

Chapter 4  
Five Conceptual Approaches to the Sacred  
Compatible with the Idea of Personal Mythology

*On Seeking Frames of Reference for Encountering the Sacred through Personal Myth*

While one may usefully consider the idea of the sacred in general theoretical terms, as was largely attempted in the previous chapter, at some point one's search for a personally relevant religious or spiritual orientation can be greatly enhanced through encounter and engagement with specific theological frames of reference relevant to the sacred dimension of one's own story. Of the innumerable theological approaches that have been advanced to define the nature and/or significance of the sacred, five particular frames of reference seem to have special relevance to the idea of personal mythology as religious or spiritual pathway. These five theological frames are Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous, Mircea Eliade's concept of hierophany, Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern," Martin Buber's concept of the I-Thou relationship, and Maurice Friedman's concept of "touchstones of reality."

All of these approaches to conceptualizing the sacred dimension of human experience share several common qualities and defining characteristics. First, all five are broad enough in their conception of the sacred to accommodate a variety of general religious orientations, as well as to be compatible with a wide range of particular religious beliefs and practices. In addition, all five tend to view the sacred as a phenomenon that is highly dynamic and/or continuously evolving in nature. Significantly, all five also acknowledge and embrace the ability of symbolic or metaphorical consciousness to serve as a conduit for the experience of the sacred. Perhaps most importantly, all five frames reflect a fundamentally existential and

phenomenological orientation to understanding the engagement with the sacred dimension of life. In this regard, all five emphasize the personal and experiential—as opposed to the collective and the doctrinal—dimensions of religious experience. Finally, while all five of these approaches share these general characteristics, it is also worth noting that only Otto and Eliade directly focus on the nature of the experience of the sacred. In contrast, Tillich, Buber, and Friedman are largely concerned with the implications of such experience for the shaping of an orientation to life and way of being in the world.

*Otto's Concept of the Numinous*

In 1917, Rudolf Otto, a German theologian and scholar of religion, published *Das Heilige*, later translated and published in English as *The Idea of the Holy*. This slim volume, with its vivid description and detailed analysis of the experience of the sacred, has been recognized as a defining work in the shaping of modern theological thought. As Philip C. Almond writes, both Otto and his vision of the sacred “are familiar items of discussion in the modern study of religion” (ix). Moreover, he continues, “contemporary accounts of the nature of religious experience invariably and necessarily contain references his best known work *The Idea of the Holy*.” Most importantly, with regard to the concept of personal mythology as sacred practice, it is noteworthy that virtually every author addressing this subject routinely refers to Otto’s ideas as a useful paradigm for comprehending the sacred.

It is noteworthy that, before writing *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto traveled extensively in North Africa, the Middle East, India, and the Far East and explored a wide range of religious traditions during the course of his travels. Otto’s personal encounters

with such a wide range of religious practices and symbols and his ability to observe their impact at first hand left him with a profound recognition of the enormous power such practices and symbols held for their various adherents. In the course of his travels, observes his English translator, John W. Harvey, Otto sought to understand “what in the religious experience which [the great traditions of the East] enshrine is specific and unique and what on the other hand is common to all genuine religions” (x).

In this regard, Otto noticed that, unlike many of his Protestant European contemporaries, the individuals he encountered on his travels in the East seemed to experience the sacred in ways that were both immediate and deeply affective. He also came to understand that such experiences were a kind of primary religious phenomenon and that, for their practitioners, the power of the direct experience of the holy always preceded the sorts of moral or ethical concerns what were emphasized within Protestant Christian religious theology and practice. Based on his observations regarding the experience of sacred in other traditions, Melissa Raphael observes, Otto set out “to isolate the mysterious, awesome, fascinating, and overwhelming essence of the holy for analysis without the moral and rational elements it has accrued” (62).

To describe this phenomenon of directly apprehending—or perhaps, more accurately, of being seized by—the sacred, Otto coined the word ‘numinous’ from the Latin *numen*, referring to a local divinity or the spirit of a particular place. According to Almond, Otto first briefly used the term *numen* to describe the source and object of religious experience in 1898. Later, in 1921, Otto extends his usage of the singular noun “numen” to coin the term “numinosum,” a word referring to the collective source of all numinous experience.

As Almond observes, Otto sought to distance his approach for comprehending the sacred from the attempts of early psychologists and anthropologists to explain away religious experience in rationalistic and reductionistic terms (59). In this regard, Raphael writes, Otto's work forcefully presents the case that "the numinous is no mere projection, but an objective datum of experience belonging to a 'wholly other' metaphysical reality whose presence can alone give rise to a numinous state of mind" (62). Since the numinous presence is experienced as an encounter with "something," Otto observes, "The numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self" (11). Describing the quality of this "wholly other" dimension of the numinous, Keith Ward suggests that one experiences it as "quite outside normal experience, completely alien." Ward further suggests that numinous "encounters us in some sort of experience—we might say, it is apprehended but not comprehended and not even comprehensible" (25-6). Not surprisingly, Otto states, a key effect of this strange and alien quality of the "wholly other" dimension of the numen is to induce in one a state of "stupor," signifying "blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute" (26).

In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto originated the now-familiar Latin phrase "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*" to describe the numinosum as it manifests in the form of numinous experience. Specifically choosing the ambiguous term *mysterium* as the key descriptor for the object of religious experience, Otto writes that the mystery experienced in the form of the numinous is "like every absolutely primary and elemental datum," in that "while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined." Commenting further on the mysterious nature of numinous experience, Ward observes that it relates

directly to the sense that the numinous “is rationally incomprehensible, extraordinary and beyond any concepts” (25).

Because the experience of the numinous is a pre-rational phenomenon apprehended via one’s visceral and affective responses to it, it must inevitably precede any theological or philosophical conceptions about divinity. As such, writes Raphael, the numinous moment “is not a supernatural person, ‘God’, but a set and class of emotions evoked by a sense of the transcendent power and value of the divine.” As a result, she notes, “for Otto, God is not a rational object of knowledge,” as “only the feeling of holiness can (indirectly) yield a sense of what God is like” (17). Equally importantly, as a result of Otto’s emphasis on the direct experience of the numinous, Larsen observes, he separates the general “*experience* of the sacred from any of its specific, particular inflections” (29).

