I

Comparing Paradises

Objective

Religions enshrine symbols, the stained glass windows of faith. Sacred symbols present an explorable treasury of religious thought—an information-rich, condensed language of spirituality. Symbols are the prisms of ideals and of other religious concerns. Symbols are susceptible to analysis and are proper objects of study. As symbols encode ideas, they require interpretation to be both understood and meaningfully compared. "We can see that an essential ingredient of the modern study of religion," writes Ninian Smart, "is *symbolic analysis*, which tries to throw light on the various themes which can be discovered cross-culturally through the exploration of various worldviews" (1985, 33). Symbolic analysis involves not only the exploration of religious worldviews intrinsically, but comparatively as well.

The scientific study of religion is said to have two levels of research: historical and comparative (Platvoet 1982, 3), as exemplified in the complementary research endeavors known as the History of Religion and the Phenomenology of Religion. Disciplined comparison, it has been said, is the central activity of the phenomenology of religion. Comparison creates perspective. By it, religions—systemically or aspectually—are mentally viewed together, with some kind of depth and sense of relationship. This study introduces a new comparative procedure in the academic study of religion: viz., the construction and comparison of multidimensional, symbolic profiles representing distinct religious worldviews—an experiment in comparative method. Correlating symbol and doctrine—the heart and soul of religion—this book attempts to resolve the similarity-difference paradox in two culturally related Abrahamic traditions in the Iranian context—early Persian Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith—with special reference to Paradise imagery and its symbolic transformation, from Late Antiquity to modernity. While "Paradise" is originally a Persian loan word, modernity has revolutionized its meaning.

The preinterpretative justification for setting this investigative agenda should be made clear. In the interests of investigating religious transformations from the ancient to the modern world, the religion known as the Bahā'ī Faith affords a natural and obvious starting point for "working backwards." Born in the full light of modernity, the Bahā'ī Faith is an independent world religion, with Islamic origins. Charismatically established in 1863 in Baghdad by Mīrzā Ḥusayn-'Alī Nūrī Bahā' Allāh/official Bahā'ī spelling, Bahā'u'llāh ("Glory of God," 1817–92), a leader of the Persian Bābī movement out of which the Bahā'ī religion emerged, and constituted as a distinct faith-community in Adrianople in 1866, the Bahā'ī religion underwent transformations in ethos and organization throughout its three missionary phases, periods marked by the Islamic context (1844–92), international expansion to America and abroad (1892–1963), and global diffusion to nearly every country in the world (1963–present).

The Islamic context is coextensive with the ministries of both Bahā'u'llāh and his precursor, Sayyid 'Alī-Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819–50), the prophet-martyr known as the Bāb ("Gate"). The Bāb had already effected an eschatological break from Islam by "revealing" what was universally regarded by Bābīs as a new Qur'ān (viz., the *Qayyūm al-Asmā'*) and law code (enacted in the *Bayān-i Fārsī*). While the Bāb's law code was formally distinct from the Islamic *sharī'a*, paradoxically the Bābī system was super-Islamic in the intensity of the piety it required, but supra-Islamic in ethos, having superseded the authority of both Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.

Except for a two-year hiatus (1854–56) spent in solitude as a dervish, Bahā'u'llāh emerged as one of, if not the most effective leader of the Bābī exiles throughout the Baghdad period (1853–63), a period eschatologically charged with his own messianic secrecy. In his preeminent doctrinal work, the *Kitāb-i Īqān* ("Book of Certitude," 1861 [1974]), extemporaneously revealed in two days and two nights, Baha'u'llah advanced an extended quranic and biblical argument legitimizing the prophetic authenticity of the Bāb. This served as an oblique, advance legitimation for Bahā'u'llāh himself, who, in April 1863, announced his own role as "He Whom God Shall Manifest" (*man-Yuẓhiruhu'llāh*), the messianic theophany foretold by the Bāb. In public epistles to Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, Pope Pius IX, and other monarchs and religious leaders during the Adrianople period (1864–68) and in the early 'Akkā period (1868–92), Bahā'u'llāh announced his advent as the "World-Unifier" and "Promised One" of all religions. This was essentially a millenarian claim to multiple messiahship (viz., Ḥusayn *redivivus* for Shī'īs, the "Spirit of Truth" or *Parousia* of Christ for Christians, the "Everlasting Father" [Isaiah 9:6] for Jews, and Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand for Zoroastrians). The *kerygma*, or gospel, of

this messianic claimant was a message that addressed modernity and, by extension, postmodernity.

In his proclamations to crown and mitre and universally to the "peoples of the world," Bahā'u'llāh advocated world peace, parliamentary democracy, disarmament, an international language, harmony of science and religion, interfaith concord, gender and racial equality, and other reforms, all of which were integrated by an overarching paradigm of world unity. Granting that these were modernist reforms, Baha'u'llah's response to modernity was to make peace sacred. In a precocious religious preparation for a global society, Bahā'u'llāh sacralized certain developments within the secular world (such as the abolition of slavery, governance modelled on the British parliamentary system, etc.), and promoted world reforms that went beyond the purview of Islamic reform advocated by contemporary Ottoman and Persian modernists.

Structurally precluding major schisms by designating successorship and the formation of democratically elected religious institutions, Bahā'u'llāh's Covenant (symbolized as "the Crimson Ark") became the organizing principle of the Bahā'ī community itself and the guarantor of its integrity as a community. In his Book of the Covenant (*Kitāb-i 'Ahd*), Baha'u'llah designated his eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahā (d. 1921) as interpreter, exemplar, and successor, and who, in his *Will and Testament*, passed the torch of leadership to his Oxford-educated grandson, Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957), by designating the latter as the "Guardian" of the Bahā'ī Faith. Shoghi Effendi globalized and evolved Bahā'ī administration into a network of annually elected councils called National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, leading eventually to the election of the The Universal House of Justice in 1963, now established on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

The Bahā'ī Faith has been described as a derivative ("secondary") monotheism in the sense that it is the daughter religion of Islam. This genetic relationship is clearly illustrated in the typology of monotheisms developed by Alessandro Bausani, who proposed the following taxonomy in his classification of monotheistic religions, which include: (1) *Monotheisms proper*, in which Judaism and Islam are classed as primary monotheisms, with Christianity and the Bahā'ī Faith as respectively secondary (derivative, yet independent); (2) *Failed monotheisms*, which include Zoroastrianism as a primary monotheism, Manichaeism as a secondary monotheism, and Akhenaton's reform as an archaic monotheism; and (3) *Paramonotheisms*, which include Sikhism and various mysticisms (1963, 168). Thus Bahā'ī Faith stands in the same relationship to Islam as Christianity to Judaism. In my book, *Symbol and Secret* (1995a), I have discussed the relationship of Bahā'ī doctrine to Islam, the eschatological break of the former from

the latter, and have identified some of the key symbols of the Qur'ān that exegetically and stylistically inform Bahā'ī texts.

