A Contemporary Understanding of Religious Truth

Robert Cummings Neville
and Wesley J. Wildman

8.1 Truths in Religion

Contemporary understandings of religious truth have come a long way from the eighteenth-century European philosophy of religion that regarded the problem merely as a matter of the epistemological justification of beliefs. To be sure, that problem remains; much contemporary philosophy of religion in the mode of analytic philosophy continues the eighteenth-century discussion. Moreover, the discussions in the first six chapters include treatments of religious truth in this epistemological sense, albeit from a fascinating range of perspectives at times alien to analytic philosophy of religion. It follows that the tradition of the study of epistemological truth in religion, though somewhat dissociated, is alive and well.

Twentieth-century developments in the philosophy of language have complicated the question of religious truth, however. There is widespread recognition now that religions use language in expressive, exhortative, and performative ways, as well as in fact-asserting ways that intend to be true in the epistemological sense. Not surprisingly, then, religions have
developed diverse understandings of truth that express standards of adequacy or felicity for these kinds of language use. The recitation of a sūtra, narrative, or creed might have little or no descriptive content and yet be highly functional as an act of mental focusing, as a community’s affirmation of its identity, or as an influential reminder of group values. And those tasks can be done better or worse, they can be “true” or “false” in special senses, quite apart from the epistemological truth of the descriptive or fact-asserting content.

The recognition of expressive, exhortative, performative, and a range of other rule-governed uses of language has come from two philosophical traditions in the twentieth century. On the one hand, there is the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy of language, beginning especially from the work of J. L. Austin. Austin’s insights proved fruitful in subsequent decades as a large number of philosophers turned their attention to the study of language. The most important works from this period are those of Wittgenstein and Searle. On the other hand, a rich integration of descriptive and cognitively shaped action was also and earlier developed by the American pragmatists Charles Peirce and John Dewey, and to some extent by William James and George Herbert Mead. Behind the application to religious language of both of those philosophical traditions in the West lies the Romantic criticism of theology as propositional truth. This Romantic complaint is famously expressed in Schleiermacher and Hegel, for both of whom “feeling” and “consciousness” were categories of morality as well as cognition.

Our concern here is not with any particular usage of religious language—whether assertive, expressive, exhortative, performative, or something else—but with any and all such uses insofar as they can be “true” or “felicitous” in some sense. This concern leads us to distinguish and pursue (often simultaneously) several specific interests. First, in the background of our work in all three volumes of this project is an attempt to understand first-order religious language and activity. Most religious acting and speaking is highly structured, which is both a familiar fact and an unsurprising one in view of the successful philosophical tracing out of the rules governing a wide variety of spheres of discourse and behavior. Second, we are interested in the conditions of adequacy that apply to the rich usages of religious language. This is one way to find out about the structure of first-order religious language and practice, of course, but it is also crucial for our focus in this volume on religious truth. Third, we are especially interested in the religious ideas that express, cultivate, and regulate those conditions of adequacy of religious language and practice. This is to be distinguished carefully from the second interest: the ideas of religious truth that exist within religious traditions can themselves be

second-order attempts within a religious tradition to describe or modify its own first-order structures of religious language and action. Our study focuses on the ways those potentially second-order ideas about the truth and felicity of first-order religious speaking and doing are similar or different. Fourth, we are interested in what can be done to develop a theory of religious truth with such comparisons as we make about religious ideas of truth. That is, we are interested in bringing the data flexibly organized by our comparative categories to bear on a positive theory of religious truth. This is a constructive philosophical task that involves making simultaneous use of contemporary theories of religious truth and the implications for theories of truth that can be derived from the data of religious studies, ideally well organized by careful comparison.

As pointed out repeatedly in all three volumes of this project, and especially in chapter 9 of Ultimate Realities, the comparative categories organizing the data pertaining to ideas of religious truth are designed to be flexible and responsive to criticism. They are not at all like an immovable foundation for a building but more like the flexible scaffolding that is placed around it and that can be changed whenever needed. The group process we have gone through has involved repeatedly correcting or abandoning previous insights about religious truth in the traditions we have studied—we hope in the direction of improved categories for our comparative efforts.

It is worth pausing to offer a different analogy for the flexibility of the categories we use for making comparisons about religious truth. Consider the dynamic cytoskeleton of many cells whereby the cell is given particular shape in a mind-bogglingly complex environment. The cell is responsive to its environment in part through specific enzymes that alter the shape of the proteins making up the cytoskeleton, enabling global shape changes as needed. Those enzymes are contextually activated, as when a red corpuscle changes from its flat, indented disk-like shape to a rolled-up tube when it needs to pass through tiny capillaries. This analogy should not suggest overly convenient flexibility, as if comparative categories can be changed to serve whatever need presses most urgently for attention, ignoring data. Rather, it is intended to indicate how the vastly complex data of religious phenomena can be seen as a structured environment within which comparatists may travel, genuinely engaging and responding to that environment. Now, drawing in the perspective of evolution in the analogy, it is precisely through the adaptiveness of those engagements that the red blood cell develops the capacities it has; the proteins and enzymes necessary for a flexible cytoskeleton are encoded in its DNA. In the same way, the comparative project, if responsive to data and properly concerned with justification of provisional conclusions,
allows the comparativist's ways of understanding to adapt and introduces selective pressure for more adequate formulations. The result is comparative categories that express the character of the religious environment even as the red blood cell's cytoskeleton expresses the character (the DNA) of its host organism. We (Neville and Wildman) claim that the least apt aspect of this analogy has to do with complexity but with the length of time involved. As difficult as it is, the comparative project can be pursued on the time scale of generations, much like the natural and social sciences, rather than the millennia of cultural evolution or the billions of years of biological evolution.

From what has been said to this point, it follows that some religious practices might very well involve making descriptive claims, affirmative or negative, as discussed particularly in chapter 2. The question of the truth of such practices comes close to being the question of what we are calling the "epistemic" truth of the claims made in them. Other religious practices such as liturgies, prayers, and meditations, or the construction and decoration of symbolically rich garments, buildings, or political constitutions, may also be true, but in a different sense. Each of these practices has its own distinctive felicity conditions, the conditions according to which it is deemed appropriate, acceptable, correct, and so on. This is what we shall call "performative" truth.

"Felicity" may be a better general category than "truth" for embracing both epistemological and performative truth. It has the advantages of surmounting the strictly logical conditions for truth that have been much emphasized in Western philosophical epistemology and of being responsive to recent non-Western critiques of the epistemologization of religious language. The felicity of "felicity" has two important limitations for our context, however. One is that it might be construed to suggest that a happy result is brought about by a religious practice or expression entirely adventitiously. On the contrary, felicity in our sense should be connected with conditions of adequacy regarding the kind of practice at hand; the following sections in this chapter indicate how complicated, and yet logically connected, these conditions might be. Second, religious traditions tend not to make such a sharp distinction between epistemological and performative truth, even though most traditions do notice the distinction. Our project has been inclined to register the blurring of this distinction by retaining the name "religious truth" for the general category of religious ideas to be investigated in this volume. Kohn and Miller argue (1.3) that the distinction between epistemological truth and performative truth is not valid in China. This is a good reminder that the blurring of the distinction happens in different ways and to different degrees. But at least the distinction needs to be registered, in China as elsewhere, and its nature explained, even as the distinction between belief and action is registered even if blurred in practice. So we remain with "truth" as the more general category and use "felicity" to name the conditions under which truth obtains in this broad sense, especially when both performative and epistemological aspects of truth are in view.

