Belief is a notoriously ambiguous term, but the principal meanings listed by dictionaries can be grouped in two general categories. On the one hand, “belief” refers to a mental state which either takes the form of assent to propositions or the form of faith in somebody; on the other hand, the word designates the objects of the assent, that is, the propositions or notions that are believed, implicitly or explicitly. “Worship” refers to an assemblage of ritual practices which have as their object and justification sacred entities and make it possible to communicate with those sacred entities, to utilize their powers and to render them homage, thus reaffirming their preeminent position in the believers’ consciousness.

Beliefs that are associated, directly or indirectly, with worship are called “religious,” and it is exclusively these beliefs that will be the focus of this article.

Both the relationship between the two meanings of “belief” and the use itself of this term as a universal descriptive category, however, raise considerable problems. Moreover, of the pair “worship/belief,” which is the more important and unifying term? Is worship an aspect
of belief, or is belief an aspect of worship? We will begin by examining the question of the legitimacy of the term “belief.”

The category “belief”
This problem has recently been addressed by two scholars, W. C. Smith (1979) and Rodney Needham (1972). W. C. Smith’s thesis can be summarized as follows: of the two principal meanings of belief, that is, “assent to propositions” and “faith,” only the latter is universally applicable to religious phenomena. Smith maintains in fact that it is improper to use “belief” as a synonym for “faith”: in our modern culture the true meaning of “belief” is a mental state of assent, which lacks certainty, and is even doubtful, about propositions. Inversely, it is erroneous to consider faith as a species of superbelief, that is, Thomistically, as an essentially cognitive power that allows people to believe in propositions which seem incredible to natural reason. “Faith” should be understood in the sense it carries in the Old and New Testaments, in the Koran and in Brahmanic literature, or in the Buddhist canon: as action and not as intellection, as an attitude (of reverence, acceptance, testimony, commitment, fidelity) toward the transcendent. Contrary to belief, this attitude does not even raise the issue of the reality of its object and for this reason it is incompatible with doubt. In sum, like the Arabic *iman* and the Hebrew *he’min* (from which our *amen* derives), “faith” means “saying yes,” responding affirmatively to a divine offer, to a revelation upon which the intellect never dwells because it never casts the revelation in doubt.

W. C. Smith is certainly right in emphasizing (as Fustel de Coulanges and especially William Robertson Smith had before him) that the modern Western tendency to reduce religion to belief in certain propositions is completely exceptional. This tendency has become stronger in modern times owing to the hegemony of scientific rationalism, but it began to manifest itself as soon as Greek philosophy took hold of Christianity and converted it, so to speak, to itself. Quite early on, Christianity—in contrast with all other organized religions (and *a fortiori* with those not organized)—insisted on the necessity that believers adhere to a creed and maintain orthodoxy, which was judged to be more important than “orthopraxis.” This tendency reached its peak in Thomistic philosophy in which *scientia* is superior to *fides*, at least from the subjective point of view (*Summa Theologica*, II–I, 67, 3 *ad 1*), and in which *fides* itself is defined as “cognoscitivus habitus” (*Summa Theologica*, II–II, 1, 1) or “habitus mentis . . . aciens intellectum
assentire non apparentibus” (Summa Theologica, II–II, 4,1). We can therefore concede to W. C. Smith that the centrality that belief (in its intellectual, propositional dimension) has assumed in the Western religious tradition makes us risk thinking that adherence to a system of beliefs (instead of, for example, a system of laws, as in Judaism and Islam, or a ritual system, as in Hinduism and in Greek and Roman religions) may have the same importance in all religions. But recognizing this fact does not mean accepting the confusion that W. C. Smith creates between “absence of creed” and “absence of belief,” nor his thesis of a radical separation, indeed incompatibility, between “faith” and “belief” (that is, between the two meanings of the word “belief” as commonly understood).

In reality, faith in the sense of acceptance, fidelity, commitment— we could say, in a word, “subjection”—as found in the Koran or in the Bible, presupposes belief in certain propositions. For instance, what meaning would a relationship of subjection to God have if God were not explicitly conceived of as a lord and master who requires, like all lords and masters, precisely subjection and fidelity? It is therefore clear that, far from being a primary attitude, and independently of belief, as W. C. Smith maintains, the faith of the Koran and of the Bible is the correlate of beliefs relating to the properties of God. And it is precisely because the belief exists that God is a “lord” that the necessity of accepting him and being faithful to him are emphasized, rather than the necessity of knowing him in an intellectually correct way. W. C. Smith himself is forced to admit that faith presupposes certain notions; but he maintains that these notions should not be considered beliefs, either because they are considered secure knowledge, or because they are not conscious. The first thesis is only valid if one agrees with Plato’s contrast (Republic, books V–VII) between belief as opinion, characterized by doubt, and knowledge, characterized by certainty. Such a contrast can certainly be found in the Koran, but this proves only that in the language of that book, the cognitive relationship with God cannot be designated with the word `zanna (“belief” in the sense of “opinion,” “knowledge whose truth is in doubt”), and does not prove that our term “belief” (in the sense of “thing held to be true”) is not applicable to that relationship. Mistakenly, W. C. Smith gives our term a narrower meaning than that which it in effect has: so doing, he ignores the fact that the term covers the entire spectrum from “subjective certainty” to “doubtful assent.” As for his other thesis, according to which no unconscious adherence to
a notion can be defined as “belief,” it slights the difficulty of tracing a clear border between reflexive and unreflexive representations (which many, moreover, put in the category of belief; see Hampshire 1983: 150), and therefore between propositional and non-propositional meaning. In practice, Smith arbitrarily assimilates “belief” to “creed.”

He rightly insists on the fact that Islamic, Biblical, or Brahmanic faith is more performative than cognitive, but he seems to believe, wrongly, that the performative aspect is incompatible with the declarative one (see Austin 1975). This prevents him from recognizing not only the intellectual aspect of “faith,” but also the pragmatic, performative aspect of belief. In effect, he does not see that, by making belief propositional—sincere and convinced adherence to a creed—the principal criterion of membership in a Church, post-ancient or modern Christianity has given belief an illocutionary dimension, not a propositional one. This dimension is particularly evident in the conventional, public expression of belief that is required in rites of passage and aggregation, such as baptism, confirmation, and so forth, or in rites of abjuration forced on heretics. All this indicates that the external but also internal expression of belief in a proposition is, in Christianity, an actual act of worship, with illocutionary effects.

