RITUAL AND RELIGION IN THE MAKING OF HUMANITY

Roy Rappaport argues that religion is central to the continuing evolution of life, although it has been displaced from its original position of intellectual authority by the rise of modern science. His book, which could be construed as in some degree religious as well as about religion, insists that religion can and must be reconciled with science. Combining adaptive and cognitive approaches to the study of humankind, he mounts a comprehensive analysis of religion's evolutionary significance, seeing it as co-extensive with the invention of language and hence of culture as we know it. At the same time he assembles the fullest study yet of religion's main component, ritual, which constructs the conceptions which we take to be religious and has been central in the making of humanity's adaptation. The text amounts to a manual for effective ritual, illustrated by examples drawn from anthropology, history, philosophy, comparative religion and elsewhere.

ROY RAPPAPORT taught at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor from 1965 until his death in 1997. He was President of the American Anthropological Association from 1987 to 1989. Among his many publications are *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968; revised edition 1984) and *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (1979).

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RITUAL AND RELIGION IN THE MAKING OF HUMANITY

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RITUAL AND RELIGION IN THE MAKING OF HUMANITY

ROY A. RAPPAPORT

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to four anthropologists who have very much influenced the ideas expressed in it and who have been otherwise important in my life and career. In the order in which they entered my life, they are:

Robert Levy
Eric Wolf
Mervyn Meggitt
Keith Hart

All of them have acted like elder brothers to me, even Keith who is many years my junior.

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Foreword

Emile Durkheim published *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie réligieuse* in 1912, on the eve of the First World War. The war consolidated a process which had been building up for at least three decades and which we can now see laid the foundations for the kind of society familiar to our twentieth-century world. This society was organized by and for centralized states, staffed by a professional class of scientific experts. Durkheim himself, as the principal founder of the discipline of sociology, had taken the lead in establishing the new sciences of society which would underpin the activities of this class. Yet in *The Elementary Forms* he posed an immense problem for the future of humanity. Science appeared to have driven religion from the field as a serious intellectual ground for the organization of society; but it could not perform the function of religion. This left a huge hole in the spiritual existence of modern people which Durkheim knew must be filled, but he himself was powerless to imagine how.

Roy Rappaport's book, the result of more than three decades' investigation into the relationship between religion, society and ecology, is, in my view, the first systematic attempt to address the question which Durkheim left unanswered. As such, it deserves to be seen as a milestone in the anthropology of religion comparable in scope to his great predecessor's work. For Rappaport is attempting here nothing less than to lay the groundwork for the development of a new religion adequate to the circumstances humanity will encounter in the twenty-first century. His stated aims are more modest, namely to review the anthropological evidence which might allow for a more comprehensive understanding of ritual as the practical matrix of religious life. But the unity of this work derives from his implicit desire to inform future attempts to construct a religion compatible with the scientific laws ruling a world for which humanity is ultimately responsible, as that part of life on this planet which is able to think.

Religion belongs to a set of terms which also includes art and science. It is a measure of the declining intellectual credibility of established religions that science, which began as a form of knowledge opposed to religious mysticism, is now most often opposed to the arts. If science may crudely be said to be the drive to know the world objectively and art is pre-eminently an arena of subjective self-expression, religion typically addresses both sides of the subject–object relationship by connecting what is inside each of us to something outside. Religion, etymologically speaking, binds us to an external force; it stabilises our meaningful interaction with the world, provides an anchor for our volatility.

Durkheim's concept of religion was consistent with this formulation, but it contained some radically distinctive elements. He divided experience into the known and the unknown. What we know is everyday life, the mundane features of our routine existence; and we know it as individuals trapped in a sort of private busy-ness. But this life is subject to larger forces whose origin we do not know, to natural disasters, social revolutions and, above all, death. We desperately wish to influence these unknown causes of our fate which we recognize as being both individual and collective in their impact; at the very least we would like to establish a connection with them. And so, for Durkheim, religion was the organized attempt to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, conceived of as the profane world of ordinary experience and a sacred, extraordinary world located outside that experience.

He recognized that we normally conceive of the sacred in terms of spiritual powers, summarized in the world religions as God. He proposed, however, that what is ultimately unknown to us is our collective being in society. We find it very difficult to grasp how our actions arise from belonging to others; and it is this property of collective life which is highlighted in the chief mechanism of religion, ritual. Through ritual, Durkheim argues, we worship our unrealized powers of shared existence, society, and call it God. Sometimes we objectify the spirit world as nature and worship that. This natural religion, associated at the time Durkheim wrote with the "totemism" of the Australian Aborigines, he considered to be the matrix of all systematic knowledge, including science. It was thus one of the tasks of *The Elementary Forms* to demonstrate that science springs from the same desire to connect the known and the unknown that spawned religion.

The chaos of everyday life, by this formulation, attains some stability to the degree that it is informed by ideas representing the social facts of a shared collective existence. Science, sociology for example, can help us to be more aware of this; but, in general, scientific knowledge and method undermine the coherence and stability of culture. Durkheim believed that the central task of ritual was to instill these collective representations in each of us. In a celebrated expression, he spoke of the "effervescence" of ritual experience. In a state of spiritual ecstasy we internalize the lessons which bind us to each other in social life. He did not elaborate on this rather important conception of the socialization process. Roy Rappaport's book, among other things, may be read as an extended treatment of this very point.

It is not the task of this Foreword to pre-empt the contents of what follows. Apart from anything else, Rappaport is unusually lucid in setting out his own agenda and sticking to it. Indeed I would argue that this book is as much a work in analytical philosophy as it is an essay composed within the anthropological discipline which acknowledges Durkheim as a founder. For the author is relentlessly precise in his use of words, a precision which is alleviated by the robustness of a prose which knows that it is borne along by the currents of an impressive intellectual tradition. The second chapter, for example, is as fine a review of what ritual has been taken to be as will be found anywhere. Moreover, Rappaport's own definition, starting from a parsimonious emphasis on formality, invariance and tradition, builds over no less than eleven chapters (out of fourteen) into an analysis of ritual which, for sheer comprehensiveness and consistency, has no parallel in the literature.

Roy Rappaport gives such rigorous and explicit attention to ritual because he finds in it the ground where religion is made. He is aware, as was Durkheim, that religion has not fared well in modern times, having been removed from the governance of society's leading institutions and left instead as an irrational palliative for the growing mass of the world's outsiders. He knows that, if the pattern of our own rotten century is repeated in the twenty-first, there will not be a twenty-second. This is because a pseudo-religion of money and commodity consumption is supervising the destruction of nature and society on a scale which is unsustainable in even the fairly short run. Rappaport believes that one possible answer to the world's crisis would be a religion founded on a postmodern science grounded in ecology, rather than astronomy – so that human society might be conceived of as being inside rather than outside life on this planet.

This is the meaning of the book's title. In Rappaport's usage, humanity is a personal quality, a collective noun and a historical project. The project of achieving our potential to be collectively human is, in a sense, barely begun. It is entailed, however, in our origin as a species, in the discovery of language and with it religion. The inclusive feature of religion is "holiness", a concept which embraces the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine. Holiness is whole (and cognate to healthy); religion, which is constantly being made and remade through ritual, is the means we have of getting in touch with the wholeness of things. Increasingly, we are becoming aware that human society has a unity defined by its occupation of a place in the life of this planet. That place has hitherto often been heedlessly destructive. The task is to assume responsibility for our stewardship of life as a whole. Religion is indispensable to that task and ritual is its active ground; hence the echoes of Durkheim's *la vie rèligieuse.*

Between the two books lies almost a century of war, bureaucracy and science. Anthropology has in that time become a major academic specialization whose achievements underpin Rappaport's work. But he also looks to theologians, psychologists, ethologists and philosophers for the means of developing his arguments. In this he is true to the discipline's origins in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant coined the term "anthropology" in its modern sense for a series of lectures (*Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*) which was published towards the end of his life. In them he posed the question of how humanity might make a cosmopolitan society beyond the boundaries of states; and he found the answer in a comparative inquiry into cognition, aesthetics and ethics. For Kant, community and common sense were generated through social interaction; the aesthetic was primarily social, having its roots in good food, good talk and good company. This is the urbane source for Durkheim's emphasis on a more primitive conception of ritual; and Rappaport takes up once more, as Durkheim could not, the project of imagining how ritual might sustain a social life of planetary rather than merely national scope.