With a following of only several million adherents at present, the population statistics of the Bahā'ī religion are not significant, but the growth statistics are remarkable. In its report on "World Religious Statistics" for the previous year, the 1988 Britannica *Book of the Year* names the Bahā'ī Faith alongside Christianity and Islam as the "most universal" of today's world religions. By a simple accounting of the number of sovereign and nonsovereign countries and territories in which it is formally established, the Bahā'ī Faith emerges as the most widely diffused religion in the world except for Christianity. As David Barrett observes: "Over 14 major religious systems are each now found in over 80 countries. Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i World Faith are the most global" (1988, 303).

Working backwards from the Bahā'ī Faith's Islamic origins, I began to wonder if there were any specifically Christian antecedents to Bahā'ī symbolism. Of course, such an investigation had to be narrowed, because Christianity is really too broad a category and too sweeping a term for comparative purposes, considering that it adumbrates a veritable "family" of "Christianities." I therefore had to consider which *form* of Christianity should logically be selected for comparison, and why. The answer soon became evident: Persian Christianity was the tradition that was historically and culturally most proximate to Bahā'ī origins. Persian Christianity was attractive also because it tied into my broader research interests in "Persian" religions generally, from Zarathuštra to Bahā'u'llāh.

"Persian Christianity" refers to East Syriac Christianity under the Sasanian empire and beyond. The term *Persian Christianity* is used by A. V. Williams (1996), Stephen Gerö (1981; 1982) and others to refer to the "Church of the East"—the official name of the church— which was territorially coextensive with, yet surpassed, the orbit of the Sasanian empire. (Acknowledging that the term *Iranian* is technically more correct, both Syriac texts and the greater part of European scholarship employ the term *Persian* [Williams 1996, 38, n. 5].) This church is most commonly known as the "Nestorian" church, a "lamentable misnomer" (Brock 1996) that has, over time, become a scholarly term of convenience.

In Late Antiquity, Rome and Persia were the world's two superpowers. (The Sasanian Empire was in power from 224–651 C.E.) Except for short-lived armistices concluded under frangible treaties, both empires were constantly at war. Such "imperial warring" contributed to a more or less equal balance of power (Williams 1996, 37). Politically, as an imperative of survival when Persia was at war with Rome/Byzantium, Christians within the Persian Empire professed their loyalties to the Sasanian monarchy. On the feast of Epiphany (January 6)

in 410 C.E., the Sasanian king Yazdegird I convened, by royal decree, the Synod of Isaac (Mār Isḥāq). Under imperial auspices as a sign of goodwill, the Church of Persia obliged the emperor in asserting its ecclesiastical independence. As a distinct hierarchical body, the Church of Persia took a further, more decisive step in establishing its doctrinal independence in 486 C.E., at the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in total severance from the West. In due course, under Islamic rule, the East Syrian "Church of the East" would eventually have to coexist with West Syrian Jacobites, who were allowed to organize themselves into a separate *millet* distinct from that of the East Syrians, thus augmenting the Syriac Christian presence in Persia. In the medieval period, Syriac Christianity contributed to Islamic culture and religious life in Iran and Central Asia. (In chapter 2, the organization and diffusion of the Church of Persia will be reviewed in some detail.)

The Zoroastrian prelate, Kirdēr, in his well-known inscription on the Ka'ba-yi Zardušt, attests to the presence of both Syriac and Greek-speaking Christians (Williams 1996, 39). Wolfgang Hage puts this in a broader perspective: "Christianity, thus spreading over the Persian Empire, was mainly supported by the native Syrian and Iranian population, but to a lesser degree by those West Syrians and Greeks who had been deported as captives by the Persians from the temporarily occupied Roman border provinces into the East" (1988, 3). Although the majority of Persian Christians in the Sasanian empire must have been ethnic Syrians, the Church of the East was once a universal, multiethnic religion. It is probably true that ethnic Persians once formed the singlemost important ethnic minority of the Church of Persia. As historian Peter Brown has written: "The Christians within the Persian empire had begun to feel at home. In the fourth century, many had been foreigners, descended from the thousands of Syrians brought back as captives by Shapur I in the 260s. Times had changed. Christians now came from the Iranian population itself, through intermarriage and, occasionally, through conversion. Pehlevi (Middle Persian) joined Syriac as the other language of the Nestorian Church" (1997, 172).

The church within the Sasanian empire became increasingly "Persian" owing to the burgeoning number of native converts from Zoroastrianism, many of whom were, and still are, revered as martyrs. In the sixth century, the patriarch of the Persian church was Catholicós Mār Abā I (d. 552), a born Zoroastrian who was "educated in Persian literature" and who had once "scorned the Christians and despised the sons of the Covenant" (Williams 1996, 45, n. 36), and who himself became a martyr. We find unmistakable evidence of the importance of Zoroastrian converts to Persian Christianity in its principal historical sources: the official canons of synods; and the hagiographical acts of the Persian martyrs. Compiled under the direction of Catholicós

Timothy I (d. 823), the official documents of the Church of the East are recorded in the *Synodicon Orientale*, a record containing the acts of synods for the period 410–775 (Chabot 1902). In 544, at the Synod of Mār Abā, we discover that there were bishops of Iranian episcopates who had retained their Zoroastrian names, such as Ādur-Hormizd, Dādāfrīd, Hormizd, Mihr-bōzīd, Mihr-Narsēh, and Mihr-Hormizd (Williams 1996, 39). The Persian martyr Mār Giwargis, born with the Zoroastrian name Mihrām-Gušnasp, was, from youth, "thoroughly instructed in Persian literature and trained in the lore of the Magians," and was thus equal to his Zoroastrian persecutors in interrogations prior to his martyrdom (Williams 1996, 51–52).