W. C. Smith also maintains that while religious beliefs vary widely from religion to religion, their notions of faith are extraordinarily similar. This would demonstrate that they all reflect a single, identical reality, the reality, that is, of faith. Not belief, but faith would thus be the appropriate category with which to define and understand the religious phenomenon in its universality. But W. C. Smith characterizes faith in, as usual, an extremely vague and ethnocentric way, especially because he turns the phenomenon into a fundamentally personal fact. According to him, the institutional and intellectual aspect of all religions is none other than a “manifestation” of personal faith, or furnishes faith with the context and language in which it can express itself. But it is sufficient to know religious practices first-hand, especially in non-scriptural religions, to realize that things are much different than Smith maintains, using exclusively textual forms of knowledge as his guide.

The majority of the faithful carries out rites and follows religious laws because, they say, it has always been done so, because it has been so for as long as the world has been the world (namely because religion is an institutional, traditional matter), not because they feel moved by the “faith” described by W. C. Smith. And it would be in-
genuine not to recognize that, even in the religions that give central importance to faith, this faith is acquired as a *habitus* and not as a spontaneous tendency, a natural property immediately available to the individual.

Needham (1972) arrives at conclusions that are more extreme than Smith’s. According to him, the word “belief” does not designate an objectively identifiable mental state. On the contrary, the idea of this state would be the reification of a use that is almost exclusively limited to modern European languages. Needham arrives at this conclusion because no precise empiric criteria exist with which to recognize a distinct mental state that may be called “belief.” In fact, this supposed mental state is not shown by somatic signs like those that allow the identification of rage, joy, anguish, and so on. Moreover, belief is not one of those phenomena whose universality can be deduced a priori from the fact that they are necessary for every possible social form. Not being able to demonstrate either a priori or a posteriori that belief is a real characteristic of human experience, nothing remains, Needham holds, but to consider it as a *flatus vocis*, valid only inasmuch as it is a communicative convention of certain languages.

Let us take, for instance, the pairs of expressions “I believe in God” / “I do not believe in God,” “I believe what he says” / “I do not believe what he says,” “I believe he will come for tea” / “I do not believe he will come for the tea.” Needham (1972: 121–122) asserts that these pairs have only their grammatical form in common and correspond neither to a class in the Aristotelian sense nor to a “family” of phenomena in the Wittgensteinian sense (see 1953). One could object however that they do in fact share a common element: the credit granted or not granted to a person (God, the person who promised to come to have tea, the person who says something to me) and, additionally or alternatively, the credit granted or denied by an assertion (“God exists,” “he is worthy of faith,” “I will come for the tea”). Let us observe moreover that the presence or absence of this “credit” is not deduced from its linguistic expression, but from the fact that the speaker is ready to act in conformity with what he or she says: ready to prepare tea for someone, to follow the dictates of divine law, and so forth. The true criterion for identifying belief is not therefore linguistic, but pragmatic. It is thus not with arguments based on analysis of linguistic expressions that one can prove that “belief” is a mere *flatus vocis*, a breath of air.
Clearly, one cannot automatically deduce from the fact that a person carries out the rituals prescribed for the cult of a god that this person believes in that god. In order to explain ritual behaviors or any other behavior it is not necessary to invoke a specific belief. It suffices to presuppose that the behaviors are traditional ones and that the idea of questioning them does not even arise, or is inhibited by fear of a social sanction. But this reasoning does not at all prove that there exists no belief which is the correlate of those behaviors, much less that it is useless or erroneous to invoke the notion of belief in the description of those behaviors. Indeed, one can carry out a rite without believing in the god to whom it is directed, but not without believing in the value of following the tradition that demands the rite’s performance, or in the value of avoiding “scandal,” and so forth. Every action, from this point of view, presupposes a “belief,” that is, subjective adherence of some sort, some sort of personal reckoning on the part of the one who acts.

In conclusion, only in strongly individualistic cultures like ours is there insistence on the obligation to make explicit those beliefs on the basis of which we act and to believe in the propositions handed down by tradition or sanctioned by an organization (the Church, but also the party, the State, the military, etc.). In most societies, individual adherence to the collective patrimony of ideas is not obligatory and is not considered necessary to the functioning of the ritual system. It is therefore not legitimate to assume that these ideas are also, necessarily, “beliefs” sensu stricto. But neither is it legitimate to infer from that that they are never such or, worse, that the mental state “belief” does not exist and is only an arbitrary linguistic usage of Western scholars. On the contrary, the ethnographic experience—that is, in-depth and continued contact with people and situations in cultures different from our own—teaches us that people generally believe that is, they have faith, albeit sometimes with a certain ambivalence, both in fundamental ideas of their culture and in persons (gods, priests, parents, tutors) from whom these ideas come and who are their guarantors. These two forms of faith are inseparable in that they are the two faces of the communicative process of which communal life consists. It is therefore legitimate to use the notion of belief as a universal category, keeping in mind, however, that the strict sense of belief as assent to propositions does not cover the whole field of religious meanings.
**Intellect and symbol**

What are the distinctive features of religious beliefs, that is, of those beliefs that are related to worship? This question generally receives two types of answers. According to some, religious representations are born of the same rational impulse that is found at the roots of both science and common sense: the impulse to explain events, to control them, and to render them predictable. From this point of view, religious beliefs form the explicative theories of traditional cultures, and ritual activities provide the practical application of those beliefs. According to others, religious representations and actions have motivations entirely different from those of science or common sense: they should instead be related to artistic expression and communication or to moral phenomena (in a broad sense), whose value is based on their social and psychological effects, not on their explicative power. The first group of answers goes by the name of “intellectualist theory,” the second by that of “symbolist theory” (see Skorupski 1976).