The universals of nineteenth-century anthropology have been discredited in our own century. And this was not difficult, since they were founded on Western imperialism's ability to unify the world as an unequal association of races governed by what was taken at the time to be the last word in rationality. Since then, another vision of world society has taken hold, a fragmented world of self-sufficient nation-states reflected in an ideology of cultural relativism which insists that people everywhere have a right to their own way of life, however barbarous. This vision has become so central to the academic anthropology of our day that Rappaport's treatise will seem to be anomalous. Of late it has come to be held that big, closely argued books on universal themes are out-of-date. Minor essays on elusive topics, ethnography for its own sake and evasion of matters of general public concern are the norm. If this book does nothing else, it makes a claim that anthropology needs to be animated by more ambitious intellectual projects which look backwards, to be sure, but also forwards to the world we hope to inhabit in the near future.

Roy Rappaport's enterprise is made possible by social conditions at the end of the twentieth century. We are living through a communications revolution sustained by the convergence of telephones, television and computers. The progressive integration of global exchange networks since the Second World War has brought about an unprecedented capacity for movement and connection on a planetary scale. At the same time we are increasingly aware of the damage being done to the environment and of the obscene inequality which marks world society. The states in which Durkheim placed implicit confidence as the sole means of organizing society are now in disarray. No government anywhere commands widespread popular support, with the possible exception of Nelson Mandela's.

We know that we are at the end of something and on the verge of something else. Rappaport does not discuss the historical context of his arguments in any way; yet this book's remarkable integrity derives from his conviction that our twentieth-century world of nation-states must soon give way to a new one premised on the need for forging a common human agenda. In other words, we need new conceptions of the universal. Religion once provided such conceptions. Anthropology filled the gap when religion was driven out by science; but it is not itself religion, merely the means towards formulating fresh approaches to religion on the basis of sound knowledge of the human condition.

It might be argued that the world is full of religion at present, as indeed it is. But the vehicles for religious experience which predominate today, especially the so-called fundamentalisms of Christianity and Islam, attract the dispossessed masses; they offer a means of connecting with world society, but they do not yet influence the institutions which rule that society. And it would be tragic if they did, since they look backwards to the certainty of religions of the Book at a time when humanity's means of communication are fast moving in a new direction.

Roy Rappaport does not engage at length with what many take to be religion's most distinctive and alarming feature, namely its capacity to fuel divisive conflicts. Instead, he focuses on the potentially constructive powers of ritual. For, as I stated at the beginning, he intends his book to be a sort of manual for those who would collaborate in the task of remaking religious life along lines compatible with the enhancement of life on this planet. It may or may not turn out to be that. What he has assembled here, however, deserves at the very least to set the anthropology of ritual and religion on a new course.

Emile Durkheim's dualistic conception of the religious life as a bridge between separate worlds, the sacred and the profane, the collective and the individual, reflected his assumption that society would continue to be defined by the impersonal institutions of the state and a market-driven division of labour. In such a world, the personal and the everyday have no meaningful connection with society and history; so that it is left to experts, sociologists and anthropologists, to discover how the abstract principles by which we live are reproduced in religious ritual. Rappaport's approach is strikingly different. His definition of ritual draws no hard line between the sacred and the everyday, between society and the individual or, for that matter, between culture and nature. And this reflects the changed circumstances of our late twentieth-century world, where faith in anonymous structures has taken something of a beating in recent years.

Rappaport's vision of the human universals appropriate to our day invites us to rethink the modernist movement which launched our century and has sustained the universities as a privileged enclave within it. In particular he insists that we find ways of reconciling science and religion, since their mutual antagonism is ruinous and their false synthesis, as in that latterday astrology, economics, is potentially even more so. The vast majority of his professional colleagues will probably be unmoved by his arguments, since they have long been committed to other ways of thinking and have too much at stake in the existing institutions. But, if there is to be a future for specialized intellectual enquiry, young anthropologists and other students of religion will be stimulated by Roy Rappaport's bold example to explore new regions of human possibility.

Keith Hart
Cambridge
April 1997

Preface

This book, as all my friends well know, has been a long time coming. Some of its ideas came to me as early as the late 1960s, and I have worked on them in fits and starts ever since. I've lectured on ritual and religion during most academic years, and published preliminary versions of some of the book's elements in such essays as the *Obvious Aspects of Ritual*, and *Sanctity and Lies in Evolution*, both 1979. An earlier version of this manuscript was accepted for publication in 1982 with requests for no more than minor revisions. Upon rereading it at that time, however, I decided it didn't say quite what I wanted to say, so I put it aside "until I had time" to revise it to my liking. But I was about to go off to do field work and when I came back I was elected to the presidency of the American Anthropological Association, an office which engaged virtually all time left over from my full-time position at the University of Michigan. And then there have always been, as for most of us, requests for articles and essays that one expects to take a week to write, but usually take me a couple of months. And so, although I made some progress on the manuscript, it was slow going. This didn't make me happy, but I was given some comfort by the feeling that my revisions were better than what I had done originally. By and large I think this is true, although the book still doesn't say quite what I would like to say, or doesn't say it as well as I would like.

In April 1996 I was diagnosed with lung cancer. To paraphrase Dr. Johnson, there really is nothing like a diagnosis of non-curable carcinoma to concentrate the mind wonderfully on what one takes to be one's priorities, what one takes to be of great significance, and, unsurprisingly, such a diagnosis encourages an ever-growing sense of the need for closure, to get it done. I walk away from the manuscript feeling that many passages could well have used more work. At any rate, they – all those passages – have come off their back burners and have, for better or worse, been front and center since the diagnosis.

I have been fortunate with my disease. So far, I've suffered no pain. My chief symptoms have been weakness and fatigue which have kept me from working more than two or three hours at a stretch. This may be a good time to thank the people most directly involved in keeping me alive and in working order over these past months: Doctors Robert Todd, James Arond-Thomas, and Michael Shea and two magnificent infusion nurses, Annkarine Dahlerus and Jennifer Welsh. Judy Federbush has not only kept me alive but reasonably sane not only during the last year but during previous periods when the manuscript and other committments were tying me in knots. I don't think I would ever have gotten done without her support.

The most crucial person in keeping me alive and functioning has been my wife, Ann. I realize that expressions of this sort are clichés in prefaces and acknowledgements, but I simply cannot imagine how anyone can get through a year or so of cancer, even with symptoms as mild as mine, without some loving support constantly there. Her support has been beyond the call of love or duty and so has, more intermittently, the help of my daughters, Amelia and Gina Rappaport.

At some point, and it might as well be here and now, I want to express my thanks to my institution, the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts of the University of Michigan, and to its Anthropology Department for providing the additional material support I've needed during this past year. I am very grateful to Dean Edie Goldenberg and Associate Dean John Cross, and to two very effective chairmen of the Anthropology department, Richard Ford and Conrad Kottak. The funds they have provided have made it possible to engage the services of Susan Else Wyman, who has overseen the production of the manuscript, and Brian Hoey, who checked the bibliography.

