

## CHAPTER ONE

# Sacred Canopies

### I. A THEORY OF SACRED CANOPIES

The phrase, *sacred canopy*, derives from Peter L. Berger's book, *The Sacred Canopy*. The purpose of that book is to develop a theory of religion with the tools of sociology of knowledge; its argument is closely connected with the book Berger wrote with Thomas Luckman at about the same time, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger's general thesis is that human beings need to order their experience, and do so by imposing subjectively constructed ordering ideas on reality. "A meaningful order, or *nomos*, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or *nomizing*, activity."<sup>1</sup> Although constructed by the human imagination, and thus subjective in this sense, the *nomos* imposed on the world is taken to be objective and people live according to it. The world, of course, has its own structure, which Berger calls "*cosmos*" in contrast to "*nomos*." The human need for ordering experience in ways that relate to purposes of survival and flourishing is extremely practical. The human ordering of experience gives structure to everyday life and also copes with the terror so natural when people face a vast and violent *cosmos* unscaled to human interests. As people objectify the meanings they project on the world, they construe their *nomos* to be *cosmos*. They thus internalize the objective meanings they had subjectively invented and projected. A cyclical relation exists, Berger points out, between inventive subjective projections, objective construals of the world in terms of those projections, and the internalization of that objectified world so that people "know" the world in the terms they have invented for it. This is "the social construction of reality."

But reality has tough feedback and not every human imaginative construction can be lived with as objective meaningful fact. A rough fit is

required between actual “cosmic” structures and the “nomic” meanings by which people navigate the real world. So the objectified nomos is constantly being amended, which requires a new internalization, in turn stimulating new inventive subjective projections in an unsteady round of learning and inventing. Although Berger does not in this book relate explicitly to the pragmatic movement in philosophy, he is solidly within the pragmatic frame which says that people interpret reality by means of signs that frequently are amended so as to interpret better or that are abandoned because they miss what is important. The “social construction of reality” is not an idealist philosophy that represents human meanings as mere fictions with no relation to reality or that represents reality as a mere fiction. Rather, it is a realistic philosophy that provides an account for how reality corrects our interpretive, meaning-giving ideas.

“Corrects” is not always the right word, however. Whatever the cosmic structure of reality, from the standpoint of human experience it is terrifying and “anomic” except insofar as the nomos shelters experience with its imposed meaning. “The sheltering quality of social order becomes especially evident if one looks at the marginal situations in the life of the individual, that is, at situations in which he is driven close to or beyond the boundaries of the order that determines his routine, everyday existence.”<sup>2</sup> The perceived objective validity of the nomos is precarious in these marginal situations.

Although the social world is supposed to be taken for granted, in marginal situations certain of its elements “stand out” as providing the world-making meaning on which the rest of social world’s nomos depends. These constitute what Berger calls the “sacred.”

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience. This quality may be attributed to natural or artificial objects, to animals, or to men, or to the objectifications of human culture. There are sacred rocks, sacred tools, sacred cows. The chieftain may be sacred, as may be a particular custom or institution. Space and time may be assigned the same quality, as in sacred localities and sacred seasons. The quality may finally be embodied in sacred beings, from highly localized spirits to the great cosmic divinities. The latter, in turn, may be transformed into ultimate forces or principles ruling the cosmos, no longer conceived of in personal terms but still endowed with the status of sacredness. . . . The sacred is apprehended as “sticking out” from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life. Although the sacred is apprehended as other than man, yet it refers to man, relating to him in a way in which other non-human phenomena (specifically, the phenomena of non-sacred

nature) do not. The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order.<sup>3</sup>

The function of the sacred cosmos, according to Berger, is not only to provide meaning at the boundaries of the social world, but also to provide legitimation for the institutions and authority structures of the social world. Because the marginalized situations threaten the sacred cosmos, the sacred cosmos is precarious, and so is the whole nomic world including the society's institutions and authority structures. Berger is concerned with tracing basic philosophical problems, such as theodicy, which threaten just about any given social cosmos. He is also concerned with understanding how modern science threatens the sacred cosmos of Western religion, especially Christianity. The sacred cosmos of our time is disjointed, inconsistent, often inapplicable or inadequate, and much broken.

