# *Introduction*

## A THEOLOGY OF SYMBOLIC ENGAGEMENT

A good way forward in Christology today, a way to engage God in Jesus Christ intellectually, know what we are doing, explain that to others, and make our claims vulnerable to correction and assessment of their truth, lies in the following four main ideas:

1. Certain important religious symbols are schematized images of an utterly transcendent and infinite ultimate reality in the terms of human experience. They present the ultimate, God, as relevant to fundamental human issues such as contingency, guilt, homelessness in the universe, and the meaning of life. Vast theological mistakes arise when the symbolic images themselves are confused with proper theological conceptions of the ultimate as such, as happens often in discussions of Christological doctrine. The idea of religious symbols as schematized images and the distinction of them from more metaphysical theological conceptions will be explained shortly and illustrated throughout.

2. A theory of religious symbols is available for understanding the ways in which religious symbols are schematized images of the ultimate. This theory shows two important things: how symbols engage people with their objects, including the ultimate, and how those engagements are sometimes true and sometimes false. A theology of symbolic engagement improves upon a doctrinal Christology.

3. Certain very important Christian symbols can be shown to be true under certain conditions, as explicated and assessed by the terms of the theory of religious symbols. Much of what follows is the development of a Christology, saying what is true about God in Christ as grasped through the Holy Spirit, under what conditions, and as involved in the symbols I shall analyze here. Much more might be said about Christology, of course, and other symbols might be analyzed.

4. Because the truth conditions of the Christological symbols will be

analyzed in the above ideas, the claims will be public to anyone who might be interested, not only to Christians. Although the topic here is Christology for Christian practice and belief, the argument is within the larger public of religious studies. In principle, symbols of other religions might be given a similar kind of analysis as schematized images, interpreted through the theory of religious symbols, and assessed as to their validity under the right conditions.

The distinction between responsible theological conceptions and the religious symbols of their objects is that the symbols are schematized images of the reality that the conceptions attempt to render in a more literal philosophical, even metaphysical fashion. People engage the ultimate directly through the symbols, not indirectly as if the theological conceptions were the real signs for engagement and the symbols represented the conceptions, not the object. Certain aspects of God and other ultimate matters can indeed be picked up through engagement with theological conceptions. But most of the existentially important things to grasp in God can only come through the schematized images of the religious symbols.

Theological conceptions in Christianity and most other religions take account of the fact that the ultimate, God for Christians, transcends ordinary determinations in important respects and is infinite, that is, non-finite, beyond determination. Thus theological conceptions work around a kind of in-built negation, "apophasis," to use the technical term. One instance of this in Christianity is the very ancient claim that God creates space and time as well as the things within space and time, and therefore God cannot be spatial or temporal. How can people relate to such an infinite God beyond space and time? Theologians might think through such relations, not a hard task for people who like intellectual play. But basic religious impulses such as worship, prayer, wonder, and longing for salvation, enlightenment, and harmony before God cannot be expressed through the metaphysical thoughts alone. For the practice of religion, including the reflective theological practice, religious symbols are necessary even in their negative character.

Religious symbols arise from complicated historical routes and rarely from their corresponding abstract theological conception. But they stand in the logical relation to theological conceptions of being the schematized images of their objects. The philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that conceptions of things that are not expressed in the spatio-temporal terms of experience need to be schematized into experiential

terms.[1] A schema is a rule or formula for rendering a transcendent concept in experiential terms, for instance the formula for drawing a circle in a plane by making a continuous line all of whose points are the same distance from a point outside the line. Whereas a schema is a conceptualized rule, a schema-image is an imaginative representation that expresses the rule. Any circular thing such as a round dinner plate is a schematized image of the concept of a circle, as is a circle drawn with a compass on a sheet of paper.

Nearly all religions have schematized their conceptions of a non-spatio-temporal ultimate with the idea of Heaven as a space/time place where the ultimate is to be found and perhaps approached now or later. The schematized images of such heavenly places reflect many historical and cultural conditions.[2] Ancient Israel visualized Heaven with the imagery of a throne room (Isa. 6) and a heavenly court (Job 1) to which early Christianity added a dining room (Matt. 26:29, Luke 22:15–18), a dormitory (John 14:2–4), golden streets (Rev. 21:21), meeting with the risen dead (1Thess. 4:17), and harp music (Rev. 5:8). Muslims visualized Heaven more as an outdoor garden of delights, and Buddhists and Hindus show a preference for palaces set in large parks. Some Daoists imagine Heaven as immortal life in the sky at cloud level.

