The Cultural Construction of Religion

Experience, Myth, Ritual, Symbols, and Worldview

The Social Construction of Reality
The Experiential Dimension of Religion
Myth and Ritual

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Worldview, Ethos, and Symbols
Summary

Here are some questions to ponder as you read this chapter:

- What does it mean to say that religion is culturally constructed?
- What are the characteristics of the sacred experience of the holy?
- How do myths, rituals, and symbols interact with one another?
- How do myths, rituals, and symbols support a religious worldview?
- What is the importance of a religious ethos, and how does it relate to one’s worldview?
- How does a social constructionist perspective help us understand religion?
Having investigated the ways in which religion operates in society and in individuals’ lives, it is appropriate next to examine religion as a cultural system and to investigate the internal interrelationships of its elements. According to sociologist Andrew Greeley, if we want to understand religion, we need to focus not on its prose or “cognitive superstructure” (doctrine) but on its poetry or “imaginative and narrative infrastructure” (experience, symbol, story, community, ritual) (Greeley 1995). For Greeley, “the origins and raw power of religion are at the imaginative (that is, experiential and narrative) level both for the individual and for the tradition” (Greeley 2000:4).

Nonrational religious experience, myths, rituals, symbol systems, worldviews, and ethos are all part of this complex phenomenon we call religion. Scholars are interested in how each of these facets relates to the others, and how they sometimes create integrity and sometimes dissonance in religious groups.

The Social Construction of Reality

The idea that reality is socially constructed comes from a classic work in sociology by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). Berger and Luckmann wanted to explain how people’s conceptions of reality are created and become institutionalized in society. Berger (1967) later applied this perspective specifically to religion.

According to the social constructionist view, “Social order is a human product, or more precisely, an ongoing human production” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:52), one that “continuously acts back upon its producer” (Berger 1967:3). The social order that humans create comes about in a dialectical process of (1) externalization, (2) objectivation, and (3) internalization.

Unlike many animals, humans are “unfinished” at birth due to our underspecialized and undirected instinctual structure. Consequently, humans must make a “world” for themselves, externalizing a world we call culture. In particular, we create symbols (and symbolic acts) that help us to interpret the world around us and communicate with each other. Religious symbols, as we will see, are crucial to this. Examples of symbols include the Star of David, the cross, the star and crescent, the eight-spoked wheel, and the Aum. Greetings are also a good example of externalization, from traditional handshakes or bows to newer forms like “daps” and fist bumps. In creating this cultural “world,” humans provide order not only for their society but also for themselves.

The second step in the process of social construction is objectivation: “The transformation of man’s products into a world that not only derives from man, but that comes to confront him as a facticity outside himself. . . . The humanly produced world becomes something ‘out there’” (Berger 1967:8–9). Consider social roles, for example—what it means to be a “man” or a “woman,” a “father” or a “mother,” an “atheist” or a “believer.” These roles are socially constructed, but they very much shape and constrain the actions of those playing them.

Similarly, religious symbols have a reality beyond their creators. Who was it that designed the Star of David and gave it meaning? Most people do not know, but they do know what the symbol stands for. They do share with others the meaning of this object. In fact, they may feel intense loyalty to the object. An entire history of a people may be recalled and a set of values rekindled when the symbol is displayed.

This is because other people have internalized the objectified symbol. In this final step, the objectified world is reabsorbed into the individual’s subjective consciousness through the process of socialization. For example, when we internalize social roles, we do not simply see ourselves playing a role like an actor (e.g., “I’m not a professor, but I play one on TV”), but we actually identify ourselves in terms of that role. We inhabit the role; we are the role: “I am a professor.”

Having briefly introduced the social constructionist perspective, let us begin exploring the roles...
PART II The Complexity of Religious Systems

of religious experience, myths, rituals, and symbol systems and investigating the relationships among them. We also discuss the way in which these specific manifestations of religion are related to the more intangible elements of worldview and ethos.

THE EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION OF RELIGION

The social construction of reality begins with human experience and the externalizations that grow out of it. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin with a consideration of the experiential dimension—some would say the experiential core—of religion.

Many social scientists define religion in terms of the sacred–profane distinction. For these scholars, the essence of religion has to do with a unique and extraordinary experience—an experience that has a sacred dimension and is unlike everyday life. According to some scholars, all religious phenomena evolve out of this seminal experience—the experience of the holy (James [1902] 1958; O’Dea 1966; Otto 1923). Such an experience is often called nonrational, for it is neither rational nor irrational. These nonrational experiences are described by those who have them as being outside the usual categories of logical, systematic reasoning. They are not illogical; they are simply nonlogical. These experiences seem to defy the normal categories of language. Whether a nonrational experience is the essence of all religious behavior may be debatable; that such mystical experience is one important aspect of the complex experience we call religion is not. Émile Durkheim in 1912 was one of the early scholars to discuss characteristics of the sacred. Using a broad description of religious experience that he believed would be applicable in all cultures, Durkheim defined the sacred realm as one that both attracts and repels individuals. The sacred is not only attractive but also repugnant; it is capable not only of being helpful but also of being dangerous (Durkheim [1912] 1995). This ambiguity rests in part in the

This Greek Orthodox painting that appears in the Stavronikita Monastery is typical of the icons throughout Greece. All Orthodox icons show a rather unusual hand configuration with the thumb and the ring finger crossed, the little finger and the index finger pointed almost straight up in the air, and the middle finger slightly bent. When Keith Roberts—one of the authors of this book—asked a priest about it, he was told that this is the symbol of Christianity. He was told this with considerable impatience—as if anyone who was Christian would most certainly know that. It is interesting that all Greek Orthodox icons of Jesus depict his hand in this posture. At this point, no one knows who created this symbol, but it is so objectified and internalized in the Orthodox Church that it is inconceivable to Greeks that this symbol of Christ has not always existed. Christ is even thought to have used it as a tiny infant, always with the right hand and often with both hands.
The cultural construction of religion involves the attribution of great power to the sacred; because of the overwhelming power that it possesses, it holds the potential for being either beneficial or harmful. Nevertheless, the attraction of the sacred is not based primarily on utilitarian considerations. The sacred is understood as a non-empirical force that is considered intrinsically valuable. As such, it places a moral obligation on the worshipper and imposes certain ethical imperatives.