The reasons for this blurring in our religious traditions are important. First, religious practices typically are shaped by religious symbols that assume, imply, celebrate, or proclaim something to be true that is religiously important. Indeed, the effectiveness with which a religious practice makes these suppositions (assumptions, implications, celebrations, or proclamations) is usually one of the felicity conditions applied to it. Too sharp a distinction between the performative truth of the practice and the epistemological truth of the associated suppositions would tend artificially to separate what religious traditions have usually—and often deliberately and self-consciously—kept together. Second, felicity conditions are enormously diverse. Just as apologies should be sincere, descriptions true, condemnations just, exhortations effective, and testimonies beautifully expressive, so religious practices have a wealth of felicity conditions, often active simultaneously. In such a context, sharply distinguishing epistemological truth from performative truth is a bit like distinguishing one otherwise unremarkable piece of straw in a pile of hay. You can do it but you can't get too carried away with it. Religious practices are subject to the most complex felicity conditions of anything that human beings do, by far, and there is no sense in getting too excited just because epistemological truth shows up in the mix.

That said, it is still possible to make the distinction between epistemological and performative truth, and then to ask about the epistemological truth of both explicit religious claims and claims implicit in religious practices. It is to that topic that we turn in sections 8.2 and 8.3. Then in sections 8.4 and 8.5 the focus shifts back to performative truth.

Despite this division, we mean to be speaking of different aspects of a single, complex phenomenon in religion, namely, the fact that the diverse felicity conditions of religious phenomena are conceived in quite specific ways by religious traditions.

Throughout this chapter and the next, it is important to distinguish between the two levels of religious ideas with which we are working because our task is different in relation to each. On the one hand, religious traditions contain second-order ideas about what truth means and about how to realize truth in practice. Comparison draws attention to the similarities and differences between these traditional ideas of truth; that material is discussed most directly in chapters 1-7. The contemporary theory of religious truth presented in this chapter aims to make sense of
those second-order ideas in their delicious variety. On the other hand, religious people have beliefs and practices that express or presuppose first-order ideas. Traditions differ in the extent to which they make resources available for adherents to assure themselves that these presupposed ideas are true; some traditions facilitate obsession over the issue while others promote near-obliviousness to it. All traditions register the issue, however, and an adequate contemporary theory of religious truth needs both to address this question of justification of the first-order ideas expressed in beliefs and practices and to explain how the variation of religious attitudes toward it expresses second-order ideas about religious truth. We present a contemporary theory of religious truth in this chapter in the hope that chapter 7 will then have served both to demonstrate how we have taken account of the comparative results from chapters 1–6 and to make the weaknesses of the theory of truth more evident.

Many factors condition religious beliefs and practices, including first-order religious ideas. Even when the ideas are not the most important conditioning factors, which is often the case with ritual practices, ideas are still present, conveyed in, and mediated by religious symbols. A convenient way to present a theory of religious truth is therefore to address the question of what it means to say that religious symbols are true. This is an extremely complex question, as the previous discussion of the multifarious felicity conditions for religious beliefs and practices suggests. Specifically, the truth of a religious symbol involves issues in at least four dimensions: (1) how the symbol interprets its object to those interpreters engaged in the practice; (2) whether the symbol purports to refer to is as the symbol says it is; (3) just what the symbol means itself, with all its resonances, ambiguities, double-plays, and implications; and (4) how the interpreters are adequately transformed through practice so as to be able to grasp this meaning. Thus, interpretation, reference, meaning, and transformation are the topics of a theory of religious truth, and of the sections of this chapter.

8.2 Truth in Interpretation

Interpretation is (1) the taking of reality (2) by an interpreter (3) to be the way an idea (a sign, symbol, etc.) says it is in the respect in which the idea is taken to represent the reality as an object. This formula will be explicated in the remainder of this section. But first some things need to be said to locate the problem of religious truth as a matter of interpretation.

Interpretation need not be conscious or deliberate. It simply is the differential taking of reality to be a certain way by means of representing it in ideas. An automobile driver interprets the road in vast and complicated ways, as much with kinesthetic signs of body-feels as with perceptions that isolate objects clearly against backgrounds. Religious life is densely shaped by symbols in many ways. Although sophisticated theologians might know the verbal meanings of the symbols, most religious practitioners are not sophisticated theologians. Yet their religiously shaped lives take reality to be the way their religious symbols diversely represent it. The verbal accounts they give indeed might be contrary or irrelevant to the ways the symbols in fact represent reality within their lives. The question of religious truth in the context of interpretation is about whether the ways interpreters actually take reality to be, insofar as that taking is shaped by the ideas, are the ways reality is.

Simple descriptive propositions might seem to be far less complicated than fancy religious symbolic claims. Consider the favorite of analytic philosophers, “the cat is on the mat,” the truth of which can be checked by looking at what, if anything, is on the mat. This example seems to make no reference to actual interpreters of the cat-mat reality who employ the propositional sign “the cat is on the mat.” But that is because we can assume that any English-speakers who know their way around cats and mats would be able to make the interpretation. We thus leave the interpretation in the subjunctive—“the cat is on the mat” would be true for any relevant interpreter if the cat in fact is on the mat. But the interpretive situation in religion is often far more complex and controversial. Suppose the Buddhist dharma needs an adept to be understood, and there are no adepts; then the dharmic claim is not true for anyone, or false: an uninterpreted claim is not claimed or asserted, assumed, and so on. What is true for an adept might be silly, irrelevant, incomprehensible, or even plain false (as in the two-truths doctrine) for others if non-adepts use it to interpret reality. In religion it is extremely important to be able to specify the interpretive situation, and the stage of spiritual discernment and state of soul of the interpreters. The subjunctive assumption of an ideal interpreter is problematic in religious cases.

“The cat is on the mat” seems to have unequivocal terms for English speakers (unless one wants to play philosophical games). Thus, it is easy to assume that the meanings of those terms are general and define a community of meaning, so that all statements of its ilk are public, not private. Religious symbols too are mainly conventional and hence defined by a community. But often the religious community is one of initiates, or of practitioners at different stages of initiation. Moreover, for very many people, the religious symbols have particular histories in their lives and that of their immediate neighbors; so the same symbols might mean different things on opposite sides of the hill, especially where meaning includes
an emotional tone. Religious symbols also interact with one another, and take on special resonances and association. The Buddha's Four Noble Truths are more colorful in Tibet than in Sri Lanka, and the Christian cross is different for Roman Catholics who represent Jesus on it than for Protestants who see it as a bare ladder to resurrection. The meanings of religious ideas need to be contextualized very subtly, something usually not relevant to "the cat is on the mat."

The reference of "the cat is on the mat" has been somewhat complicated in the philosophical literature. Which cat? Which mat? But consider how vastly more complicated the problem of reference is with regard to many religious ideas. In nearly all the religious traditions we have studied ultimate realities are represented as if they could be named like things—God, Brahman, the Dao. Madhyamaka Buddhism says that what is ultimate involves the denial of naming things except conventionally. Yet all those same traditions take pains to point out that the ultimate are not things like other things that bear names over against namers—"the Dao that can be named is not the true Dao," begins the 

"The apophatic theologies of West Asian monotheisms have parallels in the other traditions. How can religious ideas refer to things if their referents are not things? Religious symbols for things other than ultimate realities often take their bearings from their relations to the ultimate, either ontological or practical ultimates. So they too have complicated reference. Religion, of course, is not the only area of life with complicated reference. "The global ecological problem," "the bittersweet of success," and "the beauty of Mozart's music" are all well-recognized and referred-to realities but with complicated kinds of reference. Nominalist philosophers who take physical objects as the paradigm of referents tend to declare these to be nonsense and attempt to reduce them to particulars. "A cap is on the market" refers in ways quite different from "the cat is on the mat."