Although appreciating and building enthusiastically upon Berger's work, the conception of sacred canopies developed in *Philosophical Theology* pushes the notion in directions that Berger himself did not do. Berger himself uses the phrase *sacred canopy* only in the title of his book. In the body of the work he uses *sacred cosmos* instead. But sacred cosmos suggests a contrast with mundane cosmos, or with chaos.<sup>4</sup> However incoherent or fragmented, a sacred cosmos does not admit of alternatives, only of amendments or collapse. *Sacred canopy* is a better term because it suggests a great tent over a larger cosmos, a tent that depicts the boundary conditions for the world in which the socially constructed nomos also provides the meaningful details of everyday life. The metaphor of "canopy" is apt because it suggests an artifact shielding the human world from the transcendent void above and also because, when it breaks down, it can be said to be "rent" like torn canvass. In what follows, "worldview" is used, as is explained in chapter 4, to mean something like what Berger means by nomos. A sacred canopy is only the part of a worldview that symbolizes the worldview's boundary conditions.

The study of ultimacy can begin by locating the ultimate in human experience as that to which reference is made in sacred canopies. The symbols in sacred canopies refer to what is ultimate in the sense that they articulate the boundary conditions that define the world. The boundary conditions are the "last" in the various series of conditions that make up the interpretive structures of everyday life. This notion of ultimate boundary conditions is developed in many layers throughout *Philosophical Theology*.

The symbols in a sacred canopy have some degree of coherence, hence the unifying connotations of a "canopy" thrown over the affairs of experience. But the coherence does not have to be great, nor does it have to be formal. The symbols do not have to be consistent with one another as they would be in a theological system of doctrines. When a sacred canopy is functioning well, its symbols work together even though they are not consistent. When

the sacred canopy is rent, the symbols do not work together, nor do they collectively address the issues of boundary conditions that arise in marginal situations. Robert Bellah, in *Religion in Human Evolution*, develops an anthropological tradition that makes a strong distinction between the symbols making up the world of ordinary life and those making up sacred or religious life, noting that many things can be approached in both ways and suggesting that the same individuals can step from one to another.<sup>5</sup> That might be the way some religious cultures work. But there is no necessity that symbols of the ultimate constitute a different way of relating to the world than do symbols of proximate things that are part of mundane life.

Many different things can be found in a sacred canopy, from sacred rocks to transcendent, nonpersonified principles, as Berger listed in the long paragraph quoted above. Perhaps Berger did not give enough importance to the roles of narratives, histories, myths, and legends in defining boundary conditions for meaningful life. One of the great contrasts between the Christian theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich is that the former represents the overall frame for Christianity as a *narrative* of creation and redemption whereas the latter represents the overall frame as a *metaphysical structure* relating people as alienated or reconciled to God as the Ground of Being (*I*, 8, *i*).<sup>6</sup>

Although Berger recognizes the issues of individuals relating to sacred canopies or a sacred cosmos, he orients the discussion to the externalizations, objectivations, and internalizations of societies. Modern societies contain many religious cultures, and hence the plurality of sacred canopies represented by those religious cultures. Moreover, the major religions each have many overlapping but often contradictory sacred canopies. Each individual within a religious community relates to sacred canopies in individual ways, affirming or supposing some elements, and rejecting others. Individuals in this pluralistic age can relate to several quite different sacred canopies at once, or serially, or according to different situations. So it is important at this early stage of the argument to be somewhat loose, or at least vague, about how individuals and groups relate to sacred canopies as defining *their* world. Chapter 4 introduces more variables to discuss this.

The “sacred” in sacred canopies requires much analysis. Berger’s discussion resonates to the traditions of phenomenology of religion that emphasize the quality of uncanniness, as in the work of Edward Burnett Tylor, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Rudolf Otto. Yet the connection of uncanniness, or *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, or the *numinous* with ultimate boundary conditions is not obvious. At this stage in the argument it is important to stress first that “sacred” in sacred canopies means the references to the boundary conditions, the world-making things that are ultimate (*I*, 7).

Living within a sacred canopy, the boundary conditions expressing ultimacy can be taken at face value. Yet most religious traditions, surely those of the Axial Age religions, are aware of the fact that the symbols in their sacred canopy are just symbols, that they are imperfect expressions, that

in some sense they are false as well as true.<sup>7</sup> Although no sacred canopy operates within anything other than symbols, their symbols can explicitly point beyond themselves with an apophatic quality. The concept of sacred canopies is an important analytical tool in the discussion both of ultimacy and of religion in this and the volumes to follow. The next step is to define it more precisely.

