

Article

Religious Symbolism and the Experience of Life as Meaningful: Addition, Enhancement, or Both?

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Abstract: This paper explores the question of how religious symbolism functions to provide a more meaningful or enriched experience of life. It examines a common and highly influential view, referred to here as the “source model”, for which this function requires the addition to experience of transcendent meanings generated by rituals and other specially adapted kinds of symbolic activity. Using Robert Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* and Clifford Geertz’s “Religion as a Cultural System” as representative examples, I critique a key premise of the source model, namely that the meaning-making function of religious symbolism evolved in response to a universal experience of life as problematic. I argue that the experience of life as problematic is a product of symbolism, not a precondition. Moreover, with respect to this experience, I propose that symbolism functions not to add meaning but to enhance meanings that are vaguely discerned in everyday life. I close with the suggestion that an enhanced experience of life as problematic is itself a kind of enriched meaning and an important source of the affective power of religious practice.

Keywords: religion; symbolism; meaning; ritual; Bellah; Geertz; evolution

1. Introduction

In the English language, at least, *meaning* is an extremely flexible concept. It can apply to just about any aspect of experience or thought. Even so, it can be said that meaning always entails a relation between two aspects of experience: something in experience is the bearer of meaning, while something else is the meaning. But these roles can and do switch. What is the bearer in one context might be the meaning in another.¹

This flexibility also characterizes the meaning of human activities that are commonly characterized as *symbolic*: language, music, art, dance, and ritual. What distinguishes symbolic meaning from other kinds is a difficult question. But however we define it, we should take care not to confine symbolic meaning to a purely mental realm, set apart from experience and the environmental conditions that make experience possible. “No symbol exists except as it is realized in sound, projected light, mechanical contact, and the like” (Gibson 1966, p. 26). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that the kinds of things that we commonly think of as symbols can play a variety of roles in experience. Although we tend to think of the word *tree* as a symbol whose meaning is the tall leafy green thing encountered in experience, as pointed out by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, words and trees “enter into our experience on equal terms” and both can be symbolic.

For example, if you are a poet and wish to write a lyric on trees, you will walk into the forest in order that the trees may suggest the appropriate words. Thus for the poet in his ecstasy—or perhaps, agony—of composition the trees are the symbols and the words are the meaning The poet is a person for whom visual sights and sounds and emotional experiences refer symbolically to words. The poet’s readers are people for whom his words refer symbolically to the visual sights and sounds and emotions he wants to evoke. (Whitehead 1927, p. 12)

I suggest that these same points apply to considerations of religious meaning. The term *religious meaning* can apply to any aspect of the experience and thought of religious



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practitioners. We can, however, make broad distinction between two aspects of religious meaning: the meaning of various symbols encountered regularly in the context of religious practice—rituals, songs, narratives, imagery, concepts, theories, and so forth—and the meaning of life as experienced under the guidance of these symbols. These two aspects of religious meaning enter into experience “on equal terms”. And as with poetry, they can switch roles. For the religious adept, the symbols of her practice evoke a certain experience of life, while her experience of life evokes the symbols.

On this view, a key question for investigations of religious meaning is the following: How is the experience of life transformed by religious symbols? It is commonly supposed that religious practice serves to cultivate a more meaningful experience of life. But what exactly does this entail? I suggest that the experience of life as meaningful entails more than just an experience of life as having a certain kind of meaning. Implicitly, it also entails an experience of life as being quite literally meaningful—full of meaning—and, for this reason, as worthy of being lived, or at least as more bearable. It implies, in other words, an *enriched* experience of life.

I certainly do not want to claim that an enriched experience of life is something automatically provided by religious practice. Nor do I want to claim that such enrichment is always and everywhere sought by religious practitioners—certainly not explicitly. Nevertheless, I do believe that an enriched experience of life is among the most basic aims and motivations of religious practice (and of life in general). The question to be explored here—a slightly refined version of the key question posed above—is: How do religious symbols function to provide this enrichment?

A common and highly influential concept of religious symbolism understands this function essentially as a process of adding or supplementing meaning to whatever is normally found in experience. I call this concept the *source model* of religious meaning, as it effectively understands religious symbols as sources of meaning. In this paper I will critique this model, paying special attention to the version presented by Robert Bellah in his monumental treatise, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Bellah 2011), as well the closely related version presented by Bellah’s contemporary and friend, Clifford Geertz, in the famous essay, “Religion as a Cultural System” (see Geertz 1973; originally published in 1966).

By taking up an evolutionary version of the source model, we are better able to unpack its key suppositions, including especially the premise that everyday life is universally experienced as problematic in a way that demands the addition of symbolic meaning. With regard to this premise, the argument that I will make can be stated rather simply, although it has wide implications for our understanding of religious symbolism both today and in our distant past. My argument is that an enhanced experience of life as problematic is actually one of the main functions of religious symbolism. In other words, the experience of life as problematic is a product of the evolution of religious culture, not a precondition.

This critique is not just about the evolution of religious symbolism. Making this argument also allows me to point out how symbolism can work to enhance the meaning of experiences rather than simply add meaning. Although I will not enter into a detailed discussion of semiotics, I want to expose the source model as a special instance of a very widespread way of thinking about symbolism in general and, indeed, mental representation of all kinds.

The subtitle of this article (“addition, enhancement, or both?”) echoes a seminal 1955 paper by the psychologists James Gibson and Eleanor Gibson in which they mark a critical distinction between two views of perception. The majority view understands perceptual learning as “supplementing or interpreting or organizing” whatever is made available by sensory stimulation (p. 34). In contrast, they propose that perceptual learning is a matter of becoming “more discriminating”, that is, of “differentiating previously vague impressions” (ibid.). In short, one view understands perceptual learning as adding meaning to stimulation, while the other understands it as enhancing what is already there. For the first alternative, perceptual learning “necessarily consists of experience becoming more imaginary, more assumptive, or more inferential” (ibid.).