Historically the richly imaged religious symbols arise before sophisticated theological conceptions, and theology itself is stimulated by reflections on both what those symbols might mean and the conditions under which they apply. When the question of the truth of a symbol arises, as happens so often when conditions change or another symbol system is encountered, theological conceptions are developed to analyze the symbol as a schematized image of what the conception claims is true. So in one sense God really is in Heaven because God truly can be engaged by some people with the symbols of Heaven. But in another sense of course God cannot be in a place at a time and it was foolish of the cosmonaut to look for God above Earth orbit. The heavenly symbols are true as schematized images of a transcendent God to whom some people relate by means of them.

Most of the time people are not fooled by symbols, recognizing their

[1] Kant's discussion is in the chapter on "Schematism" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 176–87. His discussion is particular to the technical details of his own transcendental argument. I have discussed it in the more generalized form used here in my *Reconstruction of Thinking*, pp. 139–42.

[2] See Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang's *Heaven: A History* for a treatment of Jewish and Christian conceptions.

symbolic roles and the contexts in which to use them. But theologians are prone to confuse the symbols with the more abstract conceptions relative to which they are schematized images, developing bad hybrid theological conceptions. For instance, Christians have long symbolized God the creator as a Father, following Jesus' injunction, and thinking about their relation to the Father in terms of loving interaction, as in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). But they have also long realized that, as creator of the entire cosmos including the conditions for interpersonal interaction, God cannot metaphysically be involved in that kind of relation, and relative to the world God depends on nothing at all to which a response might be possible. Confusing the symbol with the theological metaphysics, they then have worried that a God who is supposed to be loving and compassionate, ready to kill a fatted calf or more for beloved wayward children, really is cosmically impassive, allowing suffering. Or they have compromised the metaphysics of creation to make God a finite being capable of interpersonal interaction. Much theology is stuck with confused conceptions that take a little from the symbolic imagery and a little from the metaphysics of transcendence. These confusions lose both the power of the symbolic imagery and the integrity of the theological conceptions.

Moreover the confusions compound their own difficulty by supporting an egregious opposition between so-called "biblical theology," which adheres strictly to the language of symbolic imagery, and allegedly corrupting "Greek metaphysics." Without some metaphysics adequate to the day, the symbolic imagery cannot be related to the rest of what shapes imagination; nor can there be much public measure of how the symbols apply, with what range, and under what conditions. I will illustrate this in the next section. The confusions are resolved by understanding how the theological conceptions are grounded in metaphysics and the religious symbols are schematized images of the religious object in one way or another.

"Metaphysics" has meant many things and had different models in Western thought. For most purposes of this book, a vague informal notion is satisfactory to the effect that metaphysics is the study of, and theories about, the common generic traits of all existence.[3] Because many people believe that metaphysics is an illegitimate enterprise, however, I should say that a thoroughly defensible form of it is the development of hypotheses about the generic traits of existence,

[3] This is John Dewey's definition in *Experience and Nature*, p. 50.

hypotheses vulnerable to correction.[4] The metaphysics I present here is a hypothesis.

I argue that six important traditional families of symbols of Jesus Christ are true under certain conditions: these have to do with atonement, the Cosmic Christ, the deity of Christ, incarnation in the historical Jesus, Jesus as friend, and the eschatological savior. In addition to these Christological symbols, I will also analyze and defend the truth of symbols of God as creator and Holy Spirit, the latter only briefly.

The supposition about theological truth to be defended is that in Christology truth is less a matter of true description or explanation than of bringing people, under those conditions, into the truth about God as revealed in the Christological symbols. A good name for this general theological approach is a "theology of symbolic engagement," here specifically a "Christology of symbolic engagement." The symbols analyzed here, and perhaps others, can engage certain people with God in Christ, and under the right conditions can do so truly in ways that can be assessed. What it means to "be in the truth," to "actualize" or "realize" truth, will be explained and illustrated.