## II. FINITE/INFINITE CONTRASTS

Ultimacy or ultimate realities symbolized in a sacred canopy can be understood as finite/infinite contrasts. *Finite/infinite contrast* is a technical term that will aid in defining ultimacy.<sup>8</sup> *Contrast* is a term taken from Alfred North Whitehead's cosmology that means the juxtaposition in a coherent harmony of two or more different things.<sup>9</sup> For Whitehead, a contrast bears different degrees of intensity, depending on how different the things are that are contrasted together, and how simply they fit together. Kant had defined a concept as a rule uniting a manifold of representations.<sup>10</sup> This is a good definition for some concepts. A contrast, however, does not have a rule over and above the manifold simply being together. A contrast has a pattern expressing just how the contrasted elements are together; but the pattern is not some "third thing" over and above the elements as fitted together. A contrast is a harmony of diverse things that can be grasped in an interpretive judgment.<sup>11</sup>

The finite side of a finite/infinite contrast is whatever finite or determinate thing is taken to be ultimate in a sacred canopy. This could be anything from a sacred rock to a sacred time, a sacred myth of origins, a deity or set of deities, a creator God, the Dao, a divine narrative, or any of a host of things that have been called ultimate. Most Axial Age religions take the radically contingent existence of the world to be a finite ultimate, and have something ultimate as the ground of value or obligation, something that articulates human or cosmic destiny, and so forth. The important point here is that the finite side of a finite/infinite contrast is something determinate, something that can be expressed as being what it is and not something else.

The infinite side of a finite/infinite contrast is the recognition that, without the finite side, some basic world-defining trait would be missing, or would be indeterminate, infinite. The infinite side defines the finite side as being a boundary condition, a world-making condition. Numinous rocks and personal deities might simply be strange components of the world, with nothing ultimate about them; South Asian religions claim an abundance of deities that are not ultimate. What would make them ultimate is that, without them, some crucial world-defining trait would be missing. It is apparent why the creation of the contingent world is such a ubiquitous symbol of ultimacy in the Axial Age religions that symbolize "the world as such": Without the ultimacy of ontological creation of the world, none of the other ultimate traits would have a context.

The infinite side of a finite/infinite contrast need not be thought of as a positive infinite, as in the pure actuality of Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, or the One of Neo-Platonism. In fact, to the extent that it is conceived in that positive way, the “full” infinite of those creation traditions would fall on the finite side of the finite/infinite contrast, although paradoxically because both are thought to be infinite in a sense. The logical function of the infinite side of a finite/infinite contrast is to be the counter-factual of determinateness: There would be nothing world-making, no world at all in respect of the finite trait, if the finite side were not real. The nothingness or indeterminateness of the infinite side is the only thing that would be real if the finite condition did not obtain.

So a finite/infinite contrast is an ultimate reality, or part of a larger ultimate reality, or has ultimacy, because the infinite side shows the finite side to be an ultimate condition for some dimension of reality. That condition might be the very existence of the contingent world, determinate reality as such. Or it might be the existence of some other ultimate trait defining the world. The next section elaborates a typology of kinds of ultimate conditions that was introduced in the Introduction, Section I. The location of ultimacy within human experience, we can say now, is to be a finite/infinite contrast symbolized within a sacred canopy. Sacred canopies vary enormously in the kinds of things they symbolize as finite/infinite contrasts. This variety is examined in more detail in chapter 4, on worldviews. Sacred canopies also vary in how they put together their congeries of finite/infinite contrasts, with, say, narrative structures, geometric structures, ritual structures, or all of the above, and many more besides.

A theological analysis of ultimate realities involves the articulation of that particular boundary condition or dimension of the world that is ultimate for the finite/infinite contrast in question. A personal deity, for instance, might be a boundary condition for establishing a people as historically powerful over against their enemies. Or the deity might be the condition for natural phenomena such as storms or the chaos of the sea, or for the creation of the world as a whole. Each of these is a different respect in which ultimacy is claimed. Theological analysis is needed to sort these different dimensions of ultimacy or different ultimate realities.

What is claimed to be ultimate in various sacred canopies is a matter for empirical analysis. Nevertheless, some broad categories can be articulated for a rough sorting of kinds of ultimate realities as finite/infinite contrasts. These categories do not capture all the alleged ultimates. But perhaps they articulate enough so that some of the dimensions of ultimacy will be apparent that any good sacred canopy ought to be able to symbolize.

### III. WORLD-DEFINING HUMAN PROBLEMS

In a general sense, we can suppose that the basic categories of ultimacy in a sacred canopy are those that make the human world potentially problematic.

