

**THE RELIGIOUS CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING:
Christianity and Buddhism as
'Problem-Solvers'**

**John May
Katholisch-Ökumenisches Inst.
University of Münster
West Germany**

O. Introduction

0.1 Can religions 'solve problems'?

This question is deliberately naive; its deceptive simplicity may stimulate us to ask further questions which could be theoretically fruitful.

0.2 In the past, a positive answer to the question was universally taken for granted: petitionary prayers were offered and sacrifices were made in the expectation that the granting of wishes and other desirable effects were at least possible consequences, and shamans, medicine men and witchdoctors ply their trades even today on the basis of results regularly achieved.

0.21 Even in more sophisticated circles a certain effectiveness of religion has been argued: Jung regarded the convictions of his Catholic patients as a valuable asset to therapy, and sociologists from Durkheim to Berger and Luckmann have regarded religion as an integrating or sustaining force in society.

0.22 The radical rejection of any real effectiveness of religion, however, is a characteristically modern phenomenon: for Freud religion was a necessary illusion, for Marx a dispensable superstructure. More recently, Karl Popper and especially certain of his epigones have relegated religion to the status of a forerunner of science, which alone brings us true knowledge of the world and thus holds out the prospect of solving our problems; questions of 'meaning' are merely a distraction from this task. Jürgen Habermas has diagnosed a terminal coma of religion which even in the apparently rational form of Hegel's 'absolute spirit' has failed to provide consolation and orientation for the enlightened citizens of pluralist technological societies.

0.3 We cannot debate these various viewpoints any further here; it will be enough if we are able to agree that the question whether religion has anything at all to do with problem-solving in any sense is an important question, worth following up in the present situation of religion and interesting in its own right.

0.31 I would like to suggest that if the question must be answered negatively, then religion has no future. Recent events in South-East Asia have amply demonstrated that Marxism is able to sweep aside the pretensions of either Christianity or Buddhism to shape just and humane societies for the peoples of this region; perhaps a similar fate awaits Christianity and Islam in Africa. This has nothing to do with the intrinsic historical interest of religions in themselves; but I would like to argue here that a philosophical concern with religion cannot shirk the question I am trying to formulate in this paper, which can be reduced to the question whether religions have anything to do with truth.

0.32 I am not alluding to the well-worn question of 'relevance'; neither particular religions nor the study of religion at universities depend on special pleading in this regard. But I would like to maintain that unless it can be shown that problems which are held to obtain within the contexts of particular religions can indeed be related to problems of society, ethics and science, then attempts to construct theories of religion may provide pleasure to people of a certain temperament, but they would in fact be mere fruitless speculation. This is all the more so because the former 'contemplative' type of problem – whether we are justified by faith or works, whether there is a transmigration of souls, whether *nirvana* is the extinguishing of consciousness, whether the Quran is the Word of God – are seen today to be culturally conditioned, whereas 'practical' problems of the latter type – how to distribute the riches of the earth, how to establish free societies, how to control technology – are perceived to be transcultural in nature. I submit that religious speculation entirely divorced from such problems could be irresponsible for present-day academics.

0.4 This will doubtless appear to be a very 'Western' approach to religion. There is a danger here which I do not deny, and I hope that western contact with other religions and cultures will have the salutary effect of modifying our innate activist tendency to 'get things done' and brush aside everything which does not promise 'results'. But neither Eastern nor Western categories alone are adequate to the task of formulating, perhaps for the first time, the unity of mankind in the world society which is uncertainly but inevitably emerging. I would thus like to propose an hypothesis of sufficient scope to allow a rational grasp of religion in two very different manifestations; the formulation of this hypothesis will occupy us in the first part of this paper. The second part will be devoted to the attempt to propose tests for the validity of the hypothesis. If it succeeds in passing these tests, it will have the status of a theory which would in turn lead to programmes of research and methods of investigating religious phenomena both in themselves and in relation to human concerns.

