Strategic mechanisms within religious symbol systems

One of the great mysteries surrounding the function of religious symbols is how, precisely, they facilitate a person's 'participation' or 'taking part' in that to which they purport to refer. Much is known about this process of participation. For example: it is intimately connected with the similar processes of world-making and world-interpreting; it crucially involves the human imagination; it often, and perhaps necessarily when linguistic, involves metaphors; it is multileveled in that it simultaneously involves an explicitly known immediate referent and a (sometimes implicitly suggested) religious referent; it is not mechanical but depends on the state of the wielder's 'soul'. But some aspects of the process of participation remain relatively poorly understood, including questions surrounding systems of symbols.

Symbols usually function in systems, so the process of participation is typically conditioned by structural and global features of such systems as well as by individual symbols. But what kinds of influences do symbol systems have on the process of participation? How do the global features of symbol systems – their structure and tone, the leading concepts they express, the typical forms of interpretative distortion they sponsor – modify the way symbols are wielded? How do systemic relations among symbols allow one symbol to enhance or constrain the participation facilitated by another? How do symbol systems help to make available or to obscure the participatory potency and suggestiveness of individual symbols?

I will focus my efforts in this essay on illuminating some aspects of the way that systems of symbols influence participation (I will sometimes use 'engagement' synonymously). In particular, of the many issues connected with this topic, this essay examines the strategic function that certain metaphors (thought of as a species of linguistic symbols) play within religious symbol systems. Such functions vary greatly, from marginalising certain interpretations otherwise permitted within the symbol system (or centralising approved interpretations), to moderating the religious tenor of the symbol system as a whole. Naturally, individual instances of metaphors do not throw much light on the problems surrounding strategic metaphors within religious symbol systems. The theoretical sketch developed here proceeds, therefore, by means of an examination of several interestingly different co-ordinated presentations of symbolic resources – presentations dense enough to justify speaking of the presence of a symbol system. Note, too, that speaking of 'strategic mechanisms' does not presuppose origins lying in deliberate construction. On the contrary,
most strategic mechanisms seem to arise spontaneously, presumably precisely because of their effectiveness.

This essay is neutral with regard to the controversial question of the reference of religious symbols. A familiar state of affairs motivates the adoption of this presupposition: each of the features of the process of participation mentioned to this point can be accounted for more or less adequately in theories of religious symbols that offer quite opposed interpretations of the religious realities to which those symbols seem to refer. These conflicting interpretations determine readings of ‘participation’ that range from the functionalist overlaying in the human imagination of ideas whose correspondence to ultimate religious realities is irrelevant (or the positivist denial of such realities), to the Neo-Platonic (or otherwise contextualised) conception of mystical union.

We might well ask how to advance debate among competing interpretations of participation. One approach – by no means the only way – is to bring greater realism to descriptive and theoretical accounts of participation by means of a discussion of the way symbols interact and mutually condition each other in patterned ways within symbol systems. While this does not promise to resolve the debate in question, it does enrich it by introducing a more challenging standard for descriptive and theoretical adequacy in metaphysical accounts of participation. While I will not presuppose a metaphysical interpretation of participation or engagement here, therefore, I do hope to contribute to the task of formulating adequate proposals of this kind.

1. Strategies for Balancing Personal and Impersonal Metaphors

Strategic mechanisms seem ubiquitous in religious symbol systems, so some reasonable principle of selection is needed. I will be limiting my focus in two ways. First, I shall refer chiefly to the religious symbol systems appearing in the Bhagavad-Gita, and in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Huston Smith (an advocate of perennial philosophy), and Paul Tillich. Second, I shall examine strategic mechanisms in symbol systems with regard to the way they manage the tension between families of personal and impersonal metaphors for ultimate reality.

Each of the four examples to be discussed here illustrates a distinctive way of using strategic metaphors to manage this tension. The strategies may be named the perspectival, the paradoxical, the subordinationist, and the integrationist, respectively.

1. Strategic mechanisms within religious symbol systems

1.1. Perspectival strategy: The Bhagavad-Gita

Part of the Mahabharata epic, the Bhagavad-Gita is a religious classic profoundly expressive of Indian culture and tradition. It has been interpreted in numerous ways and remains popular in widely varying parts of Indian life partly because of the Gita’s narrative setting and poetic texture and partly because the ideas presented are not easily pressed into a univocal system. This hermeneutical openness is directly relevant to what is said about systems of symbolic material within it. A hermeneutical stand must be taken if I am to proceed, therefore, and it will have to be taken without much argument to avoid a major distraction from the specific goal of this essay.

The key to the interpretation I favour is the Gita’s perspectival approach to ultimate reality and to human life, its sensitivity to differences among people and among life situations. The Gita synthesises these perspectives into a larger whole by means of its expositions of the paradoxical relationships that hold among duty, knowledge, devotion, action, desire, and discipline. Yet the whole can only be represented by means of multiple, complementary perspectives upon it. Speaking as an English reader of the Sanskrit classic, this synthetic-perspectival interpretation is demanded because the Gita seems to move from one perspective on life to another without fully reconciling those different perspectives, and without finally declaring that one perspective is universally superior to the others, except perhaps for a particular kind of person. The attempt at synthesis is made, to be sure, and devotion to Krishna is a key element of it, but the synthesis is not allowed to trample over the validity of perspectival differences.