In this paper, *enrichment* will be used in a broad sense that covers any increase of experienced meaning, whether it occurs by addition or enhancement.² As I have just pointed out, proponents of the source model tend to assume the former view of perceptual learning, and this strongly shapes their understanding of symbolic meaning. Still, although I favor the ecological view of [Gibson and Gibson \(1955\)](#), for the purposes of this article I want to leave open the possibility that religious symbols can enrich experience in both ways—by adding meanings that are generated in special contexts and by enhancing certain meanings that are already available but vaguely grasped. It is the second kind, however, that needs to be brought to light, and I believe that the experience of life as problematic is an important case in point.

Finally, at the end of this essay I will make the additional suggestion that an enhanced experience of life as problematic is in itself a way of experiencing life as more meaningful and, as a result, easier to bear. An experience of life as problematic is therefore a kind of enrichment which, although certainly not unique to religious symbolism, is one of its most important functions.

2. Cognitive-Evolutionary Theories and the Question of Motivation

Before turning the main tasks of this paper, in this Section I provide a brief discussion of how the argument to be undertaken here relates to the themes of this special issue: mind, evolution, and meaning.

No doubt readers have already surmised that this is a philosophical paper whose purpose is to interrogate a common way of thinking about religion. The influence of this way of thinking extends across multiple disciplines and into society at large, although its most prominent representatives are found in anthropology and sociology. Whether and how the present critique bears upon cognitive and evolutionary approaches to the study of religion depends on how these approaches are defined.

The present issue is motivated by the view that cognitive and evolutionary approaches have neglected the topic of religious meaning, leading to a gap between these perspectives and the kinds of humanistic and social scientific perspectives that take meaning as their focus. This gap does exist, but I predict that it will turn out to be short-lived. Certainly, it is not due to any essential differences between these perspectives. If nothing else, [Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* \(Bellah 2011\)](#) is testament to this fact. On the other hand, at least during the time it was written, the composite perspective offered by Bellah's book was an outlier. Indeed, Bellah himself was sharply critical of the way evolutionary theory had discounted meaning. As I have argued elsewhere ([Barrett 2010](#)), I believe this gap is the product of a rift caused by a particular kind of cognitive-evolutionary approach, commonly referred to as evolutionary psychology, which rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s.³

When the cognitive science of religion (CSR) first emerged as a field in the 1990s, it had close ties to evolutionary psychology, but its fate is not (or should not be) tied to any particular research program. The landscape of both cognitive theory and evolutionary theory has changed considerably in the last 30 years, opening up a number of new paths that invite exploration (e.g., see [Newen et al. 2018](#)). Moreover, once we expand our view of what counts as a cognitive-evolutionary theory of religion, it is clear that such theories have been around since at least the nineteenth century, and that many examples of the hermeneutic approach so sharply criticized by proponents of CSR are in fact representatives of a different cognitive-evolutionary perspective (e.g., see defense of Clifford Geertz in [A. Geertz 2013](#)). In light of this wider view, I would argue that there is no single cognitive-evolutionary perspective that should be upheld as *the* standard scientific approach in the study of religion, and I would add, moreover, that this is a good thing, both for CSR and for religious studies.

Also, it should be acknowledged that evolutionary thinking about religion and other aspects of human culture is an imaginative exercise, which is not to say that it is in no way scientific. Theories *can* be tested, but gathering together all the different kinds of relevant evidence against which they should be tested is a very complicated business. As a result, all

evolutionary theories of religion are to some extent “just so stories”, some better grounded than others. Even so, the exercise is well worth undertaking, and uniquely fascinating from a philosophical point of view. Any attempt to “reverse engineer” complex human behaviors necessarily involves that we unpack our ideas about these behaviors into their simplest components. Thus, an elaborately constructed evolutionary theory of religion—such as Bellah’s version of the source model—offers us the opportunity to excavate a particular way of thinking about religion. It helps to lay bare assumptions and lacunae that might otherwise go unnoticed. This opportunity is easily missed, however, when evolutionary theories are constrained by the same assumptions.

In my view, one of the most problematic assumptions of recent evolutionary thinking has to do with the question of motivation. Cognitive-evolutionary approaches have heavily favored fitness-based explanations, relegating affective and motivational causes of behavior to a secondary, instrumental role. I contend, however, that an adequate explanation of religious behavior in any context, but especially in our evolutionary past, must confront the question of motivation.

It is frequently observed that religious behavior is costly, sometimes enormously so: we are astounded by the feats required to produce medieval cathedrals, the Egyptian pyramids, and paleolithic monuments. When confronted with the puzzle of costly behavior in our distant past, cognitive-evolutionary approaches tend to skip over the question of motivation and look for some kind of competitive advantage that is conferred by this behavior. Meanwhile, in our daily life, whenever we encounter a human behavior that seems remarkably costly, we assume that this behavior must be strongly motivated, and we try to understand how this is so. In many contexts, of course, the motivation of behavior is so obvious that it can be skipped over. But when we say that costly religious behaviors are undertaken because of the competitive advantage conferred by increased social solidarity, we cannot assume that their motivation has been explained. It is not at all clear that religious participation is actually motivated by a desire for increased solidarity, let alone whatever advantage can be obtained thereby.

This tendency is not unique to cognitive-evolutionary theories of religion. Forms of evolutionary explanation that have been dominant in recent decades have tended to separate the “true reasons” for behavior from motivation in such a way that makes the latter superfluous to explanation, or simply taken for granted (see [Prum 2017](#) for a critique of this tendency in biology). But as I have just pointed out, these forms of explanation do not have any special claim to scientific authority; they cannot claim to be *the* cognitive-evolutionary science of human behavior. Moreover, if we examine them closely, I think it is clear that they drastically oversimplify the question of motivation.

In contrast, the versions of the source model to be examined in this essay do not take the affective and motivational power of religious symbolism for granted. But neither, I think, do they fully explain this power. I hope that my critique of the source model on this point will at least prompt others to take this question more seriously.