All these complications mean that the truth of religious ideas even in the context of interpretation requires an extremely complex analysis, and the applications of modes of analysis apparently adequate for many other kinds of ideas are likely to be reductive. We are now in a position to spell out some of the aspects of interpretation singled out in the formula above: Interpretation is (1) the taking of reality (2) by an interpreter (3) to be the way an idea (a sign, symbol, etc.) says it is (4) in the respect in which the idea is taken to represent the reality as an object.

To say that interpretation is "the taking of reality" is to adopt a theory of truth based on the causal metaphors of interpreters engaging reality. This is quite different from other commonly supposed theories, and is defended at length in Neville's Recovery of the Measure. For instance, it has no resonance with the mind-body dualism of Western enlightenment philosophy. For that dualistic position, interpretations are supposed to be mental realities that mirror extra-mental realities if they are true. For our theory, by contrast, ideas are ways or habits of responding to reality that have been shaped by means of interaction into semiotic codes that organize responses with discernment, and that each individual comes to master more or less well. Many of these ideas can themselves be objects of conscious awareness and analysis, but many are not. Any given activity—driving a car, singing a hymn, living the life of a Buddhist monk—has many semiotically shaped responses operative at once, most of which are not matters of attention.

The causal theory of interpretation also stands in contrast to idealisms such as Yogâcâra's "consciousness only" position. That theory of course is deeply causal, but the causation affects ideas only. On our theory, the engagement of interpreters with reality involves interactive causation among all things referred to and referring. Within interpreters, the causal patterns take on semiotic structures so that human behavior is directed to discern what is important and accomplish its purposes in the larger environment. This process is not foolproof and human beings often make mistakes about what is significant. Nevertheless, interpreters take up reality by means of discriminating ideas, and they take up ideas as they interact discriminately with reality. In the sense deriving from the continuities and connections of different kinds of causal processes, this theory of interpretation is naturalistic, although naturalism in this sense does not entail any mechanistic or physicalist theory of nature.

An idea is true, on our theory, when it carries access into the interpreter whatever is important in the referent or reality interpreted, in the respects in which the idea is taken to stand for the referent. Aristotle, and much of the Western philosophic tradition, assumed that what is important to get from the object to the knower is the object's form. That might be the case in some instances, and it is what gives rise to conceptions of knowledge based in mirroring or isomorphism between reality and mind. The more basic point, however, is that it is the value in the object that needs to be carried across. In crude pragmatic circumstances it is the force and cold of the wind or the danger of the tiger that need to be noticed. As Peirce pointed out, however, once interpreters develop complex semiotic systems that allow them to question reality, the really important things to know are what the ideals of life are, what is worth striving for, what character is desirable, what social arrangements are just, how to find and make beauty. When interpretation includes query, it seeks out what is valuable, and develops symbolic forms for discerning and dealing with that.
A religious idea is true when it carries across what is important in the religious object or referent into the interpreter or the interpreter's community, in the respects in which the ideas are used to represent reality, as qualified by the material, cultural, semiotic, and purposive nature of the interpreter. Suppose for the moment that an object is religious if it is, or is related to, something ultimate, either something ontologically ultimate or an ultimate quest, which we referred to in Ultimate Realities as an anthropological ultimate. A religious idea is true, then, if what is important in or about the ultimate is carried over into the interpreter, or the interpreter's community, in the respects in which the idea represents the ultimate.

FollowingPeirce, we can call what becomes interpretively resident in the interpreter an "interpretant." Two kinds of interpretants need to be distinguished, if only to be shown to be overlapping. One, which can be called an "intellectual interpretant," consists of the rendition of what is carried over in a network or system of symbols. If all symbols were verbal ones, we could say that the intellectual interpretant is the verbalization of what is important in the object. But there are many other kinds of symbols, signs, or ideas, including gestures, pictures, music, and the like. Intellectual interpretants are ways of embodying what is important in the object in the terms of a semiotic system. The other kind of interpretant is "practical," by which is meant how the interpreter's habits and behavior, including habits of mind, are modified so as to register what is important in the religious object. Except for intellectuals, the payoff of religious truth is mainly practical, and religious intellectuals hope that even for them the truth is at least practical.

The distinction between intellectual and practical interpretants allows us to acknowledge that some intellectuals understand their religion but do not live it and that some non-intellectual people are paradigms of authentic piety without being able to understand that intellectually. The connection between the intellectual and practical interpretants is crucial, however, when critical questions arise about how to understand or live out the bearing of the ultimate on life. Intellectual analysis gives people a critical purchase on what appear to be practical consequences of religious interpretations; practical engagement with ultimate reality in life gives another kind of critical purchase on the intellectual analysis. All of the religions we studied are complex ways of life, practically shaped by ideas, which have been thought through in many ways for each of them.

Interpretation always takes place within a larger context, and in every context it is relevant to distinguish the intellectual from the practical line of interpretants. Consider but three major contexts, the theoretical, the communal, and the devotional.

In a theoretical context, say a debate between theologians before an authority, or a theological classroom, the practical interpretants are aimed to maximize agreement on meaning and sharpen the readiness of the claims to be shown mistaken or well taken. Much religious language is highly metaphorical and, in theoretical contexts, universality of meaning presses toward developing more nearly literal language that does not have to be qualified from one context of usage to another. Perhaps no theological language is completely literal, but theoretical contexts press in that direction. Hence, the intellectual interpretants are likely to be abstract, universal, and relatively flat in emotional tone. Regarding the theoretical concern for truth, there is a recursive layering of definitions of truth and discussions of criteria such as illustrated in chapter 2 and elsewhere. All this is to say that in theoretical contexts, the terms for intellectual interpretants are shaped by the pressures for universal agreement on meaning and critical vulnerability for being corrected. The practical interpretants in turn are made possible by theoretically framed intellectual ones.

In a communal context, a religious object is truly interpreted by intellectual symbols that make sense of how the community is religiously shaped and by practical interpretants that shape the community in the relevant respects. Consider a liturgy. It has intellectual symbols nested in systems that are more or less coherent and that depict in organized fashion central imaginative structures that are structured elements of the religion's practice. These might be quite different from theoretical intellectual symbols. A ritual worshipping Guanyin ( Avalokiteśvara) with petitions for healing uses personalizing symbols that are a far cry from the austere Madhyamaka or Yogācāra metaphysics discussed in chapter 3. A Christian eucharistic liturgy compacts symbols of suffering, death, resurrection, nourishment, participation, communal solidarity, historical identity, religious authority, and cannibalism that are vastly more vivid than the theoretical notions of divine creation, Trinitarian unity, or a logos Christology that might explain the liturgy theoretically. The practical interpretants of the liturgy are the effects the liturgy has on the worshipping community, and they are true or false depending on the practical implications of the religious object for that community, as represented in the respects in which the liturgical symbols and acts stand for the object.

For a devotional context, consider, for instance, a retreat practicing St. Ignatius's spiritual exercises. On one of the days the devotee would concentrate on visualizing Jesus carrying the cross from the Jerusalem court to the hill of crucifixion. The intellectual interpretants of the visualization would not at all have to do with whether Jesus and the crowd
dressed as the devotee imagines, or whether the streets look the way imagined. They rather have to do with what Jesus’s “way through the streets” means for the devotee’s life of suffering, of “bearing crosses.” The practical interpretants have to do with how the devotee’s life is changed so as to become more Christlike with respect to bearing suffering, which depends in part on the particulars of the devotee’s pains that might be quite alien to anything in Jesus’s particular experience. This point will be expanded in 8.5.

This section has discussed at some length the notions of truth involved in interpretation as “taking a reality” “by an interpreter.” We have yet to discuss how that taking is by means of the idea that stands for the reality in some respect. A theory of truth in reference is required for the next step.

