

# Symbols of Living Faith

. . . [E]ven the highest religious truth must remain attached to sensuous existence, to the world of images as well as things. It must continuously immerse and submerge itself in this existence which its intelligible purpose strives to cast off and reject—because only in this existence does religious truth possess its expressive form and hence its concrete reality and efficacy.

—Ernst Cassirer<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Its great wings outstretched, the brown pelican spirals in the thermal air. Scarcely a flicker of those magnificent wings is required for it to soar further and further aloft. Finally reaching an apogee of the spiral, it gently banks and slowly descends, only to be uplifted again in its circling flight. The pelican's course through the air, its feet tucked behind its breast and its giant beak thrust boldly before it, seems effortless. It is not seeking to spot a school of fish, for its flight is presently over land, not sea, although near a bay adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico. It exhibits no clear purpose beyond that of sheer enjoyment and play. For me, at that moment, this pelican's flight is a compelling symbol of the numinous powers, presences, and wonders of the natural order to which we both miraculously belong.

The full significance of this haunting symbol cannot be adequately translated or communicated in words, although I use words here as a halting way of pointing to that significance. Experience of it is something felt in the depth of one's being, something that holds profoundly and undeniably *true* although its truth cannot be simply asserted as a

kind of propositional fact or reduced to a set of descriptive statements. Its symbolic meaning is nondiscursive but profoundly evocative. Roles of various symbols of this and other types are what I wish to explore in this book, especially as they relate to religious naturalism and the version of it I call Religion of Nature.

To date, I have devoted three books, the concluding chapter of another book, and several articles to setting forth, explaining, and defending Religion of Nature and important aspects of it, doing so in a largely discursive, argumentative, and propositional manner.<sup>2</sup> But no deeply relevant and meaningful religion can live on explicit doctrines alone. A living faith cries out for nondiscursive, allusive, but richly insightful symbolic modes of expression and enactment. Doctrinal statements have their place, but they cannot substitute for the symbols whose meanings surpass and lie beyond explicit doctrinal exposition and are nevertheless fertile sources of insight and understanding from which the doctrinal expositions may often take their point of departure and back to which they may continue to refer.

Doctrinal statements are themselves, of course, an important and indispensable type of symbolic usage, in the broad sense of that term. Like all assertive and argumentative language, they contain words and phrases as symbolic designations of meaning and reference, and they incorporate syntactical and logical rules and forms as ways of relating words and their meanings to one another. But I want to reserve the term *symbol* in this book for expressions of nondiscursive, nonpropositional, nonassertive types of meaning. This definitional strategy will enable me to avoid repeated and awkward use of these qualifiers or delimiters as I proceed. This book's readers should keep in mind this stipulated, restricted definition of the term. Specific types and varieties of religious symbols and symbolic meanings will be brought into view as the book unfolds.

As philosopher Ernst Cassirer points out in the epigraph to this chapter, there is an ongoing tension in religious thought between the instinctive endeavor to apprehend the "intelligible purpose" of such symbolizations by arriving at adequate doctrinal or propositional statements of their meanings, on the one hand, and the stubbornly embodied forms of those meanings which this endeavor strives to capture and thus to supersede, on the other. But seeking to cast aside the latter in the name of the former is foolish and futile, because this would be to leave behind vital dimensions of meaning which can only be exhibited and contained in the "concrete reality and efficacy" of the sensuous symbolic forms. These concrete forms can have profound *cognitive* significance, I shall claim

throughout this book, but it is not the sort of knowledge or awareness that can be adequately conveyed by even the most skillful and precise prosaic exposition. It is a type of significance that is crucial and irreplaceable for religious sensitivity and understanding. To confuse symbolic meaning with literal meaning, moreover, is to make a grave mistake. To do so is not only to lose sight of the kind of meaning which only symbolic expressions can convey, it can also distort that meaning in radically misleading ways.

I do not want to disparage the proper employment of discursive interpretations of symbols. Such interpretations can be essential aids to discovering and clarifying aspects of the symbols' significance. We can speak *about* religious symbols and their distinctive meanings, as I propose to do throughout this study, but my basic point is that there is no substitute for direct experience of these meanings or for full engagement with the symbols' sensuous forms. The concrete, nondiscursive character of religious apprehension has a crucial role to play. It clearly has continued to do so for other religious outlooks and commitments, and it can do so for Religion of Nature. Addressing the question of how and in what ways it can do so is my principal task in this book.