These are world-defining human problems and they articulate ultimate dimensions of reality relative to the human sphere. The finite/infinite contrasts are addressed by those symbols that link to these potential problems and, at least temporarily, signify that the world is real and meaningful in that “category.” The diverse sacred canopies of the multitude of world religious cultures, of course, vary among themselves, as well as within themselves, because of their different histories. All their symbols are historically situated. Moreover, it might well be that some religions emphasize some sorts of world-defining human problems and other religions emphasize others. Nevertheless, a general thesis of *Philosophical Theology* is that reality is what it is, and that all religious cultures have to address its ultimate dimensions one way or another.

To provide a rough catalogue of dimensions of ultimacy to be symbolized in the finite/infinite contrasts of a sacred canopy, it is possible at this stage of the argument to appeal to some metaphysical considerations about reality that will not be explained in detail or justified until Part III, especially in chapter 10. The argument of this section thus is seriously incomplete without that subsequent discussion. The metaphysical considerations articulate a theory of the conditions for the existence of a determinate world. Of course, few if any sacred canopies contain these or cognate metaphysical ideas per se, although it will be argued in chapter 15 that in some sense this metaphysics constitutes a kind of language for prayer or meditation appropriate for those with a metaphysical bent. Rather, the metaphysical categories name world-making structures of reality for which some religious symbolization in a sacred canopy is appropriate.

Any world, real and as symbolized, is made up of things that are determinate. That is, each thing is what it is and as such is different from other things. “Determinate thing” here can mean objects, substances, events, processes, ideas, classes, changes, or whatever: a thing is determinate if it is what it is and is not something else: so long as it is a what, anything whatever is determinate. A thing need be determinate only in certain respects, perhaps not in all respects; today is quite determinate with regard to the weather, for instance, but it is not entirely determinate today what the weather will be tomorrow—determinateness does not imply determinism. The following is a sketch of a metaphysical hypothesis about determinateness that is defended at length in chapters 9, 10, and 11.

To be determinate is to be together with at least some other things. For, determinateness means that a thing is itself and thus is different from other things, which in turn are determinate in their own ways. Consider a determinate thing, therefore, to be a harmony of two kinds of components (“harmony” is analyzed on many levels in following discussions).<sup>12</sup> One kind of component can be called “essential” in that it contributes to or determines the thing’s own being. The other kind of component can be called “conditional” because it derives from some other thing or things that condition the harmony in question. Without conditional components, a thing would not be related to other things and therefore could not be different from them.

Without essential components, the conditional components would not be integrated so as to constitute a thing that is itself and not reducible to the other things. Both essential and conditional components are necessary for a thing to be determinate. It can only be determinate in a world with other things with respect to which it is determinate. And the thing is a harmony of essential and conditional components.

Now there are four transcendental elements of all harmonies: form, components formed, existential location, and value identity. Form is the pattern in which the components are harmonized. Possibilities are forms in which actual components might be harmonized. Some forms are static but many interesting forms are dynamic, unfolding as in a musical piece. The components are all the things that are harmonized within the harmony, and they can be classified in one way as essential or conditional components. But there are many other ways to classify the components of a harmony. In a dynamic thing such as a living organism, many organic processes are formed together to make up the living harmony. All the components of a harmony are themselves harmonies, each with their forms, components, existential location, and value. It is harmonies (not turtles!) all the way down. No basic atomic simples can exist because atomic simples would have no conditional components and thus would not be determinate, which would mean that they would contribute nothing as components of a harmony. The existential location of a harmony is the set of connections by which the harmony relates to other harmonies. Some other harmonies might be wholly internal to the given harmony as components. Others might be wholly external and connected only indirectly by a chain of harmonies. Still others might be partially internal and partially external, or begin as external and become internal, and perhaps become externalized again. Some harmonies are very distant and connected only through extensive mediation. An existential field is itself a kind of harmony and thus has a form. But it is not only a form or pattern of harmonization: It is the real causal network by which things condition one another and take on their own places or existential locations vis-à-vis the others. The value identity of a harmony is the value of having its specific components together in the form it has at the existential location it has (*II*, 3; *III*, 9). Each component harmony has its value (or disvalue) that is integrated in the existential location with the harmony's form. Sometimes integrating the components in a harmony creates a significantly different value from the sum of the components apart from the harmony; the harmony might be far better than the sum of its separate parts, as a great painting is better than the colors and lines that go into it; or it might be far worse as when the party of the hostess's friends, each of whom is dear, turns out to be a disaster when they are mixed together.