8.3 Truth in Reference

Reference was a confusing notion in our discussions in several ways. Eckel frequently represented Madhyamaka Buddhism to say that there is no reference, that ideas do not refer and that it is the illusion of ignorance to think they do; enlightenment among other things means that there is no objective reality to which ideas might refer. Kohn sometimes argued, as appears in 1.2.1, that reference seems to imply that reality has to remain fixed as referred to, and that because reality is processive and not fixed it can be referred to, if at all, only elliptically. But both Madhyamikas and elliptical Daoists would say that it is a mistake to claim that reality is filled (really and not merely conventionally) with stable, self-contained, unchanging entities. It is a mistake, they would say, because reality in fact does not have such substances, but is something else. The Madhyamikas and Daoists take different turns here, the former focusing on the nature of knowing and the latter on tuning up with process. But they both refer to reality as lacking real substantiality (especially as having to do with religious concerns). What funny kind of reference is this?

Peirce distinguished three kinds of reference: iconic, indexical, and conventional. Iconic reference refers to its object or referent as being like the iconic idea or sign, at least in some respect. Indexical reference points to the object by means of the idea. Conventional reference, which Peirce called “symbolic,” refers to the object by the meanings involved in the idea, as framed in a semiotic system. Ideas can refer in more than one way. Indeed, any idea we can talk about has to be at least conventional so as to be expressible in language, and might also be both iconic and indexical. Illustrations of the three kinds of reference can explain some of the confusions about reference that characterized our discussions.

Iconic reference has many levels of generality. At perhaps the most general level, people take their culture as a whole, a rough collection of semiotic systems, to be iconic of reality; that is, reality is like what can be noticed about it, expressed, and addressed in the culture’s forms. Those cultures not conscious of the conventionality of ideas or of cultural relativity would not distinguish reality from the cultural forms, the strongest possible assertion of iconicity. Those cultures that are aware of cultural forms still take their culture to be potentially iconic. Among the latter, many cultures are aware of the problematic character of at least some cultural forms, particularly those involved in religion. All of the axial age religions we studied are of this last sort, with some kind of apophatic sensibility about basic religious reference.

Less general than whole cultures, religious myths are taken to be iconic of reality, at least in some respects; again, there is a distinction between those mythopoeic cultures that do not distinguish reality from the myth and those that recognize the mythic character of their myths. “Grand narratives” are myths in this latter sense for cultures whose members believe themselves to be beyond mere myth. Paralleling the grand narratives of West Asian religions is the “cosmic physics and geography” of East Asian religions, which are also iconic (see The Human Condition, chapter 2). Of course there are much more specific iconic references within religions.

Special notice should be taken of a particular iconic reference, namely, the claim made by many in West and South Asian cultures that reality is like the structure of language. Indo-European (and some other) languages have a subject-predicate structure, which some philosophers, such as Aristotle, take to be iconic of reality, with the philosophic result that reality is construed to be made of substances with properties or attributes. Aristotle’s metaphysics of substance is quite subtle, and modern European philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz developed brilliant variations on it to comprehend the findings of modern science. The early Wittgenstein proposed that the formal structure of an ideal language is iconic of reality, or at least of reality’s facts. Some of the same substance thinking characterized Sanskrit-based cultures that assume that real things (substances) do not change whereas their properties or attributes might change. Every culture, however, recognizes that at least some things do change, and that we experience the world as extremely processive. Therefore, the iconicity of subject-predicate language to reality as substance-attribute in structure cannot be the whole story. Plato thoroughly understood this and criticized the iconic reference of language, claiming that it might apply to ideas alone but not to concrete reality that is in constant flux. Platonic epistemology was designed to deal
cognitively and normatively with the concrete political and personal
world of change; he was willing to say that only the static world of ideas
has being, though the dynamic world of appearance is what is of philo-
osophic interest and importance. Thinking has to be dialectical, Plato
thought, constantly shifting perspectives and angles of vision, in order
to address changing affairs. By contrast, dialectic for Aristotle was a
form of logical mistake. The twentieth-century philosopher Alfred
North Whitehead was a Platonist who reformulated modern metaphys-
ics from its Aristotelian substance metaphors to Platonic ones in order
to understand how mathematics, the Platonic paradigm of form, might
apply to a world of flux. Many of the same problems and strategies
evolved in South Asian philosophy, often with an exaggeration of the
Platonic distinction between static reality and dynamic appearance to a
distinction between static reality and the illusion of dynamism (see
Clooney in *The Human Condition*, chapter 5). In some forms of Hindu-

ism and Buddhism, the static reality was taken to be more important
and interesting (at least religiously) than dynamic flux; Vedânta, for
instance, affirms the unchanging reality of Brahman, and Madhyamaka
denies the reality of static realities and its alleged though mischievous
importance.

As Kohn and Miller point out (in 1.2.1 and in *The Human Condition*,
chapter 2), the Chinese never thought that reality is full of substances.
Nor is Chinese language of the subject-predicate sort. Therefore the Chine-
se were not tempted at least along those lines to think their language is

Iconic of a reality full of substances. But were the Chinese tempted to
think that their different, non-subject-predicate language structure is

Iconic of reality, so that reality is like Chinese language? The work of
Chad Hansen does not support an affirmative answer to that question.
He argues that Chinese language and the culture based on it form people
to be discriminating and responsive in their interactions with reality, es-

pecially with typical movements of things and special worths. Chinese
language does not emphasize concepts such as truth and representation
but rather mastery of attenuement and particular action in accord with
changing realities. All this is to say that the important reference in the
language itself to reality is indexical, not iconic.

Indexical reference consists in an idea or other sign pointing out some-
thing otherwise unnoticed or obscured. Peirce argued that causal connec-
tions are at the root of indexical reference, and this is particularly the
case when ideas referring indexically guide behavior to recognize, ad-
dress, and respond to things, as in the Chinese case according to Hansen.
Although much more is involved than referring indexically in transform-
ing personal character so as to conform more to the Dao, to be liberated

from ignorance and its sufferings, or to attain a vision of God, some in-
dexicality of ideas is surely necessarily involved. Indeed, if interpretation
is the *engagement* of reality, then at least some of the interpretive ideas
must be indexical. To the extent that religious ideas are practical, as has
been emphasized throughout our volumes, they involve indexical refer-
ence. Chinese culture is by no means the only one to register what we
here call indexicality in language. To the extent, however, that European
philosophy has thought of language as names with syncategorematic
connectives, and logic as a structural mirror of reality, typical European
assumptions about language have been overly observant of iconic refer-
ence to the neglect of the indexical.

Conventional reference consists in the employment of a system of
ideas or meanings to stand for the object in some respect. To understand
this, it is necessary to distinguish extensional from intentional refer-
ence. *Extensional* reference is a function of the ideas or signs internal to
a semiotic system, defined by the system's codes and expressing a range of
possible interpretations. The totality of the semiotic system contains all
the possible interpretations of reality that can be made when reality is en-
gaged with that system, sort of like Leibniz's God's array of *compossibil-
ities* before a definite set is chosen for actualization. Every referent of any
idea within the system can be represented by another idea within that
system, which is its extensional referent; extensional reference is entirely
intrasystemic. *Intentional* reference is the engagement of reality by means
of ideas shaped within a semiotic system. It uses configurations of ideas or
signs from within a semiotic system, replete with their meanings as de-

fined by that system, to engage reality. How those ideas intentionally en-
gage reality, in what respects, depends on their extensional meanings
within the semiotic system. The failure or refusal to distinguish exten-
sional from intentional reference has led some postmodern thinkers to
believe that signs refer only to signs, not to realities outside sign systems.