Similarly, Otto takes pains to distinguish the numinous from ideas such as goodness, ethics, and piety, since the acceptance of such concepts does not require or presume the experience of the numinous. By recognizing the inherently non-rational, non-moral nature of the numinous, however, Otto does not mean that the experience of the sacred or holy is either irrational or amoral. “Rather,” writes John L. Gresham, “Otto is reaching for an understanding of the hidden depths of religion beneath the rational and moral aspects.” In this regard, Raphael observes, “Otto’s work can only be understood if it is recognized that he considered all theoretical discussion of God and religion to be entirely redundant unless it is underpinned by, and derived from, religious experience” (65). In Otto’s vision of the sacred, she concludes, “Religion can begin only where there

is immediate communion with the divine in the direct individual witness of the soul to the revelation of the will and presence of the divine in the *sensus numinis*” (66).

In describing the manifestation of the numinous, Otto delineates a number of distinguishing qualities characteristic of such experience. After discussing the inherent incomprehensibility, strangeness, and otherness of the initial experience of the *mysterium*, Otto next considers the concept of *tremendum*, a term etymologically related to the word tremor. According to Otto, the experience of *tremendum* incorporates a sense of shuddering or trembling with a kind of primordial fear or dread in the presence of the sacred.

Otto describes three constituent elements of the experience of the numinous which, when manifested together, produce of this sense of *tremendum*. The first of these elements, which Otto names “awfulness,” is a quality of overwhelming awe experienced in response to the fear or dread experienced in the presence of the numinous (13). Otto describes the second element of the *tremendum* aspect of the numinous as a sense of “overpoweringness,” an awareness of overwhelming majesty inducing in one a profound humility (19). This quality of overpoweringness is further characterized by Otto as a “consciousness of the absolute superiority or supremacy of a power other than myself.” The third and final quality of *tremendum* is the element of “energy” described by Otto as “the sense of a force that knows not stint or stay, which is urgent, active compelling, and alive” (23). Summarizing the effect of the *tremendum* aspect of the numinous, Gresham observes that in the presence of the terrifying sense of awe, overpoweringness, and urgent energy of the sacred, “one draws back, retreats or falls prostrate in fear before it.”

In stark contrast to his depiction of *tremendum*, Otto's description of the *fascinans* aspect of the numinous evokes an energy that "allures with a potent charm" and "entrances" and "captivates and transports [one] with a strange ravishment" (31). In further characterizing this aspect of the sacred, Otto uses words like "wonderfulness," "rapture," "bliss," and "beatitude," noting that the affective quality of *fascinans* goes beyond more mundane and psychologically comprehensible terms like "love," "mercy," "comfort" (31). "Only words with religious connotations," Gresham observes of the Otto's concept of the *fascinans*, "can convey the sense of incomparable joy and fulfillment to be found in union with the numinous presence." Regarding the most mature forms of the experience of the *fascinans* aspect of the numinous, Otto writes that it is "experienced in its essential, positive, and specific character, as something that bestows on man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature can neither proclaim nor conceive in thought, but may know only by direct and living experience" (33).

Fundamental to the nature of the numinous is the paradoxical experience of being terrified by the *tremendum* of the mystery while simultaneously drawn toward its *fascinans* dimension. Otto describes this "dual character of numinous consciousness" as the experience of "daunting 'awefulness' and 'majesty' " combined with "something uniquely attractive and fascinating" (30). Suggesting another description of the bipolar character of the numinous, Philip C. Almond observes, "The moment of awe and terror is, as it were, balanced by a simultaneous moment of longing and desire (70). Perhaps the most evocative description of the paradox of numinous experience is Ward's

observation that “If you feel puzzled, paralysed and simultaneously intoxicated, you have a sense of the numinous” (29).

Commenting on the overall effect of the experience of the numinous, Larsen writes, “consciousness changes tracks and begins to operate in a different way.” In the face of the *mysterium*, he continues, individual consciousness is “no longer concerned with labeling, categorizing, or manipulating the universe that surrounds it,” but rather “is speechlessly content to behold, in reverence and awe, the cosmic mystery of which it too is a part” (*Shaman’s* 30). Moreover, writes Bond, the “feelings and images that seize us in the experience of numinosity, compelling remarkable states of consciousness and behaviors, impose the vital necessity of finding some form of adaptation to their power” (49). Through this process of adaption, he continues, through “careful and scrupulous observation of the *numinosum* in his or her own life,” a renewed form of personal religious expression may emerge in the individual (51).

Describing the overall impact of experiencing the sacred in the context of the numinous, Ward observes:

We may [. . .] recognize the awe that fills the mind before the vast immensities of space, and the catastrophic power of planetary earthquakes and stellar supernovae. We may feel our helplessness before famine, plagues and inevitable death, as they rage through our human world. And we may sometimes sense the intoxication of beauty, almost too intense to bear, as we suddenly, in a miraculous moment, discern the world in all its intricate order and subtle intensity. Such moments of ‘divination’ open up depths to reality that are not normally seen or sensed. It may be that when we truly have that sense of astonished silence, of fearful awe and ecstatic rapture, then we come near to sensing what it was that the Greek gods expressed. (29)

Moreover, and with particular regard to the idea of personal mythology as pathway to the sacred dimension of life, Ward writes that even for people living today there will “be

those whose chosen god resonates with their own history and personality, but which points beyond its symbolized form to the hidden mystery of the numinous” (30).

Such a process of observing the manifestation of the numinous within one’s life story is one of the most frequently suggested approaches for exploring the religious dimension of one’s personal mythology. In Jungian psychology, for example, the experience of the numinous is intrinsically associated with both the manifestation of archetypal consciousness and the unfolding of the lifelong process of individuation. Indeed, in a broader sense, the idea of the numinous is core to the entire corpus of Jung’s work. Jung expressed that deeper connection with Otto when he observed late in his life that “the main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis but rather with the approach of the numinous” (*Letters* 377).

It is perhaps Joseph Campbell, however, who most clearly and directly addressed the profound interconnection between the ideas of the numinous and of personal mythology as a religious endeavor. “The first function of a living mythology,” he states, “the properly religious function, the sense of Rudolf Otto’s definition in *The Idea of the Holy*, is to waken and maintain in the individual an experience of awe, humility, and respect, in recognition of that ultimate mystery, transcending names and forms” (*Masks of God* 609). Most importantly for Campbell, as collective religious mythologies have lost their ability to express the numinous for many people, this religious function of mythology has necessarily devolved to the level of personal encounter and celebration in the mythology of the individual.

#### *Eliade’s Concept of Hierophany*

Mircea Eliade, one of the key figures in the evolution of the modern discipline of

religious studies, introduced a large number of influential terms and concepts into the contemporary discourse about religion. Among the most important of these concepts is “hierophany,” a term describing any particular manifestation of the sacred in the mundane or profane world. As Bryan S. Rennie observes, the term “hierophany” is derived from the Greek *hieros*, meaning “holy” or “sacred,” and *phainein*, meaning “to show” (*Reconstructing Eliade* 8). Defining hierophany in the most generic of contexts, Eliade writes, “the term in its widest sense means anything which manifests the sacred” (*Patterns in Comparative Religion* xviii). Further commenting on the significance of this term, Rennie describes hierophany as “any element of the experiential world of humanity which is perceived in such a way as to constitute a revelation of the sacred” (*Reconstructing Eliade* 15).