These traits of determinateness and harmony provide a set of categories for articulating dimensions of ultimacy that somehow or other are addressed in most civilized sacred canopies. This set has two fundamentally different kinds



of categories. The first category has to do with the very being of determinate things; the others have to do with the nature of determinate things. In list form these categories are:

1. The Being of Determinateness (as harmony of essential and conditional components).
2. The nature of Form in harmony.
3. The nature of Components in harmony.
4. The nature of Existential Location in harmony.
5. The nature of Value Identity in harmony.

Each of these dictates a set of ultimate problems that are ontological in the sense of being the conditions for determinate reality; each also dictates a set of ultimate problems that are anthropological in the sense that human beings are framed with tasks or projects in order to be responsive to the objective conditions. So then there are ten general areas of ultimacy in five ontological/anthropological pairs.

#### PAIR 1, IN RELATION TO ONTOLOGICAL DETERMINATENESS

*The ontological ultimate condition is the radical contingency of the entire collection of determinate things (I, pt 3)*

Although determinate things condition one another through their conditional components, they cannot create the essential components of one another but are simply together with those other things with their external essential components.<sup>13</sup> Any kind of causation articulated by science or other forms of inquiry consists in the conditioning of things by one another. The existence of mutually conditioning things presupposes a context other than the mutual conditioning in which the separate essential components of the different things are together. That context of mutual relevance is radically contingent and not explained by any determinate thing or combination of determinate things.

This radical contingency is articulated in many different kinds of finite/infinite contrasts. Some suppose a question of how the radically contingent world of determinate things comes to be, and one position posits an external creator, a God, and another the cooperation of independent principles such as Heaven and Earth in East Asian thought. Some sacred canopies, such as the Neo-Platonic or the Perennial Philosophy, posit an indeterminate fullness of reality that produces determinate realities by a contraction or diremption of itself. Other sacred canopies, such as in the Daoist and Neo-Confucian symbolism of Zhou Dunyi, say that absolute nothingness gives rise to Taiji, the great fruitfulness, which gives rise to extension, which reaches its limits

and returns, distinguishing yang and yin which thus makes determinate things (quoted in *I*, 12, *i.*). Many kinds of creation myths exist in addition to these more philosophical considerations. Some sacred canopies, for instance many but not all Buddhist ones, do not focus on a cause for the existence of a determinate world, but rather on the surprise at its suchness, amazement at its contingent determinateness. The large religious traditions often try several or all of these symbolic finite/infinite contrasts to respond to the world-making trait of radical contingency. The problem of radical contingency is the center of the philosophical theology developed in these volumes, and on it depend all the other senses of ultimacy. Depending on the symbolic structure involved, the other senses might be combined with the finite/infinite contrasts regarding radical contingency. For instance, if the assertion is that the world is created by a personal God, then that symbol might combine with the world-making dimension of value, saying that God creates the world for a purpose.

*The anthropological response to radical contingency can be ontological gratitude or rage/denial*

As is argued in layers of development in the following chapters and volumes, the radical contingency of the cosmos is gratuitous, arbitrary, undeserved, and surprising. The shock of apprehending this can be ontological gratitude, which has four main forms. One, in response to the gratuitousness of the existence of this or any cosmos, is gratitude as “consent to being in general,” as Jonathan Edwards called it (*II*, 12). A second is acceptance of the singularity of existence, of one’s particular place and character, in response to the arbitrariness of the cosmos, a point developed in Part III. A third kind of gratitude is humility in the face of the undeservedness of the cosmos from any human point of view. A fourth is awe and astonishment at the surprisingness of the cosmos. All four forms of gratitude in combination or singly constitute ontological gratitude for the existence of the radically contingent cosmos. The other side of the coin of gratitude is resentment, anger, and denial directed at the cosmos, which for many people is nothing but a source of pain and universal death. Because the cosmos has value, as is argued in detail, the gratitude response is appropriate and the other not, even under the circumstance that a person’s own situation has more disvalue than positive value.

PAIR 2, IN REFERENCE TO FORM

*The ontological finite/infinite contrasts have to do with possibility (II, 1)*

The form of a present set of determinate things is possibility actualized. But what about the future? Sacred canopies address the world-making quality of possibility in a number of ways. Some regard possibility as the future in some narrative, perhaps with a destining divinity controlling things, perhaps with

decisive events such as battles or the return of gods. Others regard possibility in terms of the order and chaos of nature. Yet others supply finite/infinite contrasts in the forms of rituals for ordering possibilities.