Extensional reference, of course, is that way, referring only in and around
the semiotic system. When asked to specify what one is referring to, one
always uses other ideas or signs to say that; every referent itself can be ex-

pressed within the sign-system. But this is not to say that we do not refer
to things that are external to our semiotic systems. When we say, "The
light ahead is turning yellow!" we refer intentionally to the real light,
even though the whole proposition is within our semiotic system, even
"the light ahead." Acknowledging the difference between extension and
intention, it is still possible to agree with Peirce that real things, outside
of semiotic systems, have the character of signs insofar as they can be ob-

jets of other signs and themselves serve as signs at least of their causal

connections.
Conventional reference, then, employs ideas or signs semiotically defined according to extensional meanings to make intentional interpretations that refer to reality so engaged. Conventional reference is far more varied than one might think if overly fixated on iconicity between semiotic structure and its objectified reality. Metaphor, indirectness, paradox, and gesture, particularly ritual gesture, are important kinds of conventional reference in many kinds of cultural activities, including religion. Davvening is as referential in its conventional way as saying aloud “the Lord is One.” Religions can be understood in part as complex ways of life by means of which people refer to the mystery of the ultimate so as to take up personally and culturally what is ultimately important. Such “ways of life” are vastly important conventional references to the ultimate.

The question of religious truth needs to be parsed through the complexity of reference involved. Truth, we proposed above, is the carryover of what is important from the object referred to into the interpreter in the respect in which the idea or sign stands for the object, with the “carryover” qualified by the material, culture, semiotic systems, and purposes of the interpreter. That Aristotle was enamoured of iconicity of reference explains in part why he thought the carryover is of form; the form in the matter of the object is carried over into the matter of the interpreting mind. Even if iconicity were to be completely understood as mirroring forms, that is not sufficiently general to deal with the question of truth in reference. To the extent that an interpretation involves indetical reference, the question of truth is whether the interpreter is rightly pointed to the object, rightly oriented, rightly perceptive of what is otherwise obscured, rightly triggered to be appropriately responsive. The indeticality of religious reference was extremely important in the previous chapter as we understand the performative aspects of cultivating the character to know the higher truths, or “becoming true.” To the extent that an interpretation refers by means of the conventional ideas defining a religion as a way of life, the question of truth is even more complex. To go further with this point, it is necessary to look at truth in meaning.

Another dimension of reference needs to be lifted up before turning to meaning, however. Let the object of reference be called the “primary referent.” Religious interpretation, and perhaps other kinds, also has a “secondary referent.” Whether an idea can refer (iconically, indetically, or conventionally) depends on whether the interpreter is the right sort existentially for that idea actually to carry across what is important. Suppose that the extensional meaning system articulates a certain interpretation; it still might not be the case that a given interpreter can use that articulation or idea to engage reality. For instance, an adolescent might know the dictionary meanings of the terms but still not be able to use them as an adult might. In a religious tradition that calls God “Father,” everyone might know that God is not literally a father, or even gendered; but people who in childhood have been abused by their father are less likely to be able to use that idea symbolically than those whose real father seemed godlike. Even more obvious, a person whose soul is shaped deeply by one religious tradition might learn the theology of another but be unable to engage reality with the other tradition’s ideas and symbols.

The secondary referent of an idea, therefore, is the interpreter who is of the right stage in life, the right state of soul or psychological and spiritual state, and the right deep religious culture. The extensional reference of an idea, what it can refer to within the semiotic system of ideas, need not take into account secondary reference, only primary reference. But intentional reference requires both primary and secondary reference: there can be no actual engagement or interpretation of a religious reality unless the interpreters are of the right stage, state, and culture for the ideas effectively to carry over what is important.

To understand truth in the reference of religious ideas, therefore, is to grasp not only the mode of primary reference but also the conditions for secondary reference. It is in respect of the subtleties of secondary reference that Buddhists pay such attention to nāyika, “expedient means,” which seem not to be literally true but effectively true.

8.4 Truth in Achieved Meaning

The problem of truth, as it applies to the meanings of ideas, is whether a religion has ideas that can engage religious objects in the relevant respects. Two considerations make this problem difficult. On the one hand, there is the question of whether the appropriate ideas exist within the religion’s semiotic or cultural system. Having a sign or idea that can stand for an object in a certain respect is what allows the interpreter to engage the object interpretively. Without an appropriate sign or idea, the object cannot be engaged in the respect in question. For instance, desert people need to distinguish more kinds of sand than Eskimos, and have the concepts and words to do so. Eskimos in deserts would need to get ideas and invent words if they were to tell good stories about desert dunes. More significantly, the evolution of the human species to civilization required the development of cultures full of signs that allow reality to be engaged in the respects necessary. Crude pragmatic ideas get people food and alert them to predators. More sophisticated ideas expressible in language make complex social life possible. Having ideas makes a
difference. On the other hand, there is the question of whether religious practitioners are adept enough to access those ideas, and hence whether they are able to interpret the religious objects the way their religion should enable them to do so. This second question is the issue of transformation and will be treated in the next section. The question here is the achievement of religiously profound meaning, which includes the having of the right signs or ideas.

First, some structural things need to be said about religious ideas or symbols. An idea, say Jesus as the sacrifice for the sins of the world (see Ultimate Realities, chapter 3), has its meaning defined in a system of related ideas or symbols. Fredriksen analyzed this in terms of the use of sacrifice in purification so that defiled or impure persons could re-approach the Holy, as developed in the Torah and temple ritual. This, she showed, rested within a larger family of sacrifice motifs in the ancient Roman world, which made the notion intelligible when applied to Jesus in non-Jewish communities. Then there was also the system of symbols that interpreted sacrifice in terms of the Passover according to which the angel of death passed over the houses of Jews with the sacrificed blood on their doors when it slaughtered the first-born of Egypt; from this system arises the imagery of Jesus as the paschal lamb. Then again there was the Jewish-Hellenistic apocalyptic system of ideas involving the struggle between Satan and God in which Jesus was sacrificed as a ransom. Each of these symbol systems interprets sacrifice in a different way. Yet, as Fredriksen pointed out, St. Paul used them all, and other interpretive ideas, in trying to "explain" how Jesus effects salvation. He used them all in confused ways, piling one system on another. There is no single algorithm for combining all the layers of sacrifice-symbolic systems. But they resonate together. The idea of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice requires them all, without sorting, and it cannot be expressed by one alone, for St. Paul; perhaps later Christian thinkers have done no better. That would be because the idea at hand in fact consists in a mutual interplay, an inter-resonance, of many expressible idea-systems together. This is one of the reasons religious ideas are so hard to express in words, why theology in being abstract is thought to leave out so much, and why so many clear religious ideas need to be qualified to the point of near-denial—they express only one of the idea-systems out of the many that actually function together when a religious person engages the reality, such as a Christian appropriating the atoning work of Jesus.

As if the interplay of meaning systems in religion were not complex enough, religious ideas have complicated ways of being referable to religious objects. Sometimes an idea requires a whole system of ideas beyond itself to refer to the relevant ultimate. In the above example, if Jesus is to be interpreted as effecting the purity that allows people to come into the divine presence—ultimate as a goal—much can be discussed nevertheless about atonement ideas without mentioning purity and its role in positioning people before God, as Fredriksen describes it. So, some ideas are religious only in the sense of being parts of larger systems of ideas that holistically refer to some ultimate object. Another complication is that some ideas have what might be called metaphysical meaning and others schematic meaning. The West Asian monotheisms, for instance, generally regard God as infinite in a metaphysical sense, and hence it is hard to conceptualize the approach of finite beings to God. But they all schematize the relation of the finite to infinite with ideas of heaven that locate the infinite finally. Thinkers in those traditions, when pressed by metaphysical questioners, would say that God is not really on a throne, or in a house, or in a garden. They would insist, however, that what is important for the human quest about God as infinite is adequately and not falsely schematized in terms of God's place in heaven. This conception of heaven as a place to meet the divine is schematization in Kant's sense; a Kantian schema-image would be how heaven is concretely imagined. All these complications add to the difficulty of analyzing properly just what the meaning of a religious idea is.