### Back to the Pelican

Let me now return to the soaring flight of the pelican and my response to it as a proponent of Religion of Nature. I can try to explain in the form of verbal statements some ways in which this event is religiously meaningful to me. It is a reminder that I, the pelican, and all other living beings, human and nonhuman, share in a universe that has enabled us to come into being and to live in accordance with the distinctive traits and capabilities nature has conferred on our respective species. The pelican is my fellow creature, and I have both the privilege and responsibility of respecting and reverencing its life and the environmental conditions essential to its life. The pelican's effortless flight is a telling token of the remarkable fecundity of nature and of the marvel of its multifarious, intricately interdependent creations and manifestations. It brings into vivid awareness the evolutionary processes that have formed this universe over billions of years and that have given rise to the fundamental constituents, constants, and laws of nature and to the multiple forms of inorganic matter, life, and conscious life on this earth. It is a symbol of the wondrous complexity of the material processes that make life and consciousness possible.

The pelican's flight bespeaks the exuberance and joy of life. It is an image of hope, aspiration, and freedom. It shows that we do not live by bread alone (since the pelican is not presently looking for fish) but by grateful celebration of the gift of life and all that it makes possible. It tells us that there is not only a place for play in life but that play is an essential part of life if it is to be lived to its fullest. It reminds us that the free play of imagination has given rise to many of our most impressive cultural, theoretical, and technological achievements as human beings.

But the pelican's flight also symbolizes for me a darker, more precarious side of life in general and especially of nonhuman life forms that can be adversely affected by the choices, actions, and enterprises of human beings and human institutions. A striking illustration of this observation is the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 that caused nearly five million barrels of crude oil to flow directly into the Gulf of Mexico, the same Gulf that is this pelican's immediate environment and source of food. The spill was finally contained after causing the deaths—and often agonizing deaths—of countless forms of sea birds and aquatic life, but the oil source involved continues to the day of this writing to seep from the seabed and to take a destructive toll on sea creatures and their environs in or near the Gulf. The pelican's flight stirs up feelings of sadness and regret for this and similar anthropogenic encroachments and disasters, and it engenders a mood of apprehension for the future of nonhuman life forms on earth whose continuing well-being is critically dependent on the attitudes and actions of human beings.

When I was telling one of my granddaughters about my experience of the pelican's flight, she reminded me that imagery of the pelican has long been a symbol in Christianity of Christ's self-sacrifice and shedding of blood in atonement for the sins of the world. This is so because it was believed that in times of famine the mother pelican would pierce her breast with her bill in order to obtain her own blood for the feeding of her hungry chicks. I shall return to this imagery when talking about the entwined roles of minor and major religious symbols later in this chapter.

But none of these statements or others I could make in connection with my observation of the pelican's flight, nor all such statements taken together, can do justice to the firsthand experience itself and all that it meant to me at that time and continues to mean. The experience and what occasioned it are a powerful evocation, expression, and refining of my faith as a religious naturalist, and the meanings, associations, and ramifications of that faith outstrip verbal descriptions. The religious

meanings are somehow contained in the sensuous image of the soaring bird, encapsulated or summed up in it in ways I am not able with any number of verbal statements fully to elaborate or explain.

If you want to know what my faith means to me, one of the most adequate ways in which I can try to make you aware of its meaning is simply to point you to that splendid creature, nonchalantly rising and falling on motionless wings in invisible currents of air. In the last analysis I am only able to say, "There, don't you see! This is what the sacredness of nature means, all that it bestows on us, invites us to ponder, and requires of us!" Yet the "only" of this sheer linguistic pointing is somehow, in its symbolic, elusive, statement-defying power, everything I want or need to say. What I can be said to know partly by means of this event of nature—a single aspect symbolically representative of nature's immense whole—I know with every fiber of my being, at the deepest levels of emotion, mind, and will. It is an intensely personal, transformative, revelatory way of knowing, not merely a conceptual one. My words about it are faltering and imprecise. The symbol itself and many other sensuous forms that function in ways akin to it are packed with unspeakable significance. Let us consider some of the types of religious symbols to be found in various traditions.

