



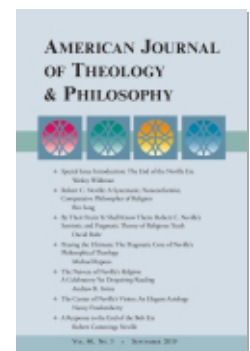
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By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them: Robert C. Neville's Semiotic and Pragmatic Theory of Religious Truth

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Abstract

This essay explicates Robert Cummings Neville's theory of religious truth, focusing especially upon its foundations in the semiotic and pragmatism of C. S. Peirce. In accordance with Peirce's semiotic, Neville construes religious truth as consisting in a triadic relation obtaining between religious signs, the ultimate objects they represent, and the living interpreters who interpret those ultimate objects via religious signs. In accordance with Peirce's pragmatism, Neville construes religious truth as consisting in the practical fruits of interpreting religious signs in the experience, behavior, and thought of living interpreters. Neville's theory of religious truth also depends crucially upon his metaphysics, which hypothesizes that all determinate things are defined by four elements: form, components formed, existential location, and value-identity. These "cosmological ultimates" define the finite sides of four "finitel/infinite contrasts" with the infinite, indeterminate ontological creative act that creates all determinate things out of nothing. Religious symbols are true in a semiotic sense when they represent what is ultimately real by schematizing the finitel/infinite contrasts that actually define the boundedness of the creation over against the ontological creative act. And religious symbols are true in a pragmatic sense when interpreting those symbols causes interpreters to regard as their ultimate concerns the religious predicaments associated with having form, components, existential location, and a value-identity. In short, religious symbols are true insofar as they represent realities that are truly ultimate and their interpretation generates the good living fruits of righteousness, wholeness, love, and ultimate meaning.

Introduction

C. S. Peirce claimed that the pragmatic method of clarifying ideas is "nothing but a particular application of an older logical rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"¹ While Jesus spoke about discriminating between true and false religious teachers, Peirce was concerned with clarifying

1. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, 1893–1913, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 401.

our intellectual concepts. Peirce's *pragmatism* asserts that we clearly understand the meaning of a concept if we can state the potentially practical and empirical consequences that would follow from the truth of a proposition involving that concept. Robert C. Neville's semiotic and pragmatic theory of religious truth unites Jesus's and Peirce's concerns, proposing that religious truth consists in an adaptedness or fit between the habit of engagement that results from interpreting a religious sign and the ultimate objects represented by that sign. In Neville's words, "the transformative point of religious symbols is to adjust the interpreters so that they themselves, personally and communally, come into better and deeper accord with the religious objects."² This essay examines Neville's account of how religious truth is possible, focusing especially upon the roles played in that account by C. S. Peirce's pragmatism and his *semiotic*—i.e., his theory about signs, reference, interpretation, communication, and meaning.³

C. S. Peirce's Semiotic and Neville's Semiotic Theory of Religious Truth

This section summarizes the basic concepts of C. S. Peirce's semiotic and examines their role in Neville's theory of religious truth. In brief, Neville conceives religious truth as a process of sign-interpretation wherein religious signs represent ultimate objects to religious interpreters, who, as a result, are brought into better accord with those ultimate objects.

Since we spend considerable portions of each day interpreting signs—from turn signals and traffic lights, to newspapers, menus, and the words and gestures of everyday conversation—we all possess a working understanding of signs and how they function. Thinking like a logician, Peirce sought to replace this vague, commonsense understanding with a technical definition that would capture the essence of a sign: "Now how would you define a *sign*, Reader? I do not ask how the word is ordinarily used. I want such a definition as a zoologist would give of a fish, or a chemist of a fatty body . . . an analysis of the essential nature of a sign . . . applicable to everything which the most general science of semeiotic⁴ must regard as its business to study."⁵ Peirce's numerous definitions of a sign differ in

2. Robert Cummings Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 151.

3. In addition to Peirce, Neville's pragmatism is importantly influenced by the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey. For simplicity's sake and because this essay will already be discussing Peirce's semiotic, which is intimately related to his pragmatism, I will rely exclusively on Peirce's formulations of pragmatism when explicating the pragmatism of Neville's theory of religious truth.

4. "Semiotic" is sometimes spelled "semeiotic" or even "semiotics" by both Peirce and his interpreters. In this essay, I have followed Neville's preferred spelling, "semiotic."

5. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:402–3.

minor details,⁶ but almost all agree that a sign is defined by being bound up in an irreducibly triadic relation with both the *object* that the sign represents and the *interpretant* to which the sign represents that object. In Peirce's words, "A sign is anything . . . which mediates between an object and an interpretant . . . in such wise as to cause the interpretant to be determined by the object through the mediation of this 'sign.'"⁷ That which makes a sign a sign is its *significance* or its grounded capacity to represent its object to a potential interpreter.⁸

The idea that a sign represents or stands for something else, its object, accords well with commonsense understandings. Though the neologism "interpretant" is less familiar, its meaning is also fairly intuitive. A sign does not represent an object unless it represents that object to something capable of registering the sign's import. If that something is the sign's *interpreter*, then the *interpretant* is the discrete influence upon the interpreter that results from interpreting a particular sign. An interpretant can be another sign—like a definition that interprets the definitum or a conclusion that interprets an argument's premises—but it can also be a qualitative feeling or a practical action that translates the sign. An interpretant expresses the meaning of the sign it translates. In the words of T. L. Short, the most thorough and insightful interpreter of Peirce's semiotic, "Peirce gave the term 'meaning' no special place in his semeiotic . . . his theory of the interpretant, in its various divisions, is his technical counterpart to the tangled uses 'meaning' has in ordinary language."⁹ Interpretants are always formed with respect to the interests and purposes of the interpreting organism. To quote Short once more,

The purposefulness of semeiosis is rooted in the interpreter, not in signs or their objects. . . . Our concern with illness or with the weather leads us to exploit, for our own purposes, the observed correlation between pulse and fever or expansion of materials and temperature, taking one to be a more or less reliable sign of the other. . . . A sign is something suitable to being so exploited . . . The sign . . . acts only through influencing an agent that, independently of that sign, is pursuing some purpose. . . . Nothing is a sign except for its objective relevance to the purposes of possible agents.¹⁰

6. By one count, Peirce offered at least eighty-eight different definitions. See Robert Marty, "76 Definitions of the Sign by C. S. Peirce" and Alfred Lang's "12 Further Definitions or Equivalents," both available on Arisbe (website), last modified April 27, 2012, <http://www.iupui.edu/~arisbe/rsources/76DEFS/76defs.htm>.

7. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:410.

8. See T. L. Short's illuminating analysis of significance in *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 151–77.

9. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, 262.

10. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

Pragmatism is intimately related to the essential role played in interpretation by the interests and purposes of the interpreter. Pragmatism asserts that the meaning of a concept is best understood in terms of the practical actions and habits of action that one would undertake, given one's interests and ongoing purposes, if one believed a proposition involving that concept to be true. More simply, meaning is a sign's significance as it bears upon the interests and purposes of an interpreting organism.

We can render this discussion more concrete by providing everyday examples of sign-interpretation (for clarity, the sign [S], object [O], and interpretant [I] have been labelled):

1. Because Riane has a fever, swollen lymph nodes, and red spots on the roof of her mouth [S], her doctor diagnoses her with strep throat [O] and prescribes antibiotics [I].
2. While hiking, Dan hears the rattle [S] of a rattlesnake [O] ahead and decides to walk around that part of the trail [I].
3. Due to a traffic report [S] announcing that Highway 71 is congested due to an accident [O], Dey'veon takes an alternate route to work [I].

In each example, the sign's representation of the object results in an interpretant that is organized to practically fit with that object: Riane's doctor prescribes an appropriate treatment, Dan avoids the rattlesnake, and Dey'veon bypasses a traffic jam. Given the interpretant's adaptedness to the object, Peirce sometimes described sign-interpretation as a process wherein the form of the object is communicated through the sign and into the interpretant such that the interpretant is organized to fit with the object via the sign.¹¹ The practical conformity of the interpretant to the object, given the interpreter's purposes and interests, is what I will call *pragmatic truth*. As discussed in the next section, Neville's account of religious truth is pragmatic in this sense.

With this introduction to Peirce's semiotic, we are prepared to examine Neville's theory of religious truth. According to Neville's general definition of truth, "truth . . . consists in the carryover of value from the object interpreted into the interpreting person or community, in the respects in which the sign interprets the object, as qualified by the biological, cultural, semiotic, and purposive nature of the interpreters."¹² This formula follows the triadic structure of Peirce's semiotic: the sign mediates between the object and the interpreter, communicating what is important about the object into the interpreter. Leaving communication into the interpreter for section 2, the remainder of this section

11. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:477, 544n22.

12. Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, xxi.

examines Neville's account of the objects represented by religious signs and how religious signs represent those objects.