3. The Source Model of Religious Meaning

At the core of the source model is the idea that the primary function of religious culture is to add meaning to our experience of life. This formulation omits a critically important premise, however. When religion is viewed as a source of meaning, it is presumed to respond to a special demand for meaning. That is, when Bellah and others describe religion as, “more than anything else, a way of making sense of the world” ([Bellah 2011](#), p. 102) they are supposing an experience of the world—and perhaps a concept the world itself—that demands to be made sense of in a special way. According to Max Weber, one of the most influential proponents of this view, behind the many varieties of religious belief “always lies a stand towards something in the actual world which is experienced as specifically ‘senseless’” ([Weber 1946](#), p. 281). An experience of the world as problematic is therefore a critical presupposition of the source model. It is taken as given, that is, as a universal condition of human life that underlies the evolution of religious culture.

This premise, often referred to as “the problem of meaning” (Seidman 1983, p. 268), is the focal point of this paper and will be examined more closely below. First let us unpack other key features of the source model as these are found in Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* (Bellah 2011) and in Geertz’s “Religion as a Cultural System” (Geertz 1973).

Bellah describes experience of religious meaning as “seeing the realm of life in terms of a realm beyond it” (Bellah 2011, p. 9). “Realm beyond” suggests the idea of a separate spiritual or supernatural reality that imparts transcendent meaning to life. Indeed, the term *transcendent* is singularly apt for the source model, insofar as it implies a connection to an outside source of meaning. What makes religious meaning transcendent, on this view, is not so much that it refers to supernatural, spiritual, or ultimate realities—although that may be the case—but that it goes beyond whatever meaning can be disclosed by ordinary forms of perceptual engagement in the midst of everyday life. Transcendent meaning is meaning that must be imported, so to speak, from somewhere else.⁴

If religious meaning cannot be found in the ordinary world, where does it come from? For the source model, religious meaning originates in special activities that are set apart from everyday life and charged with symbolic meaning. The archetypal example of this special activity is, of course, ritual. But whatever the type, symbolic activity involves the use of specially prepared spaces, sounds, materials, and movements for the stimulation of intensified experience. Thus the specialness of symbolic activity is marked first and foremost by its material conditions: the production of an intensified experience of meaning requires special resources, and cannot just happen anytime or anywhere. Also, according to the source model, an essential feature of religious symbolic activity is the representation of everyday life in another form, such that life is experienced as having meanings that it ordinarily does not (and could not) have. Thus, although symbolic activity belongs to a special realm set apart from the world of everyday life, its purpose is to evoke an enriched experience of this world. As described by Geertz, in ritual activity “the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world” (Geertz 1973, p. 112).

In sum, the hallmark of the source model is the assumption that all religious meaning originates in a specially prepared environment. Religious meaning is experienced first and foremost in the symbolic realm created by this environment and then, derivatively, in the realm of everyday life. Once transcendent meaning has been experienced in the symbolic realm it can be transferred to other contexts, including the most ordinary activities of everyday life. Perhaps, in some cases, the experience of life is transformed to such an extent that the division between the symbolic realm and everyday life is broken down. Even so, for the source model, a sharp distinction between symbolic and ordinary spheres—commonly referred to as “sacred and profane”—is a fundamental prerequisite for the generation and sustenance of religious meaning.

Now, when considered from an evolutionary standpoint, the source model raises a question: How did the special environment of symbolic activity arise? One of the main theses of Bellah’s book is that human ritual activity is rooted in the play behavior widely found among our mammalian cousins and ancestors. Animal play is not symbolic, but it can be seen as a prototype of the symbolic sphere insofar as it constitutes an “alternative reality” set apart from the “paramount reality” of everyday life (Bellah 2011, p. 77). Needless to say, animals probably do not think of play this way. But it seems that some such distinction is tacitly understood. Play behavior typically involves the imitation of normal behaviors (e.g., fighting, hunting, or mating) in stereotyped and repetitive form. When perceived as play, the meaning of behavior is altered—play fighting is perceived as different from real aggression—and to this extent animals at play effectively create an alternative reality.

One of the conditions for the emergence of play is also a condition for the transformation of play into ritual and other kinds of symbolic activity. This is the condition of being set apart and sheltered from a “world of grim survival” (Bellah 2011, p. xxi). Play requires a free and open space in which the exigencies of everyday life are relaxed, permitting other realities to be imagined. As explained by Bellah: “Play is so important to me because long

before homo sapiens, probably long before primates, play had already emerged in the evolution of mammals as a sphere sheltered to some degree from selectionist pressures, having its end internal to its practice" (pp. 111–12). Thus, although the capacity for play may have evolved under direct selection pressure, it created a "de-pressurized" space in which other capacities could be developed and, eventually, in which other realities could be imagined and brought to life.

The key breakthrough of symbolic representation—what unites all stages of the evolution of symbolic culture and sets them apart from the "episodic culture" that preceded them—is commonly understood as the ability to refer to events, places, things beyond the present situation (Bellah 2011, pp. 117–31; cf. Donald 2001). Mimesis, the most primitive form of symbolic activity, is essentially an event that represents another event (Bellah 2011, p. 128). According to this view, then, the division between the sacred and profane has its roots in the fundamental break constituted by symbolic thought in its most basic form. This break is at first nothing more than the separation of the sign user from what is signified: a literal separation in time and space. However, the more elaborate symbolism becomes, the greater the distance—not just in terms of time and space, but also in terms of meaning—between the symbolic world and the "paramount reality" that it represents. The human becomes "an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun" (Geertz 1973, p. 5).

When speaking so abstractly of religious meaning, it is easy to lose sight of an essential point. For the source model to work as a form of enrichment, it is not enough to experience life as making sense in a purely intellectual way. The experience of transcendent meaning must be compelling enough to be actually *felt* as life-affirming. Superficial versions of the source model tend to take this for granted. For example, it is easy enough to imagine how the idea of an eternal life might be comforting to the bereaved, but that does not mean that it automatically provides comfort, even for those who believe that it exists. The kind of "existential" or "metaphysical" comfort attributed to religious practice by the source model is not so easily achieved. It is not simply a matter of accepting that reality is as it is depicted by religious symbols. Assuming that all transcendent meaning has the power to evoke an enriched experience of life is like assuming that all love songs have the power to seduce. The question of the power of religious symbolism is only partly addressed by the kinds of meaning that it conveys.