The interpretations from the scholars who have made English translations of the Gita differ mainly in emphasis. Representatives of the differences are Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Barbara Stoler Miller. Radhakrishnan emphasises the complementary but independent viability of the Gita’s various perspectives on life, while Miller stresses devotion to Krishna as the principle by which the various perspectives are unified. Radhakrishnan sees the Gita developing a synthesis of the impersonal Brahman of the Upanishads, the Vedic cult of sacrifice, the Samkhya form of metaphysical dualism, and the personal God for whom overcoming human suffering and delusion is a priority. Miller, by contrast, prefers to see the various orthodox and unorthodox philosophical developments of Brahmanical and Vedic religion only as background sources for the main concepts taken up in the Gita, and sees the synthesis as being more practical than metaphysical in character. Resolving such differences of emphasis is not necessary, as the perspectival interpretation adopted here is neutral to most of the points of debate. But my interpretation does oppose two extreme readings of the Gita: that it presents a synthesis so complete that perspectives are superfluous for conceiving life and reality, and that it espouses an emphatic perspectivalism that
denies to the Gita its own specific, synthetic, historical character. My view is midway between these extremes and general enough to comprehend both Radhakrishnan’s and Miller’s readings.

The Gita is set against the tense background of imminent battle between two wings of a large family poised to fight over the succession of rule. A visionary narrator recounts the conversation between Arjuna, the mightiest of the warriors, and Krishna, his charioteer. Arjuna, having directed Krishna to move his chariot between the two armies, is paralysed by grief at the thought of the stupidity and violence of the battle about to begin. He does not know what to do, torn between his sacred duty as a warrior to fight and the thoughtful compassion that leads him to seek a better way. It is to Arjuna’s inner turmoil that Krishna addresses his teaching. Krishna shows Arjuna that action in the name of sacred duty derives its importance, its justification, and its necessity not from the ignorant passion of the single-minded warrior — which had in Arjuna’s case been disrupted by his compassion — but from eternal cosmic truths. When the ongoing processes of cosmic destruction and creation are viewed from beyond the passion of the moment, the battle and everyone involved in it are seen as part of the inexorable flow of events.

The Gita’s theophany reveals Krishna as an avatar of a divine creator-destroyer who periodically appears in human affairs to restore sacred order amidst the threat of chaos. The theophany and the vision of the necessity of human affairs contextualise Krishna’s teaching about sacred duty. Arjuna’s sacred duty is to cultivate the knowledge and the discipline needed to overcome the greatest enemy of all: attachment to the fruits of his actions that is driven by desire. The conquering of this enemy is facilitated by devotion to Krishna, for the trusting attitude of devotion expresses the very trust in the nature of reality as Krishna describes it that both aids the relinquishment of attachment to the fruits of one’s actions, and makes for the proper exercise of sacred duty.

The Gita’s subtle philosophical development of the relations between its key concepts does not need to be pursued in detail for my purposes. It is the Gita’s perspectival approach to synthesising various ways of conceiving reality and human life to which I wish to draw attention. This perspectival approach applies to the paths by which human beings may exercise their sacred duty, depending on their time in life (the Mahabharata’s student, householder, forest-dweller, and wandering ascetic stages of life) and their social location and responsibilities (expressed by position in the caste system). It also applies to the ways by which human beings may triumph over the scourge of desire and attachment — through knowledge (jnana), work (karma), or devotion (bhakti). But particularly interesting to me is the way this perspectival approach functions in the Gita as a mechanism for balancing personal and impersonal symbolisations of ultimate reality.

This balancing mechanism pitches the Upnishad conception of an impersonal absolute against personal images of God as a concerned, active, and loving Lord. The Gita is able to develop the personal conception of God with great drama owing to its epic literary context and the charismatic personage of Krishna. The God of creation and destruction, the one who maintains order within a universe replete with chaos, has the humble form of a human being in the Gita. Everything that goes with being finite and human is thereby made a vehicle for conceptualising this divinity: location in space and time, appearance and personality, will and understanding, and specific concern for human beings and their salvation. The Gita cultivates devotion to Krishna precisely because he is a personal representation of divine solicitousness, of individual, personal divine interest in the devotee.

One might imagine such a personal divinity in its wider cosmic context in many ways. In the context of the typical self-absorbed pantheon, such a personal God might be a renegade member with an atypical concern for human beings. In the context of a world created as a testing ground for human souls, a personal God would further the very purpose of the universe through being concerned with its human subjects. But the Gita’s contextualisation of the personal God of whom Krishna is an avatar is, by contrast with these other possibilities, most unexpected. The universe is a seamless moral fabric in which each being gets what it wants and wants what it deserves to get. It is a great ‘block universe’ in which everything past, present, and future is determined to occur in its proper way, and every action has its due consequence. In such a universe, even the God of creation and destruction is but an implementer of the grand design, whose personal interests are finally merely emphatic reinforcements of the cosmically ordained pattern. This is the universe grounded by impersonal Brahman, the Ultimate Reality beyond all attributes from which and within which every being springs and every moment unfolds.