The first and most famous formulation of intellectualist theory is indebted to E. B. Tylor (1871), who asserts that magical and religious beliefs differ from one another and from science not because they reflect different forms of thought (as Lévy-Bruhl will maintain), but because their premises, and therefore their content, are different. These differences are in turn due to differences in the concrete possibilities of observation and inquiry, as well as to differences of interest. What strikes and therefore interests primitive man most deeply, according to Tylor, are two phenomena: the contrast between life and death, and the contrast between dream-states and waking. The fact that absent people may be dreamt of because they are distant or dead suggests that every person, and by extension every living being, possesses a spiritual double, capable of separating itself from the body and outliving it. From this stems the belief in spiritual beings, which offers the possibility of explaining not only dreams and the difference between a living body (inhabited by the spirit) and a dead body, but also all the manifest phenomena that are inexplicable in the empirical terms of common sense.

The thesis that systems of religious belief are just theories which, introducing “invisible” entities, help overcome the limitations on possibilities of explanation offered by observation and common sense is the cornerstone of the sophisticated reformulation of intellectualist theory furnished by Robin Horton ([1967] 1970). According to Horton, differences between the intellectual procedures of modern sci-
ence and those of traditional religious thought are in large part “idio-
matic,” not substantial, and therefore more apparent than real. It is
not possible to discuss here all eight of the characteristics which, ac-
cording to Horton, religious theories and scientific theories share. It
will suffice to hint at a few. He maintains, for instance, that religious
explanations, precisely like scientific ones, try to make diversity into
unity, complexity into simplicity, disorder into order, anomaly into
regularity. These reductions are made possible in both intellectual
activities by Correspondence-Rules which make it possible to translate
events that seem like ordinary experience into events within a theo-
retical schema. For example, an increase in temperature is translated
into an increase in the movement of molecules. Analogously, an ill-
ess is translated into a divine punishment in order to explain it and
act on it. “God” is therefore a principle of explanation like the “mol-
ecule”: they differ only in that the former is a personal entity while the
latter is impersonal.

This argument and others of Horton’s are valid only insofar as
they recognize the obvious fact that all manifestations of intellectual
activity have certain formal properties in common. To think undoub-
tedly means to reduce the complex to the simple, the multiple to the
one, and so forth. But contrary to what Horton claims, these generic
properties of thought are at too general a level to explain the charac-
teristics of religious belief. Let us give an example. Lévy-Bruhl (1910)
maintains that religious beliefs have a characteristic that, from the
point of view of our logic, represents a paradox: a thing can be simul-
taneously identical to itself and identical to a completely different
thing. According to Horton, these paradoxes are analogous to those
produced by the Correspondence-Rules between theory and experi-
ence. The solution to the paradox, in science as in religion, lies in
recognizing that “the ‘is’ of Correspondence-Rule statements is nei-
ther the ‘is’ of identity nor the ‘is’ of class-membership. Rather, it
stands for a unity in-duality uniquely characteristic of the relation be-
tween the world of commonsense and the world of theory” (Horton

There is no doubt that some of the paradoxical cases pointed out
by Lévy-Bruhl can be explained in the way Horton proposes. But
others cannot be because they entail identifications not between enti-
ties of different orders (observation and theory), but between entities
of the same order, both of which are concrete. In such cases, the vio-
lation of the rule of non-contradiction seems to be due to the postu-
late according to which terms associated metonymically or metaphorically count as equivalents in ritual operations. For instance, the knife that has wounded is identical to itself but also to the wound that it inflicted, and the knife can thus be treated as the wound's equivalent so as to sustain belief in the capacity of the rite to nullify the wound by destroying, let us suppose, the knife. This example also demonstrates that we cannot adequately account for beliefs by making them into simple theories: they are often intelligible only as justifications for ritual actions.

Furthermore, many representations do not have the goal of reducing the complexity and confusion of experience to the simplicity and clarity of theory, but on the contrary shroud social relations and certain phenomena in darkness and mystery so as to legitimize them or protect them from criticism. Horton’s approach does not take into account this ideological, mystifying aspect of religious representations and actions. His approach overlooks moreover the fact that religious theories are not born, as are scientific ones, of a concern with supplying a unitary explanation of natural phenomena in general. Their principal preoccupation is constituted by events of human interest and, more particularly, unusual or negative events like illnesses, misfortunes, and so on. This is one of the principal reasons why religious forces and powers are conceived of anthropomorphically and sociomorphically. As Bergson notes ([1932] 1974), the cause must be related to the effect, and hence must be human and social like the latter. Only when the theoretical interest goes beyond the immediate sphere of human events or human interest do we begin to invoke causes that are natural and impersonal like the effects they must explain. Horton instead provides an unconvincing explanation of the contrast between the personal character (spirits, divinities, etc.) of concepts in religious theories and their impersonal character (atoms, molecules, etc.) in scientific theories.

This contrast would be attributable to different experiences of what constitutes order *par excellence*. In societies that produce religious theories, relationships among persons would appear ordered and predictable to the highest degree; therefore, in this case, the theoretical language would give preference to social metaphors, and the principles of explanation and conceptual ordering of nature would take a personal form. In societies that produce scientific theories, on the other hand, human relations would appear chaotic, and this would explain why the experience of order is linked primarily to things and
not persons. But this explanation conflicts with that upheld by various scholars who have studied the passage from religious belief to science in the ancient world. Vernant (1969), for instance, has maintained that the social and spatial order of the Greek πόλις (which was certainly not paradise) provided the model for its mathematical cosmos. The transference of social ordering to nature can, on the other hand, be interpreted, in opposition to Horton, as proof that even in traditional societies it is nature that appears as the paradigm of order. Indeed, this naturalization or reification of social order has the effect of giving it an immutable and necessary aspect, which it would otherwise not have (see Weber [1922] 1968). Whereas Horton sees a theoretical use of society to explain nature, we can then see a pragmatic use of nature to justify society.