Rudolf Otto explored the nature of the religious experience in his classic book *The Idea of the Holy* (1923). In that work, Otto insisted that there is a tendency of people in Western culture to reduce the holy to rational concepts about God. Otto’s contention was that holiness cannot be reduced to intellectual concepts; hence, he attempted to describe solely the human experience of the sacred. He insisted that the experience of the holy is so unique that one can never fully understand his description unless one has experienced it; the experience seems to bring forth a “creative consciousness.” A person is profoundly humbled as he or she senses an utter dependency and unworthiness before the holy. (See the “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature.) Rational and moral conceptions about religion come only much later, as an outgrowth of the experience itself.

### ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

**Personal Accounts of Religious Experiences**

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep—the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exaltation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion . . . I could not any more have doubted that **He** was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two. (James [1902] 1958:66)

In that time the consciousness of God’s nearness came to me sometimes. I say God, to describe what is indescribable. A presence, I might say, yet that is too suggestive of personality, and the moments of which I speak did not hold the consciousness of a personality, but something in myself made me feel myself a part of something bigger than I, that was controlling. I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in Nature. I exulted in the mere fact of existence, of being a part of it all . . . In the years following, such moments continued to come, but I wanted them constantly. I knew so well the satisfaction of losing self in a perception of supreme power and love, that I was unhappy because that perception was not constant. (James [1902] 1958:303)

Otto elaborated on the quality of this experience, which he called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*. He identified five qualities of the *mysterium tremendum*. First, the individual is filled with a sense of awe and fear. The word *tremendum* itself expresses the tremor or terror that Otto felt was part of the experience. The story of Moses awed and frightened by the burning bush provides an example of feelings a religious experience generates.

Second, one feels overwhelmed by the absolute unapproachability of the holy. Durkheim’s concept of the sacred as a dangerous force is shared by Otto. The ancient Hebrew prohibition against even mentioning the name of Yahweh because of God’s absolute power and unapproachability provides an example. One can also see elements of unapproachability in many “high churches” that allow only the clergy to enter the chancel area.

This leads us to the third characteristic: power, energy, or urgency. Otto claimed that in describing the experience of the holy, people use such symbolic language as “vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus” (Otto 1923:23).

Fourth, the experience of *mysterium tremendum* causes an awareness of the “wholly otherness” of the holy. The mystery of the experience lies in its unfamiliar and nonempirical nature. The holy is utterly unlike the profane.

Fifth, one feels a sense of fascination with and attraction to the holy. Although it is potentially terrifying, it also elicits a sense of wonder and a feeling of ultimate goodness. Hence, it commands a sense of ethical imperative. According to Otto, this experience of *mysterium tremendum* is the universal foundation and source of all religious behavior.

Religiosity is multidimensional. The kind of experience Otto described is vital to religious life for many people, but it is not the only source of religious conviction. Yet he makes the important point that religious conviction is more than ideas. To influence lives in a fundamental way, religion must have an emotional component, something that makes the ideas or belief systems “seem uniquely realistic” (recalling Geertz’s definition of religion). A nonrational experience often provides such an impetus to belief.

Andrew Greeley offered clarity to this discussion of the role of sacred experiences. In his analysis of “sacredness” and the extraordinary quality of religious experience, he granted that the sacred is usually removed from everyday existence. Yet, he pointed out that sense of sacredness is not always the same thing as religious commitment. Greeley summarized his argument with an important twist:

[People have] a tendency to sacralize [their] ultimate systems of value. Even if one excludes the possibility of a transcendent or a supernatural, one nonetheless is very likely to treat one’s system of ultimate explanation with a great deal of jealous reverence and respect and to be highly incensed when someone else calls the system of explanation to question or behaves contrary to it. It is precisely this tendency to sacralize one’s ultimate concern that might well explain the many quasi-religious phenomena in organizations which officially proclaim their non- or even antireligiousness. The communist, for example, may vehemently deny the existence of a “totally other” and yet treat communism and its prophets, its dogmas, its code, and its ritual with as much respect as does the devout Christian approach [Christianity]. (Greeley 1972:9)

Rather than citing an experience of the sacred as the source of all religious behavior, Greeley suggested that whatever we value very highly, we tend to sacralize (to make sacred). Sacredness, then, may be the result of a valuing process rather than the primal cause of all other religious activity. Greeley did not suggest that experiences of the holy are always secondary; he merely pointed out that the relationship among values, beliefs, and the sacred may be quite complex. The sacred experience, then, has appeal insofar as it can help persons make sense of the world and feel a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves.
Several conclusions can be drawn regarding nonrational religious experiences. First, they vary greatly in intensity from one person to another. Some people have a “strange warming of the heart” while others have an ecstatic, orgiastic type of experience (Neitz 1990). Second, nonrational experiences vary in frequency. For some, mystic experience becomes a goal in itself and may even take on the form of a full-time occupation, as occur in some Buddhist and Roman Catholic monasteries.

Third, nonrational experiences vary in context. For some people and in some religious traditions, intense experiences of holiness occur to individuals in isolation, as was the case for Plains Indian men who went off by themselves in search of a vision quest. For other people, profound nonrational experiences are primarily social, occurring in a charismatic prayer meeting or during a worship service (Neitz 1990). In either case, social norms usually prescribe how to achieve such an experience, the value of such an experience, what a sacred encounter “looks like,” and how to interpret it when it does occur.