In the human sphere, possibility poses a world-making problem for human freedom. Some sacred canopies deny any meaningful sense in which human beings can make a difference to which possibilities are actualized. Others take serious note of the fact that people do control what happens to some degree. Because which possibilities among options are actualized determines what values come to be actualized, it makes a difference what people choose. This is to say, because of possibility, human beings lie under obligation to do the better and avoid the worse because that makes an ontological difference to the value in the world. Many different symbols have been devised to spell out the nature of the kinds of possibilities facing communities and individuals, and articulating modes of obligation. These in various ways determine ultimacy in possibility.

*The anthropological side of the ultimate conditions of possibility is the task of becoming righteous in the sense of living up to obligations (II, 1)*

Some sacred canopies articulate this in symbols of obedience to divine law; others in symbols of the cultivation of basic virtues of righteousness. Some finite/infinite contrasts spell out historically decisive acts of righteousness. Others focus on everyday behavior. Rituals are prominent in many sacred canopies for the performance of righteousness. Ultimate reality in sacred canopies sometimes constitutes a sense of justice that combines the project of performing righteousness with recognition of Otherness in those to whom justice is owed. Righteousness is a matter of ultimacy because of the world-making function of form as possibility.

#### PAIR 3, IN REFERENCE TO COMPONENTS

*The ontological side of components is that the world is grounded in what makes it up, and we human beings are grounded in what composes us (II, 2)*

We harmonize our components, but the components are the given things in the actual world plus our own subjective contributions. If we did not have actual things to integrate into our lives, we would be but patterns. The givenness of our component processes and ancestors is what constitutes our sense of reality. Most sacred canopies have elements that address the problematic sense of *unreality*. Some have to do with being seen by God. Some have to do with cultivating a sense of embodiedness; others have to do with escaping a sense of embodiedness so as to relate to the “real” components, for instance the Atman that is Brahman. Some finite/infinite contrasts have to do with finding a part in a mythic narrative, or with addressing a component social role as a special responsibility—Jonah became real when he accepted the call to Nineveh.

*The anthropological side of the ultimacy of components has many expressions in sacred canopies*

Some have to do with the task of developing special kinds of piety toward certain of the components of life, recognizing that they have integrities of their own despite the fact we reduce them to the roles they play in our life's harmonies. This piety involves a kind of deference to the components, not just recognition of Otherness, but deference to the quasi-independent careers of the components. Human beings need food in order to maintain themselves. But eating something destroys what would be the otherwise independent career of the plant or animal. Ritualized sacrifice of animals and vegetables for food is recognition of the ultimacy of components in some religions. Some religions are vegetarian in their piety toward animals. Sacred canopies contain finite/infinite contrasts for honoring the human body as a component in a larger human life, for honoring individuals who are components of families, for honoring families that are components of larger communities. Honoring components and righteously pursuing justice are not always compatible, because sometimes justice requires the diminishment of the component. Sacred canopies have finite/infinite contrasts for recognizing this dimension of ultimacy.

PAIR 4, IN REFERENCE TO EXISTENTIAL LOCATION

*The ontological side of existential location is the finite/infinite contrasts defining place in the universe (II, 3)*

Some sacred canopies are concerned with the place of individuals, others with particular groups or nations, and yet others with humanity as a whole. Place can be defined in terms of mythic space/time, as in Eliade's studies, or in terms of a national narrative, as in Judaism, or in terms of cosmic narrative as in many forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Place may be understood primarily in relation to nature, as in Daoism, or in terms of history, as in many strains of the Abrahamic religions. Place also may be understood in terms of contemporary science. Whether there is an especially meaningful place differs from one sacred canopy to another: According to many modern scientists, the human place in the cosmos is meaningless save for what we do in it, and according to some religious groups they have no meaningful place unless they control Jerusalem.