The Gita makes no attempt to reconcile the personal God whose decisions and concerns matter with the impersonal Brahman of whom can be attributed nothing determinate. Rather, these points of view are artfully juxtaposed with each other in the Gita’s portrayal of the ultimate context of human life. The Gita’s synthesis of these points of view does not overcome the tension, but rather speaks of devotion to Krishna as a way of cultivating those attitudes to life that make for true freedom and final liberation from the weight of attachment to the fruits of one’s actions. That makes sense: devotion to Krishna is devotion to the one whose fantastic and decidedy impersonal theophany bespeaks the moral-causal, cosmic context for Arjuna’s life that Krishna’s teaching lays out. It is ironic that devotion to a personal image of God should be valued for its ability to cultivate awareness of the fundamentally impersonal wider context for human life, but no more ironic than seeking liberation in a morally deterministic universe. Both work. Moral determinism reinforces human responsibility and freedom in practice, even if the theoretical conflict is insoluble, just as devotion to a personal God and knowledge of an impersonal cosmos both lead to liberated souls.

The Gita’s system of symbolic material juxtaposes both personal and impersonal symbols and images for God calmly and scrupulously. The two kinds of characterisation of the divine are reconciled only in practice, in the cultivation
of the state of mind in which the virtues and limitations of each are appreciated. That is the theoretical reason for the acceptability of the perspectival management strategy. The reason for adopting a management strategy in the first place, by contrast, is practical: it is a matter of realism with regard to the fact that people are different and approach God in different ways. Without a way to balance impersonal and personal symbols for God one of the disciplines for striving after liberation would be marginalised. And any balancing strategy that was more systematic than the calm, juxtaposing approach of the perspectival strategy would betray the fundamental insight that liberation is a matter of realisation and not merely conception.

1.2. Paradoxical strategy: Pseudo-Dionysius

The early medieval writings written under the pseudonym of Dionysius (or Denys) the Areopagite (mentioned in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles 17: 34) constitute a small but influential corpus. I will not venture into the furiously complex debates over the authorship of these writings; nor into debates surrounding how large was the original corpus of which but four works and some letters have survived; nor into the debates over the authenticity of parts of that surviving corpus; nor into the rich history of Pseudo-Dionysius’s influence on Christian theology, especially in thirteenth-century medieval theology and then in Saint Thomas Aquinas (who quotes Pseudo-Dionysius frequently) and subsequent scholastic theology. It is enough for my purposes to outline the balancing strategy evident in the symbol system of the Dionysian corpus.

Neo-Platonic themes are omnipresent in these writings. Particularly important is the Neo-Platonic idea of emanation and return, by which the unknowable One expresses itself in creation and then draws creatures back into itself. In virtue of the emanation of the One into the created order, according to Dionysius, we must utter the divine names, which is to say we must make positive affirmations about the nature of God. For this, we ought to begin with the concepts that are most apt for expressing the divine (goodness, love, understanding, power, etc.) and then extend our naming toward the less apt, such as objects drawn from the rich diversity of sensible reality (light, father, mother hen, rock, water, etc.). This via positiva approach to the divine presupposes a fundamental participation of all of creation in its divine source and ground, so that to name is to involve oneself in the reality to which the name is applied.

The process works for salvation not because God can be named, but because the participation of creation in God is potentiated by aptness. That is, because some names are more apt than others for expressing the divine nature, a trajectory can be established from the less apt to the more apt and thus beyond even the most apt to the collapse of language in face of divine mystery. This trajectory guides the mature soul from devotional attachment to certain wondrous names toward a profusion of names, a never-ending chorus of cosmic naming, whose very fullness bespeaks the nameable mystery to which all names are addressed in vain. It is actually a trajectory of ascent because the increasingly less apt names drawn from sensible reality are embraced for the sake of filling out the roster of names and so complete the soul’s perception of the impossibility of capturing in names the mystery of the One.

Corresponding to the return of creation to its divine ground, for Dionysius, is the via negativa, by which affirmations about God are denied. This is a trajectory of ascent by which the least apt affirmations are denied first in a relentless attempt to discipline the imagination by driving it to silence. In due course, even the loftiest and holiest conceptual and scriptural names of God are denied and darkness descends upon the human soul. This darkness expresses the encounter with the divine abyss, to use one of Dionysius’s powerful images. It is the same event the abyss from which all being emanates, and which the via positiva attempts to name.

It is the more straightforward, open approach of the via negativa that causes Dionysius to prefer it to the via positiva. In fact, contrary to appearances, the via positiva is the more indirect approach to God. It calls at some point for a dramatic reversal of orientation as the soul discerns a nameless mystery in and through the cultivation of the great symphony of names. The via negativa, by contrast, requires no such reversal, and leads directly to abysmal silence through consistently drawing attention to the failure of names.

Of all the surviving writings of the Dionysian corpus, The Divine Names is the one that most self-consciously exploits the via positiva approach, though references are made throughout to two other lost or fictitious writings. The first of these, Theological Representations, supposedly dealt with the names most appropriate to God: “good, existent, life, wisdom, power, and whatever other things pertain to the conceptual names for God”. The second, The Symbolic Theology, supposedly discussed “analogies of God drawn from what we perceive”, including images, tools, places, clothes, clothes, emotions, activities, and people. Two other extant works, The Celestial Hierarchy and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, deal with nature of perceptible symbols and how they lead the soul to deeper union with the divine through manifesting the hierarchies of reality—the hierarchy in the celestial sphere and its reflection in the ecclesial sphere. Another possibly fictitious work, The Conceptual and the Perceptual, is claimed to have done this, too. Its contention was supposedly that “sacred symbols are actually the perceptible tokens of the conceptual things. They show the way to them and lead to them, and the conceptual things are the source and the understanding underlying the perceptible manifestations of hierarchy”. The Mystical Theology is the work of negative theology par excellence. It is necessarily much shorter than The Divine Names because negative theology drives toward the failure of speech much faster than theology via positiva.