A theology of symbolic engagement needs a theory of religious symbolism that understands symbols to engage or connect their interpreters with their objects in the respects in which the symbols represent the objects so that interpretations can be true or false.[5] Interpretation is the engagement of the realities interpreted, as shaped by the symbols. The symbols are not distancing substitutes for their objects, as many theories of symbolism suppose, but are connectives that orient the interpreters for better or worse to those objects. Without symbols things cannot be engaged, only bumped into or missed entirely. Reality cannot be engaged in any ultimate dimension unless there are symbols for the ultimate such as "God," "Brahman," or "Dao" that articulate or at least vaguely identify this. Human life cannot be registered as having a predicament, or a salvation either, unless symbols exist enabling that interpretation. Human beings have evolved to possess the interpretive capacities to register not only social realities but the religious depths of existence.

[4] The conception of metaphysics as hypothetical draws its inspiration from Charles Peirce and his criticism of Kant. I have dealt with Peirce and defended this sense of metaphysics in detail in *The Highroad around Modernism*, especially chapters 1 and 6. I have defended the vulnerability of theory at length in *Normative Cultures*, chapters 1–4.

[5] This theory draws its main inspiration and many of its technical distinctions from the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce, the great American pragmatist. I have developed it at great length in my *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, which also contains the appropriate citations of Peirce.

A theology of symbolic engagement analyzes how particular symbols—Christological ones in this case—in fact connect interpreters of different sorts in different contexts with their objects, or fail to do so, and whether they do so truly. The two questions should not be confused: Do the symbols engage or not? If so, do they engage truly? Symbolic engagement is an enormously complex process whose complexity will be explained in more detail shortly.

## SUPERNATURALISM AND METAPHYSICS

Religious symbols of the sort studied here presuppose some metaphysical construction of what is real and how the foundations and boundaries of the world are structured. The metaphysical construction supposed in the Bible and assumed by many Christians for whom the biblical world-view is important appears to us late moderns as supernaturalistic. God is supposed to be a supernatural being, for instance, Heaven is up, and entry can be gained to it after death, among other supernaturalistic suppositions.

Of course, what is "supernatural" depends on what is taken to be "natural." In the ancient world of St. Paul and Origen, the natural cosmology supposed a hierarchy of levels of reality with Earth near the bottom just over Hell, and a variety of heavenly levels above.[6] On each of the heavenly levels different rules of nature and causation obtained, for instance in different angelic types ("thrones," "dominions"; see Rom. 8:38–39, Eph. 6:12). Sometimes there occurred crossings of levels, as in angelic and satanic visitations to Earth or most important of all, in Christ's descent from and return to the Highest Heaven (Eph. 4:8–10, Phil. 2:6–11). With such crossings the deeds of the visitors from another level are "miraculous" in the sense of contravening the nature and causality of the Earthly visited plane. But in the large, the whole hierarchy of levels constitutes the totality of nature, and nothing was "supernatural," only un-Earthly. Heaven was indeed up, Hell down, God at the very top, and visitation by divine or heavenly beings a matter of descent and ascent. By the time of the European Christian medievals, the conception of the hierarchy of levels had softened, though the distinction between Heaven, Earth, (Purgatory), and Hell was observed (see, for instance, Memling's *The Last Judgment*, figure 15, p. 226 below). A crossing from Heaven to Earth was deemed supernatural, not merely atypical for

[6] For a systematic historical account of ancient worldviews, their imagery, cosmology, and metaphysics, see Richard Sorabji's *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*.

Earth, and a distinction was supposed between prevenient grace within nature and supernatural saving grace from God above. In the early-modern period nature was conceived in a radically continuous way, with one metric and sense of causation applying throughout the whole and a physicalistic definition of what can be measured. Late-modern physical cosmologies depart greatly from the commonsense early-modern conceptions of measure and physical things to be measured, but within the new conceptions of the physical cosmos, the radical closure of nature still obtains. Beth Neville's *From Caves to Cosmos* (between pp. 158 and 159 below) moves through the "levels" of below ground (plate 1), the Earth's surface (plate 2), atmospheric sky (plate 3), high orbit (plate 4), interstellar gases (plate 5), distant supernovae (plates 6–7), and infinite expansion to irrelevance (plate 7); though each "level" has a different scale of reality, with different typical causal patterns as in the ancient cosmology, the underlying metric physical cosmology is continuous and closed. Hers is a thoroughly scientific, late-modern vision. Much of what was religiously interesting in the Bible, for instance images of God as a super-being, miracles, and divine actions to save, including the advent of the Christ from Heaven, have to be regarded as supernatural from the perspective of late modernity.