Persian Christianity was, as stated, a historical development of East Syriac Christianity. As Christianity's most successful missionary church until decimated by the Mongols, the Church of the East sucessfully indigenized itself among local populations throughout the Persian Empire, Central Asia, India, and China. While it is true that Persian Christianity remained a predominantly Syriac tradition, with liturgy and instruction in Syriac, subsidiary Persian vernaculars were used to consolidate the influx of ethnic Iranian converts. Thus, there were imperial, ecclesiastical, ethnic, and vernacular elements that were distinctively Iranian.

Apart from the comparative agenda at hand, the study of Syriac Christianity provides an important corrective to a largely Eurocentric writing of Christian history. The Syriac language (Christian Aramaic) originated in Edessa—the "Athens of the East"—in the province of Osrhoëne (Mathews and Amar 1994a, 34). Syriac Christianity flourished in northern Mesopotamia (both Roman and Persian), in neighboring Adiabene (in 116 C.E., the Roman province of Assyria, reconquered by the Persians) and in points east. As its influence spread, Syriac emerged as the third international language of Christianity in Late Antiquity, thus ranking, alongside Greek and Latin, as one of the three great languages of Christian liturgy and missionary endeavor in the early centuries. As "the most important language of the Christian East" (Rilliet 1992c, 2: 809), Syriac was central to the diffusion of Christianity—in its concentric taxonomy—throughout the Persian Empire and along the Silk Road, through "Outer Iran," all the way to China. This linguistic and historical fact invests Syriac studies with an intrinsic importance. West to East, Christian identities shaped on the basis of Latin, Greek, and Syriac represent the three principal divisions of Christianity's first millennium, such that Syriac Christianity represents "a third cultural [Christian] tradition" (Brock, *apud* Drijvers 1996, 173).

What is so distinctive about pre-Persian, Syriac Christianity relative to other forms of the Christian faith (or "Christianities")? When one steps across the linguistic borders of the Latin West and the Greek

East into the spiritual frontier of the Syriac Orient, the Christian land-scape suddenly becomes a Semitic hinterland, the inner landscape tinctured with a rich array of metaphors, expressions twinned with spiritual experience expressed in artistic enigmaticity. Largely absent here are the enormous debts to classical philosophy and its categories so pronounced in Hellenistic Christianity. In early Syriac Christianity, there was no effort to forge a synthesis between classical thought and Christian doctrine. Instead, native metaphors, rooted in vivid Semitisms, irradiate the literary horizon. Syriac Christianity was not propositionally controlled. More importantly, given its liturgical set-ting in Syriac worship, "theology" was popularly based, and was out-side the province of the educated élite. Syriac liturgical theology bridges the typical gulf between so-called official and popular forms of religion.

Historically, it seemed obvious to me that "Persian" Christianity presented itself as the better candidate for comparison with the Bahā'ī tradition than mainstream Graeco-Latin "Roman" (later Byzantine) Christianity. Given the Islamic background of the Bahā'ī Faith, it is noteworthy that Tor Andrae had already conjectured a Syriac Chris-tian source for the Qur'ān's description of Paradise (Andrae 1932, 71–72). Edmund Beck (1948 and 1961) disputed this suggestion. Whether mediated through its Islamic heritage or not, a preliminary compari-son disclosed that Bahā'ī texts betray some intriguing affinities with Syriac texts.

As the formative period of Syriac spirituality, the fourth century was decisive in the development of all subsequent forms of Syriac spirituality. Because of this, it was not the trunk and the branches of the East Syrian ecclesiastical tree that most interested me, but rather the symbolic roots of Persian Christianity as exemplified in the hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 C.E.) and the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahāṭ (d. c. 345 C.E.). Persian Christianity—and the early Syriac Christianity that predates it—actually begins with Aphrahāṭ, "the Persian Sage," who was the first Father of the Syrian church and "our first major Christian writer from outside the Roman Empire" (Brock 1994, 71). The earliest Syriac literature is said to have been of "clearly 'Persian'" origin (Rilliet 1992c, 2: 810), with respect to the twenty-three *Demonstrations* of Aphrahāṭ. He wrote during a period of intense per-secution of Christians (Aph. Dem. XVI.1) and was understandably quite anti-Persian politically (V.1).

In addition to Aphrahāṭ, early Syriac Christianity is best exem-plified in the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, "the poet of the Christian paradox" (Brock 1983, 14), acclaimed to have been the greatest poet of Christianity in the patristic period. Not only is he the most im-portant exemplar of early Syriac spirituality, Ephrem is as univer-sal a representative of Christianity in Late Antiquity as any other

single candidate. The early Syriac culture area, of which Ephrem was
a part, was defined by coterminous "Roman" and "Persian" spheres of
influence. This Christian milieu was a mosaic of Marcionites,
Bardaiṣanites, and Manichaeans in which orthodox [Nicene] Chris-
tianity was originally a minority community known as Paluṭians, for
whom "*enkrateia* [sexual holiness] was the religious ideal of almost all
groups except the Bardesanites" (Drijvers 1996, 173). From his obscure
origins among the Paluṭians, and within his own lifetime, Ephrem's
reputation began to spread throughout the Christian world. He is the
only Syrian Christian to have been canonized as a saint in the Catholic
Church. As the more illustrious of the two, Ephrem will be privileged
over Aphrahāṭ, while the latter will be adduced to supplement the
former.