Both Geertz and Bellah recognize this point: symbolic activity is not simply a vehicle for the communication of meaning. Ritual and other symbolic activities are also occasions for the evocation of strong feelings and emotions—whatever affective power is required to make transcendent meaning compelling enough to transform the experience of life. How is this accomplished?

In his much-discussed symbolic definition of religion, Geertz speaks of "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" as products of the religious symbols themselves (Geertz 1973, p. 90), as if they had some kind of inherent power to incite emotion. But he was well aware that the affective power of symbols could not be taken for granted. Elsewhere, Geertz suggests that we understand the power of religious symbolism as arising from a synthesis of a cosmological worldview and the ethos, or aesthetic sensibility, of a particular culture: each gives validity and power to the other (pp. 126–41; see also Deeley 2004). Thus, Geertz understands the affective power of religious symbolism as a cultural achievement, and although he does not explain how this power is generated, he makes it clear that it cannot be simply ascribed to religious symbols.

In Bellah's evolutionary version of the model, the requirement of affective power is distinguished even more sharply from the conveyance of symbolic meaning. Bellah attributes the affective power of symbolic activity to an experience of wholeness and unity, which, following Abraham Maslow, he calls "Being Cognition" (Bellah 2011, pp. 5–8). He takes such experiences to be universal and evolutionarily ancient (p. 120), implying that they are prior to and independent of symbolism. When achieved in the midst of symbolic activity, however, these experiences add energy and depth to the experience of

symbolic meaning. The archetypal case is the famous Durkheimian feeling of “collective effervescence” that allegedly accompanies rituals that represent society as a whole. Notice that, in this case, shared feelings of effervescence and the perception of symbolic meaning are not the same thing—they are distinct ingredients, so to speak—even if they are both produced by the same activity and fused into one experience.

I will not dwell further on this aspect of Bellah’s account. I only want to point out that his distinction between experiential and symbolic components of religious practice (see pp. 11–14) underscores the importance of affective power for the enrichment of experience. In sum, for the source model, the function of religious practice is to add both meaning and value to the experience of life. The enrichment it offers is both cognitive and affective, combining understanding with emotion to alleviate suffering and, occasionally, to yield profound satisfaction. To achieve this aim, neither of these ingredients is sufficient in itself: an enriched experience of life cannot be achieved by affect without meaning, but neither can the conveyance of meaning alone do the trick.

4. The Experience of Life as Problematic

The argument now changes course, as the examination of the source model becomes more critical and pivots toward an exploration of religious symbols as tools for enhancement. In this section we return to the premise of the source model that was indicated at the outset of our analysis. This is the supposition that everyday life is experienced as problematic in a way that demands to be made sense of in a special way—the “problem of meaning”.

Although the problem of meaning plays a critical role in Bellah’s evolutionary version of the source model (Bellah 2011), he does not describe or analyze this problem in detail. He takes it for granted that the “world of daily life” in our evolutionary past was the “world of Darwinian survival” (p. xx), and that the latter was relentlessly demanding. Indeed, Bellah assumes this context of “grim survival” as one of the main challenges to an evolutionary understanding of religious symbolism. “How”, he asks, “could humans ‘afford’ the luxury of spending time on alternative worlds, on dance and myth, even on theory, when there was hunger and danger all around them and the necessity to procreate if their lineages were to survive?” (ibid). As discussed above, Bellah responds to this challenge by proposing that symbolic activity emerged from play behavior. Here I want to draw attention to the problem of meaning that is implied by his view of everyday life in our ancestral past as a world of “Darwinian pressures with a vengeance” (ibid).

Mixing this Darwinian perspective with Alfred Schütz’s phenomenological analysis of social reality, Bellah describes the ancestral world of daily life as a world governed by instrumental rationality and driven by an incessant “fundamental anxiety” (p. 2). This fundamental anxiety arises from “knowledge and fear of death” (p. 2), and also from two constant features of life: the fact that our world is “a world of lack” or deficiency, and the fact that our efforts to make up this deficiency have “no guaranteed success” (p. 9). Because of these constant features—death, deficiency, and precariousness—daily life is experienced with such acute anxiety that “*nobody can stand to live in it all the time*” (p. 3, italics in the original).⁵

As I have discussed elsewhere (Barrett 2012), Bellah’s characterization of the problem of meaning rests on a questionable portrayal of everyday life. Death and precariousness are easily recognizable as constants of human experience. But deficiency is debatable, and the picture of daily life as governed by instrumental rationality sounds a bit too much like the “iron cage” of modern capitalist society famously described by Weber. More importantly, Bellah makes it sound as if our experience of the problem of meaning were always directly proportional to the degree and constancy of hardship and struggle that we experience in life. Hardship and struggle are not incidental, of course, but if the problem of meaning were nothing more, it would be completely alleviated in times of health, prosperity, and peace. And yet it is generally understood that one of the peculiarities of the problem of meaning is that it never goes away. It can be experienced even in the best of times. Indeed,

it can be heightened, as when sudden good fortune (much like its opposite) leads us to wonder at the contingency of life.

Geertz's account of the problem of meaning, though closely related to Bellah's, is a bit more nuanced and also, to my mind, more convincing. He defines it as a "threat to our powers of conception" (Geertz 1973, p. 99) stemming from events that "lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*" (p. 100, italics in original). On this view, the problem of meaning is not the kind of problem that might be overcome if we were better prepared to deal with life's challenges. It entails a confrontation with the limits of our "analytic capacities . . . powers of endurance . . . and moral insight" (ibid.)

Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it—challenges with which any religion, however 'primitive,' which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope (ibid.)

To show that this way of thinking about religion is not peculiar to the intellectual tradition shared by Geertz and Bellah, here is a more recent account given by the philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger, followed by a concise statement of his version of the source model.

Everything in our existence points beyond itself. We must nevertheless die. We cannot grasp the ground of being. Our desires are insatiable. Our lives fail adequately to express our natures; our circumstances regularly subject us to belittlement.