Fourth, they vary in content. The Inuit shaman makes a spiritual journey to the bottom of the sea to visit Sedna and to appease her for violations of taboos (Barnouw 1982). The Lakota (Sioux) holy man experiences a visit by 48 horses that approach in groups of 12 from the four cardinal directions (Neihardt 1961). The Christian mystic may see the Holy Virgin, experience the love of Jesus, or hear the voice of God. The Buddhist mystic may experience “nonbeing” or “utter unity with the universe.” The content, or at least the interpretation of the experience, is defined in culturally familiar terms.

Fifth, the people who value and expect a religious experience are those who report having had one. Abraham Maslow insisted that probably everyone has had at least one nonrational “peak experience” but that some people do not value

Although William James and others focused on individual religious experiences, sociologists have long recognized that experiences of “collective effervescence” are facilitated by group interactions, like at this youth ministry camp.
such experiences and therefore dismiss them as insignificant or bizarre or even forget them altogether (Maslow 1964). Other researchers insist that people who desire such experiences may cultivate behaviors and attitudes that make it likely that they will have them (Anthony, Hermans, and Sterkens 2010; Hood, Morris, and Watson 1989; Nelson 2005; Straus 1979; Yamane and Polzer 1994).

In short, a social group’s definition of what is normal or desirable influences both the way individual members interpret their own experiences and the kinds of experiences they try to bring about (Nelson 2005; Yamane and Polzer 1994). This is a basic premise of social constructionist theory. The theory is useful in understanding and predicting variations in religious experiences between groups. Roman Catholics are surrounded by much visual stimulation in churches (Stations of the Cross, statues, and stained glass windows). It should not be surprising that Catholics are much more likely than Protestants to have religious experiences that involve visions, while Protestants, whose worship experience is heavily auditory, are more likely to hear voices.

Regardless of variations, some form of nonrational religious experience seems to be at the root of religious behavior for many people. Such an experience gives impetus and emotion to belief systems. However, the assumption (by Otto, Durkheim, and Maslow) that a mystical or nonrational experience is the only source of religious conviction may be overdrawn. As Greeley pointed out, people have a tendency to sacralize the things that they value most highly and that give meaning and purpose to their lives. Because both religion and national symbols elicit a sense of sacredness, they are sometimes intermixed. For example, 64 national flags have religious symbols on them (Theodorou 2014). While there are no explicitly religious symbols on the American flag, note the sense of sacredness that accompanies ceremonial handling of the American flag. The directions that accompany the newly purchased flag emphasize a sense of reverence and awe that should be maintained when caring for the flag. See the “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature as an example.

Such sacredness is not caused by a mystical experience but is created in the presence of a valued symbol. The sacralization of objects or beliefs places them above question; it ensures their absoluteness. Hence, that which we value highly tends to be perceived in reverent or sacred terms.

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**The American Flag as a Sacred Symbol**

The American flag is often treated with a profound respect and reverence, as indicated by the directions for flag etiquette. The mere fact that detailed rules are spelled out so explicitly for the treatment of this symbol and the reality that violation of these rules will infuriate some Americans is testimony to the awe with which this symbol is held. The extreme anger expressed by many Americans over the burning of a U.S. flag is also evidence of its sacredness, though the behavior itself is not the cause of anger. One of the rules of flag etiquette is that a tattered flag should be burned or buried as a sign of respect. The U.S. Flag Code has an extensive list of rules about sacred treatment and what constitutes desecration of the flag. A few of those rules are listed here.

- Display the flag only from sunrise to sunset on buildings and on stationary flagstaffs. The flag may be displayed at night only upon special occasions.
- The flag should not be left outside when it is raining.
- The flag should be hoisted briskly and lowered ceremoniously.
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No other flag or pennant should be placed above or, if on the same level, to the right of the flag of the United States of America, except during church services conducted by naval chaplains at sea, when the church pennant may be flown above the flag during church services.

The flag of the United States of America should not be dipped to any person or thing.

The flag should never be carried flat or horizontally but always aloft and free.

The flag should never be used as a drapery of any sort whatsoever, never festooned, drawn back, nor up, in folds, but always allowed to fall free.

The flag should under no circumstances be used as a ceiling covering.

During the ceremony of hoisting or lowering the flag or when the flag is passing in a parade or in a review, all persons present should face the flag, stand at attention, and salute. Men should remove the headdress with the right hand holding it at the left shoulder, the hand being over the heart.

The flag should never be used for advertising in any manner whatsoever.

The flag should not be embroidered on cushions, handkerchiefs, or scarves, nor reproduced on paper napkins, carryout bags, wrappers, or anything else that will soon be thrown away.

No part of the flag—depictions of stars and stripes that are in any form other than that approved for the flag design itself—should ever be used as a costume, a clothing item, or an athletic uniform. In other words, wearing hats and shirts that involve a combination of red, white, and blue stripes and stars in a design that is not a complete flag is officially an offense to the flag.

It is interesting that much of the American public seems unaware of many of the flag code rules regarding sacredness and desecration (Ballantine, Roberts, and Korgen 2016; Billig 1995; U.S. Flag Code 2007).
Anyone who doubts the fact that a firsthand religious experience can be very important need only observe the major surge of born-again and Pentecostal movements in Christianity in the past two decades. The emphasis of each of these movements is the assurance and sense of certainty provided by a personal experience of the holy. Indeed, the recent emphasis on “spirituality” can be seen at root as focusing on personal experience (Yamane 1998). Although an experience of the *mysterium tremendum* may not be the sole source of religious behavior, a sense of sacredness is clearly one important aspect of religion.

**Critical Thinking:** Is nonrational experience of the holy necessary for a vibrant religious faith, or is it mostly a contributing factor? Is experience of the holy sufficient to mobilize a religious movement? Why or why not?

**Myth and Ritual**

When Americans speak of religion, they usually think of a belief system. Indeed, many social scientists have even attempted to measure religiosity by questioning subjects on their agreement or disagreement with certain orthodox religious beliefs. Even the practice of referring to faithful members of a religious group as believers is indicative of this focus. As we will see, however, belief and ritual are interdependent, and in the case of some religious groups, ritual is the more important of the two.