Difficulties of analyzing the meaning of religious ideas aside, the question of truth regarding meaning is whether a religion has the ideas it needs. That is a paradoxical expression of course, "the ideas it needs." So often the very heart of a religion is the ideas in fact it has that give classic expression to an event (the Exodus for Judaism), a person (Buddha, Jesus), or a teaching (Confucianism, Daoism, the Vedas, Islam). Yet religions are not static, and perhaps do not even have a beginning with a first idea or founder. Consider Fredriksen's acute observation in Ultimate Realities, chapter 3, that the first generation or two of Christians were merely a slightly deviant group of Jews, with nothing distinct from Judaism in their views about God; the distinctive Christian view of God as Trinity came generations later. What made the earliest Christians distinct from other Jewish groups was their relation to Jesus, and they (principally St. Paul, in Fredriksen's analysis) struggled to understand what Jesus meant for their traditional Jewish belief in the swinging Roman world of the first century. To put the matter most crudely, the earliest Christians took Jesus to lead them to interpret the human condition and God in new respects, and they worked overtime to adapt old ideas and invent new ones to express this. Whatever ontological act God performed in Jesus Christ, according to St. Paul and subsequent Christian thinkers, the subjective acts of Christians to understand and appropriate what Jesus could mean for them about God required the development of
Christian ideas. As with all the other traditions we studied, the development of religious ideas continues throughout the tradition's history, not just its founding moments, though with many different forms—for instance, commentaries or innovative "theologies."

At least four reasons should be noted for the continued development of religious ideas within a tradition. The one illustrated above in the case of Christianity relative to Judaism is that a significant person or event calls for a reinterpretation of previously given ideas. It took Christians several centuries to work out a completely separate identity in relation to Judaism. A second reason is that genies arise in the course of history and simply enrich a tradition with new ideas that grasp the religious reality in new respects, with greater clarity and depth. A third reason is that religious ideas have plausibility not only in terms of their interpretation of the ways previous ideas interpreted the religious reality but also in relation to the larger culture of the era. The Near Eastern context of the earliest Christianity had different plausibility conditions from those of Spain, Parthia, India, China, and Egypt, to which Christianity was quickly taken. The ideas fit for Christianity as a persecuted minority religion were not entirely plausible when it became a state religion. The plausibility conditions for Nestorian Christianity in Tang Dynasty China were different from those of the contemporaneous European Dark Ages. Modern science has made radical shifts in plausibility conditions. With every cultural change, religious ideas need to be rethought and their meanings adapted in order to represent what they had represented in the previous age. A fourth reason for the continuous development of religious ideas is that the religious traditions themselves interact. In all, changing times require creativity in achieving meaningful religious ideas.

Bearing in mind all these qualifications and complications, the question of religious truth bears upon meaning in respect of achieving ideas that can be true or false in respect of which the religious objects should be interpreted. The very practice of a religion establishes respects in which the religious object needs to be interpreted. So, the earliest Christians, to continue that example, took Jesus to be salvific in ways other elements of their religion, for instance, temple sacrifice, were not: how could this be understood? Christians thus needed to develop ideas of the atonement. Or, to take another example, the early practice of Buddhism focused on the Middle Way as framed by the Four Noble Truths. But this was paradoxical in light of the Upaniṣadic doctrine that ātman is Brahman, a doctrine as much a part of the home culture of early Buddhism as Second Temple Judaism was of early Christianity: so Buddhism had to develop an idea of no-self. The "hard ideas" in each of the traditions have been forged to be able to interpret a religious reality in some respect that the tradition requires.

Religions enter times of intellectual crisis when they seem to lack ideas they ought to have, or when old ideas that once seemed true now seem false—that is, they either fail to carry over anything in the right respect or carry over the wrong thing. The late-modern crises of the traditional religions we studied illustrate this point, a consistent theme of Saladin's chapters in all three volumes. No traditional religion today has good ideas properly polished to deal with the religious dimensions of the human relation to the environment, of distributive justice in global economics and politics, of human relations in the age of the internet, or even of the contemporary encounter of religious traditions. All are scrambling to catch up, reappraising old ideas and searching for new ones that faithfully extend the traditions into a new situation. Should we think it would have been much different in the historical periods we have studied?

8.5 Truth in Transformation

The opposition between religious truth claims as doctrine and the use of truth claims to effect soteriological results is difficult to overcome (see 7.7). It is decisively overcome, however, in the theory that truth (religious and otherwise) is the carryover of what is important in the object into interpreters in the respects in which ideas (signs, symbols, propositions, theories) interpret those objects. How so? In the carryover theory there is a spectrum of possible transformations of the interpreters, all of which can be "true" or "false" in the variety of senses of performative truth (i.e., depending on the relevant felicity conditions), but none of which can be taken to be truth-claims without assuming or making an analysis of the intentional shape of the carryover. The intentional shape of the carryover consists in how the conditions of interpretation (interpreter taking the object in respects determined by the ideas in theoretical and practical ways), reference (iconic, indexical and convention, extensional and intentional, primary and secondary), and meaning (coded interplaying systems, achieved as means to engage reality) obtain in the truth claim at hand. The spectrum of transformations runs from simple informing of the interpreter in terms already given to altering the interpreter's character in ways that have no immediate relevance to the descriptive content of the religious ideas. Sketching out some typical stages on this spectrum will illustrate the force of this point about religious truth.

First, the least transformative pole of the spectrum has a fully formed set of ideas and the truth claims merely make assertions and denials in
those terms. If the truth claims are arguments, or offer new evidence couched in the given terms, the transformation might be learning something new in addition to learning what is asserted or denied. The ideal described by Clooney, especially in 2.2, is for such a situation in which learning and debate take place exclusively within what logicians now would call well-formed formulae. This is the safest context in which it might be valid to speak of truth as applying to propositions alone without reference to the interpretive situation with the ambiguities of reference and meaning. Transformation at this pole of the spectrum is merely being informed, or grasping logical implications. At this pole, Aristotle's claim that the carryover from object to mind is of form alone is quite plausible. Truth claims at this pole of the spectrum, and the neighboring ones, are likely to be accompanied by considerable disquiet because it is recognized or felt that the precisely defined ideas screen out or distort something that should be carried over but is not. Truth claims are always focal points within a background, and the background can give clues about distortion. The distinction between kataphatic and apophatic theology formalizes this point.

Second, next along the spectrum is the situation in which the interpreter is learning, but has not yet become adept in, a preformed scholastic language. The transformations involved are not only those of being informed and alerted to inferences but those of adopting the habits of mind determined by the scholastic system of ideas.

Third, next is the situation in which a community of interpreters is attempting to develop a univocal set of ideas with universal application that can interpret reality in whatever respects any context of interpretation might intend; or, more realistically, to develop such a set of ideas for a limited domain of reality, for instance, theological topics as in chapter 2. The transformations involved at this stage along the spectrum are not only the acquisition and exercise of a univocal set of ideas but the invention of them, moving from relative confusion and parochial limitation to terms that can be used by anyone in the conversation with generally understood meaning. Actually, there are probably many stages on the spectrum that distinguish different degrees and senses of self-consciousness about this kind of transformation. These range from the relatively simple attempt to get everyone to agree on common definitions, to explicit awareness of what is given up when this kind of idea is used for theological purposes, to grand narratives and theories of theories that understand the roles of ideas in cognition and performance (such as this very discussion). Technical discussions of univocity versus analogy, of literal versus metaphorical assertions, of description and explanation versus evocation, and the like give rise to complex self-conscious multiplex approaches to theoretical truth.