Neville's answer, in brief, is that the objects represented by religious signs are ultimate realities: "Certain important religious symbols are schematized images of an utterly transcendent and infinite ultimate reality in the terms of human experience. They present the ultimate, God, as relevant to fundamental human issues such as contingency, guilt, homelessness in the universe, and the meaning of life."¹³ Neville's account of religious reference is realistic, asserting that religious signs sometimes successfully stand for God or ultimate reality. How this is possible is far from obvious, as Neville acknowledges: "The indexical reference in engagements with ultimacy is far more complicated than engagements with physical objects within the world. You can point to a bird to focus attention, but you cannot point to a creator of the cosmos, at least not except in metaphor or philosophical dialectic."¹⁴

Neville's mention of "indexical reference" alludes to Peirce's "first and most fundamental"¹⁵ division of signs into icons, indices, and symbols. An *icon* is a sign that represents its object because the icon's qualities are similar to the object's qualities. An *index* is a sign that represents its object because it is directly related to that object, whether causally or via mere spatiotemporal proximity. A *symbol* is a sign that represents its object due to an instinct or convention that determines that the interpreter will interpret the symbol as a sign of that object. Neville denies that religious signs can represent their ultimate objects through sheer spatiotemporal proximity the way a pointing finger indicates its object or the letters of a geometrical diagram stand for the diagram's points and lines (Peirce labelled such signs *degenerate indices*¹⁶). Icons and symbols are also not promising bases for grounding theological reference: an icon can only be recognized as similar to its object if one already knows about the qualities of that object; and a symbol can be conventionally assigned to stand for an object only if interpreters are already familiar with that object. In a recent article in this journal, I argue that Peirce's other concept of an index, *genuine index*, is more promising for understanding the reference of religious symbols. A genuine index is an effect that represents its cause both indexically and iconically the way a fingerprint represents the finger that caused it. If God causes

13. Robert Cummings Neville, *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

14. Robert Cummings Neville, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1, *Ultimates* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 75.

15. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:273–74.

16. See *ibid.*, 163, 171–72, 306–7.

the universe to exist, then perhaps the universe itself can be understood as a genuine index that in its contingency points beyond itself toward its Creator, while also communicating information about the Creator through its beauty, vastness, variety, growth, and other qualities. Though Neville does not appeal to the concept of a genuine index, as discussed below, his account of the reference of religious signs can be interpreted along similar lines.

Rather than relying upon Peirce's icon/index/symbol division of signs, Neville bases his account of the reference of religious signs on his concept of a "finite/infinite contrast." He explains this neologism as follows:

The logic of the borderline contingency conditions, registered in at least many of the symbols of them, is that they mark the boundary between the finite and the infinite. That is, by focusing on some finite thing as a boundary condition orienting the experiential world . . . they suppose a contrast with what would be the case without the boundary condition. No world tree, no centered sphere of human existence; no primal time, no meaning to consequent time; no determinateness, no thing at all, nothingness, emptiness. The finite condition is disclosively referred to as actual; its infinite contrast is transcendent. The infinite can be merely the absence or nonexistence or ineffectiveness of the finite boundary condition. It can be construed causally, as Brahman manifested as Isvara the creator, or the infinite Christian creator. Or the contrast can be expressed as a mythic action, Marduk slaying Tiamat. . . . Precisely in being symbolized as contingent, as the focal points of contingency, as those things on which all other worldly orientation hangs, the boundary conditions are imaged as finite/infinite contrasts. . . . I propose to use *finite/infinite contrast* as a technical term for the primary direct or indirect referent of religious symbols. Finite/infinite contrasts are what I mean by the *divine* . . . because they mark what is experienced as a special condition defining worldliness or world construction. . . . If their interpretations are true, [finite/infinite contrasts] are realities, or structures of reality.¹⁷

Religious traditions symbolize finite/infinite contrasts in countless ways: as a central world tree, the mythic action of a Creator God, or simply the nonbeing that would obtain without the world's founding in the boundary conditions. According to Neville, these symbolizations represent actual boundary conditions that are supposed to actually define the finite world in contrast to the infinite void: "If their interpretations are true, [finite/infinite contrasts] are realities, or structures of reality." That is, the reality we know through experience really depends for its being upon some ultimate reality, and it is via this ontological contingency that reference to ultimate reality becomes possible. In Neville's words,

17. Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 58.

Religious symbols are those religiously functioning images that so shape the worldliness of the world that they also indexically point beyond it. As shaping the basic dimensions of the world—its temporal and spatial structures, its values and importances, and the place of the human in all this—religious functioning images refer to what makes the difference between cosmos and the transcendent.¹⁸

This quote clarifies that finite/infinite contrasts are articulated within a specific conception of the universe. Of course, that conception might be wrong and the universe might not be contingent in the imagined respect. Neville seems to assume that any plausible metaphysics will involve boundary conditions that define the worldliness of the world over against the nothingness that would obtain apart from the founding of the world in the boundary conditions. Whether or not that is a safe assumption, for any cosmology that does conceptualize the universe as contingent for its reality upon certain boundary conditions, that purported contingency provides the basis for referring to ultimate reality.