I am also deeply grateful for the honor bestowed upon me several years ago when I was nominated Mary and Charles Walgreen, Jr. Professor for the Study of Human Understanding. This honor provided me with additional time to work on this manuscript.

I finally can turn to acknowledgments of intellectual assistance, aid, and stimulation, a much more difficult task, given the many years I've been thinking about this material. And with all that space and time I couldn't possibly name everyone who contributed. There have been many generations of students who have heard some of this, and it seems to me that there has been at least one student in each generation who has asked a question or made a comment so penetrating that it has caused me to rethink key points.

There are many less anonymous acknowledgments to make. In the early days of this enterprise, discussions with Gregory Bateson were especially illuminating, and a leave at Cambridge in England gave me opportunities to spend time with Maurice Bloch and to talk at length with Meyer Fortes. There were also opportunities for important conversations with Eric Wolf, who was on leave in London at the time.

Robert Levy and Mervyn Meggitt gave very close readings to the early chapters of this book's early drafts, and their detailed comments were instrumental in transforming early drafts into the final work. They have both been cited in the book, but unacknowledged traces of their thought are ubiquitous in the work. Others who read portions of the manuscript and made valuable suggestions include Aletta Biersack, Ellen Messer, Sherry Ortner, and Aram Yengoyan. A Wenner-Gren Conference on Ritual and Reconciliation at Burg Wartenstein years ago, convened by Margaret Mead and Mary Catherine Bateson and attended by, among others, Roger Abrahams, Barbara Babcock, and Fehean O'Doherty was a break-through moment for me and I am deeply grateful to the Wenner-Gren Foundation's president at the time, Lita Osmundsen.

Since the onset of my illness, my most generous and helpful assistance has been offered by Keith Hart, who has visited twice from Cambridge, England, to help me give final shape to the text and, finally, to write a penetrating Foreword. That this book was concluded was as much due to Keith Hart's efforts as to mine. Finally, I am very grateful to the staff of Cambridge University Press, especially Jessica Kuper, the Anthropology editor, who in recogniton of the condition of my health, have abbreviated and accelerated their review and production procedures.

Roy A. Rappaport
Ann Arbor
July 1997

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Introduction

The most general aim of this book is to enlarge, if only by a little, our understanding of the nature of religion and of religion in nature. Thus, it is about the nature of humanity, a species that lives, and can only live, in terms of meanings it must construct in a world devoid of intrinsic meaning but subject to physical law.

It will be centrally concerned with religion's most general and universal elements, "The Sacred," "The Numinous," "The Occult," and "The Divine" and with their fusion into "The Holy" in ritual. It will also be concerned, both at first and ultimately, with the evolution of humanity and humanity's place in the evolution of the world.

These two concerns may seem different or even antagonistic but they are not. An argument, close to explicit later in this chapter, remaining subterranean throughout most of this book, although surfacing from time to time and becoming central in the last chapters, not only suggests that religion could not have emerged in the absence of humanity's defining characteristic but the converse, that in the absence of what we, in a common sense way, call religion, humanity could not have emerged from its pre- or proto-human condition. It is, therefore, plausible to suppose, although beyond demonstration's possibilities, that religion's origins are, if not one with the origins of humanity, closely connected to them.

The absolute ubiquity of religion, however defined, supports the attribution of such profound significance to it. No society known to anthropology or history is devoid of what reasonable observers would agree is religion, even those such as the former Soviet Union (Tumarkin 1983) which have made deliberate attempts to extirpate it. Given the central place that religious considerations have occupied in the thoughts and actions of men and women in all times and places, and given the amount of energy, blood, time and wealth that have been spent building temples, supporting priests, sacrificing to gods and killing infidels, it is hard to imagine that religion, as bizarre as some of its manifestations may seem, is not in some way indispensable to the species.

These suggestions concerning religious origins and importance are meant to provide the most general context possible for the more specific arguments and discussions developed in the course of this work. The validity of these less general arguments and discussions does not, however, depend upon the acceptance of the book's more general theses. Nevertheless, the claim that elements of religion may have been indispensable to humanity's evolution may seem to threaten to subordinate the more abstract, rarefied and meaning-laden aspect of human life to so coarse a utilitarian interpretation that its deep meaningfulness is rendered invisible and inaudible. No such reduction is intended, nor will it take place. Neither religion "as a whole" nor its elements will, in the account offered of them, be reduced to functional or adaptive terms. An account of religion framed, *a priori*, in terms of adaptation, function or other utilitarian assumption or theory would, moreover, and paradoxically, defeat any possibility of discovering whatever utilitarian significance it might have by transforming the entire inquiry into a comprehensive tautology. The only way to expose religion's adaptive significance (should such there be) as well as to understand it "in its own right" is to provide an account that is "true to its own nature." This is not to promise that the account that follows is framed in "religion's own terms," whatever they might be. It is not. If it is in the nature of religions to lay special claims to truth, then "religion's own terms" would necessarily multiply into the parochial terms of innumerable religious traditions, and we shall be concerned with human universals, universals of the human condition, universals of religion and the relationship between them.

This book is not a theological treatise but a work in anthropology. As such, its ambitions are more general than those of any particular theology. As an anthropological inquiry, its assumptions are, of course, exclusively naturalistic, but it respects the concepts it seeks to understand, attempting not only to grasp what is true *of* all religions but what is true *in* all religions, that is, the special character of the truths that it is in the nature of all religions to claim. It is further concerned, particularly in the last chapter, with how, and in what senses, the truths of sanctity may become false. Later portions of this chapter and chapters 10, 11, 12 and 14 can almost be read as a treatise on certain forms of conventional truth, on relations among them, and on various forms of falsehood.

It can also, and most obviously, be read, independent of any concern with religion's origins or evolutionary significance, as a treatise on ritual. One of its main theses is that religion's major conceptual and experiential constituents, the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine, and their integration into the Holy, are creations of ritual. To put the matter into logical rather than causal terms, these constituents are *entailments* of the *form* which constitutes ritual. Definition of all of these terms will be postponed for a little while. For the moment it is sufficient to characterize ritual as a *structure*, that is, a more or less enduring set of relations among a number of general but variable features. As a form or structure it possesses certain logical properties, but its properties are not only logical. Inasmuch as performance is one of its general features, it possesses the properties of practice as well. In ritual, logic becomes enacted and embodied – is realized – in unique ways.

Because ritual is taken to be the ground from which religious conceptions spring, the preponderance of the book – chapters 2 through 12 – will be devoted to its analysis. These chapters will, as it were, "unpack" a definition of ritual (to be offered in chapter 2), in the course of which the sacred, the numinous, the occult, the divine, and the Holy, will be derived, and it will further be argued that social contract, morality, a paradigm of creation, the conception of time and eternity, intimations of immortality, and those orderings of the world that we shall call *Logoi* (singular *Logos*) are all entailments of and are generated out of that form.

This book can, then, be taken to be a treatise on ritual: first on ritual's internal logic, next on the products (like sanctity) that its logic entails, and on the nature of their truth, and finally, on the place of ritual and its products in humanity's evolution. During the discussion of ritual that will occupy the early and middle chapters of the book, consideration of humanity's evolution, having been laid out briefly in this introduction to provide the broadest possible context for what follows, will remain in the background, present but largely tacit, emerging only for a moment from time to time, until chapters 13 and 14 when they will again move into the foreground.

We can now turn to the salient characteristics of humanity's evolution and to those of its problems that religion ameliorates.