*The anthropological side of existential location is the conception of the ultimate project of engaging the things with us in the existential field in the form of the Other, with the task of relating to other things as Others*

A person is a harmony that relates to other things as different because of sets of conditional components. But difference is not Otherness. Otherness is the fact that other different things have essential components of their own

that are not encompassed within the person conditionally related to them. The existential field connects human beings conditionally to things that are genuine Others. Some sacred canopies register this dimension of ultimacy with symbols of the deep mystery in the beings of things, or of the whole of nature, a mystery that goes beyond lack of understanding of the conditioning causal connections. Often sacred canopies have finite/infinite contrasts concerning the Otherness of other human beings. In pre-Axial Age religions, according to evolutionary biologists, the distinction between people in one's in-group and those outside was of paramount importance: the others in the in-group can be treated as Others, whereas the outsiders can be reduced to their conditional components. A decisive characteristic of the Axial Age religions (*III, 2*) is that they insist that every person, regardless of in-group membership, should be treated as an Other. This takes the form of ultimate obligations for universal justice, based on the dignity of each person having his or her own essential as well as conditional components, and universal love. The subjective side of radical contingency is that we are with Others.

PAIR 5, IN REFERENCE TO VALUE AND VALUE IDENTITY

*The ontological side of value is the set of finite/infinite contrasts that articulate the source or ground of value in the world (II, 4)*

Value manifests itself in the possibilities of form, in the particular choices for harmonizing components, and in the disposition of actualized things with value in themselves and relative to each other. Some sacred canopies characterize that ground as the expression of some divine purpose. Others characterize divine purpose as determined by value that is otherwise legitimate as independent. Many sacred canopies define value as grounded in the fulfillment of missions or teleological natures of things, individuals, or communities. Some sacred canopies represent the ultimacy of value as residing in a kind of aesthetic beauty or glory. If there were no value, then there would be no sense of accomplishment or failure in life.

*The anthropological side of value lies precisely in the ultimacy of accomplishment and failure*

Individual identity is made of up what persons do with the conditions of their lives, for better or worse. All the themes of sin and guilt, salvation and redemption, center around the anthropological side of the facts that the universe contains differential values, that the values actualized depend in part on human doing, and that human beings have the value of what they do. The ultimacy of this value identity can be symbolized, among other ways, as a matter of standing under judgment before God, of contributing to the ongoing value of nature, or of abandoning personal value-identity completely in some ultimate sense, as in the Nirvana traditions.

The categories of ultimate dimensions of life, or ultimate realities in sacred canopies, are by no means exhaustive. But they function to indicate just how complex and interactive the finite/infinite complexes are in sacred canopies. All ten categories discussed in this section are, of course, vague in the sense defined in the preliminary remarks to this part. The variety of symbolic finite/infinite contrasts that can specify them is far greater than the examples given here. Moreover, they combine in many different ways in sacred canopies, producing even more complicated finite/infinite complexes. Some of these are explored more systematically in the following.

#### IV. TRUTH IN SACRED CANOPIES

People bet their lives on the sacred canopies to which they are committed.<sup>14</sup> They take them to be the most fundamental truths about the world, the truths that make more mundane truths possible and orient them to larger meaning. Yet the claims implied in sacred canopies about ultimacy so often are contradictory, even within what is supposed to be a single unified canopy. Huge differences exist among different world religions. Given the historical differences in language and rhetorical tropes, differences in scripture and modes of commentary, to discern just where claims about ultimacy agree and disagree, are similar or different, or are about the same thing or different things, is extremely difficult. Those questions and their cognates are all empirical: Comparative theology needs to do far more work than the relatively new discipline yet has done in order to answer them. Is the question of truth in the claims or assumptions about ultimacy in sacred canopies a matter of distinguishing exactly what is implicitly or explicitly asserted and then determining which claims are true?

To complicate matters, the existential urgency of truth in matters of sacred canopies arises most especially when something causes a sacred canopy or some crucial part of it to become implausible. Peter Berger analyzes in detail the pressure that the existence of evil and gratuitous suffering puts on symbols of a divine creator who is alleged to be personally intentional, all-powerful, perfectly knowledgeable and benevolent, one of the dominant finite/infinite contrasts in monotheistic religions. Events such as the Lisbon earthquake and the Nazi Holocaust raise the question of truth in a powerful way concerning claims about a personal, omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, creator. Modern science directly challenges many of the symbols of ultimate world structure in ancient religious sacred canopies. Nature is not always as harmonious deep down as some symbols of the Dao would suggest. How can a practical commitment to an Advaita Vedantin non-dualist sacred canopy survive the adolescence of one's children? If the old sacred canopy is rent, by what truth can a new one be woven?