As for the differences between systems of religious belief and modern science, Horton explains them not in terms of content, but in terms of behavior with respect to theories. The scientist’s attitude is “open” and critical, because he is conscious of alternative theories; the religious person’s attitude is instead “closed”: every challenge to established ideas is seen with horror, as a risk of chaos which produce profound anxiety. The religious person’s attitude would be the correlate of the absence of theoretical alternatives in traditional societies. Horton uses this to explain various aspects of the religious mentality: the magical attitude toward words (if there is not an awareness of the fact that the same objects have different names in different languages, people believe that words have an intrinsic link with that which they designate and may therefore be used to influence); the lack of reflexivity (and hence of disciplines like logic and philosophy); the tendency to rationalize, with ad hoc explanations, events that contradict a theory, instead of criticizing the theory and if necessary abandoning it, and so forth.

But even here Horton’s arguments are often less than convincing: for instance, contrary to what he suggests, many traditional societies are multilingual and in any case aware of the existence of different languages; the magical use of language cannot therefore be explained by the lack of awareness of alternative designations of the same objects. Analogously, the very political and cultural fragmentation itself that is characteristic of traditional societies creates awareness of alternative conceptions of the world, an awareness reinforced in many areas of the world by the secular presence of universalist religions like Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity. The same defensive attitude of the
believer with respect to theories is found, as Horton (1982) was forced to admit in flesh-and-blood scientists, who are often quite different from the ideal scientists portrayed by the Popperian philosophy of which Horton is a follower.

In conclusion, the intellectualist theory of religious belief has the merit of individuating in religious belief general properties of intellectual activity that are also found in science and a properly cosmological-explicative aspect which should not be underestimated. But the theory seems unable to account adequately for the specific characteristics of religious belief and, even less, for those found in worship, which is reduced to activity of an instrumental, almost technological, sort.

Turning now to the second group of theories of worship and of religious belief, we should note that the “symbolist” position was initially formulated by W. R. Smith (1889) and especially by Durkheim and his school, who reclaimed, contrary to the intellectualism of Tylor and Frazer, the social—and thus the historically determined—character of thought in general and of religious thought in particular. Religious beliefs are social facts which have social motivations and cannot therefore be seen as simple theoretical constructions of “natural” reason which remains identical over time and is modified only by the quantity and the quality of available information.

In his first attempt to individuate the specific character of religious phenomena, Durkheim (1899) defines them not on the basis of specific content or logic, but on the basis of the relationship that exists between religious phenomena and the individual. He defines them, that is, on the basis of their implicitly or explicitly obligatory character. Religious phenomena share this character with those juridical and ethical phenomena, but whereas the latter imply obligations only on the plane of behavior, the former also imply obligatory representations—beliefs. This definition is obviously debatable, because it is impossible to separate obligatory representation from obligatory actions in law and in ethics.

Durkheim ([1912] 1965) subsequently proposed a definition that takes into consideration the common denominator of all the contents of religious representations: these contents concern the sphere of the sacred, that is, those things that seem eminently respectable and important to a society. But what is eminently sacred and important for the members of the society if not the society itself? From here stems his bold conclusion: it is not the literal, apparent meaning of religious
beliefs that can explain their specific character, but their hidden and profound meaning, which relates to the society itself. Religious representations, whatever their form, personal or impersonal, natural or artificial, are allegories of the social world, its reified symbols, which allow its reproduction by acting powerfully on individual consciousnesses. This action is carried out predominantly in actions within the cult, that is, in rituals that inculcate beliefs and consolidate their force while at the same time reviving social forms and, more profoundly, the social bond itself.

Durkheim’s attempt to reduce all aspects of religious representations to a social content and in particular to social morphology is debatable (see Needham 1963). This reduction is utterly useless for establishing the validity of the theory’s principal point: that religious beliefs receive much of their force and their raison d’être from their social function. In order to explain this fact, it suffices to recognize that they are socially constitutive because socially shared. Durkheim’s theory that religious beliefs symbolize society is necessarily true only in the sense that there is a component of “self-referentiality” in every symbolic act. The force of these symbolic acts is the force of the community that shares them and imposes them on successive generations; it is the force itself of the act of sharing, that actually constitutes society. It is therefore not surprising that symbolic acts may evoke society. But this evocation must, paradoxically, be distorted, must become unrecognizable, because if the intersubjective act—which lies at the foundation of religious representations and, through them, of society as it is constituted—were perceived, the consequent recognition of the representations’ conventional character would render them vulnerable to criticism and would therefore undermine them. In order to conserve their constitutive force, social representations must remain indisputable, and therefore acquire the character of things: they must become, like them, unchangeable and transcendent with respect to the subject. Fundamental social values and, in the final analysis, the very power of society to constitute these values and to constitute itself, are therefore reified and alienated.

Here Durkheim’s analysis extends those of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx, but like those, and like the “symbolist” positions in general, his analysis encounters a series of difficulties. Indeed, these analyses postulate a state of “false consciousness” which is utterly paradoxical: the true content of religious beliefs seems to need to be at one and the same time recognized (“symbolized”) and not recognized (“reified”)...
by consciousness. These analyses do not explain, however, how a thing can be at one and the same time recognized and missed; nor do they explain how it might be possible for analysis, using the fictitious form of representations, to arrive at the representations’ real content. Who guarantees that the analysis might not become arbitrary as soon as it goes beyond the literal content of the representations? Who guarantees that instead of “real content,” the analyst not extract nothing but products of his own imagination?

Various solutions or remedies have been sought for these problems. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and his followers, for instance, have attempted to avoid them by radically distinguishing, in contrast to Durkheim, function from signification. According to them, religious representations would have social effects but would not necessarily signify social realities. In any case, the thorny problem of meaning could be left aside because the true task in analyzing these representations would be to identify their function. But the difficulty of this convenient approach is that generally we cannot account for the function of representations without taking into consideration their content. In other words, the problem of symbolism, chased out through the door, returns through the window. Moreover, in the matter of signification (which Radcliffe-Brown links, without further elaboration to “cosmology”), literalism does not lead very far from, or leads back to, the intellectualist position, since religious beliefs are presented superficially as explanations.