### Some Types of Religious Symbolization

Religious symbols and symbolizations can be of many different kinds. They can be *aspects or events of nature*, whether spectacular or ordinary. For example, the eruption of a volcano, a violent earthquake, an eclipse of the sun, the quiet bubbling of a brook, a vista of stately mountain peaks, the tireless spinning of a spider, the stalwart stance of an ancient oak tree whose gnarled branches are wreathed with resurrection ferns and draped with Spanish moss, or the serene soaring of a pelican can arouse and give expression to religious sensibilities. The sun's radiance and warmth; cooling, refreshing, and restorative rain; the mysterious depths of the starry night; the cycles of the seasons; the welcome annual floods of a river essential to agriculture; the times of planting and harvesting; the migration patterns of animals; the births, maturations, and deaths affecting all living beings—these and other aspects of nature can function as religious symbols, as can the terrifying lightning and crashing thunder of a severe storm that calls attention to the awesome forces of nature with which human beings and all other life forms must contend.

The respiration or breath essential to all aerobic forms of life has become a symbol of the inner, life-giving spirit of humans and also of the nature, presence, and influence of the religious ultimate. The term *spirit* is itself derived from the Latin term *spirare*, meaning “to breathe.” Prior to the creation of the world, “the spirit [Hebrew: *ruach*, meaning “breath, wind, or spirit”] of God hovered over the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2), and “the breath of life” (Hebrew: *naphesh hayya*) is breathed into the nostrils of Adam by God after Adam is formed from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). The Greek word *pneuma*, which literally means *breath*, is widely used in the New Testament for the Holy Spirit, which came later to be regarded as the third Person of the Divine Trinity. The Chinese term *ch’i* which figures prominently in Daoism and Confucianism as a term for the active force or energy that pervades the universe and every living thing has as its literal meaning *breath, air, or gas*. The term *inspiration* means etymologically a kind of “breathing in” of empowering knowledge and awareness, and the Hebrew and Christian Bibles are regarded by Jews and Christians as divinely *inspired*. Muslims have a comparable view of the Qur’an.<sup>3</sup>

The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad of Hinduism contains a passage that responds to the question, “Just how many gods are there?” with the answer, “One,” and then goes on to state that this one is “Breath. . . . They [the sages] call him Brahman, the Yon.”<sup>4</sup> Another passage in the same Upanishad speaks of the cosmic Self or Brahman as having “breathed forth” all the wisdom, lore, doctrines, explanations, commentaries, sacred texts, and hymns of Hindu faith.<sup>5</sup> Breath is thus, in all the usages cited in this and the preceding paragraph, a fitting symbol of the innermost nature of the human being, the creative power that produces and animates the universe, and the revelatory source of sacred texts. Breath has an intimacy, indispensability, vitality, and pervasive quality that suit it for these roles.

Religious symbols can reflect *historical settings or ways of life*, as when a deity or deities are represented as shepherds, suzerains, judges, or kings, when they are portrayed as mounted on horses or riding in chariots, or when they are accorded distinctive roles related to the practices of warfare, agriculture, manufacturing, homemaking, or hunting of a particular time. Such symbols are often also drawn from *family life*, as when a deity or deities are represented as mother, father, daughter, or son, or when deceased ancestors are believed to continue to have important relations with and to impose significant obligations on those of their relatives who are presently alive. Shrines to these ancestors and rites of fealty honoring them are then required.

*Imagined heroic quests* beset by arduous challenges and trials, such as Gilgamesh's endeavor to find the secret of eternal life, Odysseus's ten-year journey toward his homeland, Jason and the Argonauts' pursuit of the Golden Fleece (with the help of Medea), Galahad's search for the Holy Grail, and Pilgrim's progress can symbolize the dedication, patience, courage, and hope required for an authentic religious life, together with the trials it must anticipate, confront, and overcome. These traits of character and aspiration are not so much described as dramatically embodied and exemplified in the whole sweep of such narratives. Such quest stories may be first imagined by an individual—perhaps in some cases loosely based on actual persons and events—but they can be subsequently refined by other individuals, elaborated on and progressively expanded by repeated oral recitations, and eventually incorporated into the lives and outlooks of whole communities through time.

*Historical events* such as the Jewish flight from Egypt late in the second millennium BCE or the trial and crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans in the first century CE can come to have powerful symbolic significance and to be regularly commemorated and celebrated in rituals such as the annual Passover Meal in Judaism or Good Friday and Easter services and the Eucharist in Christianity. The flight (Hijra) by Mohammed and his followers from persecution in Mecca to Medina in 622 CE is celebrated annually as the first day of the Muslim year, and events relating to Mohammed's earnest religious quest and announced receipt of the revelations of the Qur'an are similarly reflected upon and celebrated by Muslims. These events are not just regarded as historical occurrences in the three religions I have mentioned, although they do have undeniable importance simply as such. They have come to have pronounced symbolic meaning as well.