Where Otto’s concept of the numinous focuses on describing the affective qualities connected with the manifestation of the sacred, Eliade’s concept of hierophany centers on the complex interrelationship between the sacred and the non-sacred, or profane. As a general concept, hierophany refers to the process by which the sacred becomes manifest, as well as to the normally profane objects, places, or events through which or in which that manifestation occurs. Moreover, the concept of hierophany assumes sacredness to be both a quality inherent in the particular object, place, or event at the center of a hierophany, as well as an aspect of the direct, perceptual experience of such a manifestation. In this sense, during hierophany, the sacred is both an immanent presence in the world and a particular quality of the experience of that presence.

For Eliade, the revelation of the sacred as hierophany is inherently paradoxical in nature. “Each hierophany expresses an incomparable paradox,” he writes, “arising from

the great mystery upon which every hierophany is centered: the very fact that the sacred is made manifest at all.” Core to an appreciation of that paradox is the realization that, despite their constituting two fundamentally different and opposing forms of consciousness, the sacred and the profane nevertheless are brought together in the mystery of each hierophany. Commenting on this enigma, Eliade notes, “this paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming is what every hierophany, even the most elementary reveals” (“Hierophany” 314). Further remarking on the implications of this interpenetration of the sacred and profane, Rennie describes hierophany as a “subtle, paradoxical conception of the coincidence of the real and the unreal in the experience of human life” (*Reconstructing Eliade* 11).

Though Eliade’s conception of hierophany assumes a profound coming-together of the sacred and the profane, it is important to remember that, for Eliade, sacredness and profaneness nevertheless reflect inherently different and opposing forms of perception. Indeed, Eliade describes them as “two modes of being in the world,” adding that an “abyss [. . .] divides the two modalities of experience.” In the same vein, he also writes that “Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane (*Sacred and the Profane* 11-14).

As a result, the concept of hierophany precludes the possibility of the simultaneous perception of the sacred and profane, of the co-existence of the sacred and profane at the same time in the same place. In other words, according to Eliade, in the moment that an object or event becomes the locus of a hierophany, that object or event, having taken on a transcendent nature, ceases in some elemental sense to exist at the level

of profane or mundane reality. Then, with the passing of the hierophanic manifestation, perception returns to the profane mode and the object or event is once again seen in its ordinary, everyday, non-sacred dimension.

While Eliade views the sacred as a fundamentally different dimension of reality from that of the profane or mundane, he also recognizes that another paradoxical aspect of the nature of hierophany relates to the ability of the sacred to manifest “under any sort of form, even the most alien.” Commenting on the ubiquity and multiplicity of profane forms through which hierophanies manifest, Eliade writes, “We must get used to the idea of recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere, in every area of psychological, economic, spiritual, and social life.” Indeed, he continues, “we cannot be sure that there is *anything*—object, movement, psychological function, being or even game—that has not at some time in human history been transformed somewhere into a hierophany” (*Patterns in Comparative Religion* 29). Eliade goes on to observe that while we may not know why something should have become or ceased to have been a hierophany, “it is quite certain that anything man has ever handled, felt, come in contact with or loved can become a hierophany (11).

Perhaps the most mysterious quality of hierophany is the extent to which the sacred is both revealed and concealed as it manifests through the profane. “When something sacred manifests itself as a hierophany,” Eliade observes, “at the same time something ‘occults’ itself, becomes cryptic. Therein is the true dialectic of the sacred: by the mere fact of showing itself, the sacred hides itself” (*Journal* 268). This hide-and-seek quality of the sacred as it manifests in hierophany is further complicated by the often enigmatic nature of the significance that might be ascribed to some hierophanic

experiences. “Some hierophanies are not at all clear, are indeed, almost cryptic,” Eliade writes, “in that they reveal their sacred meanings [. . .] in part or, as it were, in code (*Patterns in Comparative Religion* 8).

Part of the enigmatic, cryptic aspect of comprehending the meaning of a particular hierophany is related to the connection between hierophany and symbolic consciousness. “The study of hierophanies,” Eliade writes, “penetrates the meaning of symbolic life and uncovers the function of symbolism in general.” In this regard, he observes, some symbols become sacred because they constitute the actual, material form through which a hierophany has previously manifested (e.g., a particular stone takes on a symbolic quality because it once was directly experienced as the locus of the manifestation of a divine energy or entity). Other symbols, notes Eliade, acquire or borrow a religious or sacred quality because of their location within a system of symbolic references. In this way, Eliade suggests, the pearl is experienced as hierophanic when human beings become aware of the symbolic relationship between pearls and “the cosmological pattern of water, moon, women, birth, and change.” This second way in which an object acquires its power as a sacred symbol, he writes, suggests the critical “role of human reflection in the origin of certain hierophanies” (“Hierophany” 316).

Given the powerful interrelationship of hierophany and symbol, Eliade observes, “hierophanies can become symbols” and “can sustain and even substitute for hierophanies” (317). Moreover, he continues, symbols play an even more startling and creative role in religious life” in that they can “carry on the process of hierophanization.” In this way, “the symbol itself is sometimes a hierophany” because “it reveals a sacred quality of reality which no other manifestation can uncover.” Through the process of

symbolization, a process described by Eliade as “hierophany in its own right,” any “worldly item may become a sign of transcendent reality and an embodiment of the sacredness of an entire symbolic system” (318). In this context, Lionel Corbett writes, “For those awakened to it [. . .] the symbol is one of the commonest forms of hierophany” (*Religious Function of the Psyche* 97).

These observations of the interrelationship of hierophany and symbolic consciousness highlight the critical role of human perception and interpretation in the complex process by which the sacred is experienced in hierophany. As Rennie observes, Eliade viewed “normal everyday experience [. . .] as illusory, unreal, profane” (*Reconstructing Eliade* 10). Nevertheless, Rennie continues, for Eliade, “that same experience, *when apprehended in a specific way, when interpreted in a certain manner,* becomes authentic, real, sacred: it becomes a hierophany” (11).