Religion has been both an attempt to interpret the meaning of these irreparable flaws in the human condition and a way of dealing with them. It has told us that everything is ultimately all right. (Unger 2014, p. 1)

Each of these accounts of the problem of meaning constitutes an attempt to articulate the essential features of a universal predicament to which all religious cultures have adapted themselves. They are, in other words, theses about the evolution of religion as well as its primary function today. As such, they are prime examples of the sort of sweeping statement about religion that in recent decades has been increasingly viewed with suspicion. But if, as I believe, they are representative of a common and influential way of thinking about religion, then we need such pithy formulations in order to expose this way of thinking to critique. Here, I focus my critique on the way in which these and similar accounts of the problem of meaning obscure certain limitations of the source model and make it easier to overlook the role of symbolic enhancement in religious ritual.

To better indicate the target of my critique, I suggest that we parse this view of the problem of meaning and its role in the evolution of religious culture into three components: (1) the experience of life as problematic; (2) the conditions of life that give rise to this experience; (3) the function of religious symbolism with respect to this experience. When expressed as more specific claims, each of these components is likely to raise questions and invite criticism. But when considered abstractly—that is, when considered vaguely, abstracting from specific claims—they present in broad outline a robust and compelling argument in favor of the source model. Indeed, once we accept the problem of meaning in broad outline, the logic of the source model becomes very difficult to resist.

For as long as we do not enter into details (more on these below), who would deny that life is problematic? Does not every person come to this conclusion sooner or later? Does not, then, the experience of life as problematic merit consideration as a universal, whatever its conditions may be? And if we admit this much, does not the source model—at least in general outline—present a highly plausible way to understand the historical evolution of religious symbolism?

It would seem, then, that the source model is least vulnerable to criticism when its premise is vaguely formulated at an abstract level. But my critique aims precisely at assumptions that hold at this level. The source model assumes that whatever conditions

give rise to the experience of life as problematic are by themselves sufficient to produce and sustain this experience with enough intensity to drive the evolution of symbolic activity toward the production of transcendent meaning. It assumes a rather acute experience of the problematic nature of life as a constant background condition for the evolution of religious symbolism. The source model can allow that the conditions that give rise to this experience can vary, and it can allow that the experience itself varies, but it requires that *some such* experience is intense and sustained enough to constitute a constant demand for transcendent meaning.

It seems that we have just conceded this condition if we accept that the experience of life as problematic is so widespread as to be apparently universal. The problem, however, is that this experience is being assumed as a precondition for the historical evolution of symbolic resources that may be just as widespread. And so we may be in danger of putting the cart before the horse. It could be that widespread experience of life as problematic is a product of religious symbolism, not a precondition. The case for this reversal is even stronger if we include other kinds of symbolic culture. Consider the full range of symbolic resources involved in the articulation of the problematic character of life. For example, think of how prominently tragedy figures in the art, literature, oral traditions, and folk songs of the world. When we say that life is tragic, we may be speaking from direct experience, but we are also drawing on our cultural inheritance to articulate this experience.

Then again, before the first tragic story was told, surely life was already experienced as somehow tragic.⁶ Is this not what we mean when we affirm that life is, in fact, tragic? Is tragedy not the archetypal case in which art imitates life?

Our line of questioning has led to the kind of imaginative thinking characteristic of evolutionary approaches. We are trying to imagine what the experience of life was like before the development of elaborate symbol systems for the interpretation of that experience. And it would seem that the conditions for experiencing life as problematic were, if anything, more powerfully present in our distant past. As we go back in human history, back before modern technology, agriculture, and medicine, it seems likely that life was more frequently and intensely experienced as problematic, not less. Presumably, the chances of meeting a violent and untimely death were greater, and our capacity to “orient ourselves effectively” was comparatively weak.

Actually, I am not certain that life for our ancestors was always harder, but for the sake of argument let us assume that it was. Even so, it does not follow that life was experienced as problematic. On the contrary: I suggest that being constantly faced with hardship—especially the urgent, life-or-death variety—actually makes it harder to experience life as problematic.

It is time to examine this notion of “life as problematic” more closely. Notice that it refers not to any particular life experience but to life itself. This is a rather abstract concept, and any problematic feature that is predicated of it will be correspondingly abstract. Earlier we considered the problem of meaning in broad outline, abstracting from particular statements of the problematic nature of life. But there are many levels of abstraction, and the point I am making now is that even particular statements about the problematic nature of life are highly abstract. Furthermore, I want to suggest that the experience of life as problematic—especially as described by Geertz and Unger above, but also by many others—is an experience of a general character that cannot be reduced to the experience of any particular hardship or succession of hardships. It is not an experience evoked by the severity of hardship, or by the meagerness of our ability to cope. It is not just an experience of our life, or the life of our community. It is, rather, an experience of *life itself*.

Now, whether we experience life as problematic, or as wonderful, or as dreary and monotonous, life itself is not an ordinary, run-of-the-mill object of experience. Typical objects of experience are things and events identified by their various properties—more or less sharply individualized objects of rather limited duration. We can plausibly extend the scope of experience to include longer episodes of life. But even an elderly person reflecting

on the entirety of her life does not ipso facto have an experience of life itself. Indeed, one might question whether life in this sense can ever properly be called an object of experience.

Perhaps the concept of life itself is too abstract. Let us focus on the problematic features of life described by Bellah, Geertz, Unger, and others—constant precariousness, inherent limitations, irreparable flaws, ethical paradoxes, and the like. Do we in fact experience such features in the midst of everyday life? Or are they products of intellectual reflection, like paradoxes that arise from the mathematical concept of infinity?

If we can experience them at all, I suggest that problematic aspects of life are akin to the invariant features described by ecological psychologists. Invariant features are unchanging properties of objects that we perceive through changes of stimulation. For instance, we pick up the circular roundness of a table through the way its form changes as we move around it (Gibson 1986). A circular table never presents to us as circular except when viewed directly from above, and yet we see it as circular because of the way in which its presented shape changes in our experience. The point at which I am getting is that even our most basic perceptual experience of ordinary objects involves the specification of abstract properties by the flow of experience. This is not to say that our perception of these properties is an illusion or mental construction—the table *is* circular, and its circularity is directly involved in our experience of it as such. But such properties are not found in any instantaneous snapshot of stimulation: they are higher-order, abstract meanings specified by flows of stimulation.