Other scholars think that it is necessary to confront head-on the issues connected with symbolism and the mental states linked to it, despite all the difficulties and risks they entail. In particular, it is a matter of recognizing the difference that exists between propositional and non-propositional forms of signification. The propositional forms are linked to the discursive, argumentative use of language and are the correlate of consciousness. The non-propositional forms make up a much more vast and complex domain, principally connected with the use of visual, auditory, olfactory, and even gustatory symbols, which have as a correlate the unconscious or semi-conscious apprehension of signifying relations. As in language, signification here consists of a putting into relations, and therefore of the perception of equivalences and contrasts. But this is a matter of relations that are not codified in the same measure and in the same way as linguistic signs: in them analogic, and not digital, codes are dominant (see Bateson 1972; Barth 1975). The problem raised by these classes of signs is that it is
not possible to analyze them in a properly “objective” way. In fact, part of their very nature is to make possible and even encourage an indefinite number of interpretations. The analyst thus ends up being implicated; and the process that allows an analyst to discriminate between his or her subjective reactions and those of the social group studied cannot be led back to methods reproducible at will. He or she can make recourse only to indirect proofs of the interpretations of these signs-behaviors normally linked to them, social effects, associations of signs of one type with those of another type, and, more generally, the whole context. One thing is certain: in this field it is not the verbal exegesis offered by informants that can provide a secure guide to the effective meaning of signs that function analogically (or through other figures of rhetoric). In fact, there is a profound difference, and at times near incommunicability, between the propositional and non-propositional levels of signification.

These developments lead to the criticism and modification on several points of the symbolist position in the form given it by Durkheim. The first of these points regards the radical contrast between collective and obligatory representations, which are, according to Durkheim, characteristic of religion, and the individual and optional representations, which would be characteristic of the profane sphere. How is it possible to distinguish clearly the public and conventional meaning from the individual meaning in the inchoate and barely codified symbolism that is characteristic of a significant part of religious symbolism? Where does public interpretation begin and private end? And is not the distinction itself deforming, beyond a certain point, if one of the fundamental conditions of the social efficacy of symbolism lies precisely in the various and indefinite character of its effects on individuals? For the same reason, how is it possible to leave analysis of the properly psychological aspect of symbolism out of analysis of its social aspect?

This last question leads to a more general objection to the excessive sociocentrism of the Durkheimian explanation of religion. Recognizing with Durkheim that the efficacy of beliefs and ritual actions has a social, conventional origin and, ultimately, that the sense of reality associated with these beliefs in consciousness and actions has this same origin does not mean having to conclude, as he does, that their motivations and functions must be found exclusively in the logic of social functioning. It is not by chance that a significant number of religious theories attempt to explain, justify, and make tolerable (often
creating the illusion of control) phenomena like death, illness, bad luck, and other imponderable elements of existence. It is misfortune, as everyone knows, that makes one religious. Religion does not console the suffering only under our skies. As Weber noted, one of the fundamental preoccupations of religion is theodicy. We must therefore recognize that religious belief also has its roots in defensive reactions against phenomena of finiteness and suffering and, in particular, against the anxiety that they cause.

To this point of view, illustrated by such thinkers as Spinoza and Bergson, Freud and Malinowski, some object that it is not anxiety that produces religious beliefs, but religious beliefs that produce anxiety (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952). This is because, in creating positive and negative prescriptions, such religious beliefs simultaneously create the fear of violating them. This objection is based, however, on the confusion of two types of anxiety: the primary anxiety, which certain tendencies and practices make controllable and tolerable, and the secondary anxiety, much less severe, which is born from the fear of incurring supernatural sanctions on those beliefs and practices. It should not be ruled out that sometimes the anxiety linked with transgression may be due to anticipation of a return to the primary anxiety.

In short, there is not a radical contrast between sociology and psychology, nor between personal meaning and public meaning, but rather a movement of reciprocal determination. Without collective mediation, personal fantasies lack reality because they are incommunicable or, if they are communicable, they are not accepted as real. But, reciprocally, collective representations derive part of their efficacy and persuasive force from their capacity to strike the most intimate chords of individuals, to satisfy their desires in an imaginary form, to calm their fears, helping them in this way to live. Religion is thus not simply prescriptive, a system of beliefs and obligatory practices: it is also, and above all, a system of communication, a place where motivations, fantasies, interpretations, and individual projects meet and are realized. Without the energy that these aspects provide the system, it could not exist; but without the system which realizes them socially, creating the context in which they can communicate with one another, they would not exist either.

Ritual, worship and sacred beings
The communicative role of religion is realized above all in the system of practices in worship, not only because they provide the concrete
contexts in which communication occurs, but also because they incorporate the implicit or unconscious notions that are not reduced nor even reducible to the propositional form of beliefs sensu stricto. A significant part of worship consists of rituals; but what is a “ritual”?

The many uses of the term “ritual” can seemingly be grouped in two principal classes. The term refers, on the one hand, to formal behaviors, with communicative and operative ends; on the other hand, it refers to fictional equivalents of real actions. Examples of the first class of rituals are behaviors of courtesy, good manners, ceremonies of installation of political and religious authorities, the ceremonial of the court, weddings, baptisms, and so forth; examples of the second class are the so-called “ritualizations” of aggressive behaviors, ritual revolts (quite common during New Year’s festivities, or when political and religious offices become vacant), and other imitations of ordinary or transgressive behaviors.

The principal trait common to both classes is evidently the symbolic character of the actions they include. But there are many other classes of symbolic actions: what justifies the association of these two classes? Fundamentally, their constitutive character: these symbolic actions—in contrast, for example, with actions that have an exclusively aesthetic character—are not limited to symbolizing, but bring into existence what they symbolize, because it does not exist except symbolically. Let us consider, for example, a marriage ritual. This ritual consists of gestures and visual symbols, which represent the passage of a couple from an unmarried state to a conjugal state and the correlative transformations (of relations between the two families, of the relationship of the bride and groom with other people, and so forth). And thus, by social convention this representation effectively produces what it represents: the bride and groom become husband and wife, their families enter into a relationship of affinity, from now on the husband and wife cannot be courted, and so on. Analogously, the ritual use of language is performative: when a justice of the peace (or a priest) says, at the prescribed point in the marriage ritual, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” he brings into existence what he pronounces. The same thing happens when a judge says “the defendant is acquitted.” In these cases, saying is doing (see Austin 1962).