As opposed to the overwhelming, directly affective, non-rational qualities that Otto ascribes to the experience of the numinous, Eliade’s vision of how the sacred manifests requires the engagement of human perceptual and interpretative faculties. While the sacred as manifested in hierophany is “immediately present to our senses, Rennie observes, “its meaning, its significance, is not accessible prior to the perceptual processes of interpretation which identify experience as either sacred or profane” (12). Indeed, he emphasizes, the essential role played by human discernment in the manifestation of hierophany become apparent when one considers the idea that “if all existence is capable of becoming a hierophany, a ‘manifestation of the sacred,’ then the difference which separates a profane from a sacred event is—must be—the perception of that event as such” (14-5).

Moreover, since both perception and interpretation are always to some extent conditioned processes, Rennie also observes that one must be prepared by personal and/or collective experience before one can apprehend a hierophany. In this way, he continues, it is our personal experience and religious backgrounds that shape “our experience of certain phenomena as hierophanic” (69). Nevertheless, Rennie writes, “It is an indispensable element of Eliade's analysis that any phenomenal entity could be apprehended as an hierophany with the appropriate preparation” (“Eliade, Mircea” 261).

As an example of the important role played by perception and interpretation in the experience of hierophany, one might consider the case of a particular form of hierophany called “theophany.” The term theophany, derived by Eliade from the Greek *theo*, meaning “god,” describes situations where the sacred manifests in such a way as to reveal the presence of a particular divinity. Since each divinity makes its appearance known by means of specific qualities and attributes associated with that particular divinity, ability to perceive a theophany is dependent upon familiarity with the nature of the divinity in question.

The example of theophany as a form of hierophanic experience is particularly relevant to the concept of seeking the sacred through a personal approach to myth. Theophany's special connection to personal mythology stems from the key role played by the concept of archetypes within personal mythwork. In this regard, since particular divinities tend to possess specific archetypal qualities and powerful personal archetypal figures and energies tend to have a feeling of divine “otherness” about them, the manifestation of archetypal material often feels theophanic. However, as with all

examples of theophany, the capacity to appreciate the manifestation of any particular archetypal entity depends on one's ability to perceive its distinctive symbolic qualities.

Equally relevant to the topic of this dissertation as the relationship between the sacred-as-hierophany and symbolic consciousness is the powerful connection between hierophany and the mythological. "Myth," Eliade writes, "describes the various and sometimes dramatic irruptions of the sacred into the world" (*Sacred and the Profane* 97). Because it recounts humankind's collective experience of hierophany, myth retains the power to connect humanity to the most ancient and primal experiences of the revelation of the sacred. "Myth narrates a sacred history," writes Eliade, in that "it relates events that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings' " (*Myth and Reality* 5). Because of mythology's linkage to that ancient past, the recounting and imitating of the events captured in myth allows one to detach "from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time" (*Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 23). In this way, any immediate, personal encounter with the images and themes of perennially powerful myths offers one the possibility of being imaginally and emotionally transported back to the realm of "once-upon-a-time."

In addition to conveying a sense of the primordial experience of the sacred, myth also functions for Eliade as a living presence in that "it supplies models for human behavior and, by that fact, gives meaning and value to life" (*Myth and Reality* 2). In that regard, comments Robert Ellwood, Eliade "taught that myths were from out of [. . .] the timeless time when the gods were strong and made the world, and when the primordial 'gestures' of the heroes set the pattern for what is still sacred in our fallen 'profane' world" (6).

Not only does Eliade connect the hierophanic quality of myth with the experience of mythic time, but also with the idea that profane space, when encountered through the lens of mythic awareness, can become imbued with a sense of sacredness. Moreover, the sense of sacredness with which place may become permeated as a result of hierophanic experience is not limited to spaces of a communal or collective nature. In this regard, Eliade writes of “privileged places, qualitatively different from all others—a man’s birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth.” For even the most “the most frankly nonreligious man,” Eliade suggests, “all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the ‘holy places’ of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life” (*Sacred and the Profane* 24).

Another important mythological implication of Eliade’s conception of the relationship between the sacred and the profane relates to the way he perceives the nature and role of myth vis-à-vis that of history. “For Eliade, myth and history were opposite and antagonistic ways of understanding reality,” writes Amanda Porterfield. “While history represented the chronological sequencing of more or less distinct events,” she continues, “myth represented the underlying dynamics of human experience that human events always recapitulated.” Unlike historical concerns with the events of the profane and mundane world, continues Porterfield, for Eliade “myths that recounted the persisting dynamics of life were deeply tied to experiences of the sacred” (216).

Echoing this idea, Thomas J. Altizer writes, “The word and action of myth can open man up to communion with the sacred only by turning him away from the actuality

and concreteness of his historical existence.” As a result, he continues, “The sacred can be actualized only by means of a dissolution or sublimation of profane existence.” For Eliade, Altizer writes, “by its very nature myth dissolves the profane world of reality and opens its participants to the transcendent world of the sacred Reality” (93). In this way, as in the experience of the numinous, he concludes, the experience of hierophany “should be understood as a response to the sacred Reality—re-presented by myth—which is so compelling in its power as to shatter, at least momentarily, all normal conscious experience” (94).

According to Eliade, however, the modern Western dependence on rational consciousness as the only reliable arbiter of reality has resulted instead in the rejection by many people of the possibility of hierophanic experience. The principal consequence of this rejection of the hierophanic within the modern worldview, observes Eliade, has been a widespread and profound sense of meaninglessness. Describing the effect of the absence of a sense of the sacred at the core of modernism, Eliade observes that “the modern world is in the situation of a man swallowed by a monster, struggling in the darkness of its belly; or of one lost in a wilderness, or wandering in a labyrinth which is itself a symbol of the infernal—and so he is in anguish” (*Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 237).

Commenting on Eliade’s prescription for how this modern sense of despair might be ameliorated, Porterfield writes, “the terrible sense of meaninglessness that modern people suffered could be remedied by imaginative experiences that simulated the archaic capacity for mythic experience” (216). Nevertheless, even with the passing of the constraints of modernism and the rise of postmodern models, the challenge posed by the

seeming eclipse of hierophanic experience remains a daunting one. “For those who embrace postmodern thought, in order to escape the whale’s belly,” writes Rennie, “we must be willing to embrace the imagination in our own sacred history—to accept the reality of that imagination, and the construction of that reality, to accept our involvement in the cosmogony through creative imagination” (*Reconstructing Eliade* 241). In addition, he suggests, we must emphasize the importance of developing “an attitude to general revelation in which the contents of personal experience (the scientists’ experience of particle accelerators as well as the mystics’ experience of ecstasy) are open to creative interpretation capable of uncovering real and valid meanings” (248).

*Tillich’s Concept of “Ultimate Concern”*

Paul Tillich, one of the most renowned theologians of the twentieth century, was also concerned with defining and describing the nature of the sacred. While deeply influenced by Otto’s vision of the numinous quality of the sacred, Tillich’s conception of the sacred is less concerned with its particular experiential qualities than on the sense of the meaningfulness and significance of the sacred as it manifests within the fabric of human existence.