**Myth**

Religious beliefs are usually expressed in the form of myths. By myth, the social scientist does not mean untrue or foolish beliefs; myths have little to do with legends, fairy tales, or folktales (Borg 2011; Kluckhohn 1972). Myths are stories or belief systems that help people understand the nature of the cosmos, the purpose and meaning of life, or the role and origin of evil and suffering. Myths explain and justify specific cultural values and social rules. They are more than stories that lack empirical validation; they serve as symbolic statements about the meaning and purpose of life in this world. One sociologist of religion has gone so far as to suggest that all religious symbols (including religious myths) are in a fundamental sense true (Bellah 1970a). He did not argue their literal veracity, but he insisted that symbolic systems of meaning are true insofar as they speak to the fundamental human condition. Hence, they need to be taken seriously. Myths have a powerful impact on the subjective or mental orientation of persons because they communicate and reinforce a particular worldview or a particular outlook on life. (See the next “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature.)

After undertaking an in-depth study of the Hare Krishna, Stillson Judah insisted that “‘myth’ is actually the highest subjective reality to the devotee. It is the vehicle [which carries one] to inner integration. [Humans] can only live without ‘myth’ at [their] peril” (Judah 1974:196). What is important here is a recognition of the emotional power of which myth is capable. For many persons, logical, systematic, and scientific statements do not capture one’s imagination so as to mobilize one’s emotional resources. The capacity of myths to do this is precisely the reason they have such power in the lives of individuals.

A Netsilik Inuit (Eskimo) myth from central Canada may serve to illustrate. Historically, the Netsilik Inuit believed in the existence of a woman, Sedna, who lived at the bottom of the sea. Sedna was once an Inuit girl. However, contrary to the wishes of her father, she married a very large bird and went to an island to live with her new husband. When her father returned from a hunting trip and found her missing, he came to get her. While the father was returning the girl to
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Myths Can Create Powerful Moods and Motivations in People

The mythology of heaven and hell and the belief that one who is not saved by God will go to hell are vividly expanded by Jonathan Edwards in this passage. By emphasizing this myth and elaborating on it, he sought to create powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods (awe of God’s power, humility, fear of God) and motivations (repentance, change of attitudes, and behavior).

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment . . . There is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God’s hand has held you up . . . Yes, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have . . . nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. (Edwards [1741] 1966)

Although there is no question that this “hellfire and brimstone” style of sermonizing still exists, Edwards’s approach has fallen out of favor in American culture today. “Old-time religion” has been trumped by American culture that is highly individualistic. Alan Wolfe points out that the emphasis of contemporary worship is increasingly on meeting the needs and interests of members. An attitude of “nonjudgmentalism” accompanies a view of God not as “angry” (Edwards’s view) but as understanding and empathetic. This creates moods and motivations of a different sort (Wolfe 2003).

Critical Thinking: Think of the difference between “hellfire and brimstone” sermonizing and the “nonjudgmentalism” Wolfe identifies. What types of individuals do you think would be attracted to the moods and motivations created by one as compared to the other? In your experience, is the happy god of nonjudgmentalism ascendant (or already on top) and the angry god of Jonathan Edwards in decline? Of what consequence might that be for religious mythologies in the future?
her home, Sedna’s husband caused a violent storm to arise. Sedna fell overboard, but she hung on desperately to the gunnels of the canoe. To prevent capsizing, the father chopped her fingers off with his machete, and she sank to the bottom of the sea. The pieces of fingers turned into the various sea mammals—whales, seals, and walruses.

The Inuit were constrained by many taboos or moral prohibitions. For example, when seals were killed and brought home, certain behaviors were prescribed (sharing meat with everyone in the village, apologizing to the soul of the seal, using every part of the seal so there was no waste) or were prohibited (e.g., the skins from the sleeping platform could not be shaken out until the seal had been cut up, products from land and sea had to be cooked in different pots, and many other taboos related to food preparation, to giving birth, and to menstruation). If any of these taboos were broken, a vapor was believed to emanate from the body of the violator. That vapor sank through the ice, snow, and water and settled in Sedna’s hair as dirt and maggots. Because she had no fingers, Sedna could not comb out this debris. In revenge, she would call the walruses and seals (which were once her fingers) to the bottom of the sea, and the people would face starvation. Salvation came only if a shaman (Inuit holy man) entered into a trance, traveled spiritually to the bottom of the sea, combed Sedna’s hair, appeased her, and discovered who the offenders were. When he returned, all offenders were required to confess their taboo violations openly. The seals then returned (Barnouw 1982).

Sedna was not a benevolent deity. She was vengeful and had to be obeyed. She was the cause of much anxiety, fear, and even hostility. The Sedna myth served to create these moods of fear and anxiety in people, which then motivated them toward certain types of behavior (obeying of taboos and prohibitions). This myth reinforced an overall worldview that the world is a hostile environment, that the future is fraught with danger and may be jeopardized by human acts, that the environment and animals must be respected, and that survival depends on conforming behavior and obedience to rules by everyone. The Sedna myth served to solidify and sacralize the general Inuit outlook on life. Insofar as this view was consistent with the harsh environmental conditions in which the Netsilik Inuit live, the myths may have contributed to adaptation and survival. Further, many of the taboos helped to sustain an environmental ethic, which was important to the survival of the people.

Ritual

Although Americans tend to think of belief as the central component of religion, ritual appears to be equally important. In fact, several scholars have pointed out that orthopraxy, not orthodoxy,
is central to Islam (Aslan 2011; Tamadonfar 2001; Watt 1996). That is, precise conformity in ritual behavior (e.g., prayers five times a day facing Mecca) is what is mandated for the faithful, not total conformity in theological interpretations. Many scholars have also observed that Judaism—especially Orthodox Judaism—and the Eastern Orthodox tradition within Christianity focus much more on concrete behaviors (orthopraxy) than on theological tenets, beliefs, or attitudes (Cohen 1983; Moberg 1984; Vrame 2008).