Once we appreciate the abstractness of everyday perceptual meaning, we are better prepared to consider the possibility that problematic features of life might also be specified by the flow of experience, albeit over much longer periods of time. Over many years, decades, and even generations, perhaps these features can be specified by the vicissitudes of living: success and failure, joy and sorrow, and so forth. Although they inhere in the problems of everyday life, they would be discerned only gradually, vaguely, and fitfully as our experience of diverse problems accumulates over time. For this reason, I suggest that they are actually obscured by intense experiences of the most urgent kinds of problems—severe physical pain or psychological distress, life-and-death struggles and the like. Being chased by hungry wolves is not conducive to the realization that all life is a “form of robbery” (Whitehead 1978, p. 105), even if it provides a dramatic case in point. Ironically, then, the experience of life as problematic requires, in addition to long periods of time, a degree of safety and comfort. Also, as I will now argue, it requires symbolic activity that can evoke an experience of life in which these problematic features are enhanced.

In respect of these last requirements, it would seem that the alternative view of symbolism that I am sketching closely resembles the source model. But the relationship between the experience of symbolic activity and the experience of everyday life has changed radically. For the source model, symbolic activity generates meanings that are nowhere to be found in everyday life. Although in some respects religious symbolism must work as a model *of* life, its more important function, according to the source model, is to provide a model *for* life (Geertz 1973, p. 93). In this latter function, the meaning that is added to the experience of everyday life is imported from somewhere else.

In contrast, with regard to the experience of life as problematic, I am suggesting that symbolic activity does not add meaning to experience, but rather brings into focus meanings that were already grasped in the experience of everyday life, albeit only vaguely and fitfully. Insofar as symbolic addition and symbolic enhancement both result in increases of meaning, they might be experienced similarly as an enriched experience of life. But the differences are crucial. Symbolic enhancement provides an enriched experience of features that do, in fact, belong to everyday life; it enables these features to become more richly differentiated. Meanwhile symbolic addition yields the kind of enrichment that “necessarily consists of experience becoming more imaginary, more assumptive, or more inferential” (Gibson and Gibson 1955, p. 34).

Even so, the source model is not necessarily contradicted by my assertion that a sustained and intense experience of life as problematic requires symbolic enhancement.

In the context of religious practice, some meanings may be enhanced while others are added, just as the source model claims. The same symbol can have multiple functions. The function of enhancement to which I am calling attention is that of the symbol as a “focusing lens” (Smith 1980). It is the function of bringing certain contents of experience to the fore, accentuating certain features while attenuating others, enabling us to have a more vivid, precise, and sustained experience of what is normally faint, vague, and intermittent. “For precisely in that symbolic form an aspect of reality is given which cannot be adequately expressed otherwise” (Langer 1942, p. 234).

Indeed, it is precisely because symbols have multiple functions, and thus multiple meanings, that the function of enhancement is so easily passed over. Proponents of the source model do not necessarily deny enhancement; they merely overlook its fundamental role in the experience of religious meaning. Let us consider an example that illustrates the fundamental importance of enhancement in religious experience as well as the ease with which this function is obscured by other kinds of meaning.

My example is the megalithic site of Newgrange, located near the River Boyne about 50 km north of Dublin, Ireland. Newgrange is estimated to be about five thousand years old, and like many other megalithic sites of its era it has an astronomical function, which it achieves with astonishing precision: at sunrise, on the winter solstice, the sun’s first rays enter the structure through a special tunnel and illuminate its inner chamber. The structure still works today, and the effect is stunning. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a clearer example of enhancement. Newgrange is essentially a giant magnification device aimed directly at the turning point of the sun in its yearly cycle. It marks not only the shortest day of winter but also the changing of the seasons and the cyclical pattern of life itself. Normally, this turning point is a subtle feature of our natural environment that is just barely perceptible to the naked eye⁷; inside Newgrange it is blown up into a dramatic experience of light coming into total darkness.

Now, for present purposes, the example of Newgrange would seem to have a major drawback: the enhancement that it offers to experience is *not* symbolic—at least not in the sense that has been the focus of discussion. Although the inner chamber of Newgrange is evidently a special place, set apart from the everyday world, what remains of its function is not representational. Inside Newgrange the turning point of the winter solstice is not re-presented in symbolic form; rather, its present occurrence is made manifest in unusually vivid fashion. Yet precisely because of its lack of symbolism, Newgrange helps to clarify two points about symbolic enhancement.

First, I suggest that the way in which Newgrange literally enhances experience is exactly analogous to symbolic enhancement. In fact, for the Peircean perspective that understands signs as causal mediators of their objects rather than substitutes, there is no substantial difference between literal and symbolic enhancement. To argue this point would require a major detour into metaphysical issues underlying theories of representation. Let it suffice to stick with the analogy and point out that symbolic representations nearly always accentuate certain features of their objects, thereby providing an enhanced experience of these objects in respect of these features. And insofar as symbolic activity functions in this way, it effectively serves as a magnifying or focusing lens.

Second, the near total absence of symbolic materials in Newgrange (except for geometric stone carvings) allows us to take notice of the way enhancement is so easily obscured by other symbolic functions. In its present form, Newgrange can be seen as a relic of symbolic activity that has been stripped of all meanings except those provided by its enhancement of the winter solstice. All that is left of the ancient ritual of Newgrange is its “experiential core”: an intensified experience of the sun’s yearly turning point. Today we can only imagine what it was like 5000 years ago when this experience was used to illuminate, both literally and figuratively, the meaning of whatever rituals attended the winter solstice. If we were able to go back in time to witness these rituals, we would likely discover a host of other symbolic meanings. Perhaps the sun was represented symbolically as a deity who must be offered sacrifices to ensure that life is renewed in the coming spring. Perhaps this ritual

offered a way of “making sense” of life and death that was satisfying to its participants. Having gained access to this wider network of symbolic meaning, we might be tempted to focus on *this* meaning—what some call the semantic meaning—at the expense of the meaning achieved through enhancement. We would conclude, then, that the meaning of this ritual is *just* such-and-such understanding of the winter solstice, or such-and-such attempt to make sense of the cycle of life and death. We would not be wrong, but we would have overlooked an essential meaning that, ironically, is impossible to miss today. For even if Newgrange were clothed again in a rich network of symbolic meaning, the enhanced experience of the winter solstice sunrise would remain its experiential core—and would constitute its primary source of power.