For Tillich, that sense of the meaningfulness of the sacred or holy centers on the personal realization of what he calls the “ultimate concern” of each individual’s life (*Dynamics of Faith* 1). “The ultimate for which we ask when we ask the question about the meaning of our life,” Tillich writes, “is manifest to us in an experience which I believe every human being has, namely, the experience of the holy.” Significantly, Tillich emphasizes the idea that the experience of the sacred or holy as ultimate concern does not require an engagement with any form of traditional religion. Instead, he

suggests, the manifestation of the sacred as ultimate concern implies the simple yet profound personal realization that there is “something in life for which you would give your life,” something that, as a result, “you take with ultimate seriousness” (“God as Reality and Symbol” 102). Deepening this sense of the personal significance of ultimate concern, he also observes that being ultimately concerned engages one with “the meaning of one’s life” (*Ultimate Concern* 6). Indeed, even the nature of divinity is defined in terms of ultimate concern by Tillich. Commenting on the relationship between ultimate concern and the divine, Tillich writes:

God [. . .] is the name for that which concerns man ultimately. This does not mean that first there is a being called God and then the demand that man should be ultimately concerned with him. It means that whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him, and conversely, it means that a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is god for him. (*Systematic Theology* 211)

Tillich also links his concept of the holy as ultimate concern with Otto’s description of the numinous. Referring to Otto’s two functions of the “fascinating and shaking character of the holy,” Tillich writes, “the reason for these two effects is obvious if we see the relation of the experience of the holy to the experience of ultimate concern” (*Dynamics of Faith* 15). Tillich suggests that the finite nature of the human heart is drawn with a kind of ecstatic fascination toward the infinite possibility manifested through ultimate concern at the same time as it is overwhelmed by the magnitude and all-consuming quality of being concerned ultimately.

Also in keeping with Otto’s conception of the numinous, Tillich writes of the immediate and personally affective dimension of the experience of the sacred as ultimate

concern. In this sense, the things or values that become mediators of the holy for one take on a personal quality when one “consider[s] them not as objects of a cognitive approach but elements of an encounter, namely the encounter with the holy.” Moreover, Tillich argues, “they are parts of this encounter, not as things or values, but as bearers of something beyond themselves.” This “something,” Tillich concludes, “is the holy, the numinous presence of that which concerns us ultimately” (*Essential Tillich* 206).

Not only does the concept of ultimate concern define the nature of the sacred for Tillich, but it also serves as the central defining element of religious life in general. In this context, Tillich distinguishes between a “universal or large” concept of religion, defined as “a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern,” and “our usual smaller concept of religion which supposes an organized group with its clergy, scriptures, and dogma, by which a set of symbols for the ultimate concern is accepted and cultivated in life and thought” (*Ultimate Concern* 4). Tillich further suggests that religious experience in the larger sense of that term can and does appear in many forms. Commenting on the significance of this re-visioning of religion by Tillich, Porterfield writes, “His definition of religion as ‘ultimate concern’ freed the essence of religion from any particular doctrine or culture.” Moreover, she continues, Tillich’s “definition of religion as ultimate concern also encouraged seekers to look for spiritual life outside of churches and other customary institutions and to find it in art, literature, and anyplace else where human beings express their vitality, passions, and deepest emotional commitments.” It is in the realm of ultimate concern, she writes regarding Tillich’s vision of the religion, “that the ground of being and the God beyond theism were to be found” (212).

Another key aspect of Tillich's concept of the sacred is the idea that ultimate concern forms an inevitable part of human life. In this regard, he writes:

If people tell you, 'I have no ultimate concern,' then ask them, 'Is there really nothing at all that you take with unconditional seriousness? What, for instance, would you be ready to suffer or even die for?' Then you will discover that even the cynic takes his cynicism with ultimate seriousness, not to speak of the others, who may be naturalists, materialists, Communists, or whatever. They certainly take something with ultimate seriousness. (*Ultimate Concern* 7-8)

Commenting on this aspect of Tillich's sense of the sacred, Richard Holloway observes, "That is why even atheism can be religious, because it is also about that ultimate concern, that final question we ask about ourselves." In these terms, he continues, "What we call faith, of one sort or another, is unavoidable here, since "faith is our response to that which we cannot establish with certainty." Though "atheists express their attitude to these final or ultimate matters in a God-denying faith," Holloway writes, "there is no doubt of their passionate concern over the matter." As a result, for Tillich, real atheism would amount to professing a complete lack of concern for the meaning of one's existence. "Indifference toward the ultimate question," he writes, "is the only imaginable form of atheism" (*Dynamics of Faith* 45).

As with Otto's idea of the numinous and Eliade's idea of hierophany, Tillich also emphasizes the autonomous nature of ultimate concern as it manifests in the life of an individual. In this sense, Tillich observes, ultimate concern is not something that one chooses, but rather something by which one is "grasped." He goes on to observe that one's ultimate concern cannot be chosen, nor "produced by active, reflective, voluntary processes," but instead "has already grasped us when we begin to reflect on it." Moreover, he adds, for a person who takes some aspect of life with the seriousness of an

ultimate concern, “as his life developed, the seriousness... came to him, perhaps very early, and never left him” (*Ultimate Concern* 8).

Nevertheless, though one cannot choose to be grasped by a particular ultimate concern, the sense remains that one must open oneself to reflect on what already, however unconsciously, might be of ultimate concern to one. Failure to open oneself to an awareness of the concerns that call one ultimately, Tillich suggests, leads to a profound sense of personal anxiety and meaninglessness. “The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings,” he writes, adding that such existential anxiety “is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence” (*Courage to Be* 47).

As is true of both the numinous and hierophanic, Tillich sees the manifestation of ultimate concern in a person’s life as inherently possessing the power and significance of religious revelation. “Revelation,” he writes, “is the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately,” (*Systematic Theology* 110). While describing the actual experience of the revelation of ultimate concern in terms of Otto’s idea of the numinous, Tillich also considers such experience in terms of the Eliadean conception of sacred and profane.

Connecting Eliade’s view of the relationship between the sacred and the profane with Tillich’s concept of ultimate concern as revelation, Carl J. Armbruster notes “The medium of revelation, the object which enters into the miraculous event, can be anything whatsoever—a person, a thing, or an event” since “everything [...] is capable of conveying ultimate concern” (73). As a result, for Tillich, sharply distinguishing between the sacred and mundane dimensions of existence does not make sense within the

context of ultimate concern. In this regard, he writes, manifestations of ultimate concern are “also present in what we usually call the secular or profane” (*Ultimate Concern* 5).