    Although he lived on the Roman-Persian frontier, Ephrem was
not a Persian; yet during his own lifetime, there was significant con-
tact with Persian Christians, so much so that the theological school in
Edessa (which Ephrem is traditionally said to have once headed) was
known as "The School of the Persians" (Brock 1996, 33). In 489, the
emperor Zeno closed the school, which then relocated to Ephrem's na-
tive city of Nisibis, which, in 363, had been ceded to the Persians. The
fact remains that Ephrem was one of the principal spiritual forebears
of the Church of Persia that formed less than forty years after his
death. These two luminaries of Syriac spirituality—Aphrahāṭ and
Ephrem—established the legacy on which the Church of Persia was
later founded. In the present study, therefore, I shall explore these
Syriac roots of Persian Christianity, for possible Christian antecedents
of Bahā'ī symbolism.

    The stamp of Syriac symbolism is visible throughout Syriac lit-
urgy and imagery down to the present. Today, Syriac Christianity sur-
vives in Iraq and Iran (the heartland of the ancient Sasanian empire)
as well as diasporally, in its several configurations: *Assyrian* (two Pa-
triarchates, East Syriac ["Nestorian"] liturgy): (1) Assyrian Church of
the East (New Calendarian—Tehran, Chicago); (2) Assyrian Church of
the East (Old Calendarian—Baghdad). *Orthodox* ("Jacobite" with two
Patriarchates, West Syriac liturgy): (3) Universal Syrian Orthodox
Church of the Patriarchate of Antioch including its Church in India;
(4) Syrian Orthodox of the Autocephalous Malankara Church of India.
Catholic (Oriental Uniate): (5) Chaldean Patriarchate of Babylonia
(Baghdad, East Syriac liturgy); (6) Syro-Malabar Church of India (East
Syriac liturgy); (7) Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch (West
Syriac liturgy); (8) Maronite Church (West Syriac liturgy); (9)
Malankara Catholic Church (West Syriac liturgy). *Protestant:* (10)
Mar-Thoma (Anglican); (11) Assyrian Evangelical Church (Tehran);
(12) Assyrian Pentecostal Church; (13) "Philadelphia Church" (Iran);
(14) various Assyrian Presbyterian congregations. Syrian converts to

Protestant denominations have been excluded from dialogue within the Syrian tradition.

In the first three of these four families, Ephrem has a distinct place of honor. Among these various Syriac Christian traditions, as a legacy, Aphrahāt's and Ephrem's imagery for Christ's incarnation is perhaps more faithfully preserved in the East Syrian tradition (Brock 1994, 82–83), as is evidenced in the liturgy known as the *Ḥudrā* ("Cycle"; Breviary). (See Appendix IV, "Fragments of a Lost Persian Christian Liturgy," at the end of this book.)

Collectively, these Syriac-oriented groups represent an attenuated, but living religion, contemporary with the Bahā'ī Faith. None of the present-day remnants of Syriac Christianity will, however, be selected for comparison. Instead, I have restricted my investigation to the formative period of Persian Christianity—before there was even an officially constituted "Church of Persia"—in order to study the most important and symbolically rich Syriac texts—particularly the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian and, to a lesser extent, the discourses of Aphrahāt, the Persian Sage—written during the golden age of Syriac literature.

While diachronically distant in respect of origins, bridged by the Islamic period, Persian Christianity is historically antecedent to the Bahā'ī religion by pedigree in the religious history of Iran. Comparison of Syriac Christianity and the Bahā'ī Faith is thus justified on grounds of common geographical, historical, ethnic and, to a lesser extent, linguistic contexts. Comparing the imagery of the two traditions should make it possible to demonstrate how symbolic transformation may be the reflex of an underlying paradigm shift of religious ideals.

As symbol systems, these two religions exhibit a wide range of expressive and ideological similarities, insufficiently classified as "parallels." The object of this study is to compare some of the dominant, world-defining Syriac symbols of early Persian Christianity with commensurate symbolism in the Bahā'ī Faith, with respect to the core paradigms (that is, the overarching and governing religious concerns) of each of the two religions. Obviously, Islam is presumed to have played an intermediary role in the transmission and transformation of Christian symbolism, as taken up in the Bahā'ī religion. While a suppressed genealogy is unavoidable in suggesting that symbolic transformations may occur as a result of paradigm shifts from one religion to another, I will be arguing analogically based on a coherence theory of truth.

The contribution I wish to make is primarily methodological. Through a systematic worldview analysis and disciplined comparison of worldviews, my objective is to interpret parallels by nuancing their differences—differences that correlate to the symbolic logics of the religions being compared. If successful, this project could suggest a

model for synchronic comparisons of diachronically unrelated traditions. In the present study, however, there is at least a distant diachronic relationship between the Christian and Bahā'ī religions. If history looks at the causes, phenomenology can at least examine the effects.

Data selection typically excludes more than it includes, so that a decision governing data selection required justification. During preliminary research, this finding fell into focus: In both Syriac and Bahā'ī traditions, many dominant symbols related to notions of Paradise. Why? Because Paradise allegorizes ideals. Paradise imagery may be analyzed as the projection of religious ideals onto an eschatological canvas. Visions of Paradise are the stained-glass windows of worldviews, encompassing most of the imagery—or "key symbols"—to be analyzed in this study. Luxuriant gardens, fountains, flowing streams, succulent fruits, jewels, pearls, illumination—all of these images can be promoted within a religious community as a master allegory of all that is ideal. Paradise is demonstrably a reflex of prevailing standards of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In the case of Persian Christianity, the path to Paradise seems to be sacramental. In the case of the Bahā'ī Faith, the path to Paradise appears to be sacrosocial.

Paradises and Paradigms

Ideals are "seen" in symbolic landscapes. Promotion of religious ideals, in Western religions, often takes the form of promises of Paradise. Visions of Paradise disclose an abundance of information relating to religious worldviews. As an afterlife, the existence of Paradise is not empirically demonstrable. Yet Paradise inspires hopes of reward for pious faith and for righteous works. In earthly terms, Paradise imagery contributes to "world building." Paradise has a social function, in addition to its traditional, eschatological role. As "realized eschatology," notions of Paradise influence faith-communities here on Earth.