1. The evolution of humanity

I did not say that this book would be concerned with "hominid" or "human evolution" but rather with "the evolution of humanity." "Hominid evolution," or "human evolution," would have emphasized what our species has in common with other species, namely that we are animals living among and dependent upon other organisms, and, further, that our species emerged through processes of natural selection no different in principle from those that produced limpets or lions. These commonalties are assumed, but the phrase "evolution of humanity" is meant to emphasize the capacity that sets our species apart from all others. Our forebears became what might loosely be called "fully human" with the emergence of language. All animals communicate, and even plants receive and transmit information (Bickerton 1990), but only humans, so far as we know, are possessed of languages composed, first, of lexicons made up of symbols in Peirce's sense of the word (1960 II: 143ff.) or Buchler's (1955: 99, 102, 112f.): that is, signs related only "by law," i.e. convention, to that which they signify,[1] and second, of grammars, sets of rules for combining symbols into semantically unbounded discourse.

It is obvious that the possession of language makes possible ways of life inconceivable to non-verbal creatures, and even "proto-language" a form of communication making use of limited vocabularies composed of symbols but possessing little or only rudimentary grammar (Bickerton 1990, chapters 6 and 7) must have conferred important advantages upon the hominids among whom they developed. With proto-language, communication could, perhaps (or even probably) for the first time in this world's evolution, not only escape from the confines of here and now to report upon the past and distant but also begin to order, to an increasing degree, the future by facilitating the division of labor and by making more precise planning and coordination possible. Social organization could, as a consequence, become increasingly differentiated, increasingly effective and uniquely flexible, and new dimensions of mutual support and protection could be attained.

Even more fundamentally, it is plausible to assume that increased communicational capacities both indicate and entail increased conceptual capacities. Moreover, the emergence of the symbol not only increased conceptual capacity but transformed it, and new forms of learning became possible.[2] With symbolic transmission individuals can learn from the accounts of others as well as from their own direct experience, and this learning may be transformed in its mere recounting, into public knowledge which can, by further recounting, be preserved as tradition.

The immediate advantages that such abilities confer upon those who possess them are patent, and, in light of them, it is plausible to believe that linguistic ability, once it began to develop, would have been very strongly selected for, which is to say that the anatomical structures on which it is based may have been elaborated and transformed at rates that were, in evolutionary terms, unusually rapid. Proto-language and language could well have emerged in a relatively short time.[3] Increased ability to plan, to coordinate, to report on the past and distant, to accumulate and transmit knowledge, to learn in new and more effective ways, must all have been among the early factors vigorously selecting for increasing linguistic ability.

Other rather less obvious but by no means obscure entailments of language may, however, have been as consequential in the long run. With language, discourse not only can escape from the confines of here and now to recapture the concrete past and distant or to approach the foreseeable future. It could also eventually escape from the concrete altogether. It may be suggested that the transcendence of the concrete and the emergence of grammar were mutually causal,[4] but, be this as it may, when discourse can escape from the concrete as well as the present, and when it is empowered by grammar, it finally becomes free to search for such worlds parallel to the actual as those of "the might have been," "the should be," "the could be," "the never will," "the may always be." It can, then, explore the realms of the desirable, the moral, the proper, the possible, the fortuitous, the imaginary, the general, and their negatives, the undesirable, the immoral, the impossible (Rappaport 1979b). To "explore" these worlds is not simply to *discover* what is there. It is to *create* what is there. Language does not merely facilitate the communication of what is conceived but expands, eventually by magnitudes, what can be conceived. This expansion of conceptual power as much as the ability to communicate to others the products of that expanded power – accounts, understanding, abstractions, evaluations – underlies the general human mode of adaptation and the specific adaptations of the many societies into which the species is ever redividing itself. As such, language and proto-language before it, have been absolutely central to human evolutionary success. It would not, indeed, be an exaggeration to claim that humanity is their creation.

2. Adaptation

The term "adaptation" has just been introduced. Its full discussion will be postponed until chapter 13. For now it is well to note that although the concept is central to much thought in biology as well as anthropology, it is slippery. Because not all writers mean the same thing by the term, it is always useful, if not downright necessary, for those involving it to make clear what they do mean. In this book the term designates the processes through which living systems of all sorts – organisms, populations, societies, possibly ecosystems or even the biosphere as a whole – maintain themselves in the face of perturbations continuously threatening them with disruption, death or extinction. Gregory Bateson (1972) put the matter in informational terms, stating that adaptive systems are organized in ways that tend to preserve the truth value of certain propositions about themselves in the face of perturbations continually threatening to falsify them. The preservation of "the truth" of these propositions is associated with, or even definitive of, the persistence or perpetuation of the systems of which they are elements. In organisms, these "propositions" are, as it were, genetically and physiologically encoded descriptions of their structure and proper functioning. In human social systems, however, regnant "propositions" may be propositions properly so-called: "The Lord our God the Lord is one," the invalidation of which would signify the demise of Judaism.

Adaptive responses to perturbations include both short-term reversible changes of *state* and longer-term irreversible changes in *structure*. Although the two classes can be distinguished from each other, they are not separated from each other in nature. Adaptive responses are seldom, if ever, isolated but seem, rather, to be organized into sequences possessing certain temporal and logical characteristics (Bateson 1972h, Rappaport 1971a, 1979a, Slobodkin and Rapoport 1974) commencing with quickly mobilized easily reversible changes in state (if perturbation continues), proceeding through less easily reversible state changes to, in some cases, the irreversible changes not in state but in structure that are called "evolutionary." The generalization connecting reversible "functional" to irreversible "evolutionary" changes is sometimes known as "Romer's Rule" after the zoologist, A. S. Romer (1954 [1933] I: 43ff.), who illustrated it in a discussion of the emergence of the amphibia from the lobe-finned fish during the Devonian period. These air-breathing, bottom-feeding, bony-finned denizens of shallow ponds did not first venture onto dry land in order to take advantage of a promising set of open niches. Rather, they were frequently left high and dry during that time of intermittent dessication. Under such circumstances relatively minor modifications in limb structure (heavily boned fins into legs) and other subsystems were strongly selected for because they facilitated locomotion over land back to water. Thus, the earliest terrestrial adaptation among the vertebrates made it possible to maintain an aquatic way of life. To put it a little differently, *structural transformations in some* *subsystems made it possible to maintain more basic aspects of the system unchanged.* This proposes that the fundamental question to ask about any evolutionary change is "*What does this change maintain unchanged*?" To translate the matter once again into informational terms, modifications or transformations in the descriptions of substructures may preserve unchanged the truth value of more fundamental propositions concerning the system as a whole in the face of changes in conditions threatening to falsify them. More detailed discussion of adaptation will be postponed until later chapters, but two brief comments are in order.

First, even this brief account of adaptation indicates that adaptive systems are generally hierarchical in structure. The parable of the transformation of lobe-finned fish into amphibia indicates that they are hierarchical in the unavoidable and irreducible sense of wholes made up of parts: changes in *subsystems* preserve the continuity of the system as a whole living entity. They are hierarchical in the secondary and derivative sense of superordination and subordination. The subsystems of a normally functioning adaptive system are subservient to the perpetuation of the system as a whole or, to put this in informational terms again, to preserve the truth value of the system's regnant proportions subordinate propositions may be modified, transformed or replaced.

Secondly, flexibility is central to adaptation so conceived, and the adaptive flexibility of humans following from the possession of language seems to be unparalleled. When social organization and rules for behavior are stipulated in conventions expressed in words rather than specified in genes inscribed on chromosomes they can be replaced within single lifetimes, even sometimes, overnight. This has made it possible for a single interbreeding species to enter, and even to dominate, the great variety of environments the world presents to it without having to spend generations transforming itself into a range of new species.