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3 Pseudo-Dionysius describes the task of these writings in a number of places, including Mystical Theology, ch. 3. See Lulbeith 1987: 139.
Together the two parts of the Dionysian corpus present an important paradox: naming the divine and denying divine names both help the soul to attain to a profound understanding of inexpressible divine mystery through driving the soul to silence. Consider, for example, personal metaphors for God. Dionysius distinguishes most clearly between perceptible and conceptual names, and it is not completely obvious into which category personal names fit. They are perceptual in the sense of corresponding to perceptual objects (Fathers, Kings), but conceptual in the sense of being abstractions from experienced relations (Fatherhood, Kingship). Nevertheless, it is clear that for Dionysius they do not possess the apiness and so the eminence of the more purely conceptual names, such as Beauty, Being, Holy of Holies, Life, Light, Love, One, Power, Righteousness, Salvation of the World, Truth, and Wisdom. Yet personal names such as Father, Friend, and Lover still have their appropriate place in the via positiva, and so are a proper part of the process whereby the soul is drawn toward union with the object of such names. That process of personal transformation through mystical union necessarily involves the realised failure of all names. Attachment to any particular name fades in the cacophony of naming, and (we must infer) the personal names, being less apt than the conceptual names, more effectively than they summon the experience of dissimilarity that is crucial to realising their failure.

For this very reason, in the complementary via negativa approach, the personal names would be denied before the less dissimilar, purely conceptual names are denied. One oddity about The Mystical Theology is that the personal names are included in the final section (especially Kingship, Fatherhood, Sonship), which deals with denials aimed at establishing that the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual. That, I take it, is a consequence merely of the fact that there are but two short sections in which Dionysius crams in all of his denials, and the distinction between these two is the one between the perceptual and the conceptual that predominates throughout the corpus. In any event, their denial is necessary if the goal of union is to be achieved.

There is paradox aplenty here. The most obvious paradox is the one in which assertions that apply names to God are simultaneously true and false in significantly the same respect. But that is not the one to which I want to draw attention. A less obvious paradox is evident in the strategy Dionysius uses for balancing personal and impersonal (in Dionysius’s case we must say ‘impersonal-conceptual’) symbols for God. On the one hand, he (supposing Pseudo-Dionysius was a ‘he’) allows that both sorts of symbols are ‘true’ and ‘efficient’ while simultaneously insisting that both are ‘false’ and ‘misleading’. On the other hand, he orders the symbols by means of the concept of apiness or similarity, enabling him to assert that the impersonal-conceptual symbols are true and less misleading than the personal symbols. And all the while he maintains that the intended object of our naming ‘is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of

what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion [...] and beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial’. This establishes yet simultaneously undermines the basis for distinguishing more true from less true symbols of the divine.

This paradoxical balancing strategy permits Dionysius to affirm the superiority of impersonal-conceptual symbols over their personal counterparts while still preventing the impersonal-conceptual symbols from getting out of control, which would lead to the trivialisation of personal symbols and the incomprehensibility of both personal spiritual development and symbolic ecclesial practices. Anticipation of this result would be strong motivation for adopting a balancing strategy in the first place. And the fact that that balancing strategy must take a paradoxical form in Dionysius’s case is due to his understanding of both God and religious symbolism.

1.3. Subordinationist strategy: Huston Smith

Huston Smith is a renowned scholar of religion who defends a decidedly unpopular view in the current climate of religious studies: the so-called perennial philosophy. He prefers to call it ‘the primordial tradition’ to emphasise that this view is always present within, and confirmed by, traditional religious and cultic groups; it is not merely a form of intellectualism, as ‘perennial philosophy’ might suggest. Smith argues that religious traditions, beneath their surface differences, have a common core – and that common core is the primordial tradition.

According to Smith, this primordial vision of reality expresses the deepest accumulated wisdom of corporate humanity about the nature of reality. Smith wields this multi-millennia-strong consensus against the modern West’s infatuation with and misjudgement about the limits of science. It is because ‘scientism’ has taken over in the West that he believes it to be the only significant exception to the historical pattern that confirms the primordial tradition as the consensus of humanity about the ultimate nature of reality. Thus, Smith is frequently heard and read promulgating a two-fold message. He prophesies against the scientific hubris of the West, while articulating the basic elements of the primordial tradition. Both tasks are undertaken with greatest clarity and efficiency in his Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition (1976).

The primordial tradition affirms an hierarchical vision of a great scale of being, typically expressed in spatial metaphors. Smith’s way of expressing this is to speak of ‘levels of reality’. At the lowest level is the terrestrial plane, which is the realm of material, corporeal objects. Above that is the intermediate level, which is the realm of the psychic, of animate and inanimate phantasms and astral bodies, of demonic and angelic beings, of ghosts and other discarnate entities. It is primarily this realm that Pseudo-Dionysius charts in The Celestial Hierarchy. Above the

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5 This is the title of ch. 5 of The Mystical Theology, see Luishied 1987: 141.