Echoing Eliade’s sense of the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, Tillich observes that the experience of the manifestation of the sacred as ultimate concern is always “mediated by some piece of finite reality.” In this sense, he continues, “Everything can become [. . .] a bearer of divine power.” Moreover, he continues, “everything” in this context not only includes “all things in nature and culture, in soul and in history,” but also “principles, categories, essences, and values.” Most importantly, Tillich observes, because ultimate concern inevitably also engages one with the mundane, “in the moment in which something became a carrier of the revelation of ultimate concern, it also received a personal face” (*Essential Tillich* 205).

Another quality shared by both Eliade’s idea of hierophany and Tillich’s concept of ultimate concern is an emphasis on the importance of symbolic consciousness in the apprehension of the sacred dimension of existence. As John P. Dourley observes, “Tillich was primarily concerned with redefining the nature of religious experience and restoring its connection with an inherently symbolic form of consciousness” (9). For Tillich, engaging the symbolic dimension of consciousness is essential for the recognition of the sacred as ultimate concern. “Man’s ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically,” he writes, “because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate” (*Dynamics of Faith* 41).

Also as with Eliade, Tillich recognizes the existence of an essential connection between his conception of the sacred and the realm of myth. In this regard, he writes, symbols expressing a sense of ultimate concern “do not appear in isolation,” but rather

“are united in the ‘stories of the gods.’ ” Referring collectively to these stories, he observes, “This is the world of myth, great and strange, always changing and always the same: man’s ultimate concern symbolized in divine figures and actions.” The reason that the mythic is ever evolving, he notes, is because myth “uses material from our ordinary experience,” putting “the stories of the gods into the framework of time and space” (49).

As with the inevitability of ultimate concern, Tillich’s vision of the sacred also assumes the mythic to be a permanent and intrinsic aspect of human existence. “The important thing to remember here,” writes Holloway, “is that we cannot do without myths; they are the way we express and give form to our transcendent longing, our ultimate concern.” Because symbols and myths “are forms of human consciousness which are always present,” Tillich observes, “the attempt to “demythologize” symbol and myth are futile.” Since “myth is the combination of symbols of our ultimate concern,” he writes, “one can replace one myth by another, but one cannot remove myth from man’s spiritual life” (50).

A final aspect of Tillich’s approach to the sacred that may be relevant to the concept of personal mythology is his notion of *kairos*. An ancient Greek word, *kairos* originally referred to a divinely sanctioned and inspired kind of sacred time, as opposed to the ordinary or profane sense of chronological time. Originally used by Tillich to describe the special quality of monumental events effecting large numbers of people (such as the birth of Jesus), *kairos* also came to be associated in his work with certain kinds of profound individual experience. “When I try to interpret the meaning of the *kairos*,”

writes Tillich, “I refer to biographical experiences in which something new, unexpected, transforming, breaks into our life” (*Ultimate Concern* 150).

Describing such experiences as “kairotic,” Tillich emphasizes that this term be reserved for happenings that are “fundamental for the meaning of our existence.”

Despite the magnitude of the significance of such events, however, Tillich does not see them as the exclusive province of mystics, noting “most people have the feeling that they have had experiences like this in their own lives.” Summarizing this idea of personal *kairos*, Tillich writes, “whether we call it the eternal or the divine or whatever, if something happens to us which has to do with the ultimate meaning of our life, I would call it an individual *kairos*” (151).

Tillich’s vision of ultimate concern is profoundly useful in the practice of personal mythology as pathway to the sacred. Indeed, without some sense of how one’s story symbolically and imaginally might guide one toward an awareness of the core concerns of one’s life, one’s personal mythology would lack a critical dimension of what a religious or spiritual orientation to life ideally implies. In addition, since one’s ultimate concerns also carry profound implications for the shaping of core values and principles, seeking a sense of the sacred as ultimate concern within one’s mythology represents an important step in the process of turning that mythology into a meaningful way of life.

#### *Buber’s Concept of I-and-Thou.*

Martin Buber, one of the most renowned Jewish philosophers and religious scholars of the twentieth century, created yet another framework for comprehending and engaging the sacred that is potentially relevant to the idea of personal mythology as religious endeavor. This vision of the sacred was first directly addressed in a brief

volume published in German just six years after Otto published his influential work on the nature of the holy. Entitled *I and Thou*, this work poetically details a very different sort of framework than Otto's for understanding and encountering the sacred. Unlike Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Buber's work does not attempt to describe the quality of the encounter with the sacred, but rather focuses on the inherently relational nature of sacred experience.

Fundamental to Buber's vision of the sacred is the distinction between two opposing frames of reference respectively described by Buber as "It" and "Thou." It is important to note at the outset of this discussion of Buber's vision that the term "Thou"—an early translation of the informal, affectionate second-person German pronoun *du*—has often been rendered in English-language commentary on Buber's work, as well as in the most recent translation of *I and Thou*, simply as "You." This change from "Thou" to "You" in the most current translation reflects the fact that the former pronoun, while originally connoting the same intimate quality as the German *du*, now tends to connote a sense of hierarchical distance and deference. Recognition of the implication of Buber's choice of the original German pronoun, however, is essential for understanding his sense of both the intimate and relational nature of the sacred.

Referring to the realm of It, Donald J. Moore observes, "Whenever I touch, explore, categorize, name, apply, or use, I am in the world of It" (113). In the relationship of I-It, one holds oneself to be separate from the object one experiences. Moreover, in the relationship of I-It, only a part of the person is brought to the experience. On the other hand, in the I-Thou relationship, there is a genuine meeting or encounter with someone or something that prevents objectification and requires us to

bring the totality of ourselves—in Buber’s words, “one’s whole being”—into the moment of encounter (*I and Thou* 9).

In addition, while the I-It relationship is a one-sided one in which the It remains an object to the I, the relationship between I and Thou is always one of genuine encounter. In this encounter, the I is addressed by the Thou and is expected to respond in some fashion to that message. In I-Thou encounters, writes Daniel Breslauer, “people develop by meeting other subjects, by allowing the reality of other subjects to challenge them, to call forth a response, to change them in one way or another” (9). The concept of “dialogue”—referring to the event that occurs when an I is addressed by a Thou and chooses to respond—is essential to Buber’s vision of the sacred. “Dialogue implies becoming aware, becoming aware that we are addressed and that the address demands an answer,” writes Moore (104). Moreover, he adds, “It is not necessarily a person of whom I become aware; it can be an animal, a plant, a stone.” In this way, he continues, “Nothing is excluded from the things through which from time to time something is said to me” (104).