In the present historical situation, there are three main options for response to the supernaturalistic metaphysics of biblical symbolism.

One is to adopt it with conviction and learn to see one's whole world through it. For people in late-modern cultures such as the North Atlantic countries, this means imposing the supernatural view on top of a scientific understanding of nature. For people with a fuzzy appropriation of the scientific world-view this is not hard, though better scientific education is always a threat to their religious imagination. For those who are equally committed to the scientific world-view it is harder, and this has given rise to one branch of the "science and religion" debate according to which the chief problem is to determine how a supernatural God, a being transcendent of nature, can act within nature without compromising accepted causal laws.[7] For people in Africa or parts of China, and in other places where the scientific world-view has not yet defined nature, Christian supernaturalism is imposed on top of whatever conception of nature they have. When that conception is already filled with spirits moving from one plane of reality to another, this imposition might not be difficult. For them the crucial agenda is not how to

[7] For an excellent collection in this genre, focusing on eschatological action, see Polkinghorne and Welker's *The End of the World and the Ends of God*.

reconcile supernaturalism and nature but how to discern the Christian from demonic supernatural agents. Or rather, their situation is closer to that of the early Christians, for whom the whole of nature includes realms from which visitations might be made different from that of ordinary life, and the question is how to distinguish true from false spirits and learn to live accordingly. The threat to this way of adopting Christian supernaturalism is that modernization will lead to acceptance of the scientific world-view and the situation will approach that of late-modern Europe and America.

The second response to supernaturalism is simply to reject it and those elements of Christianity that depend on it. The late-modern intellectual elite increasingly is making this response, in two main forms. One adopts a very pale form of Christianity that usually focuses on ethics, liberation of the oppressed, domestic organization, and community building, and treats the Christian symbols as having the role and force of Santa Claus, Jack Frost, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny – something for children around which the family can gather. The second form rejects Christianity outright because of its supernaturalism, often with nostalgia and sadness.

The third response, which I shall defend in detail in this book, is to say that some Christian symbols that are central to worship, community life, cultivation of the spiritual life, and a Christian interpretation of affairs, are compatible with a non-supernaturalistic metaphysics. Chapter 1 will sketch some elements of this metaphysics, enough to show on the one hand that it is compatible with the late-modern scientific world-view, indeed with late-modern concerns for ecology, cultural pluralism, and many other things that did not register in the world-view of antiquity. On the other hand the sketch will provide the metaphysical background for underpinning the valid use of the large symbols to engage God truly in late-modern culture. These are not softened Christian symbols, but the radical, often offensive, ones such as the atoning blood of Jesus, Jesus as the Cosmic Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, the historical incarnation, a personal friend, the eschatological savior.

The metaphysics of antiquity is no longer viable. Nevertheless, metaphysical assumptions compatible with late-modern science can be articulated and used to provide the appropriate background for Christian life with the affirmations contained within the symbols of its practice.[8] This is the claim to be defended here.

[8] I have defended the viability of metaphysics in the pragmatic or process sense of systematic hypotheses about reality, vulnerable to criticism and open to correction, in many places. Perhaps the most succinct is throughout *The Highroad around Modernism*.

Now the ancient Biblical world-view that seems to us to be supernatural is only a schematized image in the sense defined above. It is a concretely imagined universe in which its symbols resonate throughout the structures and affairs of human life. In the ancient world, the accepted physical cosmology was more or less in accord with this schematized image. Therefore, little motive existed for articulating a separate metaphysics that could provide connections between the biblical schematized images of God, Christ, and salvation on the one hand and cosmological imagination on the other. The biblical and the physical cosmology could be taken together to be a more or less consistent icon for reality.[9] In our late-modern culture, the scientific view needs to be reconciled with the biblical schematized image across many cognitive dissonances. A viable contemporary metaphysics is necessary for this, interpreting both the scientific assumptions and the biblical schematized image (or rather many images).[10]