As the author of a systematic philosophical cosmology, Neville has a definite conception of the finite/infinite contrasts that define existence. According to his metaphysics, everything determinate in any respect is defined by four boundary conditions: form, components formed, an existential location relative to other things, and a value-identity achieved by integrating its components into its form in its existential location.¹⁹ These four “cosmological ultimates” constitute the finite sides of a contrast with the infinite “ontological creative act” that creates everything determinate. The cosmological ultimates are crucial for understanding Neville’s account of how religious symbols “carryover the value” of their ultimate objects into interpreters. Because these finite/infinite contrasts define all determinate things, including human individuals and communities, they also constitute matters of ultimate concern for human beings. Corresponding to the cosmological ultimates of form, components, existential location, and value are ultimate religious problems of achieving righteousness, wholeness, proper comportment toward the value of others, and ultimate meaning, respectively. In Neville’s words,

Inanimate things play their roles as parts of God’s creative act in simple ways, compared with human beings. We have freedom, and thus exercise some control over what we do and are. Being free, we have a problem to find and embody the best forms for our lives. In moral terms, this means we should be righteous, forming our lives justly, although we can choose unjust forms, which is to be unrighteous. Being free, we should honor all the components of our lives—our bodies, our use of resources, our neighbors, our traditions—as

18. *Ibid.*, 65.

19. Neville, *Ultimates*, 193–209.

we bind them together into the forms for which we are responsible. . . . Being free, we should engage the issues and problems of our existential location, our politics, our family problems, our social issues, our personal trials. . . . Being free, we should be concerned to achieve the best possible value for our lives, viewed in ultimate perspective, given the life-forms available to us, the components, and the existential realities of our location.²⁰

Because they form the finite side of the finite/infinite contrasts by which we conceptualize ultimate reality and they also define problems of ultimate import for finite creatures, the cosmological ultimates function as the hinges of Neville's account of religious truth. Religious symbols can be true in Neville's sense if they represent the finite/infinite contrasts as ultimately real while leading interpreters to engage the issues of righteousness, wholeness, love, and meaning as matters of ultimate concern.

Of course, developing religious symbols capable of standing for these ultimate objects to interpreters who always interpret with respect to their particular biologies, cultures, and ongoing purposes is easier said than done. The next section on the pragmatism of Neville's theory of religious truth addresses these issues.

Neville's Pragmatic Theory of Religious Truth

The preceding section on the semiotic dimensions of Neville's theory of truth focused mainly upon how religious signs represent their ultimate objects. In contrast, this section on the pragmatism of Neville's theory of religious truth is concerned with how religious truth is communicated via religious signs into the persons and communities who interpret religious signs. Especially important for Neville's pragmatic theory of truth is the list of factors that qualify "the carryover of value" from the object, through the sign, and into the interpreter:

By the qualifications of "biology, culture, semiotics systems, and purposes" is meant that the religious object needs to be transformed to the stuff of the interpreter's experience and life. Thus the carryover must respect the fact that religious symbols and their interpretation are activities of people with meat-brains, not computers or angels. It must address the cultural conditions that frame what is important to interpret and that affect the respects in which interpretations are made.²¹

On Neville's account, religious signs are not true in abstraction from bodies, but only insofar as they become relevant to the practical purposes and concerns of "people with meat-brains." Pragmatism more generally asserts that meaningful

20. *Ibid.*, 83.

21. Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 31.

concepts are those that are translatable into patterns of practical action that engage the encompassing environment. While many other biological constraints could be mentioned, perhaps the most important with regard to the meaning of religious symbols is that our brains are highly specialized for interpreting other humans' facial expressions and body language, intuiting their emotional states, and guessing their intentions. In order to bring religious truths home to minds so constituted, a certain degree of theological anthropomorphism is probably inevitable, as it has proven to be throughout the history of human religions.

The qualifying factor Neville discusses in greatest detail is culture. This is because, with respect to the interpretation of religious symbols, the qualifications of culture are especially acute in contemporary life. Many factors conspire to undermine the plausibility and appeal of traditional interpretations of religious symbols for modern interpreters, including worldviews informed by modern science, historical awareness of the all-too-human origins of religious texts and traditions, and widespread recognition of the richness, beauty, and wisdom of other human religions. Given such dramatic changes in interpreters' imaginations, traditional interpretations of religious symbols often fail to engage modern interpreters with the ultimate realities they once successfully symbolized. In Neville's poignant description,

When the symbols of a given religious tradition are fresh and living, people see through them to the divine. They do not notice the symbols as such any more than they notice the glass in a window or think about columns of mercury when hearing the temperature from the TV weather announcer. When another religion with different symbols is encountered, however, attention is suddenly called to the symbols as such, as if the window were dirty, or shown to be a photograph . . . in the present theological situation, affected by the secular skepticism of modernity and by the present vivid encounter of different religious traditions with one another, the religious symbols are always problematic.²²

In some instances, the gap between the traditional interpretations of the symbols and the imagination of modern interpreters is too vast and the religious symbol is, for those interpreters, dead beyond the hope of resurrection. For example, Neville suggests that symbols of atonement through sacrifice are beyond recovery for many modern interpreters:

Nothing is more apparent in this secular age, however, than that many ideas and objects that had effectively engaged people in previous ages now are dead. Perhaps the symbols were once authentic and true, or even would

22. Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 29.

be true again if the means could be found to engage them today. But they simply have died and cannot live in our culture as it stands. . . . The chief reason I do not hold to much of a doctrine of atonement to understand Christian salvation is that I believe that the atonement imagery depends on the symbol of sacrifice rectifying wrongs and that that symbol is dead for us in the North Atlantic world in the late twentieth century.²³

In other cases, however, symbols whose traditional interpretations fail to engage modern interpreters with ultimate realities can be resuscitated through creative reinterpretation. The next section of this essay discusses Neville's efforts in *Symbols of Jesus* and his Marsh Chapel sermons to give new life to Christian symbols through such creative reinterpretation.