1. The Hypothesis: Religions 'Construct Meaning'

1.0 It is obvious that nothing but confusion will result from any further steps under this heading unless the concept 'meaning' is clarified — perhaps the most unclear concept in the whole philosophical vocabulary and one especially prone to misuse as a token of 'depth' and 'seriousness'.

1.01 I have found the most fruitful approach to 'meaning' in the analysis of communication, which even in its most abstract form as the mathematicized theory of information still needs the assumption of a background matrix or common stock of 'everyday.knowledge'. New knowledge — 'information' — can only be formulated, transmitted and recognized against this background: experiences which are wonderful novelties to my baby daughter are commonplace to me, which is no doubt an impoverishment of my emotional life but frees me to occupy myself with matters such as those discussed in this paper. Our stock of basic knowledge dispenses us from further preoccupation with a whole range of recurrent experiences and frees us to venture into new fields, although these can only be understood — as the common expression has it — *in terms of* what we already know, at least until our new knowledge itself becomes a part of what we can presuppose.

1.02 This background knowledge, from our sense of space and time to our possession of logical principles, creates the very possibility of new experiences being recognized as such, of their yielding new knowledge — or, if you like, of *meaning* anything to us. The sociologists of knowledge have pointed out to us that this background of everyday knowledge on which we depend for cognitive orientation is itself a 'social construct', a vast reserve of possible logical moves, possible senses and combinations of words, possible structures of sentences and forms of narratives, built into the very language we speak and handed on to us within our cultural tradition in the course of an immensely slow process of development and modulation. It is thus that I wish to speak of the possibility of 'constructing meaning'.

1.1 We are still a long way from being able to describe how religious utterances could have meaning, and in fact a great deal of philosophical effort has been expended in the course of this century to show that they do not and can not have meaning. In answer to this challenge theologians and philosophers of religion have rung the changes on just about all the conceivable logical ways of proving that religious utterance is not nonsense. Some, such as the Neo-Thomists or Ian Ramsey, have tried to show that religious language is in some special way cognitive; others, like Braithwaite or Hare, have been satisfied with an emotive or attitudinal interpretation; but none of them has succeeded in overcoming the dichotomy between what Max Charlesworth has well called the *descriptive* and the *non-descriptive* interpretation of religious language — not to mention, as Ninian Smart has remarked, that most of these efforts have been directed at the analysis of various kinds of 'Christian talk' rather than at 'religious language' in any generalizable sense.

1.11 I would like to suggest that the way forward might lie in the development of a more detailed and more universal *semantics* of religious language than has heretofore been attempted, and that this can only be done on the basis of an adequate theory of *symbolization*. I take the process here referred to as 'symbolization' to be the distinctive characteristic of human consciousness, our way of utilizing the impressions of sense experience for memory, foresight and the whole complex system of logical relationships, analyzed by the Structuralists, which underlie culture.

1.12 I have found it useful to make a broad distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' levels of symbolization. 'Primary symbolization' would correspond roughly to the use of natural symbols such as birds, animals, trees, stones, the waters and the heavenly bodies to interpret human relationships in society and in individual experience and to construct what Levi-Strauss has called an understanding of nature by 'homology'. At this level the social functions and the emotional force of symbols are inextricably tied up with one another and with any referring functions of the words used to describe the symbolized objects. In such contexts of discourse a rock is never merely a rock, a tree never merely a tree — and a locality never merely a possible uranium deposit, as the Australian Aborigines are trying to remind us.

1.13 At the level of 'secondary' symbolization' the uses of language which have made modern science possible are differentiated out: objective reference, propositional syntax, the logic of non-contradiction and of existential quantification and so on. Of course everyday language and the language of literature move back and forth between the two levels, and on each level many more precise divisions of usage could be made; theories of metaphor and analogy have attempted these tasks. What matters for our present project is that the religious use of language might well be found on examination to depend largely on the extremely inaccessible semantics of primary symbolization, with only occasional excursions onto the secondary level such as the references to certain historical events in the semitic religions. Possible ways of analyzing concrete examples of primary religious symbolization will emerge in the course of what follows.