The resolute faith and commitment of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed is symbolically enshrined in the recounting of these and other events in their lives, in legendary or mythical accretions that may have come to be associated with their lives, and in the subsequent regular celebrations of the events, showing that the *lives and missions, ordeals and triumphs of persons*, especially of those who serve as major founders or leaders of emerging religious traditions, can be of deep symbolic significance for adherents of the traditions. They serve as iconic exemplifications of the religious life and its ideals. Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh acknowledges the importance to Buddhists or Christians of faith in "the wonderful, universal Buddhas" or in the resurrected Christ and eternity, but he insists that "the

examples of the actual lives of the Buddha and Jesus are most important, because as human beings, they lived in ways that we can live, too."<sup>6</sup> What the great religious leaders I have mentioned and others like them represent and mean to their followers cannot be adequately captured in verbal statement or analysis. It needs also to be conveyed in story, legend, myth, and ritual, and in the concrete exemplification and symbolization of the course of the great religious leader's life.

*Books or writings* that come to have the role of sacred texts constitute, not just in their specific contents but in their overall character and importance, a significant type of religious symbol. Torah, New Testament, Qur'an, Upanishads, Analects, Dao De Jing, and other texts are to be revered and treated with special care. Each text in its turn helps to symbolize a whole way of life for those who find in it central religious inspiration, guidance, and meaning. The singular, inimitable beauty and revelatory power claimed by pious Muslims for the style of Arabic writing in the holy Qur'an is alleged by them to be outstanding proof of its divine inspiration and origin. Taken as a whole, it and other sacred texts are evocative symbols in their own right.<sup>7</sup>

Sacred *places* also have symbolic force and character. Mount Olympus and the oracle at Delphi were sacred for the ancient Greeks. Jerusalem is sacred ground for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with its Jewish Temple Mount, Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and Muslim Dome of the Rock. Saranath, outside the city of Banaras (Varanasi) in India, is where Gautama Buddha first taught his disciples and where the oldest known stupa, the gigantic Dhamek stupa, is located. Banaras itself is a holy city for Hindus. Numerous ritual cremations take place below its ghats that descend to the sacred Ganges River. Mecca, with its Ka'aba shrine, is the destination of pilgrimage for all able Muslims at a special time of the year, at least once in their lifetime. The Vatican in Rome, with its St. Peter's Cathedral, is a holy site for Roman Catholics and also a pilgrimage destination. Constantinople (or Istanbul), with its Sacred Wisdom (*Hagia Sophia*) Cathedral<sup>8</sup> and Blue Mosque, has served historically as a holy city for Christians and Muslims. To travel toward, to wander about in, and to meditate in such places can mean experiencing a special closeness or presence of the focus of religious commitment, whatever that might be for an individual traveler or group. Experiencing the site at firsthand can be to sense that closeness and presence in an especially powerful manner, but such sites can have symbolic meaning even when at great distances



from religious adherents. The five daily Islamic prayers, for instance, are oriented toward Mecca, and Jews and Christians sing of Zion.

Religious symbols can also take the form of *creation stories*, expressively noting the origins of all things, the primordial character and subsequent development of these things, and especially the place of humans in the universe. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the creation account in the Book of Genesis, and the Daoist *Chaung Tzu's* depiction of the world's ongoing creation by K'ung the fish's transformation into P'ung the bird, "mysteriously moving from darkness to darkness, from north to south, year to year,"<sup>9</sup> are examples. Hindu stories of the world's creation, preservation, and destruction, ceaselessly giving rise to new world cycles, are associated with Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. The dance of Shiva depicted throughout India in sculpture, painting, and architectural ornament as well as in human dance ceremonies is the endless dance of creation and destruction—evil, worn-out, used-up worlds being replaced by better, fresher, more vigorous ones. Shiva's lingum or phallus is symbolic of the inexhaustible source of all the worlds' energy and its powers of creation and destruction. Of great symbolic significance in Zoroastrianism are accounts of the creation of an entirely good world by Ohrmazd, and an entirely evil one by Ahriman, these counterworlds to be used by the two deities as respective weapons in their cosmic battle against one another.