Fourth, whereas the above three stages on the spectrum have emphasized the transformations effected as intellectual interpreters, those stages also might effect practical transformations. Debate within the first stage, for instance, might convince a theist that atheism is true, with the practical consequence that the interpreter should switch school-affiliations. Learning within the second stage might transform the interpreter into an adept and teacher within a community. Learning within the third stage might make the interpreter a more humble multiculturist. Learning what is true in any of the first three stages might have far-reaching consequences for how to live and build communities. If responsibilities are thereby incurred, their exercise is subject to appropriate felicity conditions, depending on the context. Likewise, appropriately contextual felicity conditions govern announcements of decisions to change community or school affiliations, apologies for past behavior, expressions of gratitude for kindnesses shown, and engagements in religious rituals, any of which may occur in conjunction with intellectual transformations.

Fifth, next along the spectrum of transformation come stages that are interpretations for the sake of building communities. These stages are not easily ordered among themselves. Religious ideas function normatively to shape many kinds of community, family, and religious groups, including entire societies shaped by many ideas in addition to religious ones. Intellectual interpreters are often important in community transformations, especially when there are serious questions about how to live and what to do. But equally important, and usually far more, are practical interpreters—family rituals for ancestors, meal-time prayers, the organization of community worship, institutions of handing on religious learning, religious effects on cultural ideals and social policies. Whereas we in our project have usually talked about this as embodied truth, actualized truth, or being true (personally as well as communally), the community side to it is perhaps more helpfully called faithfulness. This is, what is important in the religious object is carried over faithfully into the community in the respects intended by the ideas. This is a way of speaking about how the fidelity conditions for these kinds of truthfulness are importantly different from those associated more directly with individual transformations.

The work of cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and theologians such as George Lindbeck has sometimes been construed to mean that truthfulness is merely a matter of the consistency and thoroughness with which a community's life is organized according to its system of ideas or symbols, broadly construed.25 This is, there is no truth as carryover from the real object into the belief and practice of the
community. But this inference need not be drawn, and surely ought not be drawn in Lindbeck’s case. The situation with respect to truth claims is that reality can indeed be engaged by a community and interpreted with its cultural-linguistic semiotic, and that interpretation is true if the community’s response is faithful to what is important in its real object. The cultural-linguistic system might register the truth-claims as mere information or logical discovery; people in the religious community might learn their cultural-linguistic system better by attending to the truth claims; and the cultural-linguistic system itself might evolve, as surely all such systems have.

Sixth, beyond these stages are transformations of communities in which the practical interpreters are as before, that is, things that conform the community to what is important in the religious reality in the respects in which the ideas represent such reality, but in which the intellectual interpreters are not descriptive, strictly speaking. The intellectual interpreters rather are symbols from scriptures or liturgies or other imaginative sources that are used but not themselves much interpreted. Those symbolic interpreters are often themselves arranged in systems and given a rational order. But their context of use is more local than the more nearly universal ideas discussed earlier. Their metaphors are particular to their context. They often articulate a narrower cultural world than their interpreters in fact inhabit, as when an interpreter enters into an ancient ritual whose terms do not relate to contemporary political, social, and cognitive ideals. Such narrow symbolic systems would not be called true in a descriptive sense, an ideal to which the more philosophic literal functions previously discussed aspire. But they are true in a profound sense if the communities formed by them, for instance, as liturgies form a worshipping community, are transformed by their carrying over of what is important in the religious object. That is, the applicable felicity conditions for true transformation in such cases may be so dominantly matters of communal formation and participation that descriptive adequacy becomes negligible in importance. Of course it is difficult to tell when such a true transformation takes place. In the case of more theoretical forms of truth claims, the claims themselves and their surrounding arguments are the relevant places to look, although it is far better to find corroborating evidence from many different angles too. In the case of practical community transformations by religious ideas that are not specifically true considered in their own intent, only corroborating evidence from other sources is possible. A Buddhist would judge the appropriateness of upaya and a Christian would look for “fruits of the spirit,” in St. Paul’s phrase. In the same way, the judgment of the truth of a community’s practical interpretation of a liturgy or a scripture invokes complex criteria that derive from deep within the tradition in question, having survived the test of time. Felicity conditions of this sort do not appear from out of thin air. They are forged in corporate experience and win their authority there.

The virtue of at least some of these local ideas or symbol systems is that they are able to carry over kinds of importance that the more theoretical ideas cannot. The impotent religion of the French Revolution showed the limitation of using relatively abstract and universal language for conveying religious truth important for concrete communities. The local ideas and symbol systems not only convey more vivacity than do abstractions but also those aspects of particular identity, history, and locale that are important in different ways for different religions.

There are many models for the relation of the more abstract and theoretical ideas to the more local symbol systems. In some situations, the more abstract interpret the more local in a wider context; in many religions, however, there are histories of the interpretation of the abstractions and independent histories of the interpretation of the local symbols with little reference to the abstractions. Another model is that the abstractions characterize sophisticated thought and the more local ones popular religion. Another model is that the abstractions allow communication between religious communities, as discussed in chapter 2, whereas the more local terms facilitate concrete personal and communal religious commitment and life. No simple model is helpful for long; Śaṅkara, one of the most abstract of all religious thinkers, accessible to nineteenth-century Englishwomen as well as to his own comrades, cited the local Vedas as his source and authority. In all the religions we studied, there have been complex interactions between the more theoretical intellectual interpreters and the more local intellectual interpreters.²⁶

Seventh, yet farther along the spectrum, reaching now the other pole, are personal transformations in what might be called the life of the devotee in which the practical interpreters are completely separated from the intentional content of the intellectual interpreters. In the previous case, there is at least supposed to be a continuity between the local ideas and the more abstract universal ones: for Thomas Aquinas, that God is the Act of Esse which was supposed to be a conceptualization of the same God who talked and bartered with Abraham. Religions sometimes express this continuity in the form of controversial tensions, with advocates for the local ideas and their community embodiment, such as Bernard of Clairvaux in the Christian Medieval period, differing with the more abstract thinkers. In the present case of transformations on the spectrum, however, that continuity is abandoned. Ideas contemplated in devotional meditation are often wholly fantastical and exaggerated. Tibetan Buddhists who
contemplate pictures of ugly armed goddesses wearing skulls are hoping to be awakened; they are not affirming that emptiness is like an ugly goddess. A Zen kōan is contemplated not for its answer but for its awakening surprise. Whether the devotional ideas function truly, carrying across what is important for the devotee, is extremely difficult to judge. In this case, the appropriate felicity conditions are embedded within the complex traditions of spiritual discernment in all the religions we studied. Moreover, the application of these felicity conditions is at least as much the task of the individual as of a community to which he or she may belong. This brings to the relevant felicity conditions the greatest possible degree of flexibility.

All along this spectrum, from theology classroom to hermit’s hut, religious ideas can be understood as true if they carry across what is important in the object they interpret to the interpreter in the respects in which they stand for that object. By carrying something across, they transform the interpreter with effects as slight as transferring data to as mighty as enlightenment and holiness.

A final and crucial point about transformation needs to be made. A religious idea can be transformative only when the interpreter is ready for it. Only when the interpreter is ready for the transformed real object can the transformative interpretation be made. As previously argued, this requires the interpreter to be at the right stage of life, in the right spiritual and psychological state of soul, and with the right culture (which involves having the right ideas or signs available). In the case of theoretical transformations at the beginning of the spectrum above, this might not mean much more than learning a theological vocabulary. But in the communal and personal devotional stages of the transformative spectrum, readiness is more complicated. Traditions of spiritual discernment include awareness of the proper timing of transformations, inviting patience on the part of adepts and students alike; devotional and even communal transformation has its seasons. This is a key feature of felicity conditions for transformative truth.