Another quality of the Thou as distinguished from the It is the autonomous nature of the manifestation of the Thou. Much as Otto’s numinous, Eliade’s hierophany, and Tillich’s ultimate concern, Buber’s sense of the sacred as the relationship between the I and Thou is not controllable by human beings. “The *Thou* meets me through grace,” Buber writes, “it is not found by seeking” (11). Nevertheless, according to Buber, the relation of the individual and the sacred as Thou remains volitional in that one must still choose to enter into relationship with the Thou that autonomously manifests.

While Buber takes pains to differentiate the profound qualitative difference between I-It and I-Thou relations, his vision of the sacred also recognizes that, like the sacred as the numinous or the sacred as hierophany, any particular manifestation of the Thou will be inherently temporary in nature. “Every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*,” writes Buber in this regard, while “everything in the world [. . .] is able to appear as an *I* to some *Thou*” (16). Given this interrelationship between the It and the Thou, Buber observes, “The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly” (18).

Moreover, while the I-Thou relationship remains for Buber the only source of genuine meaning in life, he also recognizes the basic necessity of the I-It frame of reference. “The world of It is a reliable world,” writes Moore, “necessary to the growth and sustenance of human life” (113). Similarly, just as the world of It is not regarded as inherently evil in Buber’s theology, the world of Thou is not seen as an unqualified good. According to Buber, the moments of Thou “appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security” (34).

At the core of Buber’s sense of the sacred is the conception of what he calls the “eternal Thou.” Buber’s vision of the sanctified nature of the I-Thou relationship derives from the idea that that “every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou” (75). Indeed, according to Buber, it *only* through engagement with a particular and temporal Thou that the otherwise unknowable eternal Thou may be experienced by human beings. Further refining this idea of God as the eternal Thou, Buber cites Otto, observing that “Of course, God is the ‘the wholly Other.’ ” Buber also paradoxically

insists, however, that God is “at the same time the wholly Same: the wholly Present.” As a result, he continues, God “is the *Mysterium Tremendum* that appears and overthrows; but He is also the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my *I*” (79).

Despite the omnipresence of Buber’s vision of the eternal Thou, he also sees an unbridgeable gulf between the eternal Thou and the mundane world of It. This separation exists because, unlike every particular Thou, which must ultimately become an It, the eternal Thou can never do so. “The eternal *Thou* can by its nature not become *It*,” Buber writes, “for by its very nature it cannot be established in measure and bounds” (112). In this sense, Buber’s conception of the sacred parallels Eliade’s, for just as Eliade’s sacred can never become one with the profane, Buber’s Eternal Thou can never become one with any part of the world of It.

While Eliade’s view of the sacred tends to emphasize this separation of the sacred and profane dimensions of consciousness, however, Buber’s vision nevertheless seeks to diminish that distinction. Since the eternal Thou can only be met via encounter with a particular Thou and since every It offers the potentiality of being transformed into a particular Thou, the sacred and mundane are perpetually intertwined for Buber. “One cannot meet the Eternal Thou by turning away from the temporal Thou,” writes Maurice Friedman, just as “One cannot find one’s direction to God apart from ‘the lived concrete’ ” (*Hidden Human Image* 236). Supporting this idea of interrelationship between the temporal and eternal aspects of the sacred, Buber insists that one look to the immediate present for the source of the sacredness of myth, while Eliade encourages one to look to the primordial past. “Where for Eliade myth liberates one from the fallen, present world and returns one to the time of the primordial experience that inspired the

myth,” writes Robert A. Segal. “for Buber myth enables one to garner in the everyday, present world an experience akin to the original experience” (Forward iii).

Buber’s particular vision of myth directly relates to his concept of the sacred as the encounter between the I and the Thou. “Buber views myth as a special type of story: a mythic story begins in an I-Thou event that defies rational explanation,” writes S. Daniel Breslauer (26). “Myth for Buber,” he continues, “evolves from the natural response of the human spirit, expressing the memory of that meeting, and acting as a psychological stimulus for future meetings.” This process of communicating the memory of I-Thou encounters through myth, however, remains an inherently paradoxical one for Buber. This paradox arises from the fact that, by definition, all human communication—including myth—is of the world of It. At the core of this paradox, observes Breslauer, is the idea that myth “represents an I-It version of an event people experienced in I-Thou reality” (23).

In addition to its relationship to his vision of the sacred as an I-Thou encounter, Buber’s sense of the mythic also grows out of his study of the Hebrew Scriptures and his attempt to graft a mythic sensibility onto the rigorously historical orientation of the Jewish religion. As a result, unlike Eliade, Buber strongly rejects the idea that the mythic and the historical are fundamentally irreconcilable forms of consciousness. Instead, he sees myth and history as complementary forms of understanding, with the mythic view serving to deepen awareness of the metaphysical significance of historical events and the historical view serving to ground the mythic in particular lived experiences of human individuals and communities. Reflecting Buber’s view of this interrelationship between the mythic and the historical, writes Segal, “History roots myth in actual, concrete events,

and myth transforms history from merely a record of past events to an ever-beckoning opportunity for present ones” (Forward iv).

Further discussing Buber’s view of myth, Friedman observes that Buber also recognizes that not all myth can be ascribed or connected to historical experience. For example, while much of the Biblical material that Buber attempts to revision in mythic terms derives from accounts of the historical experience of the Jewish people, others—for example, the Genesis story of creation—are clearly non-historical in origin. Buber’s vision of myth, Friedman continues, recognizes that “some myths do, in fact, have a historical kernel and other, universal ones, an existential kernel, one that is repeated over and over in the history of the human race.” For Buber, then, creation stories would be an example of myth growing out of an existential experience, namely the experience of asking cosmological questions and of experiencing the arising of order out of chaos.

In addition to even those mythic forms that Buber considered to be existentially derived, however, Buber recognized that some myths have “come loose from both the historical and existential kernels that gave rise to them,” as Friedman describes this phenomenon. For Buber, the existence of such myths gives rise to the idea of archetypes. However, Friedman further notes, in Buber’s view, even archetypes “have a human base and arise out of the loam of earthy, human existence,” which in no way denies their reality, but “roots them in the lived concrete rather than some Platonic universal or some mystical sphere floating above time and history” (*Via Humana* 63). As Buber himself expressed this concern for historically and biographically grounding archetype, “What is wrong is not the mythicization of reality which brings the inexpressible to speech, but the

gnosticizing of myth which tears it out of the ground of history and biography in which it took root” (*Prophetic Faith* 46).