1.2 An implication of this proposal which will already be apparent to you is that it seems to relegate the meaning of religious utterance to the realm of subjective validity, so this is the question we will have to tackle next. If one is not worried by allegations of subjectivism with its attendant relativism, of course, this is no problem. Sociologists of religion such as Peter Berger seem to me to acquiesce in relativism by being satisfied with what I can only call the 'collective subjectivism' of a variety of 'universes of meaning' or 'world views' within which particular social groupings 'construct reality'.

1.21 This is an apt description of the mythical slumber in which religions great and small, separated from each other and tied to the functional needs of particular societies and cultures, have existed up till now. But it is also evidence of the epistemological slumber in

which the sociology of knowledge presumes to examine cognitive processes. From the functional point of view of social science it is quite unobjectionable to take note only of what is *held* to be 'reality' by the members of a certain group. But the whole difference between philosophy and such would-be empirical science is that philosophy wants to know not only what specific religious locutions *mean to* the members of a certain group, but what they may mean *in themselves*. Universal, not restricted validity is in question, and thus 'objectivity'. This is another way of saying that truth is a unity, or it is nothing — for there is, after all, only one 'world'. This is roughly how the question of truth arises in the philosopher of religion's area of concern.

1.22 But of course raising the question of truth with respect to religion at all has become a very difficult matter indeed. Let us take the two notions of 'validity' and 'objectivity'. If we are agreed that religious language is in fact used as a medium of communication in identifiable communities of discourse, then we may go on to say that, for the members of such communities at least, religious utterances 'have meaning'. (Of course there is no such thing as 'religious language' in the same sense as there is 'the English language'; rather, natural languages are used '*religiously*' in the contexts created by religious symbolization).

1.23 Now it is quite unclear what we intend to say when we assert that an utterance 'has meaning' for us. 'Meaning' is obviously not 'there' in the same way as empirical objects of discourse are; strictly speaking, 'meaning' is not an 'object' at all and there is no sense in talking about meaning 'in itself', as theologians and religious educationalists sometimes try to do ('*die Sinnfrage*', 'the meaning of life'). But on the other hand it does make sense to talk about a 'meaningful sentence' or a 'meaningful action' as opposed to a nonsensical one; here, as in the case of the formal attributes of works of art, we are referring to certain structural qualities of a combination of words, of the 'fittingness' of an action with respect to a situation, or of any system of symbols, no matter how abstract (a mathematical theorem, a scientific explanation). We are on the fine edge of a distinction between what we might call the inherent *sense* of a symbolic structure and its *meaningfulness* to those who use it communicatively (the German words *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* express this more clearly). We normally associate 'sense' as used above with successful objective reference and the predication of attributes, and we like to think that 'meaningfulness', however subjective its *validity*, retains links with the *objectivity* of some symbolic structure, not only in the sense of *internal* formal coherence, but as a structure of *successful* reference and predication. Poetic metaphor only functions by bringing to mind the literal references of the terms used, however far it may range from them in free association of images.

1.24 Religions in which reflection on these matters is at all developed have consistently maintained, not only that their particular symbolic systems, whether mythical, metaphysical or dogmatic, are coherent in themselves (cf. the *mysteriorum nexus inter se* of the First Vatican Council), but also convey knowledge of the world and of our

existence in it, i.e. constitute 'sense' in *both* the ways the word has been used above. Only on this basis of 'objective' or even 'absolute' truth have they then gone on to claim that their doctrines are 'meaningful' in providing orientation to individual and social life in the form of 'reasons' for existence or 'answers' to the problems of suffering and death. They have thus claimed to provide 'views' of the world (what Donald Evans has called 'self-involving onlooks' on the world) which are at once comprehensively objective beyond the wildest pretensions of natural science and subjectively satisfying as no rational knowledge could be. 'Truth' in religious contexts can only be regarded as 'absolute'.