Paradise images are certainly iconic. They can represent an ontological reality posited by scriptural authority with whatever propositional infallibility is ascribed to it. But such images may be reflexively symbolic as well. One man's paradise may not necessarily be another's. And so it is that there are different notions of Paradise across the religious spectrum. Within discrete religious systems, it may be observed that Paradise is confessionally referenced. It is keyed to a set of values and behaviors that embody beliefs about salvation and ideals of perfection. On an individual level, contemplation of Heaven is thought orienting and can supply strategies for action. For the faith-community, Paradise may function as a master symbol of a core religious paradigm, a controlling, conceptual model that governs ideal beliefs and behaviors.

Religions may share ideas in common about Paradise. This renders the comparison more interesting and challenging. Symbols may be "the same"—exhibiting formal affinity—but disclosing significantly divergent shades of meaning. Parallels may be seen as distorted mirror images. Visual nuances of one and the same image depend upon the mirrors themselves, which reflect that image, but perhaps in slightly different ways. Interpretations, after all, are forms of distortion.

Interpretations are governed by overarching paradigms. For the purposes of this study, the term *paradigm* is indebted to Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn's technical use of the term *paradigm* has recently been lexicalized in the 1993 *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: "*Philos.* a mode of viewing the world which underlies the theories and methodology of science in a particular period of history" (2: 2093). This study extends that definition to a religious context, such that "paradigm" will now mean: "*Rel.* a model of viewing the world which underlies the beliefs and practices of religion and society in a particular period of history."

Paradigms can render parallels intelligible. As perspectival filters, paradigms provide a heuristic key for explaining parallels. To nuance formal similarities and to resolve conceptual differences, parallels need to be indexed to core paradigms, which are coefficients of anthropological and soteriological assumptions. The present investigation seeks to reference parallels to those controlling paradigms. As a contribution to what William Paden (1996a) has recently called the "new comparativism," this study proposes the following axiom for further research and refinement: *"Parallels" yield paradoxes of commensurability resolvable by paradigm "logics" within religious systems, resulting in symbolic transformation.* This is a testable statement, not on historical, but on thematic and typological grounds.

This investigation will explore how one religious paradigm may or may not compare to another, and, in so doing, attempts to render such comparisons schematically clear. Formally affine and distinctive symbols drawn from Syriac and Bahá'í texts will be compared by an inventory of features, with respect to superordinating paradigms of each religion. As the main force of this research project is structural rather than historical, it is not within the scope of this study to prove historical influences. It prescinds from advancing claims of a genetic nature. While questions of historical transmission clearly fall outside of the province of this project, history will afford an anchor for the data, in relatively "thick" descriptions of both Syriac and Bahá'í religious contexts.

Systems of Symbols

Symbolic analysis of religions proceeds from the fact that religions are systems of symbols. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has privileged or

highlighted the role of symbols in religion. In his 1965 essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," Geertz works out a definition of religion in terms of its symbols: "A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1973, 90). This is a functional definition that has much tighter specifications than does a definition like "religion is a system of numinous symbols"—a definition that employs the same analogic model (Poole 1986, 440).

While favorably disposed towards Geertz's definition, Willard Oxtoby observes: "Many have found Geertz's article a useful mainstream representative of twentieth-century social theory of religion. This is so despite the evident elasticity of some of its wording. Just what, for instance, is an 'aura' of factuality? Just how, exactly, do symbols, rather than people, 'act'? But a strength of the definition is its parallel between clause 4 as intensification of clause 3, and clause 5 as intensification of clause 2" (1996c, 499). Note that it is not a requirement that the symbols themselves "seem uniquely realistic" but rather what they represent or evoke ought to seem realistic. Geertz defines a symbol as "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's meaning" (1973, 91). In the present study, scriptural symbols are "objects" as well as allegorical "acts" that metaphorically and narratively enshrine conceptions. Clearly, Geertz's definition intensifies the relation between religion and its symbols by defining religion in terms of its symbols.

Symbols are interesting, but why are they important for the Study of Religion? Sherry Ortner describes the importance of Geertz's own interest in symbols as methodological revolution of sorts: "Geertz's most radical theoretical move (1973b) was to argue that culture is not something locked inside people's heads, but rather is embodied in public symbols, symbols through which the members of a society communicate their worldview, value-orientations, ethos, and all the rest to one another, to future generations—and to anthropologists. With this formulation, Geertz gave the hitherto elusive concept of cultural symbols a relatively fixed locus, lending the study of such symbols a degree of objectivity previous lacking. The focus on symbols was for Geertz and many others heuristically liberating: it told them where to find what they wanted to study. Yet the point about symbols was that they were ultimately vehicles for meanings; the study of symbols as such was never an end in itself" (1984, 129). Religious symbols inform and structure religious consciousness.

Books are typically less interesting when devoid of illustrations. Perhaps the same could be said of scriptural texts as well. Symbols are

the illustrations of sacred ideas and ideals. Symbols are more than illuminative. They have a focalizing function. The key to Ricoeur's theory of symbol is his formula (cited by C. Long 1986, 50): "*Le symbole donne à penser*" ("Symbol invites thought"). For Ricoeur, the symbol is a two-dimensional phenomenon, unifying dual universes of discourse: linguistically, symbols exhibit metaphoricity; and presemantically, symbols are rooted in the depths of human experience, from which derives their evocative power (see DeLoach 1983). "All texts," Dilworth writes, "convey meaning in assertive (propositional), active (morally and politically agential), and exhibitive (aesthetic, performative) modes of expression or judgment" (1989, 18). Symbols, by Dilworth's standards, are not assertive. But they are "active" and "exhibitive." Their agential role is stressed in the anthropology of religion.

Symbols are encoded metaphors. Behind symbolization, figuration will be assumed to exist. As Rice and Schofer state: "Extended over an entire text, the act of reading and interpretation is a complex interplay between symbolization and figuration. Although figures and tropes can be isolated for analysis, in reading there can be no figuration without symbolization and no symbolization without figuration" (1983, 37). Symbolism is a transformation of metaphoricity, with respect to its iconic function in representing nonphysical, or spiritual, reality. Apart from signs, which are explicit, symbols may possess what Royce calls "surplus meaning" (cited in Fawcett 1970, 28). A symbol is most commonly defined as "a material Object substituted for a moral or spiritual truth" (Bullinger 1968, 769). How does a symbol come to be? Bullinger states that a symbol is formed in three stages: (1) a metaphor or metonymy is used to *represent* something other; (2) the one is used to *imply* the other; and (3) finally, the one comes to permanently *substitute* for the other (ibid., 770). Wheelwright is simpler still. He suggests that a symbol is a "metaphor stabilized" (1960, 7).