3. The symbol

Language and its entailment, culture, the general way of life consisting of understandings, institutions, customs, and material artifacts, whose existence, maintenance and use are contingent upon language,[5] must have emerged through processes of natural selection as part of the adaptive apparatus of the hominids.

But even such far-reaching claims as "Language is the foundation of the human way of life" do not do language's importance justice, for its significance transcends the species in which it appeared. Leslie White used to say that the appearance of the symbol – by which he meant language – was not simply an evolutionary novelty enhancing the survival chances of a particular species, but the most radical innovation in the evolution of evolution itself since life first appeared. Inasmuch as the symbol seems to be unique, or virtually unique, to humanity, such a claim may be uncomfortably reminiscent of theological assertions of a status for humans only one step lower than the angels but, bearing in mind the dangers of such assertions and insisting that humanity remains squarely in nature, we should recognize that White's claim was not extravagant. A quibbler could argue that the development of language was nothing more than the most radical innovation in the evolutionary process since the appearance of sex, to which it may be likened in some respects. Both, after all, are means for recombining and transmitting information, and sex laid the groundwork for a sociality that language later elaborated. The significance of language, however, is not confined to the recombination and transmission of the already existant class of genetic information. With the symbol an entirely new form of information (in the widest sense of the word) appeared in the world. This new form brought with it new content, and the world as a whole, not merely the genus *Homo*, has not been the same since.

The epochal significance of the symbol for the world beyond the species in which it appeared did not become apparent for many millennia – perhaps hundreds of millennia – after it had emerged. But earlier effects of language and even proto-language upon the lifeways of the hominids in its possession must soon have become enormous. That language permits thought and communication to escape from the solid actualities of here and now to discover other realms, for instance, those of the possible, the plausible, the desirable, and the valuable, has already been emphasized. This was not quite correct. Language does not merely *permit* such thought but both *requires* it and *makes it inevitable*. Humanity is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meanings it itself must invent. These meanings and understandings not only reflect or approximate an independently existing world but participate in its very construction. The worlds in which humans live are not fully constituted by tectonic, meteorological and organic processes. They are not only made of rocks and trees and oceans, but are also constructed out of symbolically conceived and performatively established (Austin 1962, see chapter 4 hereafter) cosmologies, institutions, rules, and values. With language the world comes to be furnished with qualities like good and evil, abstractions like democracy and communism, values like honor, valor and generosity, imaginary beings like demons, spirits and gods, imagined places like heaven and hell. All of these concepts are reified, made into *res*, real "things," by social actions contingent upon language. Human worlds are, therefore, inconceivably richer than the worlds inhabited by other creatures.

"Human worlds." Each human society develops a unique culture, which is also to say that it constructs a unique world that includes not only a special understanding of the trees and rocks and water surrounding it, but of other things, many unseen, as real as those trees and animals and rocks. It is in terms of their existence, no less than in terms of the existence of physical things, that people operate and transform not only their social systems but the ecosystems surrounding them which, in all but the cases of hunters and gatherers, they have dominated[6] since the emergence of agriculture 10,000 or so years ago. Since then, language has ever more powerfully reached out from the species in which it emerged to reorder and subordinate the natural systems in which populations of that species participate.

4. The great inversion

Although it conforms to this account to say that language is central to human adaptation, it is also clear that such a statement is so inadequate as a characterization of the relationship of language to language user as to be dangerously misleading. If, as agents, people act, and perhaps can only act, in terms of meanings they or their ancestors have conceived, they are as much in the service of those conceptions as those conceptions are parts of their adaptations. *There is, this is to say, an inversion or partial inversion, in the course of human evolution, of the relationship of the adaptive apparatus to the adapting species.* The linguistic capacity that is central to human adaptation makes it possible to give birth to concepts that come to possess those who have conceived them, concepts like god, heaven and hell. To argue that all such concepts or the actions they inform or guide enhance the survival and reproduction of the organisms who maintain them as a simple adaptive theory of language would have it, is not credible.

That language is central to the human mode of adaptation is the truth, but it is far from the whole truth. If adaptive systems can be defined as systems that operate (consciously or unconsciously) to preserve the true value of certain propositions about themselves in the face of perturbations tending to falsify them, and if the metaphor of inversion (surely an oversimplification) is at all apt, then it is appropriate to propose that the propositions favored in human social systems are about such conceptions as God, Honor, Freedom, Fatherland, and The Good. That their preservation has often required great or even ultimate sacrifice on the parts of individuals hardly needs saying. Postulates concerning the unitary or triune nature of god are among those for whom countless individuals have sacrificed their lives or killed others, as are such mundane apothegms as "Death before dishonor" or "Better dead than red."

That the implications of such an inversion for evolution may be obvious does not make them any the less profound or epochal. First, whatever the case may be for explanations of the behavior and organization of other species, and of their evolution, the extent to which concepts like "inclusive fitness" and "kin selection" can account for cultural phenomena is very limited. Secondly and related, whatever the case may be among other species, group selection (selection for the perpetuation of traits tending to contribute positively to the survival of the groups in which they occur but negatively to the survival of the particular individuals in possession of them) is not only possible among humans but of great importance in humanity's evolution. All that is needed to make group selection possible is a device that leads individuals to separate their conceptions of well-being or advantage from biological survival. Notions such as God, Heaven, Hell, heroism, honor, shame, fatherland and democracy encoded in procedures of enculturation that represent them as factual, natural, public, or sacred (and, therefore, compelling) have dominated every culture for which we possess ethnographic or historical knowledge.

Language, in sum, makes for profound changes in the nature of evolution and, even more profoundly, in the nature of evolving systems. Non-human systems are organic systems constituted largely by genetically encoded information. Human systems are cultural-organic systems constituted by symbolic (linguistic) as well as genetic information. Whereas the transformation from organic to cultural-organic must have been strongly selected for, we are coming, in this discussion, to see that the consequences of the emergence of language and its concomitant, culture, were not unambiguously advantageous to those in their possession. We may note in passing a seldom-remarked evolutionary rule: every "advance" sets new problems as it responds to and ameliorates earlier ones. Language was no exception.

We have been led from a panegyric to language to a recognition of its vices. In addition to setting up possibilities for unprecedented contradiction between the symbolic and genetic such that the propositions that humans attempt to preserve above all else may lead them to their deaths, two others seem intrinsic to language's very virtues. They may be less obvious than language's gifts but they are both profound and grave.

5. The lie

The first is this. When a sign is only conventionally related to what it signifies, as in Peirce's sense of the symbol, it can occur in the absence of its *signification* or *referent*, and, conversely, events can occur without being signaled. This conventional relationship, which permits discourse to escape from the here and now and, even more generally, to become separate and distinct from that which it merely represents or is only *about*, also facilitates lying if it does not, indeed, make it for the first time possible. The very freedom of sign from signified that enlarges by magnitudes the scope of human life also increases by magnitudes possibilities for falsehood.

The concept of lie requires some discussion. The term "Lie" will be used in this work in its most general sense to denote a family of forms of falsehood, some of whose less well-known members, those I call "Vedic Lies," "Diabolical Lies," "Gnostic Lies," "Lies of Oppression" and "Idolatrous Lies," we shall encounter later. For now we shall be concerned only with the most familiar and most fundamental form, the "Common" or "Vulgar" lie,[7] the willful transmission of information which is thought by the transmitter to be false.