1.3 And yet from the point of view of much contemporary philosophy of science it would seem that religious utterances cannot even be assigned a meaning, let alone a truth-value. On the other hand, these philosophies seem very inadequate for handling the social and ethical issues which the technology they make possible has thrown up. The only way of bridging this gap between philosophy of religion and philosophy of science which I can envisage at present is to suggest that, in order to take account of the whole range of experience possible to men in the world, something like an *analogous* use of the concept of 'truth' must be allowed, just as we have found necessary for the concept of 'meaning'. There is a danger here of reverting to that handy theological standby, the autonomous Wittgensteinian 'language game', or even to the 'two truths' theory proposed by Siger of Brabant against Aquinas and by some Hindu and Muslim philosophers. On the contrary, the prime analogates here would be the 'sense' perceptible *in* symbolic structures and the self-relating of language-users to the empirical world *by means of* the symbolic structures of language.

1.31 But our relations to the world and to each other are much more complicated than this. That is why the partly unconscious 'mythical' structures of primary symbolization still underlie 'rational' consciousness and provide the material for symbolic systems which in the scope of their reference *go beyond* all possible empirical knowledge of the world to refer *in one and the same act* to the simple question posed to our symbolizing consciousness by the very *existence* of the world. Here all the meanings of 'meaning' we have distinguished are realized in one complex process of symbolization embracing a kind of quasi-objective 'reference' to the world *as a whole* and at the same time actualizing a quasi-subjective response or attitude to it. This can be at once intensely emotional, concentrating in itself all the richness of experience, yet eminently rational, as long as one is able to disregard the literal meanings of the symbols used, and deeply spiritual, freeing one to enter into more sensitive relationships with the world and one's fellow-men.

1.32 Perhaps this analysis throws some light on the use of 'truth' in such religious contexts as the Gospel of St. John. It may liberate us from excessive concern with competing truth-claims among religions and at the same time prepare the ground for a new grasp of religion on

the basis of universal reason – the only medium of communication uniting *all* men.

1.4 We may now hasten to end this disproportionately long and abstract first part of the paper by trying to formulate, in the light of the clarifications made, our hypothesis on the function of religion.

1.41 Using the terminology we have now acquired, we may say that religions – as socio-cultural phenomena – *construct* radically new *primary symbolizations*, thus creating a *meaning* of the world and of human existence in it. They do not do this in any purely subjective way, not even on a collective basis, though in ‘tribal’ religions or religions of a people such as Hinduism or Judaism religious insights seem to have emerged in the course of slowly developing interaction among various social classes and doctrinal schools in the course of a long evolution from the ‘mythical’ to the ‘rational’ stage of consciousness. But the ‘universal’ religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, which in characteristic ways typically emphasize the individual’s road to salvation, the consensus which supports the central beliefs and teachings is potentially co-extensive with that of all reasonable men and is thus intentionally universal. In these profoundly different accounts of ultimate meaning we are offered the choice of what John B. Cobb calls ‘structures of existence’ the flight from personality itself into empty transcendence, or the identification with the suffering and death of the Crucified in the hope of transcending these in a more than human love.

1.42 Nevertheless, I can see a way in which this ‘opposition of religious doctrines’ (W.A. Christian) may itself be transcended. Underlying the *consensus fidelium* on which unity – and particularity – at the level of doctrine depends I sense what I can only call a ‘*consensus patientium*,’ a ‘consensus of the suffering’ which potentially unites all humanity and at the same time provides the ultimate motivation of religious symbolisations of meaning. Here Stephen Toulmin’s ‘limiting questions’ are posed, and only what Robert C. Coburn has called ‘logically complete answers’ will suffice. The religions could provide a medium of expression for this ‘consensus of the suffering’ if they were freed of their ideological bonds to traditional institutions. But would the answers they give in terms of meaning ‘solve problems’? This marks the transition to the second part of our enquiry.