For all of our traditions it is probably fair to say that the deepest religious ideas have many levels of access, and that the truth applicable at any level depends on the interpreter being at that level. As Edward Conze pointed out, decades of yogic practice might be required to make a serious judgment about the validity of an important religious idea. He contrasted this with graduate education in the sciences in which a few short years can suffice for learning both criteria for judgment and decent taste. As scholars, we in this project are not so modest as to assume that we have no depth of yogic insight into the profound ideas we study and compare. On the other hand, none of us pretends to be an adept at an esoteric level in any of our traditions. So our comparative judgments are complicated yet again.

Are the ideas we compare, and the senses of truth attached to them, at comparable levels of spiritually transformed understanding? We have no good way of answering that question. We have taken the methodological dodge of not raising the issue and assuming that we have the level of understanding typified in the latest scholarly literature. This has us up for criticism by an adept in any of the traditions who tells us, “You just don’t get it!” Truth to tell, each of us has been tempted to say this (and many succumbed to the temptation) to others of our group attempting to represent our favorite tradition or text; this happened more at the beginning than at the end of the project. This applies even to the theory of truth presented in the present chapter: our group is not in uniform agreement with it. Although it does connect the theoretical discussions in each tradition with the performative, which our group judges to be a virtue, various among our number would weigh the felicity conditions we have discussed differently than this chapter has. Some would place even greater stress on spiritual disciplines and discernment. Others would point out that our self-referential entanglement in these religious traditions changes the felicity conditions for our own work, drawing in spiritual dimensions that scholars tend to marginalize when it is themselves rather than others under examination. In the long run, however, we all acknowledge that first-order religious ideas are believed to be true by those who hold them, and that the traditions themselves have second-order ways of accounting for this, ways that were discussed in the previous chapter.

Notes

1. For an intriguing survey of contemporary philosophy of religion in relation to its eighteenth-century sources, see Eugene Thomas Long, God, Reason and Religions (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995). This volume is a reprint of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, vol. 38, 1995. What is astounding about the collection of essays by distinguished American philosophers of religion is that they mainly take Christianity to be the religious of analysis; in this they are no different from their eighteenth-century ancestors such as David Hume. Neville's contribution to the volume shows how the first volume of the journal, in 1970, sparked studies of other religions by an international group of scholars, whereas the later volumes returned to a more Christian and epistemological orientation. The moral of this, in light of the great burgeoning of religious studies, is that philosophy of religions at such is much broader than the technical craft of philosophy of religion, as it is usually expressed in recent issues of that journal.

5. See *Ultimate Realities*, chapters 7 and 9, for a discussion of precisely what is meant by justification of comparative categories.


10. Religious naturalism is a typical position within American pragmatism. It generally means a causal continuity among things. Its objection to supernaturalism is not to transcendent deities, spirits, or parapsychic phenomena, all of which have been of great interest to Peirce, James, and others. It is rather to the claim that such religious entities can be separate from nature and still act within it. Pragmatic naturalists have usually been anxious to define natural processes in non-mechanical ways. Peirce, for instance, modeled natural causation on interpretation. Whitehead offered a different account of natural processes that he called organismicism. Neville, in *Recovery of the Measure*, develops an extensive philosophy of nature that connects semiotic causation with other kinds, and gives an account of intentional reality consonant with the claim that truth is the carryover of value from the object into the interpreter in the respects in which the signs in the interpretation stand for the object. The difficulty with philosophical non-mechanistic reconstructions of natural processes is that they are difficult to coordinate with scientific representations of nature, which usually aim to be mechanistic. The importance of Wildman and Brothers, op. cit., is that it folds neurophysiological mechanism into a Peircean theory of natural process so that it is possible to speak of brain conditions being experiential and interpretive.

2. See J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume XX (1946): 173ff, in which he uses ideas that the preface to the famous *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) says were formed in 1939. Austin 1962 introduces a number of important terms, including "speech act" and "illocutionary act." Stating is a kind of illocutionary act to which considerations of truth and falsity apply but there are a great many others illocutionary acts. He tentatively lists five classes: "the verdictive is an exercise of judgment, the expository an assertion of influence or exercising of power, the commissive is an assuming of an obligation or declaring of an intention, the behavitative is the adopting of an attitude, and the expositive is the clarifying of reasons, arguments, and communications." (Austin, *How to Do Things*, 163). Each has its own ways of being felicitous or infelicitous; for instance, behavitative such as apologies or expressions of sympathy may be sincere or insincere. The illocutionary force of an utterance crucially depends on context and background; different illocutionary acts can be achieved in the same utterance, depending on context.

3. These philosophers include P. Geach, P. Grice, R. M. Hare, and P. E. Strawson. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953) also belongs to this tradition. In some respects this book continues the philosophical attitudes of his earlier *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), but it is a dramatic reversal in other ways. In particular, the later work abandons the earlier work's rigid approach to meaning, as well as all theories of meaning that focus on sense and reference, looking instead toward the use of language as the source of its meaning. The "meaning is use" motto characterizes the work of many of these philosophers. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), launches an appreciative attack on the vagueness of this motto and the fallacies to which it leads. Where Austin analyzed and classified speech acts, Searle offers a relatively comprehensive theory of language as a rule-governed form of behavior, including much sophisticated and consistent analyses of the conditions of adequacy of many kinds of speech acts. The attempt to analyze the conditions of adequacy of religious speech acts defines the principal sense in which our own project is a continuation of this philosophical tradition.


12. The “qualification by material, cultural, semiotic, and purpose” is necessary to acknowledge continuities and discontinuities along the causal route of caregiving. How can a holy mountain or an intangible Daoist spirit get carried over into a human being with a meat brain? By being transformed into a different material with a cultural and semiotic shape and activated by purpose. Without such qualifications, brute causality, physical or spiritual, cannot be grasped intentionally. For an analysis at length, see Neville, *Recovery of the Measure*, chaps. 3–4.


14. Peirce’s theory of signs is extremely complex. He developed it in many places, often as an aside in dealing with other topics. The most focused discussion is in Peirce, “Speculative Grammar,” *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1932). The theoretical discussion of reference is in chapter three of that book, “The Icon, Index, and Symbol.” Peirce used the word “sign” to mean all kinds of significant items, and the word “symbol” to mean signs that refer through conventional means. To preserve the specialized meanings of “symbol” in religious contexts, we use “convention” for what Peirce meant by “symbol.” Moreover, though “idea” has the same technical range as Peirce’s “sign” (for us as well as for Plato), we will usually use “sign” more specifically and “idea” more vaguely.


16. Plato’s Charmides and Euthydemus are his delightful comic discussions of language and the flow of reality. *The Republic* is the masterpiece of argument to the effect that we need to acknowledge unchanging forms in order to deal with practical politics and the ordering of personal life in a world of constant change. Plato’s prime concern was with the concrete reality of “becoming” rather than the static formal world of “being.” Later thinkers, beginning with Aristotle, would give pride of place to being over becoming.


18. See Chad Hansen’s *A Taoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, and “Term-Belief in Action,” the latter of which is a compact summary of his main point.

19. This is the view Wittgenstein attributes to Augustine (falsely) at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* (2) and against which he launches his theory of language games.

20. For a more complete analysis of this technical distinction, see Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, 32–47.

21. On this claim that religious ideas are often conceptions or resonances of symbols participating in many symbols systems at once, systems not quite coordinated and perhaps even contradictory, see ibid., chap. 3.