To oversimplify, a symbol is a metaphor reified over time, being transformed, in the currency it acquires through recurrent usage, from a "unique flash of insight" to "a relatively stable element of perceptual experience, standing for some larger meaning or set of meanings which cannot be given, or not fully given, in perceptual experience itself" (Wheelwright 1962, 93, 92). Though Rice and Schofer do not give a definition of symbol as such, it is clear from their discussion of the symbolic process that a symbol is marked only by incompleteness, since there is no incompatibility between the text and context, as there is in figuration. Yet the reader detects the incompleteness and decodes the text symbolically (1983, 38).

Cain proposes what is one of the simpler approaches to symbol, in which the symbol mediates between subject and *numen*. By "numen" is meant the signified, perceived, extrarational, sacred reality of the

believer's universe (1979, 340). (No ontological commitment is made in postulating this symbolic domain.) In this schema, the symbol evokes the presence of the *numen*. Typically, symbols find their "fulfillment" in numinously evocative ritual, dream, or vision. They may likewise be "realized" in the present through an act of identification, even if that be an exegetical one. If the Cross is the symbol of salvation, the object symbolized is Christ (the savior), the subject symbolized is man (the saved), while the *numen* is salvation (my example). Here, the symbol links subject and object, by linking the numinous with the evocative and sympathetic power of the symbolic. The symbol's referent is experientially, but not empirically, verifiable. The subjective apperception of the numinous through the symbolic is real enough. To the extent that symbols, as numinous archives of meaning, incorporate ideas, they may be said to hypostatize them. Ontological claims of a supramundane power may be studied as a psychological reification of that which is experienced or imagined. Not the ontology but, rather, the interpretive "reality" is of immediate hermeneutical concern.

One must determine how symbols concatenate. The symbol is an enigma. It is like an oracle; it needs to be deciphered. A symbol is not susceptible of interpretive closure, or "truth exhaustion," partly because of its recombinant possibilities in connection with other symbols. Charles Long observes that "religious symbols, precisely because of their intrinsic power, radiate and deploy meanings; the spread of these meanings creates an arena and field of power relationships" (1986, 2). Relationally, within a religious system, symbols possess what might be thought of as a kind of collective "dream logic." This process of decoding is not a purely mental operation. As an encoded metaphor, the symbol is not simply a code. It is a mode of expression. One might even speak of its emotional content. The symbol is the language of the heart.

As Oxtoby often says to his students, the methodological "proof of the pudding" is both in the pudding and in the eating of it. Which is to say that data selection is just as significant as the methodologies brought to bear on the data. To this end, selecting for the more important symbols becomes a methodological concern. Some symbols are more important than others in terms of their relative influence. There are dominant symbols and there are subsidiary symbols. Dominant symbols have been termed "key symbols" in the anthropology of religion. Constellations of subordinate symbols may cluster around key symbols, which are the affective and exhibitive poles of religious thought. Identification of preponderating symbols provides the necessary data for comparison. Interpretation of this data on comparative grounds derives from research design. In the next section, the concept of "key symbols" will be explained.

Key Symbols

In this study, Syriac Christianity and the Bahā'ī Faith are conceived of as constellations of information-rich key symbols, exhibiting a wealth of metaphorical language operating as concept indicators. In general terms, a religious symbol will be expected to significate "the knowledge by which self/society/action are joined" (Jensen 1992, 6). This is an integrative definition in its part-to-whole set of relations.

Given the existence of competing theories of the symbol, and its wide array of definitions, it is necessary either to invent or to adapt a paradigm, to the exclusion of others. This study will adapt Sherry Ortner's concept of the "key symbol." This technical term derives from symbolic anthropology. On the basis of her 1970 dissertation, Ortner (1973) developed a model of symbolism for "symbolic analysis"—a paradigm that will be adapted to the present study. Ortner wanted to show that cultures were not just clusters of symbols, but something more. Cultural symbols were more than even the ideologies they represent. A "key symbol"—a superordinating, dominant image of an idea or an ideal—is immediately cognizable. A key symbol commands respect, fixes attention on the intentional referent for which it stands, a silent yet evocative representation of something religious, present, ethereally imperial. Among the dominant "key symbols" of a given culture are "key scenarios" or schemas for enacting cultural behaviors. Ortner's paradigm will be employed independent of its original theoretical context and adapted to the discussion at hand.

Generally, key symbols are of two kinds: "summarizing" and "elaborating" (see schematic in Kippenberg 1985, 189; *apud* Goedendorp 1991, 117). "Summarizing" key symbols are iconic, sacred symbols, "objects of reverence and/or catalysts of emotion," such as the Cross for Christians, corresponding perhaps to the "Material" or "Artistic" (seventh) dimension of Smart's dimensional model of religion. What is the Bahā'ī counterpart of the Christian cross and spire? In the present-day Bahā'ī Faith, the continental Bahā'ī Houses of Worship come to mind, as does the Bahā'ī ringstone symbol. By its very nature, a summarizing key symbol is "clustered, condensed, relatively undifferentiated, 'thick'" (Ortner 1973, 1342). A summarizing symbol is characterized by "its focusing power, its drawing-together, intensifying, catalyzing impact upon the respondent" resulting in a "crystallization of commitment" (ibid.).

Summarizing symbols are said to "catalyze feeling." They speak to "a different level of response, the level of attitude and commitment." Such symbols "ground" a variety of "surface-level meanings to their deeper bases" (ibid., 1343). Ortner points to the American flag as a prime example: "The American flag, for example, for certain Americans, stands for something called 'the American way,' a conglomerate

of ideas and feelings including (theoretically) democracy, free enter-
prise, hard work, competition, progress, national superiority, freedom,
etc. And it stands for them all at once. It does not encourage reflection
on the logical relations among these ideas, nor on the logical conse-
quences of them as they are played out in social actuality, over time
and history. On the contrary, the flag encourages a sort of all-or-noth-
ing allegiance to the whole package, best summed up on a billboard I
saw recently: 'Our flag, love it or leave.' And this is the point about
summarizing symbols in general—they operate to compound and syn-
thesize a complex system of ideas, to 'summarize' them under a unitary
form which, in an old-fashioned way, 'stands for' the system as a
whole" (ibid., 1340).