A more recent example of a religious creation story is the allegation of profound religious meaning in current scientific accounts of the origin of our universe in the Big Bang and its stages of development thereafter, including those that led to our own evolution as a species. A book published in the early 1990s by mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme and cultural historian Thomas Berry sets forth the scientific creation story and explores its mythic significance for contemporary human life.<sup>10</sup>

Religious symbols can take the form of *parables* that express important aspects of a particular religious outlook on the world. For example, the parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–31), the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3–7), and the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) in the Christian gospels can be interpreted as emphasizing the unconditional gift of God's grace, while the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30) can be interpreted as emphasizing the requirement for appropriate human responses to the workings of that grace or even as stressing the need to earn and be worthy of that grace. A paradoxical relation of unconditional grace and a necessary condition of human effort and accomplishment

for the appropriation of that grace is thus suggested. Such parables capture in the form of stories aspects of religious outlook and life that are memorably and forcibly—even if sometimes elliptically and puzzlingly—conveyed. They may seem simple on the surface but often contain hidden depths.

The Hebrew Bible's book of Second Samuel (12:1–15) recounts a parable told by the prophet Nathan to David the King of Israel whose import is subsequently made crystal clear. The parable recounts the flagrantly unjust action of a rich man with many flocks and herds against a poor one, namely, his commandeering of the latter's only ewe lamb in order to slaughter it and serve it as part of a meal for a visitor. David initially reacts to the parable with an upsurge of anger and smug condemnation of the rich man. When he is informed by Nathan that the parable applies to him on account of his taking Bathsheba as his wife after arranging for her husband to be killed in battle, the parable's application to his own life is suddenly revealed to him. He is stricken with dreadful awareness of the magnitude of his sin and of divine judgment on his sin. The parable has this symbolic effect in a way that a mere literal denunciation of his action would probably not have. It jolts him into stark awareness of the character and consequence of his deed that he had hitherto put at the back of his mind.

*Paradoxical expressions* of various kinds can often have symbolic significance for religious thought even though on a purely literal level they look like contradictions. To dismiss them as mere contradictions, therefore, is to misunderstand their symbolic meaning. The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity, for example, contains in suspension assertions of God's absolute oneness alongside assertions of God's triune nature, and the Doctrine of the Two Natures of Christ asserts both the identity of Christ with God and also Christ's full humanity. These paradoxes of one-in-three and God-man may be literally absurd, but they serve as indications that the radically transcendent character of God, on the one hand, and God's radically immanent relation to the human being Jesus, on the other. They stubbornly defy, in their incomprehensible mystery, literal human comprehension. Each paradox contains two important things that must be said about God on the basis of belief in God's self-disclosure in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, where God was somehow able to assume human form and yet to be worshipped and prayed to as Father by that human being Jesus during his earthly life. These notions cannot be resolved into logically consistent conceptions or statements. They are

symbolically expressive not only *despite* but precisely *because of* their literal incoherence and tensional, paradoxical nature. Their meaning is not of a literal kind but of another kind.

The essential role of paradox as a way of deepening understanding on one level, while defying it, on the other, is often noted and stressed in the Hindu scriptures. For example, the Isa Upanishad declares of Brahman-Atman that

It moves. It moves not.  
It is far, and It is near.  
It is within all this,  
And it is outside of all this.

A paradox of transcendence-immanence similar to the Christian one of Christ as God-man is thus posed. And the devout Hindu is told in this same Upanishad that the intuitive awareness to be gained when confronted with such paradoxes is both other than knowledge and other than non-knowledge.<sup>11</sup> It lies, this is to say, in a realm much deeper than ordinary modes of rationality or understanding, a realm that can be reached only by disciplined meditation and the direct insight and experience it affords. The paradox has a symbolic character. It suggests and alludes to a profound truth that cannot be consistently stated.

A type of paradox prevalent in one form of Zen Buddhism is the koan, which often takes the form of a dialogue between a student and a Zen master. The koan is not so much a puzzle to be solved as an object of meditation, and responses to it which are presented by the student at various times expose the stage of spiritual development of the student. The koan is designed to show that the deepest nature of things cannot be comprehended by reason or literal interpretation but only by years of meditational experience. Here is an example of one such koan, which I take from the Internet site "Zen Koans."<sup>12</sup>

Yamaoka Tesshu, as a young student of Zen, visited one master after another. He called upon Dokuon of Shokoku.

Desiring to show his attainment, he said, "The mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, after all, do not exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realization, no delusion, no sage, no mediocrity. There is no giving and nothing to be received."

Dokuon, who was smoking quietly, said nothing. Suddenly he whacked Yamaoka with his bamboo pipe. This made the youth quite angry.