Before turning to that analysis, a few words concerning the qualifying role of the interpreter's purposes are necessary. As noted above, although signs are significant prior to interpretation, they are only meaningful insofar as they bear upon the interests and purposes of an interpreting organism. To use examples already introduced, a traffic report on the radio is meaningful for someone driving to work, but for someone bed-ridden in the hospital, the same report is only an interruption in the morning news. Likewise, while a rattlesnake's rattle would lead to fear and avoidance for most hikers, for a biologist studying rattlesnakes, the same rattle would likely cause excitement and approaching behavior. Similarly, Neville emphasizes that the meaning and truth of religious symbols depends importantly upon the different contexts in which and purposes for which those symbols are interpreted.

Neville identifies three primary contexts in which the same religious symbols are interpreted. In *theological* contexts, the purpose of interpretation is intellectual. Theology aims to determine whether religious symbols represent their objects accurately and to develop theories concerning the nature of the realities those symbols represent. In *communal* contexts, the purpose of interpretation is primarily practical. The goal here is to interpret religious symbols insofar as their meaning bears upon the practical issues and concerns presently facing the religious community. In *devotional* contexts, personal transformation is the goal of interpretation. Given that goal, religious symbols are often interpreted in exaggerated and fantastic ways. Neville summarizes these contexts as follows:

The theological use of symbols nudges them toward clarity, systematic definability, perhaps abstract applicability to different instances, and a readiness to affirm or deny in ways that can be understood as representational and true or false. The practical use of symbols nudges toward analogical generalizability, discrimination regarding consequences, and readiness to be exemplified in social relations and actions that can be given

23. *Ibid.*, 221–22.

nonreligious descriptions. The devotional use of symbols, while perhaps a species of practical usage, stretches symbols beyond safe theological representationalism and responsible practical application to have a power of transforming the soul.²⁴

Although Neville does not emphasize this point, these three contexts and purposes for interpreting religious symbols are closely associated with different kinds of resulting interpretants. Peirce recognized three main kinds of interpretants: *emotional interpretants* express the meaning of a sign through feelings; *energetic interpretants* express the meaning of a sign through concrete actions; and *logical interpretants* express the meaning of a sign through further signs.²⁵ Generally speaking, theological interpretation interprets religious symbols through logical interpretants, namely, theological tomes like Neville's three volume *Philosophical Theology*; communal or practical interpretation interprets religious symbols through energetic interpretants, namely, the concrete actions and engagements of religious communities; and devotional interpretation interprets religious symbols through emotional interpretants, namely, the soul-transforming feelings devotees experience while interpreting religious symbols.

Thus far, we have seen that Neville's theory of religious truth is pragmatic because it emphasizes that religious symbols are true only if what they represent about ultimate reality is effectively communicated into the life of interpreters who are defined by specific biologies, cultural contexts, and ongoing purposes. Assuming that religious symbols effectively address interpreters in this way, what exactly does this communication of ultimate reality into the life of interpreters consist in? Neville says that it involves the carryover of value from the religious object into religious interpreters:

Religious symbols are true if they transform people's practices so as to embody the religious object, properly qualified; they are true if they effect transformations in devotional life so that the soul becomes more and more conformed to the religious object, properly qualified. They are true if they carry over the values in the religious object so that the intentional understanding of the mind is conformed to them, properly qualified.²⁶

In everyday examples of sign-interpretation, conformity of the interpreter to the object consists in actions like avoiding traffic jams and rattlesnakes or prescribing medications that treat the causes of illness. But how exactly does one conform oneself to ultimate reality?

24. *Ibid.*, 153.