The constitutive character (see Kantorowicz 1946) or performative character as it is also called, is equally evident in rituals that provide the fictional equivalent of a real behavior. A custom of the inhabitants of the Andaman islands furnishes an example of this type of ritual:
when a group wants to make peace with an enemy group, it pretends to attack that group and dances, armed, a war dance, which ends only when every dancer has violently shaken, first from the front, then from behind, every member of the enemy group, which on this occasion remains completely passive (see Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 134–35). The representation of war here produces peace—that is, the opposite of what is represented. Symbolization is performative in this case too, but it becomes such through negation. The performative effect is obtained by putting the truly symbolic character of the action at the forefront, that is, by emphasizing the fact that the symbol of something is different from the thing itself. The representation of war is a war that is no war; it is a pretend war. It can thus represent (and conventionally produce) the transition from actual war to peace. In short, there are two ways to produce reality by conventional definitions, such as marriage, peace, and so forth, through entities which are themselves conventional as symbols: directly or inversely, by a direct affirmation or by a negation, either postulating that the symbol is identical to what it symbolizes (the representation of two people as husband and wife transforms them into husband and wife) or that the symbol is of a reality different from what it symbolizes, in effect, contrary to it.

Naturally these two procedures can be combined, and the above-mentioned Andaman ritual provides the proof of this. For while one of the two sides that carry out the ritual symbolizes peace through a negation of the conflict, the other side symbolizes peace by exaggerating its characteristics: it remains in fact completely passive. Analogously, in numerous rituals the social order is reproduced by combining its direct enunciation in an extreme (and hence “formal”) form with its indirect enunciation through a fictitious disorder a Saturnalia or a carnival. The combination allows the ritual action to be given a dialectical form perfectly fitting to symbolize and produce the transformations that are the principal concern of all rituals. Indeed, as was noted long ago by Van Gennep ([1909] 1960), the majority of rituals have to do with passages: from childhood to puberty or an adult state from an unmarried state to a married one, from life to death, from the status of a commoner to that of king or priest or knight, from the old year to the new, and so forth.

Another common characteristic of all rituals is their fundamentally ludic nature. That is, they feature actions that constitute an imaginary order, which exists in creative tension with the real order either because these actions represent a more ordered, quasi-utopistic form of
the real order or because, on the contrary, they represent an alternative to it. Obviously, the first case corresponds to a considerable portion of the rituals which consist of “formal” actions, that is, of actions which, in contrast to ordinary actions, make clear their form, communicate this form, and say: “look, we are acting according to the rules that constitute this action, and therefore it is valid.” Although these rules are first and foremost constitutive of the characteristic order of the ritual, and as such are not necessarily applicable to ordinary actions as well, their apperception in the course of the ritual has repercussions on daily life, since the ritual is also a model or a metaphor of the everyday world. For instance, rituals of coronation have their own rules, but they likewise represent the ideal relationships between king and subjects, between political and religious power, and so on, which should be found, if in a more diffuse and less ordered form, in everyday life. Analogously, a ritual such as the Catholic mass expresses ideal relationships between God and the faithful which it is difficult to find in daily life. The artificial order of the ritual is thus a “game,” a simulated event which makes it possible to strengthen consciousness of the forms and values that must (or should) guide ordinary actions. But on the other hand, the self-constitutive character of ritual forms allows them an opposite kind of functioning: the ritual can be a reward or a consolation for the chaos of ordinary life, to which ideal values cannot seem to be applied. Relations between the ideal order of the ritual and the order of everyday life are thus complex and ambiguous, with aspects of contrast and aspects of agreement.

Even more complex and ambiguous are relations between ordinary life and those rituals which, inasmuch as they are fictitious imitations of prohibited behaviors, allow an imaginary satisfaction of the desire to transgress order as well as allowing the production of forms that are alternative to the order. These forms can in certain situations be adopted into everyday life: then the feast becomes revolution. But ordinarily, the subversive character of these rituals is only fictitious: through them one pretends to invert, destroy, and contest the established order, but given that this is done as make-believe, nothing happens but to reestablish indirectly the order itself. In these rituals in any case, the same creative aspect of the game is more important than its role as a model, which instead dominates in “formal” rituals.

These facts indicate that the ritual—beyond constituting specific situations and transformations by virtue of stipulations of an almost
juridical character—is constitutive in a more general and profound sense. In the final analysis the ritual contributes to constituting the social community that performs it, to creating a communicative field, and more generally a relational field, among its participants. This is particularly true for those societies in which the community reaches its greatest compass in the moment of the execution of rituals and does not exist beyond this execution. Moreover, whereas language constitutes the community by making it possible to communicate propositions, ritual constitutes it, at a more profound level, by making possible a communication which for the most part is not propositional.

The ritual is not necessarily religious. It is only so when it is believed that the source and ultimate guarantee of its constitutive power are situated not in social convention, but in transcendent entities, personal or impersonal. The constitutive effect of the ritual is then attributed to the intervention of these entities, which means that a religious ritual can be recognized by the fact that it always includes procedures for establishing proper relations with these entities. Why do a significant portion of rituals assume the character of worship? Why do the powers of social convention and human action in the rite become reified and personified? An adequate response to these questions can be given only by a theory of religious action, which cannot be elaborated here. But it is permissible to assume that belief in sacred entities as conditions for the efficacy of the ritual is due at least in part to the convergence of two facts (see Valeri 1985a).

1) The ritual is lived as an objective order, not constituted by any subject or by any empirical relationship since, ultimately, it is constitutive of everybody. Inasmuch as it is the ultimate author, the ritual must therefore remain without author—a principle developed to its extreme consequences by Brahmanic speculation, which holds the sacrificial ritual to be an objective order that embraces and constrains gods and men alike (see Levi 1898) or must have an author who is himself transcendental. In this, the situation of the ritual is similar to that of language, that is, to the other institution that is highly transcendental because highly constitutive of society. It is not therefore by chance that many gods (beginning with Yahweh) are personifications of the power of the magic word—personifications, that is, of language and of rite at the same time.