The contrast between a world-view, as a complex schematized image, and a metaphysics leads my Christology to a paradox. On the one hand the argument below takes itself to be a way forward in the late-modern world, overcoming the impasse created by the conflict between supernaturalism and science. On the other hand, the properly metaphysical claims to be defended seem to stand in stark contrast to, even rejection of, the biblical symbols interpreted metaphysically rather than as schematized images. For instance, I shall claim that God the Creator is not a being transcendent of the world, though properly imaged as such in some contexts. The metaphysical conception of God I defend denies any literal interior subjectivity, thoughts, or intentions to God and supposes no personal structure, let alone a personality, although in some contexts it is not only possible but requisite to personify God.[11] Jesus Christ should not be conceived to be a transcendent metaphysical entity breaking into the human realm, although in some contexts he should be symbolically imaged that way.

[9] Of course, most early Christian thought did not relate seriously to the abstract metaphysics in, say, Plato's *Parmenides*, which would have required dealing explicitly with the distinction between the schema and the schema-image See Robert S. Brumbaugh's *Plato on the One*.

[10] Alfred North Whitehead has shown how such metaphysics is possible. His major metaphysical works are *Science and the Modern World*, *Process and Reality*, and *Adventures of Ideas*. The latest and most magnificent development of his metaphysics, especially dealing with God and creation, is Lewis S. Ford's *Transforming Process Theism*. I believe that such process metaphysical theology is mistaken, and that my own improves upon it. My criticism is in *Creativity and God*. Whitehead is defended against my criticism by John H. Berthrong in *Concerning Creativity*. My own metaphysics is surely flawed as well and should be improved upon; suggestions to this effect are in Chapman and Frankenberry's *Interpreting Neville*.

[11] On personifying what is not intrinsically personal, see my *Religion in Late Modernity*, chapter 4.

To people who take the symbols to be directly metaphysical, the Christology presented here can be viewed as a rejection of Christianity. Those who insist metaphysically that God has to be conceived as a transcendent being, and Christ as supernatural, for instance, will think that this Christology abandons the very things that define Christianity. My philosophical answer, developed throughout, is that their response confuses the biblical schematized image with metaphysics, and that when properly distinguished, the perhaps supernatural biblical image is compatible with a naturalistic science-friendly late-modern metaphysics.

A more powerful argument for this Christology, however, is that its strategy justifies and guides the concrete practice of Christianity with its symbols, at least the symbols dealt with here, so that Christianity is true and its saving ways effective for those on its path. This is to say, Christianity is a vital, true, and saving religion (whether there are others is an open question, not discussed here) because its basic symbols engage Christians with God vitally, truly, and with efficacious salvation.[12] The proof of this claim, of course, is in testing the quality of Christianity in our place and time.

## A THEORY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

The success of a theology of symbolic engagement depends on having a plausible theory of religious symbols that accounts for how engagement is possible through imagination, how the symbols might be used truly or falsely to interpret their objects, and how it is possible both in principle and in practice to assess truth and falsity. This section will summarize the theory.[13]

[12] For the record, I have defended a form of Confucianism as a viable set of symbols for certain conditions within the contemporary situation. See my *Boston Confucianism*.

[13] As mentioned in a previous note, the full theory is developed in my *The Truth of Broken Symbols*. There is a lengthier summary than here in *Religion in Late Modernity*, chapter 3, with an application to the issue of personifications of God in chapter 4. The theory of religious symbols itself rests with a more elaborate epistemological theory according to which all thinking is valuational in some sense, a theory laid out in the three-volume trilogy, *Axiology of Thinking*, which has five parts. Volume I, *Reconstruction of Thinking*, contains the first two parts. Part 1 argues the historical case against the fact-value distinction in the common European Enlightenment conception of thinking and details where, in interpretive judgment, valuation might lie. Part 2 presents an analysis of valuation in imagination and makes the case, supposed in the present book, that imagination enables engagement. Volume II, *Recovery of the Measure*, contains part 3, which is devoted to a theory of interpretation; whereas imagination presents engaging images, interpretation makes truth claims. Because truth is given a causal account as the carryover of what is important from the object to the interpreter in the respects in which the signs or symbols represent the object, subject to qualifications of biology, culture, semiotics, and purpose, the account of interpretation must be an integral part of a philosophy of nature. That volume