25. See Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:409.

26. Neville, *Truth of Broken Symbols*, 243.

As indicated in section 1, Neville's answer revolves around his doctrine of cosmological ultimates. Recall that the four cosmological ultimates are form, components formed, existential location relative to other things, and the value of getting those components together into that form in that existential location. In human life, these cosmological ultimates manifest as universal predicaments that Neville thinks truthful religious symbols ought to help us address. The first predicament is that we need to integrate the components of our lives into some sort of whole. Our components include, trivially, the trillions of cells that constitute our bodies, as well as the complex systems—cardiovascular, digestive, nervous, etc.—that keep those bodies functioning. But components also include our conflicting impulses, purposes, and ideals and the competing responsibilities of our roles as child, spouse, parent, employee, citizen, etc. Given this complexity, it is easy to be internally divided, acting at cross purposes with ourselves or conforming to contradictory values in different contexts. Truthful religious interpretation should help us harmonize this complexity into an integrated whole. Secondly, we need to relate rightly to the value of other people and things. This is easier said than done, especially in a world where one must kill to live. But one can eat thoughtlessly and wastefully or mindfully and gratefully. Rather than being selfish, we should cultivate deference toward and love for others. Truthful religious interpretation ought to deepen our appreciation for the value of others, inspire us to struggle for social and ecological justice, and, when conflicts are irreconcilable, to love even our enemies. The third predicament is that we are being created in time and are obligated to choose what we will do and who we will become. All of our choices are somewhat ambiguous, realizing one valuable possibility and excluding others, and we inevitably make many bad choices. Thus, the first thing we need is the courage to engage wholeheartedly in the struggle for righteousness. Truthful religious interpretation should supply moral courage, wisdom for discerning the best possibilities, and fortitude for persisting through failure. Fourthly, we need to find ultimate meaning in life. We might not be great at getting our lives together, overcoming selfishness with love, or being courageous and righteous choosers. Nevertheless, our ambiguous lives achieve some positive value as we occupy our little corner of creation's vastness. Truthful religious interpretation ought to help us, saints and sinners alike, to develop a sense of the ultimate meaning and value of our lives. Finally, regarding the ontological ultimate, truthful religious interpretation should result in ontological surprise, awe, and wonder. True religious symbols should bring to attention the shocking fact of our being created, inspire mystical bliss, and produce deep gratitude and love for God. In sum, truthful religious interpretation orients interpreters to what is ultimately important, resulting in persons and communities who are filled

with gratitude and love for God; who live healthy, integrated lives; who love unselfishly and struggle for justice; who engage the issues of their watch wisely and courageously; and who have a deep sense of the ultimate meaning and value of their lives.

Before turning to Neville's application of his theory of religious truth in his interpretation of Christian symbols, let me briefly summarize that account. Relying on Peirce's semiotic, Neville construes religious truth as a triadic relation holding between religious signs, their ultimate objects, and their living interpreters. Neville provides an objective account of what constitutes a religious sign: reality is defined by boundary conditions that define the finite world over against the infinite nothingness that would otherwise be; and religious signs are signs that represent those finite/infinite contrasts to be ultimate realities. Religious truth consists in the communication of what is important about the ultimate objects of religious signs, through the signs themselves, and into the experience, behavior, and thought of living interpreters. The pragmatic dimension of Neville's account of religious truth concerns this communication into the experience, behavior, and thought of living interpreters. In order to stand for their ultimate objects, religious signs must be able to appeal to living interpreters who are defined by specific biological constitutions and cultural inheritances and who interpret religious symbols for different purposes in different contexts. Though religious symbols purport to represent realities that are universally ultimate, they only succeed when they address themselves to the concrete particularities of actual living interpreters with their messy biologies, ever-evolving cultures, and shifting purposes.

Neville's Theory of Religious Truth Applied: The Truth of Christian Symbols

In my opinion, Neville's theory of religious symbols, interpretation, and truth is the deepest and richest systematic application of Peirce's semiotic and pragmatism to the analysis of religious symbols that is currently available. In addition to his systematic explication in *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, Neville has also applied that theory to the analysis of specific religious symbols in *Symbols of Jesus* and his three volumes of Marsh Chapel sermons. Regarding the latter, during three years as Dean of Marsh Chapel, Neville preached his way through the lectionary, providing a systematic interpretation of Christian scriptures made in light of his own philosophical theology and by way of application of his theory of religious symbols, interpretation, and truth. In order to render the preceding abstract account of Neville's theory of religious truth more tangible, this final section summarizes his account of how "Christianity is a vital, true,

and saving religion . . . because its basic symbols engage Christians with God vitally, truly, and with efficacious salvation."²⁷

Neville's account of religious truth generally, and the truth of Christian symbols in particular, is normative in both semiotic and pragmatic senses. Religious symbols are only true in a semiotic sense if they successfully refer to ultimate reality, meaning that an actual interpreter actually interprets the sign as standing for something that is actually ultimate. Religious symbols refer to ultimate reality, on Neville's account, when they schematize a finite/infinite contrast that actually defines the world over against the nothingness that would be were the world not founded in that finite/infinite contrast. Religious symbols are true in a pragmatic sense if interpreting them helps interpreters to address the ultimate concerns of their lives: making righteous choices, achieving personal wholeness, properly comporting oneself toward the value of other people and things, and achieving an ultimate value-identity and meaning for one's life. Given this general account of religious truth, Neville's method of interpreting Christian symbols to be true consists in interpreting them as: (a) schematizations of the four finite/infinite contrasts whose finite sides are form, components formed, existential location, and value-identity; (b) that construe the religious predicaments associated with the four cosmological ultimates as matters of ultimate concern; and (c) that are potentially fruitful for helping contemporary interpreters to address these matters of ultimate concern, bearing the good fruits of righteousness, wholeness, love, and ultimate meaning.