“If nothing exists,” inquired Dokuon, “where did this anger come from?”

The precise sense of the central Buddhist idea of emptiness or *śūnyata* and its relations to ordinary perceptual experience have been much discussed and debated in the history of Buddhism and within different Buddhist schools. If sheer nonexistence is the final reality, as the student alleges, how can there be a student, the master, the whack of the master’s pipe, and the eruption of the student’s anger? And what sense can be made of the idea that *nonexistence*, if construed as the meaning of emptiness, *exists*? The student in the koan was confident that he had the right understanding of this issue, but he was chastised by the master for his cocksure naïveté. The student’s nihilistic interpretation showed that he was far from having an understanding of the matter’s elusive, perplexing quality, and the master’s reaction to his statement was a way of bringing this fact forcibly to his attention. The master does not resolve the conundrum he poses. He leaves it to the student to ponder and meditate upon. The paradox to which he calls attention is a symbolic invitation to continuing reflection and deepening experience, not to conceptual resolution.

*Rituals* are of paramount importance as symbolic enactments of religious outlooks and expressions of religious praise, devotion, obedience, thankfulness, confession, repentance, and petition. The seven sacraments in Roman Catholicism and the two in Protestantism; services marking the liturgical year in Christian churches; enactments of the stations of the cross in Christianity; the practice of Monastic Hours in Christian monasteries and nunneries; festivals of the Jewish year; Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant services of worship; the Muslim five daily prayers; the journey to Mecca and seven circulations of the Ka’aba in the Islamic Hajj; rituals associated with monastic life in Buddhism; the removal of one’s shoes and wearing appropriate garb before entering a Hindu temple; the four-day Hindu Festival of Lights; washing and other purification rites; rain dances; war dances; dances of planting and harvest; dances or other rituals celebrating the rising and setting of the sun or seasons of the year; rituals oriented to the cardinal points of the compass; rituals of the Day of the Dead in Mexican Catholicism; rituals expressing piety toward one’s ancestors in Confucianism; rituals relating to birth, puberty, marriage, and

death; the tea ceremony in Zen Buddhism; the fire ritual in Zoroastrianism; rites of animal or human sacrifice—all of these are examples of the symbolic force and meaning of ritualistic practices. They are religious symbols in action.

A particularly striking ritual expressing the impermanence and transitoriness of all things, including the self—a central precept of Buddhism—is the Tibetan Buddhist practice of sand painting. Grains of sand of different colors are fashioned over days or weeks into a complex and beautiful picture or design. Then the picture or design is dumped with appropriate ceremony into a body of water, where the particles of sand return to their original form. The nature of all experienced entities, including the human self, as constituted of interdependent point instants that maintain a form or character only for limited periods of time (*pratityasamutpada*) and thus the related central Buddhist concepts of impermanence (*anicca*) and no-self (*anatman*) are dramatically symbolized in this way. These fundamental aspects of the Buddhist outlook are *shown* in the ritual more directly and convincingly than they can be propositionally *stated*. The process of making and then destroying the sand painting is an *enactment* of central Buddhist convictions that stir the depths of the adherent's awareness, expressing, clarifying, and confirming their truth in a powerful manner. The ritual has a vividness and immediacy about it that verbal descriptions, theoretical statements, and injunctions do not. Its meaning is not just contemplated but performed. In the words of philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, ritual in this case and in general is an "outer framework which both occasions and identifies an inner event,"<sup>13</sup> an inner event of activated religious awareness and devoted participation in religious significance and worth.

Many other types of religious symbols deserve mention. Buildings, gardens, paintings, sculpture, music, dramatic productions, myths, novels, poems, emblems, mandalas, and calligraphy can carry significant symbolic meaning for sharers in various kinds of religious outlook and commitment. I shall take particular notice of the close relations of meaning and overlaps of form between works of art and religious symbols in the next chapter. Totemic animals symbolize the character and cohesion of tribal communities, so closely in fact as for the members of those communities to think of themselves as one with the animal, and it with them. Hour glasses, candles, or clocks can symbolize the fleetingness of present moments and the religious need for security in face of the uncertainties, threats, and inevitabilities of the flow of time. Clocks also became

important symbols of the mechanistic view of the universe that came to the fore with Newtonian science and by implication of God as the awesome Mathematician and Designer of the intricate mechanical workings of the universe.