2. The Verification: Religions ‘Solve Problems’

2.0 It goes without saying that there can be no question of carrying out anything like a complete verification of our hypothesis in the space still remaining. It will be enough if I can give a brief indication of how this could be done. My task is thus to show how the hypothesis could be translated from its necessarily abstract formulation into a practicable method which would be able to sustain fruitful research programmes. I see a great unused potential for the philosophy of religion in the infant science of linguistics, perhaps the only one among the so-called ‘human sciences’ which has a real chance of being

placed on a strictly scientific footing, thus facilitating interchange with the natural sciences. Of course there is also the practical advantage that students of religion have to be familiar with a wide range of ancient and modern languages for professional reasons, which provides an ideal basis for mastering theoretical linguistics.

2.1 I would like to believe that what is coming to be called 'discourse analysis' (what the Germans call *Textlinguistik*), which takes 'texts', not words or sentences or statements or propositions, as the basic units of linguistic communication, provides a more promising approach to our subject than the terminologically limited and culturally prejudiced philosophy of 'linguistic analysis' which is still regarded as orthodoxy in many of our universities. I am not denying the valuable lessons which this current of philosophy has taught us, and for which no one should be more grateful than theologians. But speculation about artificially constructed examples of English usage is a narrow basis indeed for the investigation of the great religions of mankind in a scientific age. It is both a strength and a weakness of linguistic analysis that it concentrates much of its attention on logical syntax, separating this helpfully from the confusions and inconsistencies of traditional grammar but failing to pay attention to a whole range of possible functions of language. The later Wittgenstein and Oxford philosophers such as Austin and Hare were concerned to correct this imbalance, but even structuralist linguists such as Chomsky took a long time to admit the importance of the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language. This is not to deny that the syntax of mythical and religious utterance is a fascinating study in itself, but it is a purely formal study, whereas semantics lead us to formulate questions of content and pragmatics studies the presuppositions of communicative use. In the light of what has been said so far it will be obvious that these aspects of religious language are much more relevant to what we have called 'the religious construction of meaning'.

2.2 We have already touched on the fundamentals of the semantics of religious language above. Here we need only add that the key texts handed down by tradition are our only means of access to the underlying symbolic structures out of which the meaning of the world's existence and our own existence in it according to the different religions is constructed.

2.21 The Kingdom of God is such a central symbol in Christianity, allowing Christians to 'make sense' of their once-and-for-all existence as individuals caught up in the historical process by revealing to them that this process has an 'end' in the sense of both 'finality' and 'termination'. But this new symbolic construction of the meaning of life was first communicated by the simple parables of Jesus, culminating in the 'existential' parable which was his life and death.

2.22 Similarly, in Buddhism *nirvana* is a central symbol of timeless release from the strains of individual existence in a process, not of history in the Western sense, but of opportunities for successive purifications. Yet this understanding was first developed in the doctrinal sermons of the Buddha, to which we must turn if we are to appreciate its original force.

Semantic analysis of such material, building on the results of historical textual criticism, could reveal much about the way such fundamental symbolizations of meaning are translated into the concrete language of narrative forms, a process which may be expected to continue if religions are to retain any sort of hold on men's minds.

2.24 It would also allow us to include the temporal dimension in what the linguists call 'diachronic' analysis, which is not the same thing as historical analysis but the study of successive changes in semantic structures. Here we could trace the history of quotation of a particular parable, mystical text or Zen *koan* in successive doctrinal contexts, for example the handing over of the 'power of the keys' to Peter in the age of allegory, in the Church-state conflicts of the Middle Ages, in the ultramontane atmosphere of the 19th century and in the contemporary situation of rethinking the relationship of authority to consensus and community in the Church.