While most of Neville's analysis is focused upon Christological symbols, we can begin by noting that he interprets the symbol of "God the Father" as a schematization of the ontological ultimate, or the indeterminate ontological creative act that creates everything determinate.²⁸ God the Father symbolizes the infinite side of the finite/infinite contrasts that have the four cosmological ultimates as their finite sides.

Neville interprets the symbol of "Jesus the Cosmic Christ" through a *Logos* Christology in which Christ or the *Logos* refers to the four cosmological ultimates, the finite sides of the finite/infinite contrasts that give a reflexive definition to the infinite, indeterminate side:

When with the creation, God became God, it was because of the Word through which all things are created. The Greek word for Word is *logos*, from which we also get the word "logic" and all of its cognates. In the

27. Neville, *Symbols of Jesus*, 10.

28. See *ibid.*, 24–59.

ancient world, the *logos* was the fundamental rationale or intelligibility that allows finite determinate things to exist. . . . I believe myself that the *logos*, or Word, or divine nature that arises through creating, involves four elements. One is that to be a thing, a created thing has to have a form or pattern. A second element is that created things have parts or components that are integrated by their forms. A third element is that created things have location in space and time; they exist somewhere and somewhen. A fourth element is that a created thing has value, namely the value of having all its components together in its particular form at the spatiotemporal location in which it exists.²⁹

Neville's subtle reinterpretation of Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1—"When with the creation, God became God"—means that, apart from the determinate world that is created, the ontological creative act is indeterminate and infinite, lacking any character or determination by which it might be known; yet as creator of the world we find ourselves in, the ontological creative act has the character of creating a world defined by form, components, existential location relative to other things, and value-identity. The finite sides of these four finite/infinite contrasts give a reflexive definition to the indeterminate, infinite side, allowing Neville to interpret the cosmological ultimates according to a *Logos* Christology. Jesus the Cosmic Christ symbolizes this four-fold *Logos* and "presents the Ultimate as immanent in and intimate to every thing, to every starburst and to every human being, to every sinner, to every sin."³⁰ The ontological creative act is inseparable from what it creates. While indeterminate apart from creating the determinate world, the ontological creative act has the character of being the creator of the determinate world we know through experience. In Neville's words, the four-fold *Logos* or the Cosmic Christ, is "the prime visible image of the invisible God" and it "conveys the heart of glory and holiness, that is, the juxtaposition and oscillation of the knowable and unknowable God."³¹ In the same sermon quoted above, Neville employs the language of incarnation to describe the relation between the ontological creative act and its determinate terminus:

Only in creating the world does God have any flesh at all. "Flesh" in this context means determinate character. Apart from creation, God has no determinate character, no "nature" about which we might know. So in creating the world, God makes God's own divine nature as creator of this world. Only as Creator does God have the flesh of a divine character. . . . Apart from creation God is not in time, does not have a date, does not

29. Robert C. Neville, *Nurture in Time and Eternity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 82.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Neville, *Symbols of Jesus*, 118.

endure, or anything like that. Apart from creation God cannot be a thing that possesses properties in a place or holds a constant character through time. Only because God does create can God have a nature and endure through time. . . . When Genesis says, “In the beginning God when God [*sic*] created the heavens and the earth . . .,” that means that time and space began with the creation, and so did God’s character. The creation of the world is what gives God flesh. . . . This means that God is in us, creating us. We are the end-products of God’s creative act. God cannot create us and withdraw, because there is nothing outside of space-time to withdraw to. God is incarnate in each creature, our own true inner nature.³²

While Jesus as Cosmic Christ symbolizes all four cosmological ultimates, taken together, Neville interprets other Christological symbols as primarily addressing ultimate predicaments associated with particular cosmological ultimates.