The common lie (which I will simply call "lie" for now) is often associated with deceit, but deceit is more general in both occurrence and scope. The term "deceit" implies an intention to mislead to the disadvantage of those who are misled, particularly *vis-à-vis* those misleading them. "Lie" also entails intention, but the defining intention of lie is related to the signal transmitted, whereas the defining intention of deceit is concerned with the effect upon, or more specifically, the response of, the receiver. When such a distinction is made it becomes apparent that the terms "lie" and "deceit" designate overlapping but not coextensive ranges of phenomena. Deceit often employs lies, and lies are often deceitful, but it is not difficult to find instances of lying that do not seem so. Most people would not think it a deceit to say to a sick child "You are going to be well," even if the speaker really thinks the child is in danger of dying. In fact, if patients are suffering from conditions that could be exacerbated by strong emotion, like heart disease, we might think it perfidious to "tell the truth," or what we think "the truth" to be. If perfidy is a form of deceit it is clear that not all deceitful acts are lies.

Even those meant to harm dupes may not be lies in a strict sense. The horse that the Greeks left for the Trojans may not have been a lie properly so called, but it certainly was the central element in what seems a rather implausible deception.

Lying seems largely a human problem, but deceit may be more general. There are, at least, both behaviors and organic structures common among animals that do share characteristics with deceitfulness. They include such things as bluffing, broken-wing behavior, playing possum, camouflage, and mimicry. But intentionality is lacking from some of these phenomena. The fly that looks like a wasp doesn't consciously try to look that way, and playing possum may be genetically programmed. Moreover, even the intention to mislead may not be sufficient to identify deceitfulness. No reasonable person would consider a feint in boxing, a trap in chess, a finesse in bridge, a fake hand-off to the tailback[8] or even an ambush in modern warfare or possibly the ancient presentation of wooden horses to Trojans to be deceitful. The notion of deceit presupposes the existence of a relationship of trust which deceit then violates, and there is no violation in the last two cases because no relationships of trust prevailed at the time of the act. It is significant that, aside from bluffing which is often if not, in fact, usually directed toward conspecifics in contexts in which competition or antagonism is clear, the sorts of instances I have noted among animals are generally employed by members of one species to deceive members of others, usually (if not always) those preying on them or on which they prey, and with whom they certainly do not stand in relationships of trust.

In light of the absence of intentionality in some of these instances and the absence of previously existing bonds of trust in others, it seems reasonable to establish a more inclusive category, "Deception," of which deceit and lie are overlapping subclasses, lie also overlapping with a third subclass that we may, for lack of a better term, call "Innocent Deception."[9]

Deceit and deception generally are, then, more widespread among the world's creatures than common lying, but such lying does expand possibilities for deceit and deception enormously. We should also recognize that inasmuch as possibilities for lying to those with whom one does not share a language are very limited, those duped by lying humans are not only not members of other species but not usually members of other societies. Considerations of propinquity and common language both suggest that the dupes of human lies are most frequently members of the liars' own social groups, persons, that is, to whom the liars stand in relationships of trust.

The contention that lying is largely a human problem is not novel. Hobbes (1951 [1651]) said as much in the seventeenth century. Long before him, Plato's discussion of "noble" lies in *The Republic* presupposed language, as did St. Augustine's discussion in *The Enchiridion*: "Now it is evident that speech was given to man, not that men might therewith deceive one another, but that one man might make known his thoughts to another" (quoted by Bok 1978: 32). In this century Hockett and Altman (1968) added the ability to prevaricate to Hockett's earlier list of the "design features" of human language. A few years earlier, Martin Buber, not a linguist but a philosopher and theologian, opened his book *Good and Evil* by declaring the lie to be one of the two grounds of human evil.

> The lie is the specific evil which man has introduced into nature. All our deeds of violence and our misdeeds are only as it were a highly-bred development of what this and that creature of nature is able to achieve in its own way. But the lie is our very own invention, different in kind from every deceit that the animals can produce. A lie was possible only after a creature, man, was capable of conceiving the being of truth. *(1952: 7)*

W. H. Thorpe (1968, 1972: 33), an ethologist, in a discussion of Hockett and Altman, gives qualified support to Buber, observing that the ability to lie is "highly characteristic of the human species and is hardly found at all in other animals."

Sufficient research on animal deception has been conducted in the decades since Thorpe's comment to have called humanity's sole proprietorship of the lie into question. That dubious honor is probably still ours, however, although, as already noted, deception is widespread among animals, and behavior that closely resembles "true lying" has frequently been observed among apes and, possibly, canids as well (Ruppell 1986).[10] Two decades ago, for instance, Jane Van Lawick-Goodall reported the now-famous and rather spectacular case of a non-domesticated adolescent chimpanzee named "Figan" by the researchers at Gombe in Tanzania, who was observed to do something that seems on the face of it to qualify. It was the practice of the ethnologists to leave bananas in a certain clearing to attract chimpanzees for close observation. High-ranking males dominated these assemblages, of course, and appropriated most of the fruit for themselves. To enlarge his share Figan applied what it seems plausible to assume he consciously knew of his conspecifics' typical attentiveness to each other's behavior. If, after a group of chimpanzees has been at rest, one of them leaps up in an apparent state of heightened attention and agitation the others are alerted, and if he or she then moves off briskly and apparently purposefully, the others are likely to follow, probably because they take him or her to have heard something. On several occasions, Figan led the group away from the feeding area in such a manner, returning quietly and alone a little while later to gorge himself in solitude. Van Lawick-Goodall (1971: 96) states "quite obviously he was doing it deliberately." Margaritha Thurndahl, who watched Figan on other occasions, told me that his guile was even more elaborate. He not only acted as if he heard something, but dashed off into the forest after it, vocalizing and stimulating others to vocalize, returning to the clearing under the cover of the general commotion.

We can admire Figan's ingenuity, but our very admiration is a recognition of how difficult and awkward is lying that relies upon communication which is not symbolic in the Peircian sense. Figan's signals on this occasion were not symbolic but, rather, feigned indexicality, an index being, in Peirce's tripartite classification – as stated in note 1 above – a sign that is "really affected by" that which it signifies (a dark cloud does not symbolize but indicates, or is an index of, rain). Thus an agitated demeanor combined with an attitude or posture of heightened attention in one of his conspecifics might indicate to an observing chimpanzee that his associate had heard something.

With all due respect both to Figan's ingenuity and to his disingenousness we must be struck not only by how awkward and difficult is lying that is dependent upon pseudo-indices but also how limited is its scope. In the absence of the symbol, we have already noted, the significance of messages is almost entirely, if not, indeed, entirely, limited to the here and now. Lying does not escape from such limitation. Thus a female gorilla, to cite another well-attested case (Hediger 1955: 50f.), who lured her keeper into her cage by pretending that her arm had somehow gotten caught in the bars, could only transmit a false message about the *present* (here and now) state of affairs. She could not indicate or pretend to indicate that her arm had been stuck sometime last week or would be next month, much less that someone else's arm was stuck somewhere else at the present time. Furthermore, her transmissions were not only limited to the here and now but she herself had to be unceasingly engaged in the transmission of her own lie. Similarly, Figan could transmit the message "Something is out there" only by acting and *continuing* to act as if there were. (If Thurndahl's account is accurate, he was, however, able to prolong the effectiveness of his falsehood beyond the cessation of his own transmission by, deliberately or not, stimulating his dupes to continue the transmission through their own behavior.) In contrast, a symbolically transmitted lie need not be transmitted continuously. It may remain operative and continue to affect the dupe's understanding of the state of the world long after its transmission has ceased, being revived from time to time in circumstances the dupe takes to be appropriate. A lie symbolically transmitted in a sentence or even a word may, like blood libels against Jews in medieval Europe, endure for centuries. In light of these profound differences between the capacities of apes (and perhaps other animals) and humans, I think it proper to preserve the title of "World's Only True Liar" for our own species. We may admit to our society a few chimpanzees whom humans have taught to sign, but even the craftiest of unschooled apes seem incapable of more than what may appropriately be called "Proto-Lying," a form of falsehood that relies upon the use of pseudo indices.