Berger develops the notion of the sacred canopy or sacred cosmos from the methodological perspective of sociology of knowledge. This perspective treats religious symbols as human constructions only and deliberately prescind

from the question of whether they actually refer to what they seem to refer to.<sup>15</sup> In this perspective, the social functional utility of a sacred canopy is the closest thing to the question of truth. An implausible element in a sacred canopy is not so much false as useless or counterproductive in the human project of ordering the world meaningfully. Few religious people view the commitments concerning ultimacy in their sacred canopies to be mere instruments for imagining the world to have an order, or for creating a fictional order in a reality of dangerous chaos.

This chapter has taken the small but decisive step of subverting the social construction view of order making into the pragmatic semiotics of interpretation. The following chapter spells this out in detail.<sup>16</sup> According to pragmatic semiotics, all conventional signs or symbols are human constructions that are used in interpretive acts to refer to their objects. Their reference to their objects is in only certain respects, as determined by the character of the symbols and the purposes or intentions guiding the interpretation. The interpretation can be true or false. In this pragmatic sense, a sacred canopy is a complex, not necessarily coherent, hypothesis about the ultimate boundary conditions of the world. Its objects are ultimate realities, dimensions of ultimacy, and so forth, in the sense defined as finite/infinite contrasts and as illustrated in the previous section.

Treated as an hypothesis to which a deep meaning-founding religious commitment can be made, a sacred canopy can, in principle, be subjected to inquiry about its truth, in part and whole. "In principle" is an enormous qualification. Such an inquiry would have to sort through all the wild systems of symbols used in interpreting ultimacy in sacred canopies. It would have to understand the modes of reference involved in living and thinking according to the sacred canopy. The intentional and purposeful contexts for interpreting ultimacy in life and thought with the symbols of a sacred canopy would have to be identified. A sacred canopy is neither true nor false unless it is used in interpretation, lived-by in some sense, or assumed as the world-building background to other interpretations; these are all dimensions of interpretation and interpretation is always contextual. An interpretation that is true in one context might be false in another. Given the enormous complexity of sacred canopies, the question of truth is astonishingly difficult to address.

The complexity having been admitted, the meaning of the truth of a sacred canopy is whether it carries over from the ultimate realities into the interpreter what is important or valuable in those realities, in the respects in which the symbols of the canopy interpret them. This is a formula that will be explained in greater detail in the next chapter.<sup>17</sup> Its point is a fundamental pragmatic one: Does a sacred canopy attune us to ultimate realities so that we can discriminate how we should comport ourselves toward them? If it does attune us so, all things considered (about symbol systems, reference, contexts, etc.), it is true.

Given the unsteadiness of sacred canopies, and the fact that they seem always to be torn and under repair, it is important to distinguish the manifest

sacred canopy from the ultimate realities to which it is supposed to refer. Of course, we cannot *say* what the ultimate realities are except by manifesting them in some (hopefully) improved symbols. The tendency in most civilized religious traditions to move from sacred canopies framed in folk symbols toward sacred canopies expressed in metaphysical language reflects this tension. Folk symbols are highly variable in meaning and truth as to context, whereas metaphysical language aims to apply across most if not all contexts.

Nevertheless, the question of the truth of sacred canopies is even more complicated than all this, for two reasons. First, even the most expansive, metaphysically general, logically coherent, consistent, applicable, and adequate sacred canopy, in the form of a sophisticated theology, will interpret ultimate realities in only some respects, not in all respects.<sup>18</sup> Part of the necessity of system in theology is to provide a discipline for attempting to interpret ultimacy in the *important* respects. But that sense of system can never be completed. The potential always exists that some important aspect of ultimate reality has been missed. The vast plurality of sacred canopies is itself a blessing in this sense because it goes some way to get around the blinders that the rhetoric of any given sacred canopy would have that prevent it from addressing other respects in which ultimacy might be interpreted. Even all the sacred canopies together, however, are only a few select guesses at the riddle.

The second complication to the truth question regarding sacred canopies is built into the nature of finite/infinite contrasts. The symbols in the sacred canopy describe only the finite side of the contrasts, along with registering their world-founding functions that derive from the infinite side. But the symbols cannot mediate the finite/infinite distinction. The contrasts remain contrasts. This means that between the infinity of what would be the case if the finite side were not real, and the finite side itself, is an ultimate arbitrariness. Precisely because it is infinite, wholly indeterminate, the infinite side cannot supply a reason for the finite side. Thus even the best sacred canopy, with all possible theological virtues, ends in mystery and surprise, knowing that it cannot be wholly right.