2) Reflection leads to the abstraction of various types of authority, of various aspects of the constitutive power of ritual. These types are
distinct from concrete ritual actions, but they preserve the objective character common to all of them. They thus appear transcendental, like the ritual itself. And since these types of authority distinguish types of actions, they are inevitably represented as actors—that is, they are personified. Personification is not however always present, nor is it present in equal measure in religious thought. Personal or not, these reified types participate in the constitutive character of ritual. In addition to their generically constitutive character, they have a specific one, with respect to the actions and relations of which they are models.

The gods and other sacred entities are, in short, objects of worship because they are its transcendental subjects. These subjects are the result of a process of rationalization and reflection, which explains why beliefs themselves which have a propositional form, may be found above all in theological discourse, whereas non-propositional forms of signification may abound in ritual action, which utilizes means that are non-discursive and more particularly musical, choreographic, gestural, and so forth—means that are by their nature rich with unreflective or unconscious associations.

Belief and ritual constitute, therefore, the two levels, in part complementary, in part antagonistic, of any system of worship. The level of belief represents the attempt to justify rationally the constitutive power of ritual, but this power is always richer than the belief and thus cannot be completely reduced to it. From this power of ritual springs the visceral anti-ritualism of religions that privilege belief, and its correlate, faith as an interior and subjective relationship with the divinity.

**Forms of worship and belief**

Worship is therefore a process of communication between men and sacred entities which has constitutive, that is, conventional, effects. Naturally, it also has non-conventional effects, but it is the conventional effects that distinguish worship from other types of action, since those non-conventional effects are common to all actions. The constitutive effects of worship involve both the relations between sacred entities and men (that is, between the objects and subjects of worship), and the *status* of each. In fact, it is only in and only through worship that the relationship between gods and men becomes a true relationship, that is, subject to rules and stipulations of an almost juridical nature (as with the famous “pact” between Yahweh and the Israelites). It is not by chance that law is often born of worship and that, as in
ancient Rome, the juridical nature of the relations among men is the counterpart of the juridical nature of relations between men and their gods (see Dumézil 1970).

As for the constitutive effects of worship on those who participate in it as “subjects” or “objects,” it may suffice to mention the fact that everywhere gods need worship, honor, and even the life and energy with which human recognition provides them. Abandoned, deprived of worship, gods become insignificant and can even die. If instead they are objects of worship, they reward—or should reward—those who honor them by producing the requested corporal or social transformations. Explicitly or implicitly, the center of gravity of worship is always constituted by these transformations, and more generically by the desire for “salvation”—material or spiritual—of the human participants. These participants are often subdivided into two classes: those who commission a particular cultic event and the ritual specialists (priests, mediums, or shamans) who carry it out and function as intermediaries between the divinities and those who turn to them. Beyond those who directly commission the ritual, spectators or indirect beneficiaries also attend, providing the real audience.

Communication between gods and men in worship thus includes processes of communication among men: between commissioners of the ritual and ritual intermediaries, between ritual intermediaries and the audience, between commissioners of the ritual and the audience. Therefore, toward the goal of setting up a typology of worship phenomena, it is necessary to take into consideration not only their aims, the messages transmitted, and the modalities of their transmission, but also the relations among the various interlocutors in the process of ritual communication so much the more since relations of co-variation exist among components of worship. For instance, when a god has a predominantly moral character, the preaching, that is, the direct teaching of the audience by the god through a human intermediary (whether priest or prophet) becomes a prevailing element of worship (see Weber [1922] 1968). This is due to the fact that in such a case worship consists above all in paying homage to the god by obeying his moral imperatives, and it is thus necessary that these imperatives be reaffirmed and the audience be persuaded to follow them. The ritual intermediary is then more spokesperson of the god to the audience than spokesperson of the audience to the god. In extreme cases, there are forms of worship in which one ceases to ask
anything of the god explicitly and leaves the initiative to concede or not concede what the god, in his omniscience, knows is desired.

But it is only in the worship of impersonal entities or personified abstractions like the homeland, the nation, the flag—which have as their explicit aim the reconstruction of corresponding social groups—that communication with the audience predominates over communication with the sacred entity, to which one often turns with non-verbal signs precisely because this entity is not conceived as an actual person. Instead, where the god provides above all a guarantee of the “magical” efficacy of ritual operations, emphasis is put on communication with him rather than with the audience. The ritual intermediaries also turn, albeit indirectly, to the human spectators when these spectators are able to judge the correctness of the procedures put in play in order to communicate with the god. But often the knowledge that allows evaluation of these procedures is accessible only to ritual intermediaries, either because it is a privilege of theirs or because it is too difficult (the use, for instance, of special languages—like Sanskrit, Pali, Latin, Slavonic, classical Arabic, and so forth—is frequent in worship). However, even when excluded from more complex (particularly verbal) aspects of communication with the god, the audience still always remains a necessary interlocutor: it must at least be made to know that the rite is being carried out. In this sense, every act of communication between gods and men presupposes at least implicitly an act of communication among men.

There are two possible aims in communication with sacred beings: either to produce a conjunction between them and a human situation or, on the contrary, a separation. Depending on the case, and particularly on the points of view, the proximity of sacred powers can in fact be either beneficent or maleficent. Let us consider for instance the case of an ordinary man who mistakenly enters a place in which a god is present. He becomes contaminated by divine power and consequently he risks contaminating other people and things as well. This forces him to interrupt his ordinary activities and relationships. So that he may regain these, he needs to persuade or force the god to distance himself from him. The ritual acts that have this goal are called rites of desacralization. We speak of rites of purification when the conjunction with the sacred power is supposed to have as an effect a state of impurity. Finally, rites of exorcism distance those powers conceived as intrinsically maleficent, such as demons, spirits of the dead, and so forth. While these ritual acts remedy the maleficent
connections, others—that is, ritual proscriptions or taboos—prevent them by signaling the incompatibility among different classes of beings and in particular between sacred beings and profane beings.

Ordinarily, contact with sacred entities is dangerous and is therefore avoided, except by those people—priests or ascetics—who consecrate themselves permanently to the god, simultaneously separating themselves, at least in part, from the social world. But in moments that are rendered extraordinary by circumstances or by the calendar, such contact is instead actively sought. At these times, one turns to divinities, seeking to persuade or force them to intervene in theirs spheres of competence, but then sending them away when the desired effects have been obtained.

