is more deeply personalist—not in the sense of individualist: the personal is also the social, and especially so in the religious realm. The true history of religion, not yet written, is the history of the depth or shallowness, richness or poverty, genuineness or insincerity, splendid wisdom or inane folly, with which men and women and their societies have responded to such symbols as were around them. It is also, however, the tale, and to some degree this can be told, of when and in what fashion they have forged new symbols, or neglected or found themselves unable to respond to old. And nowadays it is also the story of how they deal or fail to deal with a plurality of symbolisms.

One's faith is in some sense the meaning that religious symbols have for one; but more profoundly, it is the meaning that life has, and that the universe has, in the light of those symbols. For religious symbols do not "have" meanings of their own; they crystallize in various ways the meaning of the world, of human life. There is a history of their varying ability to do this, at various times and places (or of people's varying ability to have them do it). How new symbols or patterns of symbols emerge is too complex or controversial a question to be summarized here; but how they develop once launched, how they are reinterpreted (sometimes radically) over the centuries, how their success in pointing beyond themselves often gives way to a rigidity and narrowness in which they or their institutions are prized or defended simply in themselves; how iconoclastic movements arise, to shatter the symbols (literally, smashing idols; or figuratively, attacking concepts and mores), whether in the name of something higher or out of misunderstanding, and often both; saddest of all, how a time may arrive when the symbols no longer serve a community, no longer communicate a transcendent vision, and then a profound malaise settles on the society and life comes to seem without meaning, and people become alienated from each other and even from themselves and from the world in which they live—all this the historian can trace.

In recent Western history an aberrational tendency has arisen to imagine that human life is fundamentally or naturally "secular," and that religion has been an added extra, tacked on here and there to the standardly human. This view now appears to be false. Rather, the various religious systems have expressed varying ways of being human. The unbiased historian cannot but report that it has been characteristic of man to find that life has meaning and to formulate that meaning in symbolic ways, whether grostesque or sublime.