2.3 It is not by accident that with the mention of 'situation' and 'context' we have already touched upon the concerns of pragmatics. This is not surprising because 'meaning' in its full import comprising both structural 'sense' and functional 'meaningfulness' proceeds from the constant interaction of the semantic and pragmatic components in language use; hence the new terminological hybrid 'pragmasemantics'. The teachings of religion, both the underlying symbolic structures and the narrative texts in which these are articulated, only become 'meaningful' in the fullest sense of the word when they are received by the adherents of a religion with reference to the life-situations in which they find themselves (Paulo Freire's method of 'conscientization' is a present-day recognition of this).

2.31 But a closer analysis of the pragmatics of religious utterance might reveal much more about the 'construction of meaning', for example the whole hidden communicational 'logic' which we presuppose when we use words like 'I', 'you', 'we', or 'the world', not to mention more elaborate concepts like the Buddhist 'not-I' or the Christian 'person'. When this system of assumptions is made explicit, we may discover a whole inbuilt logic of transcendence in religious discourse quite distinct from the content of particular doctrines such as creation or the transmigration of souls.

2.32 Indeed, German philosophers such as Karl-Otto Apel are claiming to have solved the Kantian problem of transcendence by extracting the 'universal pragmatics' of ordinary discourse without any reference to religion, and the Erlangen School of logicians led by Paul Lorenzen are trying to reconstruct the whole of logic on the ethics of dialogue. These attempts betray a certain exaggerated exclusiveness, but even allowing for some scepticism they do show what is considered possible in the field of pragmatics.

2.4 Most of this work remains to be done. At this stage, I can only say that the outcome of research along these lines will doubtless decide whether hypotheses such as the one developed above have sufficient power to give us a surer grasp of the religious situation present and future. In conclusion, I would like to indicate briefly how

hard and fast tests of religiously constructed meaning as a 'solution' to problems could be devised.

2.41 To start with the best studied and least hopeful case: could it be shown that the religions in whose areas of influence racism is prevalent – we may think of Christianity in South Africa or Buddhism in Malaysia – have compromised or neglected some of their basic principles? If so, what are these and how could they be translated into ethical and political demands appropriate to present-day situations? Another example: how could we bridge the yawning gap between the largely symbolical, not to say mythical expression of attitudes to nature and to man's place in the world as found in the great religions and the need to humanize and restrain industrial and military technology? Ivan Illich with his 'convivial tools' and Edward Schumacher with his 'economics as if people mattered' have made impressive attempts; are we in a position to comment on, constructively criticize and improve upon such attempts? Another problem which particularly interests me in the midst of the much-lamented 'crisis of democracy', rejected by the emerging nations and compromised by ineffectiveness and scandal in its modern homelands, is the possible connection between religious traditions and new forms of political life in which minorities – migrants, the young, the old, the poor, women – would be enabled to participate in political consensus-building and in the just distribution of wealth and resources. How does the record of the Christian missions in the colonial period look today in this regard? What has been achieved in Sri Lanka, Burma? What happened in Vietnam? A last, perhaps the most difficult test case, but one which will force itself upon our attention more and more, is the rapidly developing field of biology with its complex relationships to fields as widely divergent as cybernetics and medicine: will those whose interest is religion have anything at all to contribute to the urgently needed discussion of the ethics of genetic experimentation, of sexual predetermination?

2.42 Let me emphasize once more that I am not trying to demonstrate 'relevance' by raising these questions. Instead I am trying to devise tests for the hypothesis that the 'meaning' objectified in religious symbols has indeed allowed the adherents of various religions to 'see' themselves and their world in such a way that they either succumbed to new problems which arose in the course of evolution and history or were enabled to solve these problems and thus lay the basis for viable, even universally valid modes of individual and social existence. We can see that in the past some religions succeeded in this – Christianity and Buddhism are examples – whereas others such as Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism and the religion of the Aztecs failed. Whether the universal religions at least are capable of performing such a task today is of course another question, some will say an 'interested' one. But perhaps the confrontation with present problems will spur us on to test the religious claim to 'construct meaning' more thoroughly than would the record of the past alone.