A careful observation of human behavior is enough to make one aware of the great attraction of humans to ritual experiences. Consider, for example, the elaborate pageantry and ritual of a Shriners’ convention, a scouting induction, or the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games. Football games always begin with the playing of the national anthem, and colorfully uniformed marching bands perform. Many meetings of secular civic groups begin with a ritual pattern: the pledge to the flag and a prayer. Moreover, for many people, marriage is not legitimate unless the couple has been through a ceremony, however brief. The preceding examples do not necessarily involve a sense of sacredness or ultimacy, and we do not suggest that they are particularly religious phenomena. Our point is merely that there is something about human beings to which ritual and pageantry appeal.

Religious ritual usually involves affirmation of the myths and gives emotional impulse to the belief system. Judah pointed to this when he wrote, “The enthusiasm of the devotees leaping in ecstasy with upraised arms... can be contagious for many” (Judah 1974:95). Not only is the mood contagious; acceptance and understanding of the belief system may be attained through continual practice of a ritual. Judah cited a number of devotees of the Hare Krishna movement who made comments such as the following: “Although we may not understand something when it is given to us, it comes to us through faith. It’s revealed to us through our continuing [ritual performance]” (Judah 1974:169).

Ritual may involve the enactment of a story or myth, or it may symbolically remind one of the mythology of the faith by moving participants through a series of moods. Perhaps a brief analysis of a ritual familiar to many readers will help illustrate the point.

Biblical theology was based on the idea that God had a covenant (or contract) with the chosen people. If they obeyed the commandments and worked to establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness, then God would protect them and provide for them. The scriptures maintain that the Hebrew people got into trouble whenever they broke the covenant, forgot the demands of justice, and ignored the sovereignty of God. In these circumstances, the prophets called the people back to the covenant. The prophets assured them that if they would repent and renew their covenant, Yahweh would forgive them. The New Testament renews this theme, with Jesus calling the wayward to repent and promising God’s forgiveness. The most important sacrament in the Christian church is Communion (alternatively referred to as the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, or the Mass). In instituting this practice, Jesus claimed to be inaugurating a new covenant. Covenantal theology, then, is a basic Christian mythology or belief system.

Many Protestant Christians are not consciously aware that the liturgy (or ritual) in which they participate is based on this theology. In fact, many laypeople believe that the order of a worship service is rather arbitrary, that the minister randomly intermixes hymns, prayers, a confession, scripture, anthems, and other liturgical devices. Let us look, however, at a consistent pattern that prevails in many American Protestant liturgies. The sample provided in the next “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature will serve as an example. While there is some variation in the order...
Muslims pray to God five times a day at set times, regardless of where they are. They are also required to face Mecca. Conformity to this and other ritual behavior is considered a more important measure of faith than doctrinal orthodoxy.

of mainline Protestant worship services, the majority of such churches in the United States tend to move worshippers through successive movements or moods as shown in this liturgy (Hesser and Weigert 1980; Johnson 1959). Let us examine the relationship between these liturgies and the mythology of the divine covenant.

At the outset of the service, the liturgy is designed to create a mood of awe and praise. The architecture of the building may also enhance this sense. Many church bulletins request that worshippers sit in silence and focus their attention on a rose window, on some other symbol, or on “the presence of God.” The prelude is frequently a piece of music that will lift one’s spirits. The call to worship draws one’s attention to the reason for gathering: to worship and praise God. The congregation then joins together in a hymn of praise, which is frequently a joyful, uplifting song of adoration.

Shortly after the congregation is made aware that it is in the presence of God, the mood shifts. Although most of the worshippers were in the same place dedicating their lives to God just a week before, the liturgy attempts to make them aware of the fact that they have not always lived in a way consistent with Christian values. They are reminded that in the push and pull of daily living, they have said an unkind word or failed to do a loving deed. The values they professed on Sunday they may have betrayed by Wednesday (if not by Sunday afternoon). Hence, the second mood or theme of this worship liturgy is a service of confession. The prayer of confession is sometimes called an “act of honesty” (between oneself and God). However, this liturgical movement does not end on a note of guilt. Confession
ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Order of Worship
First United Methodist Church

Service of Praise

Prelude: Walther
Call to Worship
Hymn of Praise: #432 “Fill Us With Your Love”

Service of Confession

An Act of Honest before God: Confession (in unison)

Lord, we gather on the Sabbath to worship You and to dedicate our lives to Your service. Yet in the strain and hurry of everyday living, we often forget You. We say the unkind word, or we fail to do the loving deed. We betray the values which we profess on Sunday morning, and we do not remember that You are the Center of Life. Forgive us, O Lord, and renew in us a resolve to live Christ-like lives.

Assurance of Pardon

Service of Proclamation

Apostles’ Creed
Children’s Chat
Anthem: “Different Is Beautiful” Avery/Marsh
Scripture Reading
Hymn of Proclamation: #11 “Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise”
The Sermon

Service of Commitment

Concerns of the Congregation, Prayer of Intercession, Lord’s Prayer
Tithes and Offerings N. Lebegue
Hymn of Dedication: #593 “Here I Am Lord”
Charge to the Congregation and Benediction
Postlude: J. Stanley
is followed by words of assurance, assurance of pardon, or words of new possibility. At this point, the congregation is assured by the minister (often through quotation of a biblical passage) that people who sincerely confess their sins and who renew their commitment to God are forgiven. The covenantal theme of repentance prior to renewal of the covenant is enacted.

The liturgy then moves to a third phase, an affirmation of faith, or service of proclamation. This phase is frequently the major part of Protestant services. The congregation may repeat a creed or covenant, listen to an anthem or other special music, sing a hymn of proclamation, listen to scripture, and hear a message (sermon) delivered by the minister. In this phase of the ritual, the emphasis is on remembering and rehearing the Word of God and remembering the demands of the covenant.