The more general point that I am making is this. Symbolic enhancement is often, if not always, an essential ingredient in the ritual performance of other symbolic functions, such that much of the affective power of these other symbolic functions derives from enhancement. And yet this enhancement is frequently passed over in our analysis of symbolic meaning. Consider any ritual that symbolically depicts another world beyond death: evidently this ritual has some kind of transcendent meaning that should be included in an analysis of this ritual as symbolic activity. But we should not overlook the fact that rituals of this kind nearly always present an enhanced experience of death as a constant feature of life—a problematic feature if there ever was one. This, too, is the meaning of the ritual. Moreover, I suggest that the power of this enhanced meaning infuses the entire experience of the ritual, including its transcendent meaning. Accordingly, in this case, an enhanced experience of death is an essential ingredient in the symbolic enrichment of the participants’ experience of life, even though its meaning is not, strictly speaking, transcendent. Rather, it provides an enriched experience of the world of daily life in respect of a feature that belongs to this world. Perhaps experience is further enriched by the addition of transcendent meaning. I suggest, however, that an enhanced experience of death suffices for an enriched experience of life.⁸

5. On the Affective Power of Ritual: The Enrichment Thesis

I have just proposed that enhanced experiences of the problematic features of life are, in and of themselves, enriched experiences of life. This proposal is not a conclusion of the preceding analysis; it derives from a more general thesis about meaning and affect, called the enrichment thesis, that I have defended elsewhere (Barrett and Schulkin 2017; Barrett 2022). The enrichment thesis says that when our experience of *any* meaning is enriched—in respect of intensity, specificity, breadth, or depth—this enrichment always has a positive impact on the affective tone of experience, such that it necessarily reduces suffering or increases satisfaction. The emphasis on “*any* meaning” in the previous statement indicates that it extends even to meanings that we normally experience as negative—injury, loss, failure, separation, loneliness, destruction, death, and so on. In turn, the enrichment thesis is part of a larger theory concerning the nature of affect and its role in experience (Barrett 2023). To conclude this paper, I want to focus specifically on the enrichment thesis as it applies to religious symbolism, and my aim is not so much to argue for this thesis as to articulate its implications for understanding the affective power of religious ritual.

The enrichment thesis can be clarified by a brief comparison with what I suspect is the most common view of the role of enhanced experiences of death and other problematic features in religious rituals. On the commonsense assumption that enhanced experiences of problematic features are emotionally troubling and therefore inherently *negative*, these experiences cannot, in and of themselves, constitute an enriched experience of life. They can, however, contribute to the affective power of rituals, and thus to enrichment, without being sufficient for this function. They contribute by adding intense feelings of negative emotion in a way that increases the net positivity of the overall experience. That is, by way of contrast, they add to the positive experience of *other* symbolic meanings conveyed by the ritual. The importance of this contrast should be apparent from our earlier discussion of affective power as an essential ingredient of religious ritual that is not necessarily entailed

by the conveyance of transcendent meaning. According to the source model, the function of ritual is not simply to “make sense” of the world or indicate that “everything is ultimately all right” but to do so in a way that is convincing and emotionally impactful (Deeley 2004). Perhaps, just like narratives, rituals need tension and conflict in order to have this impact. Enhanced experiences of death and other problematic features supply this tension, and thereby increase the relief provided by the experience of transcendent meaning.

The enrichment thesis would seem to be directly opposed to the commonsense view just elaborated, as it holds that the enhancement of problematic features can, in and of itself, enrich experience in a way that has a positive impact. But my intention is not to argue against the commonsense view. On the contrary, I find it quite convincing, and if properly qualified I think that it can be made compatible with the thesis that I am now proposing.⁹ To make the commonsense view compatible with the enrichment thesis, it would be necessary to enter into a more detailed analysis of enhancement, distinguishing varieties that suffice in themselves for enrichment from those that contribute to enrichment via contrast. Here I will only suggest that these alternatives need not be exclusive.

This last suggestion is in keeping with one of the main themes of this essay, namely that symbols can and do play multiple roles in experience. We should not expect religious symbols to be any different. At the same time, the purpose of my critique of the source model has been to show that a certain kind of symbolic function—what I call enhancement—tends to be obscured in our thinking about religious symbolism, even though it is arguably just as fundamental and widespread as others. Now, in closing, I am proposing that symbolic enhancement of problematic features of experience is sufficient to provide enrichment and, moreover, that this is *one of the ways* in which religious symbolism can function to enrich the experience of life.

Some might find this claim paradoxical. In response, I would point out that it is no more paradoxical than our enjoyment of tragic themes in music, literature, and other arts. In fact, without getting into the larger theory from which it derives, the best way to indicate the initial plausibility of the enrichment thesis is to consider how it might apply to the so-called “paradox of tragedy” (Levinson 2014). Aesthetic enjoyment of tragedy (broadly construed) is truly ubiquitous: it is found in every culture, from folk traditions to fine art. Consider the fact that many of the most popular songs around the world are also those that are most likely to bring people to tears. Indeed, the much-beloved tearjerker is so commonplace that is rarely thought of as paradoxical. The paradox only arises when we confront the apparent contradiction between our enjoyment of these songs and the commonsense assumption that an intense experience of sadness, loneliness, or some similar emotion must be intrinsically negative. Philosophers and psychologists since Aristotle have offered numerous solutions to this paradox. My way is to treat these common experiences as special cases of the enrichment thesis, which in turn is embedded within a more comprehensive view of affect as the enrichment or impoverishment of experience as a whole (see Barrett 2023).