6 The Mystical Theology, ch. 5, in Luishied 1987: l.c.
intermediate plane, according to Smith, is the celestial plane, which is the realm of Plato’s forms, of Jung’s archetypes, of the personal God of traditional Western theism. Personal metaphors are entirely appropriate here because the natural relation to be cultivated is one of love in which the distinction between soul and God is always maintained even in intense closenesses.

Unreachably far above the celestial level is the Infinite, which Smith always spells with an upper-case ‘I’. This is not another realm of being, but beyond being. It is where we first lose all distinction are removed, the sought-after goal of broken religious symbols, metaphors for divinity, trajectories of naming, and theological negations. It is the transpersonal One, the infinitely intense source of being without being a being, the mystic’s dazzling darkness, the shining sea into which the dewdrop silently slips, the abyssal ground of everything determinate. Simplicity and power of being increase as we move up the hierarchy of the primordial tradition, just as vulnerability and conceivability increase as we move down. That by itself is Braham for the primordial tradition; the infinite human spirit is nothing other than the Infinite itself.

The distinction between personal and impersonal symbols for God is vital to Smith. He insists that affirmations made about the personal theos at the celestial level can be true without being the whole truth. So God really is Mother, Lover, King, Friend, Lord, and human beings are right so to speak. But these truths must be contextualised by a full awareness of the great scale of being. The final truth cannot be spoken, though it be true; the Infinite cannot be named, though the power of all names for divinity derives ultimately from it. The distinction between the personal God and the Infinite is well expressed in an Indian distinction: between the God with attributes (saguna Brahman), and the God without attributes (nirguna Brahman). The former is a personal God, the ultimate reality for theistic religious traditions; the latter is the ultimate reality for the primordial tradition that lies within each tradition, and is shared among all traditions. The former is real, but less real than the latter; true statements may be made about it, but they are incomplete truths that point beyond themselves to the unearthly Infinite.

The subordination of personal to impersonal symbols for God is obvious here, as is the inevitability that any relation between the two sorts of symbols would have to take this subordinationist form. What is not so obvious is why it is strategic: What is at stake for the primordial tradition in balancing personal and impersonal symbols for God? It must be admitted that when the primordial tradition appears in closed groups expounding esoteric teachings — as in some monastic communities, some forms of Gnosticism, and some sects — there is no interest in balancing mechanisms. The subordination serves to demarcate the deep truth about reality, and the reality of contradictory views is explained by means of reference to the state or type of the human soul. The jiva of many lives may be able to see what the less experienced soul may not.

The interest in balancing mechanisms only appears in what might be called ‘relatively egalitarian’ forms of the primordial tradition. In such cases, there is the bodhisattva’s interest in the cultivation of souls, and the need for a reasoned realism about the way symbols are wielded at every level of spiritual maturity. This implies that there will be the attempt to affirm the use of personal symbols for God, just as Smith does, while still scrupulously subordinating such usage to the larger scheme of levels in which the Infinite always lies beyond the realm of the personal God. In this way, and especially in Huston Smith, the hierarchical subordinationism of the primordial tradition is put to work as a strategic mechanism for balancing personal and impersonal symbols for God.

1.4. Integrationist strategy: Paul Tillich

The final example to be considered here is that of Paul Tillich. I will focus on Part II of his Systematic Theology, and especially on the sections that deal with personal symbolism for God.

Tillich’s discussions of divine symbolism are replete with balancing strategies, self-consciously adopted. This is a consequence of Tillich’s heightened sensitivity to the polar structure of being. This can be explained in several small steps. First, the self-world correlation is the basic ontological structure, for Tillich. It is expressed in polarities within being: the ontological elements of individualisation and participation, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny. The first term in each of these polarities is the subjective element, corresponding to the subjective term of the self-world correlation. Likewise, the second term in each of the polar elements expressed the objective side of the self-world correlation. Second, since Tillich conceives of God as the ground of being, as being-itself, it follows that the self-world correlation and the ontological elements have their ground and unity in God. Third, the fact that human beings symbolise God as their ultimate concern out of the resources made available by being under the conditions of existence then implies that the self-world correlation and the ontological elements are crucial conceptual tools for analysing symbolic language about God. Finally, the fact that the structure of being is essentially polar means that adequate symbol systems referring to God will have to be in balance. Most generally, symbols expressing the subjective side of the basic ontological structure will have to balance symbols expressing its objective side. More specifically, sets of symbols expressing the ontological elements will have to reflect the unity and balance that each pair of elements has within God. As Tillich (1951: 242) says with regard to each particular polarity, it is “necessary to balance one side of the ontological polarity against the other without reducing the symbolic power of either of them”.

Tillich’s adoption of balancing strategies is not only for the sake of having symbols in collective systems refer as truly as possible to God. He is also

7 See Paul Tillich 1951: 163-289, esp. 244-246 and 286-289.
concerned with the distortions induced in spiritual life when theology allows its symbols for God to slip out of balance. For example, unless the family of symbols expressing the holy power of God (Lord, King, Judge, Highest) is balanced with the family expressing the holy love of God (Father, Creator, Helper, Saviour), distortions will result. Sentimentalism will emerge if the holy power of God is muted, and power unchecked by love is demonic. Tillich insists that “even the attempt to emphasize one over the other destroys the meaning of both,” (281) and he makes repeated remarks throughout his writings about the havoc such distortions wreak upon the religious life.