The final movement of most Protestant liturgies is a service of dedication. This part of worship calls for a response to God’s word by the congregation. The movement is characterized by a monetary offering (a symbolic act of the giving of one’s self), concerns of the congregation or announcements from the pulpit, a hymn of dedication, a charge to the congregation, and a benediction. In some churches, the third and fourth phases of the liturgy (proclamation and dedication) may be merged into one. In this case, some acts of dedication and commitment (such as the offering) may actually precede the sermon. However, the hymn of dedication always follows the sermon. In the more evangelical churches, this hymn may be followed by an “altar call”—a request for members to make a public commitment by coming forward and standing before the altar to commit their lives to Christ.

It should not be inferred that all Protestant worship through history has followed this mood sequence. The pattern described here was initiated by John Calvin. It is noteworthy that much of contemporary Protestant worship emphasizes proclamation and commitment. The Catholic Mass seems to place more stress on the service of praise. This reflects a fundamental difference in Protestant and Catholic views of worship (Pratt 1964). The Roman Catholic Church has historically taken an objective approach to the Mass. The emphasis is on glorification of God, and the liturgy is designed with that in mind. It is best to have a congregation present at the celebration of Mass, but if no one came, the Mass would go on. On the other hand, a Protestant minister would scarcely think of conducting a full service of worship if no congregation gathered. The more subjective emphasis of the Protestant denominations—especially the ones that have a more informal, low-church tone—is on how the worship affects the worshippers themselves. Hence, the beliefs about worship itself significantly affect the order of a liturgy and the themes it includes.

From the example provided, it may be seen that ritual and belief are often closely intertwined and tend to be mutually reinforcing. That is, they tend to provide an interrelated system. It is noteworthy that sample surveys have consistently found a high correlation between regular attendance at rituals and a high level of acceptance of the belief system of the denomination. However, it is also true that many people are unaware of the logical progression of the worship liturgy and of the theological basis for its order. Hence, the liturgy is viewed by some attendees as just so many hymns, prayers, and scripture readings in random order (Roberts 1992).

Relationship Between Myth and Ritual

Ritual and myth are closely connected. Some scholars have maintained that, in terms of chronological development, ritual emerges first and myth develops later to justify the existence of the ritual (Kluckhohn 1972). However, the process may develop the other way as well. The Mass is clearly an example of a ritual based on
a sacred story. Another example is the Ghost Dance, a religious ritual based on a dream or vision by Wovoka, the Paiute holy man whose trance in 1889 regenerated a powerful religious movement among Native Americans. In this case, the interpreted dream provided both a mythology and a command to perform a ritual (LaBarre 1972). Clyde Kluckhohn points out that regardless of which emerges first, “what really is important is the intricate interdependence of myth with ritual and many other forms of behavior” (Kluckhohn 1972:96).

In some cases, both myth and ritual may be viewed as factors dependent on a third component: mystical or nonrational experience. The experience of awe may be so fascinating and attractive that a ritual is established to try to elicit or re-create that experience. Furthermore, a mythology is generated to try to explain or make sense of the experience (O’Dea 1966; Otto 1923; Van der Leeuw 1963).

The image presented here of highly integrated ritual and myth needs a word of caution. The discussion of the Protestant liturgy suggested a high degree of integration and interdependence between ritual and belief system. However, that integration is largely a matter of interpretation—that is, this integration is to a considerable extent in the eye of the beholder. The participant interprets the ritual and myth as mutually supportive—hence it is mutually supportive for that person. However, many cases have been found in which diverse tribal people practice the same ritual but interpret that ritual as expressing very different myths. Likewise, people holding the same belief system may celebrate those beliefs with very different ritual patterns. In summary, we can say that beliefs, ritual, and religious experience are important components of religion, that they are usually interrelated and mutually supportive, and that the integration of the three is itself largely a matter of interpretation by the believer and the community (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993).

**Critical Thinking:** As readers attend religious services in their own communities, they may be interested in asking themselves, What is the rationale for the order of this liturgy? How are myth and ritual intertwined and mutually supportive, or is there no apparent relationship? What does the ritual mean to the members of this group?

### The Importance of Symbols

The reason why myths and rituals normally have a close relationship is that they are both manifestations of a larger phenomenon—a system of symbols. Elizabeth Nottingham emphasized the unifying function of symbols:

[It] is not hard to understand that the sharing of common symbols is a particularly effective way of cementing the unity of a group of worshipers. It is precisely because the referents of symbols elude overprecise intellectual definitions that their unifying force is the more potent; for intellectual definitions make for hairsplitting and divisiveness. Symbols may be shared on the basis of not-too-closely-defined feeling. (Nottingham 1971:19)

Certainly, this is one reason that symbols are important. Clifford Geertz emphasized a slightly different reason for symbols’ critical importance: “Meanings can only be stored in symbols: a cross, a crescent, or a feather. Such religious symbols, dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt somehow to sum up what is known about the way the world is” (Geertz 1958:422, italics added). Edmund Leach’s research on the symbolic power of rituals supports this view. Leach has studied rituals as “storage systems” that encapsulate knowledge. He maintained that ritual provides an important form of economical thinking among many tribal people (Leach 1972). Meaningful information and important knowledge are encapsulated in ritual in a way analogous to the loading of computer chips with information in our culture.
Rituals are viewed by Leach as vessels that carry powerful symbols and that authoritatively transmit a worldview and an ethos.

A consideration of certain elements in the Catholic Mass illustrates the power of symbols. As the celebrants come before the altar, they genuflect and cross themselves. Although the act may sometimes be perfunctorily executed, making the sign of the cross acts to remind believers of a particular event. The cross has meaning because it reminds the participant of a sacred story, a particular life, and a divine event. The theological interpretation of the event may vary somewhat from one celebrant to another, but with the regularized pattern of crossing oneself, the centrality of Christ on the cross will not be forgotten. The stained glass windows may have symbols meaningful to the early church or perhaps depictions of Jesus in a well-known scene. These symbolic representations also bring to mind a whole series of events and stories that are part of the sacred myth. At certain points in the Mass, the congregation kneels. This act is a gesture of humility and is to remind one of an utter dependency and humility before God. In each case, the entire story does not have to be repeated in detail. If the myth is well known and if the symbolic meaning of the ritual action is understood by the celebrant, then all that is necessary to elicit certain moods and motivations is to introduce the symbol itself. The symbol stores meaning and can call forth certain attitudes or dispositions.