This study will take up Ortner's other category of "key sym-
bols"—those which have an "elaborating" function. There are two pri-
mary modes in which key symbols operate: thought and action. "Root
metaphors" and "key scenarios" respectively represent ideals of
thought and action. In Ortner's "key symbols" paradigm, "root meta-
phors" serve to orient thought.

The term *root metaphor* was first developed as a key term and
launched as a descriptive and analytic category by Stephen Pepper
(1942). Pepper conceived of root metaphors as symbols imbued with
tremendous elaborating power, in which the principal mechanism is
the metaphor. Root metaphors were pivotal in the maintenance of
world hypotheses—another term coined by Pepper—that roughly cor-
respond to the notion of a worldview. Acting as a symbol, the root
metaphor provides a set of categories for cognitive and affective con-
ceptualizing of the world. Pepper linked his concept of root metaphors
with Kuhn's notion of "paradigm": "According to his [Kuhn's] exposi-
tion," writes Pepper, "there is practically no difference between the
function of a paradigm as a guiding pattern in scientific procedure
and that of the root metaphor as a guiding conceptual pattern in
world hypotheses except for the restricted scope of the former" (1984,
3: 200).

In Ortner's use of the term, a root metaphor is one in which "one
can conceptualize the interrelationships among phenomena by analogy
to the interrelations among the parts of the root metaphor (op. cit.,
1341). Root metaphors serve to establish "a certain view of the world"
(ibid.). A few words ought to be said about the term *metaphor* and how
an understanding of metaphors in general might elucidate the role of
root metaphors in particular. In her "key symbols" paradigm, Ortner
seems unconcerned with linguistic distinctions between "symbol" and
"metaphor." "Root metaphors" are simply a species of "key symbols."
Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind what a metaphor is and
what a metaphor does, as this does relate to an appreciation of the
dynamics of thought-orienting root metaphors.

Metaphor is arguably the ground of symbolism. Metaphor has been considered to be the most elaborate of tropes. Traditionally taking it to be the most fundamental form of figurative language, most theorists agree that a metaphor is based on association and, in its dynamic effect, triggers some kind of transference of meaning in the mind of the reader. Younger states: "The power of metaphor derives precisely from the interplay between the discordant meanings it symbolically coerces into a unitary conceptual framework and from the degree to which that coercion is successful in overcoming the psychic resistance such semantic tension inevitably generates in anyone in a position to perceive it" (1990, 164). Personification, for example, depends on verbal metaphors, metaphors of action (Dupriez 1991, 278). "Metaphorical thought," wrote Max Black, "is a distinctive mode of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought" (1962, 237). A metaphor is aspectual. It may be thought of as the overlap of two meanings (Watson 1984, 263).

For example, in the verse, "Why, then, has Israel become a prey?" (Jer. 2:14), Israel is the "tenor" while the prey is the "vehicle" of the metaphor, in which the attribute of vulnerability is the "ground" or overlap of meaning between tenor and vehicle (Watson, op. cit.). This is very straightforward. The idea of Israel as prey implies vulnerability. In the metaphor, the transference of meaning is covert, whereas, in contrast, a simile literally "*proposes* the transference" (Hawkes 1972, 30). Negatively, Levin defines a metaphor as an expression evincing, in its composition, a degree of linguistic deviance, in which the meaning of a word swerves from its lexically codified usage. Due to their oddity, metaphors require first to be construed before being understood (Levin 1988, 1).

Positively, Ricoeur argues that metaphor, by virtue of its semantic innovation, "is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality" (1979, 7). Rice and Schofer define metaphor as follows: "Metaphor is characterized by a semantic and referential relationship made possible by the possession of one or more semantic features" (1983, 21). This definition, based as it is on resemblance or similarity, does not differ appreciably from traditional notions. Beyond mere juxtaposition, in highly encoded metaphors, there are condensed, numerous intersections of meanings, which are said to "contaminate" each other (ibid., 102).

In simpler terms, Thompson speaks of "metaphoric unity" in a text rich in figurative language, in which that unity interrelates symbolic elements of the text "vertically." "Metaphoric unity," writes Thompson, "occurs all at once; that is, a metaphor consists of simultaneous 'vertical' layers of language analogous to a musical chord" (1990, 354–55). Moreover, a metaphor "identifies rather than compares two elements" (ibid., 356), though Thompson does not pursue the implica-

tions of this contrast to simile. The use of such language does not merely illustrate and supplement demonstrative statements of doctrine. Metaphorical texts may in fact communicate more vividly and fully the experiential dimension of nondiscursive truth. A metaphor is more evocative than literal discourse. Figurative speech, from a cognitive perspective, requires a certain level of competence to decode. The same may be said of metaphorical and symbolic modes of discourse in religious texts (cf. Goodenough 1951). A certain competence is required to understand it.

"Key scenarios"—Ortner's other class of "key symbols"—serve to influence action. This is because "they are valued as implying mechanisms for successful social action." Key scenarios are endowed with "action elaborating power" that define "strategies" for "orderly social action in relation to culturally defined goals" (op. cit., 1340). Key scenarios "are culturally valued in that they formulate the culture's mean-ends relationships in actable forms" (ibid., 1341). The activity of symbols is seen, for instance, in cult and sacrament, where a symbol takes on a performative role in its creative or reconstitutive operations. Action instantiates its symbols. In the cultic domain, therefore, we can accept the Weberian notion that ideology influences behavior, such that key scenarios may have an ordering function. Just as root metaphors are thought orienting, key scenarios are action ordering. Ortner's concept of key scenarios is akin to Victor Turner's concept of "root paradigms," which have a persistent force in society. In Christianity, for example, Turner points to martyrdom as a root paradigm (Turner 1974).