### Symbols of Evil

I should not fail to take notice of the critical importance of religious symbolizations of the presence and threat of *evil* in the world. Not all religious symbols are about joyfulness, thankfulness, goodness, and renewal. Many have to do with recognizing and warding off evils of various kinds. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” is a poignant petition of the *Pater Noster* or Lord’s Prayer in Christian devotion. The goddess Kali in Hinduism, with her horrible grimace, blood-drenched teeth, and garland of skulls is a symbol of destruction and evil in Hinduism, and regular rites of sacrifice are required to avoid the terrifying effects of her actions. Medusa in Greek religion; Satan, evil ghosts, and witches in Christianity; Mara in Buddhism; and Ahriman in Zoroastrianism are personifications of evil, as are the various kinds of demons and the stories of demonic possession in different religions. Satan tempts Jesus, and Mara tempts Gautama Buddha in Christian and Buddhist lore, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

The serpent in the Garden of Eden in Genesis is usually regarded as a symbol of insidious temptation to evil-doing and disobedience to God. This is so even though he provides accurate, if not entirely complete, information to Eve. In the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation in the New Testament, a snake or dragon is cast from heaven by the angel Michael and his hosts and identified as “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). The symbolism seems natural in a way in view of the fact that snakes slither menacingly across the ground or in brush where they cannot always be seen, hide in crevices, are often deadly poisonous, can sink their fangs with lightning speed, and are generally feared and avoided by humans and nonhuman animals.

But the symbolism of the snake happens to be highly ambiguous, functioning as an emblem of evil and good—and even predominately of good—in the religious outlooks of the ancient world, as biblical scholar James H. Charlesworth points out. He also discusses at some length the fact that the imagery of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wil-

derness in Numbers 21:4–9 is used as a type or analogue to Jesus’s being raised up on the cross in John 3:14–15. The use of this analogy in John’s gospel suggests that the serpent imagery has a positive role to play, and perhaps did so at one time in ancient Israel (cf. II Kings 18:4), despite its usual association in later Jewish and Christian theology with unequivocal evil.<sup>15</sup>

Bad-smelling, sulfurous fumes emitted by cracks in the ground can betoken the abode of the devil and his minions in the bowels of the earth, where they have been consigned in keeping with the myth of fallen angels. The chilling terror of the devil and his wiles is vividly portrayed in the New Testament when it describes him as prowling “around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour” (I Peter 5:8). Warding off or rendering harmless the temptations and actual or potential devastations of evil beings and forces can be a crucial part of religious observations and symbolizations. After the sacrifice of one goat, a second goat (the scapegoat) is sent off into the wilderness, ritualistically carrying away the sins and evils committed by individuals and the community in the Jewish *Yom Kippur* or Day of Atonement.

The struggle with evil forces, presences, and allurements of many different kinds—both individual and social—is a basic motif running through religions. An incisive way of understanding the nature of religion itself is to view it as a persistent exposure of the destructive menaces and corruptions of evil and as laying out a path and means of deliverance from them. Symbols of evil have a critical role to play in pointing out the direction and goal of this path and the formidable obstacles to be anticipated, encountered, and overcome while traveling on it.<sup>16</sup>

### Major and Minor Religious Symbols

Religious symbols are not all of equal importance. They run across a spectrum from symbols of what I term *master* and then of *major* importance to those of relatively *minor* significance. Master, major, and minor symbols are such because of their differences of scope, criticality, and evocative power in the religious traditions involved. I shall focus in this chapter on major and minor religious symbols and devote attention to master ones in Chapters 3, 5, and 6. Even minor religious symbols can call vivid attention, in their own distinctive fashion, to the most fundamental themes of religious outlook and commitment. They can do so because they are part

of a vast web of interrelated symbols, where attention to one of them can bring to mind associations with many of the rest of them, and especially with the major ones of them. The injunction in the Hebrew Bible to refrain from muzzling the ox that treads the grain (Deuteronomy 25:4) relates on the purely literal level to the treatment of one kind of animal. But it can be a symbolic reminder to practice justice and mercy toward even the lowliest of persons or beasts, and it can recall the justice, mercy, and loving kindness of the God who made a covenant with Abraham on behalf of the future people of Israel and delivered the forerunners of the Jewish nation from the harsh treatments of their servitude in Egypt. The mention of the rainbow as a token of God's earlier covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:13) and what were to become the people of Israel is a similarly minor symbolization that has an intimate connection with the greater ones in Judaism. Covenant and Exodus are major symbols in Judaism, while the injunctions regarding the ox and the rainbow symbols are not, but the latter have significant symbolic associations with the former in the context of Jewish faith and experience. It is interesting to note that the chapter in Deuteronomy in which the verse concerning the ox is contained concludes with reference to the flight from Egypt and journey toward the Promised Land.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter the image of the mother pelican piercing her breast with her beak to obtain her own blood as food for her chicks in a time when regular food is hard to come by. This symbol has become for Christians a relatively minor and yet favorite one calling attention to the far greater one in traditional Christianity of Christ shedding his blood on the cross to atone for the sins of human beings, and of his willing sacrifice of flesh and blood to be regularly enacted and recalled in the eating and drinking ceremony of the Eucharist. This is another example of how minor and major symbols can dovetail in religious traditions, the former bringing into a particular kind of focused attention the pervasive, more important significance of the latter.