In the Jewish tradition, one can see the same power of symbols in a religious festival such as the Seder meal. Even a Gentile cannot help but be moved by the symbolic reenactment of the escape from Egypt. The eating of bitter herbs, which actually bring tears to one’s eyes, reminds one of the suffering of the ancestors. The unleavened bread, the parsley, and the haroseth (a sweet condiment) have symbolic value in recalling a sacred story. This symbolic reenactment confirms in the minds of the Jews where they have been, who they are, and what task lies before them. A sense of identity and a sense of holy mission are powerfully communicated through the ritual (Fredman 1981).

Geertz’s definition of religion articulates very well the important role of symbols: “Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence” (Geertz 1966:4). The symbol systems are important in that they act in people’s lives. Ritual and myth, then, are important as symbol systems. In this text, we have stressed worldview (conceptions of a general order of existence) and ethos (powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations) as central components of religion. Hence, the next issue before us is the relationships among worldview, ethos, and symbols.

WORLDVIEW, ETHOS, AND SYMBOLS

Worldview refers to the intellectual framework within which one explains the meaning of life. Myths are specific stories or beliefs, the net effect of which is to reinforce a worldview (Wuthnow 1981). A single story may not be sufficient to convince someone that God is in charge of the universe and all is well. However, a series of many such myths may serve to reinforce such an outlook on life. Worldview is a more abstract concept than myth; it refers to one’s mode of perceiving the world and to one’s general overview of life. In this sense, a worldview is more taken for granted and less questioned. Many individuals may not be fully conscious of the alternative types of worldviews, and many never question the fact that their perception is influenced by intellectual constructs. Whether one is optimistic or pessimistic in outlook is strongly influenced by one’s worldview. (See the passages from Jonathan Edwards in the “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature on page 87.)

A religious worldview is also closely related to a group’s ethos, as demonstrated in the next “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature. “A people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and
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Judaism is rich with symbolism, and the symbols often serve on an everyday basis to remind people who they are. The man on the left wears a yarmulke like those worn by Jewish men since roughly the 2nd century CE. It symbolizes respect for and fear of God. These caps are also a sign of belonging and commitment to the Jewish community. At the right is a mezuzah, a daily reminder of identity on doorjambs of Jews. A parchment inside it has the “Shema Yisrael” (Deuteronomy 6:4–9) written on it, a passage that commands the faithful to keep God in their minds at all times. Whenever Jews pass through a door with a mezuzah on it, they kiss their fingers and touch them to the mezuzah, expressing love and respect for God and God’s commandments. These symbols carry meaning and reinforce identity every day.

Ethos refers to attitudes about life (moods, motivations), whereas worldview refers to an intellectual process—thoughts about life (concepts of a general order of existence) (recall Geertz’s symbolic definition of religion from Chapter 1).

Both attitudes and concepts are essential to the establishment of a sense of meaning in life. The worldview is confirmed and made to seem objective by the ethos. The set of concepts is placed beyond question and is made absolute by the sacred mood in which it is transmitted. Furthermore, this basic attitude (ethos) is justified and made reasonable by the worldview. So in a well-integrated religious system, the ethos and worldview are mutually reinforcing.

ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Native American Ethos: Moral and Esthetic Style and Mood

Sam Gill insists that the moods and motivations of Native American religion are both critically important for understanding Native American religion and often beyond the capacity of rational discourse to explain or describe. In a discussion of the oral tradition of storytelling (myths), he commented on the ethos:

Ordinarily underlying questions of meaning is the assumption that these oral traditions carry messages and that we need to translate these speech acts into their messages so that we too will know what they mean. After spending much time asking Native American
Symbols play the central role of relating the worldview to the ethos (Geertz 1958). Symbols transform fact into value. The function of sacred symbols is to encapsulate, or summarize, the system of meaning and to deliver that meaning system with power and authority at appropriate times. Geertz discussed the symbolic significance of the circle among the Oglala Sioux as an example:

Critical Thinking: Identify a smell or song (perhaps a pop music favorite from your elementary or middle school years) that elicits a strong reminiscence. What does that smell or that tune mean to you? Why is it so difficult to explain? Does the fact that it is difficult to explain indicate that it is insignificant to you? Why or why not?
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For most Oglala the circle is but an unexamined luminous symbol whose meaning is intuitively sensed, not consciously interpreted. But the power of the symbol, analyzed or not, clearly rests on its comprehensiveness, on its fruitfulness in ordering experience. Again and again the idea of a sacred circle . . . yields, when applied to the world within which the Oglala lives, new meanings; continually it connects together elements within their experience which would otherwise seem wholly disparate and, wholly disparate, incomprehensible. (Geertz 1958:423)

Thus, symbols have power to bind worldview and ethos into a unified system of meaning. Durkheim suggested long ago that the experience of anomie—social rootlessness or a lack of identity and purpose—can be so unsettling that it can result in suicidal behavior. The feeling of a firmly rooted worldview, with certain and definite moral rules and regulations, is a compelling need for many humans. Geertz insisted that his tribal-society respondents were quite willing to abandon their cosmology for a more plausible one. What they were not willing to do was abandon it for no other hypothesis at all, leaving events to themselves (Geertz 1966).