The problem of the lie is not only embedded in language and thus in the essentials of human nature, but is a fundamental one for human society. What is at stake is not only the truthfulness or reliability of particular messages but credibility, credence and trust themselves, and thus the grounds of the trustworthiness requisite to systems of communication and community generally. The survival of any population, animal or human, depends upon social interactions characterized by some minimum degree of orderliness, but orderliness in social systems depends, in turn, upon communication which must meet some minimum standard of reliability if the recipients of messages are to be willing to accept the information they receive as sufficiently reliable to depend upon. If they are not sufficiently confident in its trustworthiness their responses are likely to become decreasingly predictable, and social life increasingly disordered. What were called "Credibility Gaps" during the Vietnam years are socially corrosive and individually demoralizing. When a system of communication accommodates falsehood, how can the recipients of messages be assured that the messages they receive are sufficiently reliable to act upon? I will argue, among other things, *that aspects of religion, particularly as generated in ritual, ameliorate problems of falsehood intrinsic to language to a degree sufficient to allow human sociability to have developed and to be maintained.* Three comments are in order.

First, I do not claim that religion arose more or less simply as an adaptive response to enhanced possibilities of falsehood, but that certain defining elements of religion, especially the concept of the sacred and the process of sanctification, are no less possibilities of language, particularly of linguistic expressions in ritual, than are lies, and that *religion emerged with language*. As such*, religion is as old as language, which is to say precisely as old as humanity*.

Secondly, it must be emphasized that religion provides no cure for falsehood. There is no absolute cure for the common lie, nor should there be. Most philosophers and theologians have not taken falsehood to be unambiguously evil, and we can easily recognize the social benefactions some lies provide. Most obviously, "white lies" are, by definition, lies meant to be protective of those to whom they are told. Insincerities are an important ingredient of civility and as such an indispensable lubricant of social relations. Common lies, furthermore, may also be legitimate responses to questions concerning matters which are none of the inquirer's business. They have, no doubt on innumerable occasions, helped to guard the meanings of colonized and subordinated peoples against outside threats posed by the likes of missionaries and colonial administrators. Religion, happily, is no more capable of banishing the common lie than are any other means known to humankind. It can do no more than ameliorate some of their vices.

Thirdly, not all symbolically encoded messages present the same sorts of difficulties. Those communicating necessary truths or well-known and immutable facts or empirical laws or social rules may not present problems of credence and credibility. The message 1 + 1 = 2 does not trouble a normal receiver. Given the meanings assigned to the terms it would be self-contradictory to deny such a statement. Receivers of such messages as 1 + 1 = 3 have available to them, at least theoretically, logical grounds for rejecting them. Similarly, the assertion that the application of sufficient heat to ice produces liquid water is not likely to excite doubt. But, such generalizations constitute only a minority of socially significant messages. A law concerning heat, water, melting points, boiling points and so on does not tell us whether a distant lake has yet thawed or whether the fish there have started to bite. That 1 + 1 = 2 does not tell us how much treasure remains in the coffers. The laws of *Kashrut* do not tell a pious Jew whether the meat offered him by his host has been butchered according to those laws, and it is one thing for a Maring man to know that the ritual planting of *rumbim* turns war into peace, but quite another to know whether or not a particular local group has performed that ritual. It is not society's *generalizations* about the *nature* of the world in which it lives *that in the first instance* present continuing problems of credibility and credence. It is specific information concerning the *current states* of that continuously changing world, particularly its social aspects, that is problematic.

6. Alternative

The common lie is not the only vice intrinsic to the very virtue and the very genius of language, not the only worm in the apple so to speak. Language's second problem is alternative. Whereas the problem of the "Lie" follows, in the main, from the symbolic relationship between the sign and the signified, problems set by Alternatives arise, as much or more from the ordering of symbols through grammar, language's other *sine qua non*.

Grammar makes the conception of alternatives virtually ineluctable. If there is enough grammar to think and say "YHVH is God and Marduk is not," or "Socialism is preferable to capitalism" there is, obviously, enough to imagine, say and act upon the opposite.

Some ability to conceive alternatives must, of course, constitute part of the cognitive processes of most animals. It is reasonable to suppose that a squirrel pursued by a dog sees the alternative trees up which she can escape, and may even in some way assess the advantages and disadvantages of the routes available to her. But the scope of alternatives takes a quantum leap with grammar. We can infer from the squirrel's ability to undertake alternative courses of action that she can conceive of *alternative states of affairs* and even evaluate their advantages, but grammar does more than enhance the ability to conceive and evaluate alternative courses of action and states of affairs. Grammar makes it possible to conceive of alternative worlds, that is, of *alternative orders* governed by *either* the laws of Marduk *or* those of YHVH, or of worlds organized in terms of the principles of socialism or of capitalism.

The ability to imagine and establish alternative orders is not, on the face of it, problematic. Such an ability makes possible, or even itself constitutes, a quantum leap in adaptive flexibility, the capacity of a system to adjust or transform itself in response to changing conditions. This enhanced flexibility has, however, an unavoidable but dangerous concomitant: increased grounds for disorder.

No actual society is utopian. It may, therefore, be difficult for any society's members not to imagine orders in at least some respects preferable to those under which they do live and labor. If they can conceive of better orders, how are their actions to be kept in sufficient conformity to the prevailing order for that order to persist? The conception of the possible is always in some degree the enemy of the actual. As such it may be a first step toward the disruption of prevailing social and conceptual orders, whatever they may be, without necessarily being a first step toward their improvement or replacement by orders more acceptable to those subject to them. Because of its disruptive capacities, Martin Buber (1952) took alternative to constitute the second ground of human evil.[11]

Consideration of alternatives brings into view problems deeper than disorder. For there to be disorder there must be orders that can become disordered. We come to the underlying matter of the "reality" of such orders, to the matter of WHAT IS, of what is actual and what is only a figment of fear or yearning, for what, out of the range of conceived or conceivable alternatives, can "truth" be claimed? Marduk or YHVH? A Triune or Monophysite divinity? At a lower level what is honorable, what dishonorable, what moral, what immoral? In societies in which such matters are contested, such "reality," or "truth" is not, moreover, merely a matter of the civil establishment of one or the other possibility nor, necessarily, the outcome of an easy tolerance, as is made clear by the diatribes of Hebrew Prophets against both idolatry and against the habits of kings. It is not merely a question of what order *does* prevail but which one *should* prevail. For at least some of the world's symbolically contingent elements "reality" or "truth" has a moral as well as social dimension, and historical states of affairs at variance with that reality are taken to be false. We will return to this matter later especially in chapters 4 and 10. Here I will assert that the problem of WHAT IS is not, for humans other than scientists and philosophers, a problem concerning stars or rocks or digestion or the leafing out of trees, or even the photosynthesis located in those leaves, that is to say, of visible or even invisible physical components of the world, of elements constituted by cosmic, geological, meteorological, ecosystemic, genetic and physiological processes. It is primarily a problem concerning those world elements whose actuality is contingent upon symbolic-beings, like gods and demons, places like heaven and hell, virtues like honor and humility, moral qualities like good and evil, social abstractions like democracy, socialism, equality, freedom, free enterprise, fatherland; for all of these there are conceivable alternatives, and all of them may, therefore, be contested: Marduk or YHVH?