In lieu of a more thorough explanation and defense of this view, the best I can offer is the following exercise. Consider, in your own experience, an example of strong aesthetic enjoyment in which a normally troubling emotion such as sadness figures prominently. For this exercise a favorite song about heartbreak usually works best. Now, if you can confirm that in this experience you actually enjoy, savor, or embrace a normally troubling emotion, I submit that this emotion is experienced in an exceptionally fine and vivid form that goes far beyond what words can describe. It is more than sadness, more than melancholy, nostalgia, anguish, or *saudade*: it is uniquely *this* emotion, powerfully evoked by *this* performance. If you can confirm that this is true of your experience of music, then it should be possible to consider the enrichment thesis as a plausible alternative explanation of the affective power of religious ritual.

Why trot out this thesis at the end of the argument, and not at the beginning? First, because my main argument—that an enhanced experience of life as problematic is a product of religious symbolism, not a precondition—can and should be considered independently

of the enrichment thesis. Second, because I do not want to present the enrichment thesis as an alternative to the source model, but rather as a complementary perspective that addresses its flaws. Although I have not emphasized this point in my critique, I hope it is clear that the source model is especially vulnerable on the key question of affective power. Sophisticated proponents such as Bellah and Geertz do not assume that transcendent meaning has affective power, and I believe that they are right to concede this point. But in so doing, they sever the connection between the experience of meaning and the emotional or existential comfort that they suppose to be one of the mainstays of religious practice.

Again, I think the best course is to diversify our understanding of the functions of religious symbolism with respect to the kinds of comfort and relief that it can offer. Based on appearances and testimony, it would seem that a great many religious practitioners find comfort in the conviction that the world “makes sense” from a transcendent perspective or that “everything will ultimately be all right”. But from what I can tell, not all religious practitioners feel this way. Thus, however common it might be, the sense of security provided by transcendent meaning cannot be described as the sole motivation of religious practice. Fortunately, to find an alternative form of relief, one does not have to look far afield. According to the enrichment thesis, an alternative form of relief is mingled together with ordinary practitioners’ attempts to “make sense” of the world. And it can be found sprinkled throughout the more perceptive accounts of religious culture.

For example, in Geertz’s discussion of the problem of suffering, alongside the intellectual pursuit of the “ultimate explicability of experience” (Geertz 1973, p. 104) he acknowledges an alternative route that seeks the *refinement* of experience rather than its explanation. According to Geertz, the religious problem of suffering is “not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer”, and he suggests that religious symbols, for “those able to embrace them”, provide not just an understanding of suffering but also give “a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it” (ibid.).

The enrichment thesis affirms that this enhanced “precision” of feeling and emotion is one of the primary functions of religious symbolism and, indeed, of symbolism in general (cf. Langer 1942). With respect to enhancement, then, religious symbolism can be understood as closely related to other kinds of symbolism. Indeed, once we consider the many ways in which symbols of various kinds are used to enhance our experience, we may find it impossible to distinguish religious symbolism solely with respect to this function. Enhancement cannot, therefore, be treated as the definitive trait of religious symbolism. Rather, my argument has been that the function of enhancement belongs to the “experiential core” of religious symbolism and is an important, perhaps essential, source of its affective power.

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¹ Actually, according to C.S. Peirce’s influential theory of signs, the experience of meaning has at least three components: the sign, the object or referent, and the interpretant or habit of interpretation. For present purposes we can remain with a simplified dyadic picture, but it should not be forgotten that the experience of meaning requires that some aspect of experience is *taken* by the subject to mean something. It is the active taking of meaning that makes signification irreducible to a dyadic relation.

² For those who know the 1955 paper to which I am referring, this use of “enrichment” may be a bit confusing, as Gibson and Gibson use this same term to refer to the majority view of perceptual learning as supplementation. As explained in the text, I prefer to use “enrichment” as a general term for any increase of meaning. The question, then, is not whether enrichment occurs, but how: the ecological approach asserts that “perception gets richer in differential responses, not images” (p. 34).

- 3 When this article was published, Bellah wrote to me to express his agreement and support for the main points of my argument.
- 4 Neither Bellah nor Geertz considered “belief in supernatural beings” to be an essential trait of religious symbolism (see Bellah 2011, p. xiv), and my discussion follows their lead. The concept of supernatural is not easily defined across cultures, and when clearly defined, it does not reliably pick out the kinds of symbols that are used to impart meaning to everyday life. For example, although belief in ghosts is very widespread, only in some cultures (e.g., those in which ancestral spirits figure prominently in mythology and ritual) do they perform the kind of symbolic function that Bellah and Geertz consider to be essential to religion.
- 5 Later in the book Bellah introduces another problematic feature of human life: the problem of solidarity (Bellah 2011, pp. 120–31). It is not clear to me how this problem is related to the “fundamental anxiety” that he presents in the opening pages.
- 6 Notice, however, that when we think about the origin of tragedy, the logic of the source model does not seem to apply so well. Unlike religious symbolism, which often seems designed to assure us that “everything is ultimately all right”, in tragic works of art this purpose is often conspicuously absent.
- 7 The winter solstice is barely perceptible to the naked eye insofar as it is possible to observe how the point on the horizon where the sun rises (or sets), as viewed from a particular vantage point, changes position over the course of the year.
- 8 Enhancement occurs whenever some aspect or feature of experience is marked, differentiated, accentuated, intensified or magnified by symbolic activity. Once brought to our attention, countless examples of enhancement can be found within contemporary contexts of religious practice. Rites of passage that serve to mark transitions between different periods of life and roles in society also function to enhance our experience of these differences. Funeral rites and customs give form and structure to the experience of loss and separation and to powerful emotions of grief and anguish. Chanting in unison and synchronized movements provide enhanced experiences of shared identity and community. In religious contexts, however, symbolic activity almost always has other functions and meanings, and that is why enhancement so easily escapes our notice.
- 9 The commonsense view of enhancement is supported, for example, by the existence of ritual activities that seem specifically designed to subject participants to intense experiences of emotional distress and even physical pain. Even in the stripped-down example of Newgrange, heightened tension and relief is suggested by dramatic transition from darkness to light within the inner chamber, and no doubt similar contrasts could be found in many other symbolic activities. To create this contrast, it is not necessary to create tension and relief in successive moments; they can be juxtaposed in the same symbol.

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