To recapitulate, key symbols of the elaborating order subdivide along a thought/action axis, consisting of "root metaphors" (thought orientations) and "key scenarios" (action ordering). Root metaphors are "static formal images serving metaphor functions for thought" while key scenarios involve "dramatic, phased, action sequences serving scenario functions for action" (Ortner 1973, 1342).

Identification of key symbols within a single religious tradition constitutes internal analysis, as part of what one might call "worldview analysis," through employing what Ninian Smart has termed "*symbolic* analysis" (1985, 33). In Syriac and Bahā'ī sacred texts, particular attention will be given to two kinds of literary forms: (1) for analysis of root metaphors, genitive metaphors (the most complex type of noun metaphor and one that is frequently used to express Bahā'ī and Syriac root metaphors) will be used; and (2) for analysis of key scenarios, allegories, or symbolic narratives will be adduced. Although this paradigm is admittedly programmatic, the use of key symbols here should not be viewed as deterministic or overly constraining.

It is necessary to distinguish between the academic concept of "key symbols" and religious references to "symbols" within the Syriac

and Bahā'ī traditions themselves. By using nearly identical terms—
i.e., *key symbols* (symbolic anthropology) and *symbols* (Syriac and
Bahā'ī terms)—the analysis runs the risk of being caught within a reli-
gious self-understanding that "entangles the analysis with the very
discourse it seeks to interpret and explain" (Poole 1986, 413). The term
key symbols—despite its terminological affinity to religious *symbols*—
is conceptually independent. It is theoretically crucial to the perfor-
mance of symbolic analysis that this distinction be maintained.

Dimensional Model

Analysis of data depends upon an adequate description of it. Adequate
description is a requisite for explanation. Ninian Smart's "dimensional
model" of religion assigns six "dimensions" to each religion (1985). For
mnemonic purposes, I have coined the acronym DREEMS (Doctrinal,
Ritual, Ethical, Experiential, Mythic, Social) to represent these dimen-
sions. Defining religions as systems of symbols (Geertz), this study fo-
cuses on key symbols (Ortner), comprised of thought-orienting root
metaphors and action-incentive key scenarios. Providing holistic de-
scriptions of religions as symbol systems for worldview analysis, the
invention of a "symbolic profile" orders an array of dominant,
ideationally indexed images within respective "dimensions." These
symbolic profiles are synoptic mappings of dominant key symbols
within each tradition. Key symbols for the various dimensions of the
DREEMS map are charted.

Clifford Geertz has defined religion as a "system of symbols."
Sherry Ortner—Geertz's student—has classified and defined those
symbols. Now that a paradigm for symbols has been adopted for the
present study, we turn our attention to the religious "system" itself.
What does it mean to say that a religion is a "system" of symbols? A
cross-cultural, systemic model of religion is needed. Ninian Smart, a
distinguished phenomenologist of religion, has offered such a model. It
is an analytical apparatus, with a methodologically elegant, descrip-
tive power. Whether or not this model gains widespread acceptance
remains to be seen.

Smart has developed and refined what he calls a "dimensional"
model of religion. It has the advantage of describing a given religion
roundly, giving a picture of the religion in its totality. So long as
phenomenologists are careful to surrender to the data and not to the
model itself, the dimensional approach to religious systems can be
quite useful. Although spirituality seems to be characterized by a cer-
tain depth of ineffability, Smart's six dimensions of religion provide
superficial, yet necessary windows into the functioning of a faith com-
munity. Ideally, Smart's dimensional model is a simple taxonomy of
religion.

In Smart's model of it, religion may be viewed from different angles, like turning a six-faceted jewel. Each facet is aspectual, representing one dimension. Each dimension also serves as a comparative frame for the focus of a comparison between two or more religions. Over the years, Smart has variously described these dimensions. In what probably has been his most important description of them, Smart's *Worldviews* introduces the following dimensions in this order: (1) the Experiential Dimension; (2) the Mythic Dimension; (3) the Doctrinal Dimension; (4) the Ethical Dimension; (5) the Ritual Dimension; (6) the Social Dimension (1985, ix).

In the 1995 reprint of *The World's Religions*, Smart has slightly revised these headings as follows: (1) The Practical and Ritual Dimension; (2) The Experiential and Emotional Dimension; (3) The Narrative or Mythic Dimension; (4) The Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension; (5) The Ethical and Legal Dimension; (6) The Social and Institutional Dimension; (7) The Material Dimension. Under the last dimension, Smart subsumes the "Artistic" (Smart 1995, 10–21). In Ortner's terms of reference, it seems fairly obvious that the Material or Artistic Dimension is where the majority of "summarizing" symbols are to be found. The "Material" dimension adumbrates artistic and iconographic modalities of religion. In the Bahā'ī tradition, the ringstone symbol (designed by Bahā'u'llāh's son 'Abdu'l-Bahā [d. 1921]) and the distinct architecture of Bahā'ī Houses of Worship fit nicely here in the seventh dimension, but are excluded from the present study as they are not literary. For the purposes of the present study, the seventh dimension, concerned as it is with "summarizing" rather than "elaborating" key symbols, will be excluded from purview.

Smart's dimensional model is not without controversy. Recently, Michael Pye has argued that interculturally based theories of religion are in short supply and there is no single theory of religion that is sufficiently stabilized to command wide assent (1994, 52). Pye questions the utility of Smart's model with respect to Japanese religions, in which both "doctrinal" and "ethical" dimensions appear to be lacking (ibid., 59). Their absence leaves a gaping hole in Smart's paradigm. But is this an exception, existing in splendid isolation, that in effect "proves the rule"? Or has Pye exposed a weak link that will break Smart's theoretical concatenation of dimensions? I think that the lack of an ethical dimension in Japanese religions is perhaps taken up elsewhere, in a transconfessional way, from some other value system, religious or civil, lest we deduce from Pye's remarks that the Japanese who follow Japanese religions are altogether bereft of ethics. Smart's model seems to have withstood the scrutiny of other scholars over time, and to have enjoyed a certain popularity based on its utility. (It is probably too soon to speak of a near consensus.) Smart's dimensional model provides a powerful analytic framework that makes significant sense