In line with this emphasis, Mary Douglas has offered an insightful interpretation of biblical taboos (such as the taboo against eating pork or against eating a milk product and a meat product at the same meal). In the process of socialization, a child learns to think in terms of categories of language and in terms of theories or explanations extant in a culture. When new information is received, it is interpreted in terms of those accepted categories of thought. New experiences and new information are assimilated into the present worldview. When an experience does not seem to fit into this mold, the person experiences dissonance (internal cognitive conflict). Douglas claimed that many taboos have to do with avoidance of those things that challenge one’s worldview (Douglas 1966, 1968).

Anomalies that do not fit one’s worldview are simply abominations that are dirty and to be avoided. Other aspects of social order may also be protected or reinforced by taboos. Beliefs about women being unclean during their menstruation and in need of purification functioned to remind them of their inferior social position. The insistence in the New Testament that women cover their head in church served a similar function. Men and women were viewed as fundamentally different. This was symbolically emphasized by men keeping their hair short and women keeping theirs long. Anything that threatened this essential distinction (essential to that worldview) was an abomination (it threatened concepts of order). Douglas argued that protection and preservation of the worldview is very important in understanding much religious behavior.

Sociologist Peter Berger insisted that one’s worldview must seem authoritative, certain, and compelling. In the midst of alternative paradigms and cosmologies, one’s worldview may become fragile and vulnerable. Hence, the vulnerability of a worldview is concealed in an aura of sacredness (Berger 1967). Without a basis in a convincing worldview, social values would not seem compelling, and social stability itself may be threatened. Geertz came to the same conclusion through cross-cultural analysis of religion:

[M]ere conventionalism satisfies few people in any culture. Religion, by fusing ethos and worldview, gives to a set of social values what they perhaps most need to be coercive: an appearance of objectivity. In sacred rituals and myths values are portrayed not as subjective human preferences but as the imposed conditions for life. (Geertz 1958:426–427)

In conclusion, we might simply point to the complexity of the relationships among the various components of religion. In terms of the integration of these elements into a coherent religious system, we might summarize with the following four points:

1. Ritual and myth tend to be mutually reinforcing as symbol systems.

2. Symbols (including rituals, myths, and artifacts) encapsulate the worldview and ethos of a people. Hence they can elicit powerful emotional responses and (by repetition) help reinforce a general worldview.
3. The ethos and the worldview are themselves mutually reinforcing.

4. Together, all of these elements provide a compelling basis for social values (see Figure 4.1).

A problem may arise when a religious system is not so well integrated and mutually reinforcing. Geertz has himself described the social and cultural disintegration that can happen when...

Figure 4.1 The Meaning System

Worldview and ethos are at the heart of what we mean by “religion.” Yet these concepts are abstractions from experience; an individual’s worldview and religious ethos (moods and motivations) are so pervasive and so taken for granted that the subject may not be fully conscious of all their dimensions. These abstractions are made concrete and are reinforced by more concrete expressions of religiosity: ritual, myth, and symbols. Each of these is interrelated and acts to confirm the ethos and worldview. Frequently, the entire religious realm seems uniquely compelling because of a nonrational religious experience. Some groups may emphasize some of these elements more than others (e.g., religious experience may be more important than unquestioned belief in the myth). Variations in interpretation of any of these may also lead to considerable conflict within the group. In actual practice, religion always has a good deal more internal inconsistency than this diagram would suggest. Hence, it is important to bear in mind that this model is idealized. It does represent a strain toward integrity that is a very real part of all religion. It is also true that when glaring incoherence in this system and conflict in interpretation of the elements becomes severe, some form of religious change is likely to take place.
ritual, myth, social values, and social structure do not harmonize. Some measure of conflict between these elements can be tolerated and is normal. This is the advantage of symbols: They can unify individuals who each adhere to the symbol but who attach alternative meanings to that symbol. However, some scholars believe that the lack of a common, shared worldview can eventually become a problem for a pluralistic society. Their argument is that lack of agreement on the big picture, the unifying ideology or outlook, leaves the culture without a unifying core (Geertz 1957).

It is a maxim of the social sciences that “facts do not speak for themselves; they must be interpreted.” The difficulty in a heterogeneous culture is that there is no agreement on which big theory really makes sense and explains the meaning of life. The overriding, integrating worldview—which religion provides for many cultures—is not a uniting and integrating factor in a pluralistic one. For most science teachers in the past several decades, evolutionary theory has provided the big picture, the overriding theory that explains the relationships among data. The creationist or intelligent design movement, of course, challenges this big picture. It is an interesting question whether a core of common assumptions about the way things are is critical to harmonious social life.

**Critical Thinking:** Is a lack of a single uniting religious outlook a serious problem for a pluralistic society like Kenya, India, or the United States? Is the result anomie, or can societies be bound together by common interests and interdependencies? Why do you think as you do? What evidence is persuasive? What kind of evidence might cause you to change your mind?

**Summary**

Social constructionism focuses on the processes by which individuals create and internalize the cultural worlds that they inhabit. By watching how others act in certain circumstances, we define situations—ascertaining what is going on and is appropriate for that situation. Because of its emphasis on the construction of meaning in ambiguous situations, this theoretical perspective has much to offer the study of religion. Clarification of the meaning of life, death, and suffering is fraught with ambiguity and requires interpretation of meaning.

In terms of religion, these worlds include experiences, myths, rituals, and symbol systems. These cultural elements are also related to the ethos and worldview of a religion. Frequently, there is a perceived integrity between these elements, and they are mutually reinforcing. Myths are embodied in rituals and vice versa; rituals facilitate religious experiences, which are shaped by the symbol system; religious experiences reinforce the ethos and worldview of a religion; and so on.

Because of this, it is nearly impossible to identify one as primary—at least when one is referring to religion as a general phenomenon. However, specific groups may emphasize one or more of these and de-emphasize others. Pentecostals emphasize direct, embodied experience of the Holy Spirit more than Presbyterians (Poloma 1989), and African American congregations do so more than white congregations (Nelson 2005). When a religious group begins to undergo change, the relationships between these elements of religion may be less integrated. This may be so disconcerting to believers that the conflict may lead to schisms, a topic to be discussed in later chapters.