The means employed to distance the gods or bring them near are substantially the same: they consist of operations effected on or with verbal and non-verbal signs. Verbal operations take the form of prayers, orders, exhortations, and so forth. Non-verbal operations are the most rich and complex: they utilize dances, musical pieces, perfumed or colored substances, sacred images (statues, paintings, etc.), gifts, immolations, and so forth. Some of these means serve to influence only the gods, others only the human participants, but most influence both. In effect, what influences men also influences divinities conceived anthropomorphically. We should note that the transformations of the human participants’ mental and physiological state are not a mere side effect of the use of communicative means applied exclusively to transform the state and disposition of the gods, but are explicitly recognized conditions of the efficacy of the ritual. The participants must indeed transform themselves in order to enter into contact with the god by purifying themselves, exciting themselves (sometimes with drugs), or by fasting and practicing other privations that modify their ordinary mental state. Men and gods can therefore encounter each other only by converging. Rites of worship thus have the task of provoking a complex of sensations and associations in which the person encounters, in the alteration of his or her experience, the divine modifier.

By combining the aims of worship with the verbal and non-verbal means that it employs, scholars have created typologies such as “prayer,” “sacrifice,” “votive offering,” “libation,” “deification,” “inspiration” (that is, the possession of a human intermediary by a spirit or god), and so forth. The use of these terms creates the risk of reification: sacrifice or prayer are discussed, without taking account of the
fact that these terms can be utilized only to refer to phases or aspects of an always-complex process of communication between men and gods and at the same time between men and men. For instance, it is rare for there to be a sacrifice without prayer, that is, without a verbal rite specifying the reasons for the manual rite, as well as the commissioners of the rite and those to whom it is addressed. Prayer in a reciprocal way almost always involves non-verbal correlates (a respectful attitude, the use of special gestures or garments, offerings, and so forth). And analogously, sacrifice almost always involves a divining aspect, since the sacrificial body (from whose bowels or from whose behavior the will of the god, or his answer to a problem, is deduced) is the meeting-point between human messages and divine messages. This conjunction is also realized by the bodies of the *medium* and of the shaman: from this point of view, sacrificial rites and rites of possession can appear equivalent and be used in alternation or in combination.

Notions such as sacrifice, possession, and deification are therefore useful only insofar as they define certain positions in a communicative structure, in the circulation of constitutive messages (and therefore also of forces) among the various human and divine participants. This structure forms the only true unity in the study of worship. Reciprocally, it is in this structure, which is realized concretely in every culture and every situation, that these terms must find their definition. The same is true for the definition of human and divine participants. The former, as we have seen, can be subdivided into those commissioners of the ritual, intermediaries, and audience, depending on the position they assume in the process of communication within worship. The commissioner provides the motivation for the process and the material means to realize it (but is at times helped by those who are invited); intermediaries provide their knowledge and even their bodies (which can act—in a complementary or redundant way with respect to the bodies of sacrificial victims and with respect to material objects such as images or fetishes—as a meeting-point between human and divine); the audience acts as witness and contributes to rendering the ritual event socially efficacious, spreading word of its success and perpetuating its memory.

The divine participants in ritual can be classified on the basis of numerous parameters, deducible from the acts in which they appear, as well as from the beliefs of which they can be, as we have seen, the explicit object. For instance, sacred beings can be classified in terms...
of the function of the social units that worship them. Thus various deities—domestic deities, deities of clans, ethnic or state deities, deities of corporations, of localities, etc.—are distinguished from one another. And it is immediately evident that a certain solidarity and thus analogy exists between the human and divine interlocutors in worship: the god (or saint) of the artisans is himself an artisan, the god of a lineage is often an ancestor, the god of a domestic group is often a personification of the hearth, and so forth. It is not uncommon, moreover, for every individual to have a deity which is exclusively his, a δαίμονον that he alone may worship, which guarantees by this his individual existence.

In addition to their relationships with the human participants in worship, sacred entities are defined by their relationships with the material world, that is, by their tangible manifestations. Deities are always conceived anthropomorphically in the sense that they respond to words, they have a will, they have human desires and needs, and they have a sex (or they combine the two sexes). It is not therefore by chance that in places of worship, deities may often be represented by anthropomorphic images and anthropomorphic elements, and even by men in whom they are incarnated or whom they enter for some period of time. Such manifestations make the similarity between gods and men tangible and thus legitimize the use of purely human means (language, gifts, and so forth) to communicate with gods and influence them. But the gods are not only human (and therefore fundamentally comprehensible): they are also transcendent with respect to the human, and from this point of view they are not human. This is one of the reasons for which non-anthropomorphic manifestations of the gods—as mountains, animals, plants, substances, and, at times, their combination in “fetishes”—are often important in worship. The use of “natural” manifestations of the gods, insofar as it reflects the alterity and opacity of the divine, is thus related, by a paradox that is only seemingly so, to the radical prohibition on images professed by Islam, Judaism, and by some forms of Protestantism.

In conclusion, all theological typologies are encompassed by a fundamental contrast: the contrast between polytheism and monothelism. Polytheism seems to be the correlate of forms of social and conceptual consolidation which accentuate the combination and mediation of heterogeneous principles rather than the use of a homogenized hierarchical structure. The tendency towards hierarchical homogenization is manifested instead in henotheism (that is, in the
cult of a single god whose existence does not exclude that of other
gods, which are often reduced to its manifestations: see Evans-
Pritchard 1956; Horton [1967] 1970) and even more so in mono-
theism. Insofar as it puts a society of gods into relation with a society
of men, polytheism always presupposes that the relationship of the
individual with the gods will be socially mediated. Monotheism, to the
contrary, favors a personal relationship (which often escapes social
control as well as “external”—that is, public and formalized—forms of
worship) between the human individual and a god who is conceived
as a superindividuum: endowed with free will, autonomous, containing
the principle of his existence within himself, and so forth. Naturally,
between these two tendential extremes (represented, let us say, by the
polytheism of West Africa and the monotheism of Protestant Eu-

crop), a whole range of complex interrelations develops among theo-
logical representations, ritual practices, social forms, and particular
historical processes.