To claim that the problem of the real is a problem concerning the world's symbolic but not its physical elements is not to claim that the principles by which the physical elements of the world originated, evolved or operate, or even of what these elements consist, are fully known or understood. Obviously they are not, and there is some reason to believe that they never will be (Grim 1991). Nor is it to propose, with an equivalent absurdity, that we can ignore, even for the purposes of this book, or leave to specialists, the questions concerning the reality of the world's physical elements – creatures, objects, substances – with which humans continually interact. We shall return to such matters and to the interaction of the world's symbolic elements with them. It is simply to observe that humanity's knowledge of the reality of the symbolically contingent elements of the world and the world's "naturally constituted" element are differently grounded. If the world's physical elements and processes are to be known they must be discovered, and humanity has developed general principles and procedures for ascertaining them. The world's symbolic elements are not naturally constituted, but are, rather, human fabrications. Knowledge of their actuality – whether Marduk governs the world and YHVH is no more than a figment of heretical imagination or *vice versa* – is not primarily a matter of discovery. The actuality or reality of any symbolically contingent element of the world becomes known, in the first instance, as a consequence of its construction, establishment and maintenance by those who would take it to be actual. This is to say that knowledge of "the truths" of the symbolically contingent portion of the world is an ontological as well as, or even rather than, an epistemological matter. As Giambattista Vico put it as early as 1699:

> We stand in relation to the products of the human mind as God stands to nature: "God alone is the maker of nature: the human mind may I be allowed to say, is the god of the Arts," and, as he later proposed in the first sentence of *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* (first published in 1710) " ... *verum* [the true] and *factum* (what is made) are interchangeable ... " that is, one and the same. Having made it we can know that is the case. *(Palmer, 1988: 9)*

The cornerstone of Vico's thought was a radical critique of certain aspects of Cartesian method and of the method of natural science, particularly those proclaiming that only objective knowledge derived through precise observation of objects by dispassionate observers radically separated from them could claim truth about the extended world, and of Descartes' claim that mathematics is the ultimate and perfect form of objective knowledge, that numerical representation provides the best guarantee of certainty, and that all other claims for truth are trivial or false.

Vico acquiesced in his early works (1709, 1710) to the superiority of truth claims for mathematics but proposed that the truth of mathematics is known to us not because we discovered it objectively but precisely because we did not. In doing mathematics we are not discovering the most immutable features of an objective world but *inventing* a logical system. We can know its truth fully because we *made* it.

He elevated this form of truth into a general principle. The only consciousness that can know a thing truly and fully is the consciousness that made it. Thus, he argued, the only consciousness that can truly know the natural world is God's, because God made it. Humans can glimpse the workings of the natural world by imitating God through experiment, but otherwise they are limited to "outside knowledge," to a knowledge of that which can be ascertained – for example, that four moons orbit Jupiter, and to inferences from that which can be directly ascertained, for instance, that the earth orbits the sun. In contrast, he argued, we can have full and true knowledge of that which we have made, of machines, for instance, or more importantly, of human images, thoughts, symbols, and institutions because we have created them, or if we ourselves did not, they were fabricated by minds which, being human, are sufficiently like our own to be, through various methods, accessible to us, as the divine mind that fashioned nature can never be. Thus, Vico stated as early as 1699, we stand in relation to the products of the human mind as God stands to nature ("God alone is the maker of nature: the human mind, may I be allowed to say, is the god of the arts").

Vico distinguished terminologically between the forms of truth available through Cartesian method applied to the physical world and those which humans can attain of "the world of civil society" (1968 [1744]: paragraph 331; Bergin and Fisch 1984: 97).

All that the former can yield is the inferior form of truth that he called *certum*, that which can be ascertained, simple fact. Humans can, in contrast, attain deeper knowledge, knowledge *per causas* (Berlin 1981: 113), inside knowledge of causes, motive, reasons, operations, as well as the knowledge provided by direct experience, knowledge of what it is to be poor or injured or a father or exultant. For such knowledge Vico reserved the term *Verum*, "the true." His general thesis was stated in the first sentence of his 1710 book *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*: "For the Latins, *verum* (the true) and *factum* (what is made) are interchangeable [i.e., one and the same]". This is generally read as an epistemological principle and, of course, it is. But I believe it is more than that. It is at a deeper level and, in the first instance, ontological. In proposing that the human mind is to the arts as God is to nature, Vico, it seems to me, is recognizing not only the potential omniscience of the human mind with respect to the world's symbolic elements, but its omnipotence in that domain as well. It seems plausible to suggest that he had at least a glimmer of the twentieth-century development called "Speech Act Theory" (see Austin 1962; Searle 1969, and chapter 4 below).

Such truth is closely related to lie: both are fabrications, and so we are led to the question of how humanity grounds the truths it must fabricate and how it distinguishes them from falsehood.

This question is close to the one Hans Kung asks in the very first paragraph of his monumental *Does God Exist?*: "And since the emergence of modern, rational man there has been an almost desperate struggle with the problem of human certainty. Where, we wonder, is there a rocklike, unshakable certainty on which all human certainty could be built?" (Kung 1980: 1).

I would modify Kung's question only by dropping the terms "modern" and "rational." The problem is as old as humanity. Modern "rational" man may be faced with the breakdown of ancient means for establishing certainty, but that is another matter. Although the problem of certainty may have become increasingly serious, problematic and even desperate as humanity has evolved socially and culturally, I take it to be *intrinsic to the human condition*, that is, the condition of a species that lives, and can only live, by meanings and understandings it itself must construct in a world devoid of intrinsic meaning but subject to causal laws, not all of which are known. It is, further, a world in which the lie is ubiquitous, and in which the "reality" or "truth" of key elements, like gods and values and social orders, not only have to be invented but maintained in the face of increasing threats, posed by ever-burgeoning alternative possibilities, to falsify them. If the world is to have any words at all it may be necessary to establish *The Word* – the *True Word* – to stand against the dissolvant power of lying words and many words, to stand against falsehood and Babel.

It is a major thesis of this book that it is in the nature of religion to fabricate the Word, the True Word upon which the truths of symbols and the convictions that they establish stand. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, I take the foundry within which the Word is forged to be ritual. A definition of ritual will be offered and its general features examined. Two streams of messages carried by all religious rituals, the self-referential and the canonical, will be distinguished, and differences between them with respect to the relationship between signs and their significata will be discussed. The self-referential stream will be explored in some depth with emphasis placed upon formal features of its transmission and their implications for clarity, ambiguity, and vagueness. The relationship of self-referential to canonical messages will occupy chapter 4. I will argue there that social contract, morality, and the establishment of convention are intrinsic to ritual's form, and I address the question of why it is that virtually all rituals include acts and objects as well as words. Then I will discuss ritual's sequential, simultaneous and hierarchical dimensions from which a concept of the sacred will be derived. The relationship of sacred and sanctified truths to other forms of truth must be later explored. The relationship of sanctity to order will develop the concept of Logos. The non-discursive, affective experiential aspect of the religious and its generation in ritual will be examined, and, finally, the emergence of the concept of the divine out of ritual will also be considered there. Finally, we will return to the matter of adaptation and the place of the sacred, the numinous and the holy in adaptive structure and process and then consider the relationship between holiness and power and, further, the degradation of the sacred, the delusion of the numinous, the breaking of the holy, the contradiction between the epistemology of discovery defining science and the ontology of meaning underlying the symbolic aspect of the world, and, finally, their possible reconciliation.