The tension between personal and impersonal symbols for God is fundamental for Tillich because it corresponds to the tension between the subjective and objective sides of the basic ontological structure (the self-world correlation). God is a self but not only a self, and certainly not a self in the sense of being separated from other selves, for God is also the context for and ground of all selves. This tension between God as self and not-self is expressed more specifically with reference to the ontological elements of individualization and participation. Without personal symbols for God, Tillich insists that the individualisation aspect of this tension cannot be expressed. Moreover, he rightly insists that human beings cannot be ultimately concerned about anything that is less than personal. So how is God to be understood as personal? While acknowledging that this is a tricky question, Tillich (1951: 245) argues that “personal God” does not mean that God is a person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal and that he carries within himself the ontological power of personality.

It appears, therefore, that Tillich’s balancing strategy adopts an integrationist approach. He analyses symbol systems for God against the background of a rich ontological analysis of being that has a distinctively polar structure. Then he allows the ultimate unity of these poles in the divine ground of being to function as the motivation for balancing personal and impersonal (and other matched pairs of) symbols for God. Tillich’s systematic integration of personal and impersonal symbols for the divine is arguably not as balanced as he says he would like because the personal side of God is far less prominent than the impersonal side in the system as a whole. That, however, does not alter his intention to maintain an even-handed balance by means of an integrationist strategy.

2. Evaluating balancing strategies

2.1. From four strategies to a classification of strategies

There are balancing strategies other than the four illustrated here. However, what we have seen so far permits an argument—none entirely arbitrary—to the effect that any other strategy would have to be related to the perspectival, paradoxical, subordinationist, and integrationist strategies in a particular way. Consider the following.

First, to list the major premises of the argument, the implementation of any balancing strategy presupposes a means of judgement of the relative adequacy of the symbols to be kept in balance, for otherwise no sense of balance could be established. Such a basis for judgement will necessarily presuppose or implement or call for a relevant, wider theory that makes clear how arbitrariness is being avoided in the making of judgements. Such wider theories will have to comprehend either or both of two complex realities: the purposed object of the symbols (God), and the wielders and wielding of the symbols (human beings and their religious activity and language).

Second, the basis for such a judgement may be readily apparent, or it may be obscure, owing to the need to subject the basis of judgement itself to multiple, superficially incompatible criteria of adequacy. In this latter case, the basis for judgement is both constructed and questioned even as it is applied, and the balancing strategy that results is paradoxical in the sense that the Dionysian strategy is.

Third, suppose, contrary to the Dionysian case, that the basis for the judgement needed to ascertain balance is readily apparent. Then a double distinction may be drawn concerning the wider theory such judgements presuppose. On the one hand, these judgements may be made with primary reference to parts of the wider theory that focus either on God or on human beings. On the other hand, this wider theory may promote an even-handed balance or a lop-sided balance between the symbols in question. When combined, these two distinctions permit a grid of possibilities to be imagined.

Fourth, when the balancing in question is between pairs of symbol families, as it is in the case of personal and impersonal symbols for God, there are two varieties of lop-sided balance possible, along with the possibility of even-handed balance. The resulting six (non-paradoxical) strategies are all independently conceivable, but the strategies described above blur over the edges somewhat. The perspectival strategy (from the Bhagavad-Gita) emphasises judgements of balance made with reference to the state of the soul that wield the symbols, and permits an even-handed balance to be achieved between personal (in bhakti) and impersonal (as in jnana) symbols. The integrationist strategy (Tillich) likewise permits an even-handed balance but depends more on a theory of God. The subordinationist strategy (Huston Smith) eschews an even-handed balance and can be implemented using judgements that are grounded in wider theories of God or human beings. Smith himself uses both sorts of theoretical contextualisation for his judgements simultaneously.

Finally, the strategies whose basis for judgement is paradoxical can also be analysed using this pair of distinctions, but only with difficulty. For example, while it might be argued that Pseudo-Dionysius’s judgements of balance stress the theory of symbol-wielding over the theory of God, the argument that he affirms impersonal-conceptualisation symbols over personal symbols is frustrated by the
Dionysian self-deconstruction of the very basis for judgement that is implicit in such an affirmation. It is safest to resist subsuming the paradoxical strategy into the rest of the categorisation, accordingly.

The resulting classification of balancing strategies can be diagrammed as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-paradoxical basis for judgements of balance</th>
<th>Paradoxical basis for judgements of balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal more significant than impersonal</td>
<td>Personal as significant as impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on God in the wider theory</td>
<td>Focus on human beings in the wider theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A) Tillich</td>
<td>B) Bhagavad-Gita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>Smith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that this diagram can be generalised to encompass the balancing of any pairs of families of symbols. It would have to be modified, however, to express the complexities of balancing three or more symbol-families. This is one indication of the misleading nature of the diagram. Another such indication is the fact that the names I assigned the four strategies discussed above do not mesh very well with the diagram. I will continue to use the names because being able to refer to specific strategies with characteristic names is more useful than having an exhaustive classification. The classification is still useful, however, in that it makes evident what other balancing strategies might be employed, and it helps to formulate some of the fundamental issues surrounding the challenge of balancing symbol-families in complex symbol systems.