As discussed above, corresponding to each of the four cosmological ultimates is an ultimately important predicament that human beings must face and that true religious symbols ought to help us address. Without being comprehensive, let me review two of Neville’s examples of how Christian symbols can be true, in this sense, for contemporary interpreters. Corresponding to the ultimate of having components, we face the problem of achieving wholeness by integrating all the components of our lives. These components include, not only the cells and organs that make up our bodies, but also key relationships that define us, like those to our parents, spouses, and children, as well as the diverse roles we play in different areas of our life. Each of these components has a value of its own that deserves to be honored, yet the very process whereby we integrate those components is a compromise that inevitably subordinates the value of each component to the value of the whole they are integrated into. The result is that we can never properly honor the demands made upon us by the various components of our lives.³³ Given this situation of inevitable failure, we are tempted either to deny the obligations placed upon us by these components or to become alienated and fail to engage the challenge of wholeness. According to Neville, the symbol of Jesus as the Lamb of God allows us to acknowledge the costs of our lives without becoming estranged due to guilt:

The Christian message of resurrected new life in the blood of Jesus Christ can be put to the most secular sensibilities of the late-modern world this way: If you can identify with bloody suffering and death so that it imaginatively becomes your own punishment for the price your life has cost, you can accept this as your ultimate identity—bloody-guilty, but paid up

32. Neville, *Nurture in Time and Eternity*, 81–82.

33. See Neville’s analysis of the components of his own life at *Symbols of Jesus*, 109.

and redeemed. Then all the powers of creation that have constituted your natural environment, your biology, personal integrity, family, community, and civilization become your powers. . . . Your life's many parts are each to be delighted in and deferred to, each the result of great prices paid. . . . You cannot seriously begin to appreciate what is wrought in you and yours, however, until you feel the prices that have been paid, ruined stars, bound snakes, suppressed impulses, subordinated interests, social duties, history's losers. The weight of that load of prices cannot be borne when you accept it as constituting yourself. Only if you can see that the burden is assumed by the heart of the creative process itself, and can make that part of you, can you face your identity within creation. That Jesus is the heart of the creative process is the central supposition of the atonement symbols.³⁴

Neville interprets the symbol of Jesus as Lamb of God somewhat traditionally as addressing the problem of original sin. But that problem has been reinterpreted to refer to the inevitable costs, with respect to the value of our lives' components, incurred in our quest for wholeness.

If the problematic of wholeness concerns the inherent value of the components of our lives, the problematic of love concerns properly appreciating and comporting ourselves toward the value of other things in our existential location. These valuable others include other people, whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe, as well as the living organisms and inanimate matter that constitute our sustaining environments. Neville emphasizes, as especially problematic features of our contemporary existential location, massive inequality in the global distribution of wealth and the devastation of the ecosystems that sustain all life on Earth. Given the centrality of love of neighbor in Jesus's teaching, Neville suggests that the symbol of Jesus's incarnation—not primarily in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but in the life of the church as it imagines Jesus calling it toward love of neighbor in each particular time and place—can help Christians to address the ultimate concern of love of human neighbors. In order to help Christians extend that love to nonhuman neighbors, Neville suggests that the symbol of the wildness of God, derived largely from scientific conceptions of the cosmos, can help Christians to better comport themselves to the value of untamed wilderness:

I suggest that the ecological crises of our time constitute a wake-up call for wildness. We need to find, preserve, and learn from the wilderness. Even more, we need to retrieve and cultivate the images of God as wild. God is the creator of the entire cosmos, vast beyond human importance. . . . The world God has created is largely a whirl of expanding gases where the

34. Neville, *Symbols of Jesus*, 84–85.

elements for human habitation clump briefly between initial fire and the final dissolution. The creation that reveals God's nature is wild, untamed, not domestic at all. The domesticated God of Kingship and War against Evil is but a tiny prismatic ray of that great Wild Light, shining on human affairs just because there is a difference between what we can do and what we should do. . . . Late-modern science has created new images of the Wild God of infinite blasts, dances of expanding gases, and a cosmic finish more profound than any kings' imagined tortures of final retribution and fulfilling peace. And it is from the perspective of these images that we need to reread the lessons of the environmental disasters that have come upon the entire globe. . . . God's cosmic dance of gases can smash the globe with comets and end us like the dinosaurs or the supernovae. That Wild God has a different holiness from the Heavenly Court holiness of biblical images based upon pharaohs and emperors, a much greater, truer, and now inescapable holiness.³⁵

Despite the fact that love of God and neighbor has always been central to Christianity, Neville proposes that, in order to extend that love to our nonhuman neighbors, Christian symbols can be helpfully supplemented by images of the wild God revealed through modern science.

Further examples drawn from *Symbols of Jesus* and Neville's Marsh Chapel sermons could be provided, but the preceding two examples are sufficient for understanding how religious symbols can be true in Neville's semiotic and pragmatic sense. Religious symbols are true in a semiotic sense when they represent what is ultimately real by schematizing, for interpreters defined by particular biologies, cultures, and purposes, the finite/infinite contrasts that actually define the boundedness of the creation over against the unbounded, infinite, indeterminate ontological creative act. And religious symbols are true in a pragmatic sense when interpreting those symbols causes interpreters to regard as their ultimate concerns the religious predicaments associated with having form, components, existential location, and a value-identity. In short, religious symbols are true insofar as they represent realities that are truly ultimate and their interpretation generates the good living fruits of righteousness, wholeness, love, and ultimate meaning.

35. *Ibid.*, 188–89.