Another example in this same connection is the relationship of the regular ancient Jewish altar sacrifices to God and the symbolism of God's sacrificing his only Son as a necessary atonement for all human sin. Here the relatively minor and later outmoded symbolic ritual of sacrificing a pigeon or lamb in the Jewish temple is brought into close relation with the major symbolism of Christ's crucifixion, the Lamb of God whose blood is shed for the sins of the world. The Sacrificial Theory of the Atonement, which seeks to explicate the salvific consequence of Christ's death, shows



how these two types of symbolization have been brought together. Even the relatively minor symbolism of the story of the Widow's Mite in the gospels (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4) can easily be seen as a token of or pointer to Christ's own supreme sacrifice. The poor widow gave "all the living she had"; Christ gave everything he had—his entire life.

A final example of minor and major symbols and their relationships is the story of the conversation with a roadside skull in the Daoist scripture the *Chaung Tzu*. The skull is a symbol of death, of course, but it is also a symbol of life, for life is lived in the face of the inevitability of death. The skull is nonchalant, happy, and cheerfully conversational in its death. And Daoism shows us how to be relaxed, joyful, grateful, and fulfilled in our lives even with full awareness of our impending deaths. Every night when we lie down to sleep, we lie down within our skulls, and all our thinking, experiencing, and planning takes place within our skulls. The story of the roadside skull is a relatively minor symbol within the whole of Daoism, but it ties in nicely with the major symbolism of the two cosmic aspects of *yin* and *yang* represented in the familiar conjoined teardrop shapes of the Daoist mandala or *Taijitu*. Life must be lived in the face of death. Yet we can be joyful when "we live as if we were already dead." The universe as a whole and everything in it exhibits the continuous coming and going of opposites (*yin* and *yang*), including the interpenetrating opposites of life and death.<sup>17</sup> Thus, religious symbols should not be thought of as standing apart and alone; they frequently make reference to one another. The relatively minor ones can point beyond themselves to the major ones, and all of them together can powerfully allude to the central commitments and lived truths of a religious tradition.

In this chapter I have provided examples of various kinds of religious symbolism and discussed their significances. In doing so, I have tried to suggest the great range of the types and roles of such symbols within religious traditions and call attention to their singular importance. In discussing the nondiscursive character of religious symbols, I do not want to imply that reason or rational analysis must be entirely ignored, set aside, or violated in recourse to symbolic meanings. Instead, symbols can complement and enhance thought and awareness, and render them more penetratingly reasonable. By their use, something deeper than or at least significantly different than discursive reasoning can be brought into perspective, a type of understanding whose meaning and truth lie beneath straightforward verbal expression and are more in touch with direct feeling, experience, and awareness. Here something is revealed and

made known in an immediate, intuitive, alert manner that would not have been so intensely grasped, recognized, or participated in through the use of linguistic abstractions.

Perhaps what I have in mind and am seeking to explain is something like suddenly grasping the punch line of a joke. To miss it is not to fail to understand the words or sentences of the joke, but it is to miss the joke's point. And religious symbols have a point—or better a meaning or complex of meanings—that mere verbal statements are unable to capture or convey. They are essential in religion because religion is primarily concerned with issues of *existential* significance and value, issues so complex and elusive, so fraught with profound emotional, volitional, personal, and spiritual consequence, that they have to be symbolically encountered or engaged, and not just addressed in a detached, coolly analytical manner. But once again, the relation between discursive and symbolic thought and expression is a complementary one, not an adversarial one. Each can provide essential religious insight and direction from its own perspective, and neither is adequate by itself. This notion will be probed in more depth and detail in the chapters to follow, particularly in its relations to the outlook and practice of Religion of Nature.