Note, too, that it is not hard to think of examples where impersonal symbols for God are permitted as philosophical necessities, but are kept subordinated to personal symbols for God. Forms of religious piety that have a suspicious tolerance of philosophical categories might regard the impersonal-conceptual symbols for God as potentially dangerous to the soul, and balancing mechanisms would be introduced in the form of sanctions against excessive philosophising in an attempt to cultivate most effectively the souls of believers. This would be a realisation of the possibility marked [B] in the diagram. Less common in corporate piety but more common in theology (conservative evangelical Christian theology, for example) is the insistence that impersonal-conceptual symbols for God are philosophical abstractions from the most basic truth that God is a supernatural 'person'. If it were held that such abstractions can be tolerated so long as they do not take over discourse about God, the result would be a balancing strategy of type [A].

2.2. Motivations for and effects of balancing strategies

It is important to remember that some religious groups abjure balancing strategies altogether, and simply ban the use of certain families of symbols. One example was given above: the esoteric social realisations of the primordial tradition, as in closed Gnostic communities. Examples of the opposite reactionary response would be forms of personal piety in which impersonal symbols for God are not tolerated but rather interpreted as dangerous incursions into religion from philosophy or from some other essentially alien source. Perhaps extreme forms of bhakti devotion, devotion to the Buddha, or Christian piety illustrate this.

Even when these extreme reactions to the danger of religious symbols are not present, the sense that some danger attends the use of certain families of religious symbols usually still persists. There is good reason for this concern, of course, and the two points of view that have already been emphasised elsewhere will prove useful again here. On the one hand, in relation to the intended ultimate object of God-symbols, there is the legitimate concern that certain families of symbols threaten more immediately than others to distort the image of God presented in religious language. For example, according to the primordial tradition, while talk of God as personal is acceptable for people in a certain spiritual state or stage, it really does fail to express the higher truths about God, for which impersonal-conceptual symbols are better. On the other hand, in relation to the spiritual state of the wielder of symbols, there is the worry that the forming of the imagination under the influence of certain God-symbols may be counter-productive, in the sense of being spiritually or psychologically bad for the health. For example, Tillich insisted that personal and impersonal symbols for God had to be maintained alongside each other to avoid the harms caused by demonic impersonal abstraction and sentimentally foolish personalism, under neither of which descriptions can God be the object of genuine ultimate concern.

These are the two main forms of anxiety that motivate balancing strategies: anxiety about truth and anxiety about efficaciousness of symbols for God. They are the moderate forms of reactions to the danger of symbols that in more extreme forms lead to the repudiation of the families of symbols that are perceived to be dangerous. Pseudo-Dionysius and Paul Tillich seem to me even-handedly concerned about both truth and efficaciousness in their adoption of balancing strategies.

The primary motivation of the Bhagavad-Gita and Huston Smith, by contrast, derives from another issue. In these cases, there seems to be considerable comfort with the aptness of certain symbols for certain types of people. Anxiety about souls in jeopardy from dangerous symbols or about the distortion of the truth about God seems greatly muted in these cases by comparison with Pseudo-Dionysius and Paul Tillich. The Bhagavad-Gita and the primordial tradition are, however – in typical Indian fashion – anxious to take account of people’s varying experiences of God, and to validate the absolutely significant character of those experiences for those having them by emphasising their aptness. In this process of
explanation, the challenge is how to make this validating move while still affirming a meaningful, consistent account of God and of the human soul. Balancing strategies, especially of the hierarchical and perspectival varieties, are well suited to that task.

2.3. Evaluating balancing strategies

We have seen that balancing strategies tend to affirm either that some symbols are less true or less helpful than others (Pseudo-Dionysius, Smith) or that certain relations between symbol families are less true or less helpful than others (Tillich and the Bhagavad-Gita). The judgements involved in these views underlie the implementation of balancing strategies. Two kinds of questions about the effectiveness of balancing strategies are suggested, accordingly. First, how accurate are the judgements pertaining to truth and helpfulness? And second, how effective are the balancing strategies themselves? Depending on the answers given to these questions, one strategy might appear superior to the others, or some new strategy might be suggested.

I confess that I am at a loss to know how to address these questions briefly, if it is possible to deal with them at all. For example, while I am convinced that the strategic preference for personal symbols of the divine ([A] and [B] in the diagram, above) can only be justified by the assumption that more theologically adequate symbols are not viable for the particular group or type of people in question, I do not know how to establish this conveniently. The argument required involves a complex process in which the theoretical adequacy and practical efficacy of competing, large-scale interpretations of God, reality, and the religious life are weighed against one another. More profoundly, I agree with Pseudo-Dionysius that the basis for judgements bearing on the truth and helpfulness of symbols needs to be deconstructed precisely as fast as, and in the same sense that, it is made available by some encompassing theory of God or of symbol-wielding. But this agreement derives from an aesthetic preference for symmetry that is excited by the Dionysian tendency to handle symbols and criteria for assessing them in the same paradoxical way. I do not know how I would go about establishing this through argument — even if I had unlimited space and time. For these reasons, I must be content to point out that balancing strategies can in principle be evaluated even though I cannot present the arguments associated with such an evaluation here — or, with respect to some kinds of evaluation, anywhere.

Another problem dogs the heels of attempts to evaluate the practical effectiveness of balancing strategies: the research techniques do not yet seem to have the required sophistication. The conceptual problem of designing adequate field instruments alone is daunting. It would be important to connect: (1) particular religious beliefs of individuals at a subtle level that detects and presses beyond mere reversion to the default formulations of their group; (2) personal histories of psychological-spiritual development; (3) what might be called 'spiritual-personality' types, or at least preferences for orienting world-pictures; and (4) the structure and function of corporate activities of many different kinds as they bear on forming a religious milieu by means of a symbol system. Rough judgements can be made about the efficaciousness of balancing strategies, but they cannot have the reliability or longevity of the judgements that appropriate scientific instruments would permit.

With these apologies in place, I shall make some generalised evaluative remarks about systems of symbols and the balancing strategies that are implemented within them. First, it seems clear that balancing strategies have a certain degree of prima facie effectiveness. The use of symbols that reflect the value judgements underlying such strategies — in public rituals of worship, sacred texts, religious education, meditation, and acts of charity — really ought to have some of the desired effect on those participating. Human self-understandings and religious convictions are formed in part by the linguistic and social environment, as the sociology of knowledge has established. When the social-linguistic environment is itself formed by a balancing strategy of some kind, then those within its ambit will be subject to a strong tendency to conform. For example, Nietzsche's analysis of Christianity's hijacking of the symbols 'Good' and 'Evil', in spite of its extreme and slightly unstable character, is a sobering reminder that such environmental conditioning can have destructive effects. The emergence of saints in all traditions under the self-professed influence of traditional symbol systems is a forceful reminder that those symbols sometimes permit participation in that to which they refer with marvellous consequences. And the existence of religious communities with distinctive styles and emphases is evidence that the way symbols are connected in systems — including by balancing mechanisms — does have an effect.

Second, however, it seems equally clear that it is not easy to make people and imaginations do exactly what any strategy or person stipulates — a fact for which we must never cease being grateful. Independent-minded people continually detect conceptual fractures in the models of God and world sponsored by symbol systems. Various forms of 'feedback' in the form of experience of the world itself offer ways to test the adequacy of such models, and so of the symbol systems expressed within them. And people often have their own individual preferences that resist analysis in terms of what we can know of environmental influences. It follows that balancing mechanisms, or any symbolic conditioning processes, can be more or less, but never wholly, successful. Of course, religious groups vary tremendously in the extent to which they are prepared to impose upon their members a particular sense of how symbols ought to be related.

Third, many balancing strategies for religious symbol systems are profoundly related to a personal spiritual disposition or stage or state. The teenager who cannot help but conceive of God in personal terms may grow into a middle-aged adult with a balanced appreciation for a rich range of symbols of the divine, with a passion to disappear with Sankara into Brahma as a drop of dew into the shining sea, or with an ever intensifying fascination with God as person. Correspondingly,
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balancing mechanisms are often stratified in their application, imposing tighter limits for some people or some ages than others; the dangers of symbols are greater for the impressionable young than for the worldly-wise elderly. Even if this were not so, people learn to subvert the influence of balancing mechanisms in their religious group, willing to pay in the currency of cognitive dissonance for the freedom to develop their spirituality as they see fit.

Fourth, we have seen that a systematic process of symbolic checks and balances often serves strategically to control the potentially dangerous elements in a particular family of symbols. In religious groups for which this is a goal, the strategic mechanism tends to be highly effective, within the limits on effectiveness already described. However, when the aim is to keep personal and impersonal symbol families in even-handed balance, the strategies seem to be significantly less effective. This kind of remark is, even more obviously than others of my conclusions, dependent on personal observation, and so subject to the problems of bias and limited information. That said, it is borne out by a key difference between Tillich's integrationist and the Bhagavad-Gita's perspectival strategies. For both, even-handed balance between personal and impersonal symbols for God is theoretically important. Whereas the Gita contains a comfortably plural portrayal of paths to liberation, Tillich's integrationist strategy sees things a particular way and tries to co-ordinate as many perspectives as possible into a consistent conceptual whole. Whereas the Gita's perspectival strategy is realistic about the fact that people approach God differently and remains content just to point people in the right direction given where they happen to be standing at the moment, Tillich's integrationist approach calls in principle for people to move together in more or less the same way. But that no more works in practice than Tillich pulls it off in his own system. Just as impersonal-conceptual symbols for God dominate in his system despite the theoretical even-handedness between them, the attempt to maintain a balanced appreciation for both personal and impersonal symbols for God in religious groups will always fail. Within the camp defined by the goal of theoretical even-handedness, the move away from the Gita's strategic pluralism forces the introduction of a lot of theoretical overhead to try to keep very different families of symbols together. That theoretical overhead, even if it did its job perfectly in Tillich's system, is indigestible to most religious people.

From this we may draw a conclusion that is supportive of the observation with which this point began: in practice, which is to say in the individual and corporate religious imaginations, either the personal family of God-symbols dominates over the impersonal, or vice versa, but even-handed balance is rarely seen. This domination is explicitly recognised, approved and explained in the subordinationist and paradoxical strategies; it is recognised and approved but not really explained in the perspectival strategy; and it is recognised in Tillich's form of the integrationist strategy, but not approved. I believe this point could be extended to cover strategies of type [A] and [B], too. One family seems inevitably to gain ascendency over the other.

References