Buber’s insistence on grounding both myth and archetype in historical and biographical experience, however, does not mean that either myth or archetype should be constrained by the requirements of rational causality. Indeed, while a such a focus on causality is a hallmark of the world of It for Buber—“Causality has unlimited reign in the world of It,” he writes in *I and Thou* (51)—he knows that humanity’s “myth-making facility” can bypass this awareness “in times of high tension and intense experience” (“Myth in Judaism” 104). At such times, he writes:

one perceives the world’s processes as being supracausally meaningful, as the manifestation of a central intent, which cannot, however be grasped by the mind but only by the wide-awake power of the senses, the ardent vibration of one’s entire being. And this, more or less, is how the man who is truly alive still relates to the power and the fate of a hero; though capable of placing him within causality, he nevertheless mythicizes him, because the mythical approach discloses to him a deeper, fuller truth than the causal, and by so doing, first reveals to him the very being of the beloved, beatific figure—in other words, of the sacred as the eternal Thou.

In considering the mythic nature of the eternal Thou which one encounters in each I-Thou meeting, Keith Ward suggests it takes on “countless names and forms.”

Employing Eliade’s term for the manifestation of the sacred as a particular divinity, he continues, “The world is full of gods and each god signifies a living and continually renewed relational event. In a moment of theophany, the ‘thou’ confronts me. I step into direct relation with it. In such moments, gods are born, moments of meeting” (33).

Like myriad forms of the numinous and the hierophanic, like the manifold manifestations of ultimate concern, the idea that the Eternal Thou can assume infinite variety of divine forms has profound implication for the idea of seeking the sacred

through the medium of personal mythology. Most importantly, however, Buber's theological framework identifies a critical dimension of the sacred that must be encountered in the sacred space in between personal mythologies. That dimension of sacred—namely, divinity manifested through one's relationship to the other—can only be found in those places where personal mythologies intersect and engage each other.

*Friedman's Concept of the "Touchstones of Reality"*

The last of the five approaches to the sacred considered in this chapter centers around a concept called "touchstones of reality." This religious framework has been developed by Maurice Friedman, a contemporary religious studies scholar and the principal biographer of Martin Buber. Friedman's approach to the religious dimension of life evolved, at least in part, from his engagement with Buber's vision of the sacred and draws heavily on Buber's idea of the sacred as encounter or meeting.

Originally employed as an ancient method for testing the genuineness and quality of precious metals, a touchstone was a hard, highly polished flint-like stone against which a piece of gold or silver could be rubbed. If the metal was actually gold or silver, it would leave a telltale streak across the touchstone, the color of which would indicate the relative purity of the alloy being tested. The metaphorical sense of something being a touchstone, therefore, suggests that which serves as a kind of standard or exemplar against which some other thing's potential value can be tested and evaluated. Given its connection with the idea of discerning the preciousness of something, it is not surprising that the word touchstone also seems to have developed a particularly philosophical and religious connotation. Noteworthy in this regard, for example, is the fact that religious groups as diverse as Quakers, the United Church of Canada, Roman Catholics, a

fundamentalist Christian organization, and an organization of American Muslims all currently use the word “touchstone” as the title of one of their respective religious journals.

Friedman’s use of this term draws specifically on its philosophical and religious connotation. He employs it to refer to the accumulated ideas, beliefs, principles, and values that both direct one’s engagement with the world and serve as a sort of existential standard for personally deciding what is good and true. According to Friedman, one’s collective touchstones represent an evolving spiritual and ethical framework that is both experientially derived and continuously tested through interaction with everything that one encounters in the course of living one’s life. “For touchstones there cannot be two separate spheres of religion and morality,” he writes, “but one indivisible sphere of the concrete hour in which our awareness of what speaks to us and our response to that address are two aspects of a single reality” (*Touchstones of Reality* 237).

Given this sense of guiding or directing one’s actions, of establishing a kind of ethical or moral dimension to one’s life, Friedman’s concept of touchstones—like Tillich’s idea of ultimate concern and Buber’s concept of the other as Thou—largely focuses on the dimension of personal mythology concerned with the underlying structure of one’s personal beliefs and values. Described by Michael Pieracci as the “ontic” dimension of myth, this aspect of one’s personal mythology reflects those deeply held beliefs and values that both shape one’s mythic narrative and draw continuing support from it (212).

Friedman repeatedly emphasizes that one’s touchstones of reality must be discovered and tested through a process of encountering those of others. As a result,

Friedman observes, one does not evolve one's touchstones primarily through adherence to an existing system of values, but rather through existential conflict with these values. In this regard, he continues, this process of encounter must open one to continuously question the validity of the one's existing touchstones. The idea that engaging new touchstones requires a process of contending with existing ones implies that new touchstones only come, "when we have fought our way through to where we are open to something really other than our accustomed set of values and our accustomed way of looking at the world" (*Touchstones of Reality* 23).

Another important aspect of Friedman's approach to the sacred is its open-ended quality as a framework for religious engagement. Just as Otto's numinous, Eliade's hierophany, Tillich's ultimate concern, and Buber's eternal Thou all can manifest in and through an infinite variety of forms and contexts—including images and ideas, as well as events, people, and material objects—so too can touchstones of reality be encountered in many ways. In considering some of the sources of his own touchstones, Friedman identifies "meetings with persons, with situations, with the characters of literature, the scriptures of religions, and the writers who have spoken to me through their thoughts" (22). In a similar vein, he also observes, "Walking on our path, we encounter something that lights up for us—an event perhaps, but it might also be the teaching of the Buddha if that speaks to our condition." In this sense, he observes, "a Greek tragedy or a Rig Veda may say something to us just as any contemporary happening may" (24).

Still another important dimension of Friedman's approach is his emphasis on the potential of touchstones to bring together opposing subjective and objective modes for apprehending the meaning of experience. As Friedman observes, "touchstones of reality

imply that we do not have to be ‘hung up’ on either objective, universal meaning or a meaning that is merely subjective and cultural,” but instead are able to seek forms of meaning which retain their objective and universal significance while also being firmly and experientially grounded in the subjective and the cultural (59).

Referring simultaneously to the historical and impressionistic qualities of one’s encounters with touchstones, Friedman describes the process by which he arrived at the touchstones of reality in his own life as a succession of “glimpses.” These glimpses, he observes:

have come to me in a series of separate yet not unconnected events and meetings in my life [...]. In the residues of these events and meetings a way in the present and into the future has opened up for me. For these residues, I claim what cannot be claimed for any objective metaphysics or subjective inspiration. (22)

Moreover, just as touchstones help bridge the gap between purely subjective and objective ways of experiencing the world, the memory of the experience of the meetings that shaped one’s touchstones simultaneously connects one with one’s past and anchors one in the present moment. “Touchstones have a history,” observes Friedman, “they live with us.” It is also important to note, however, that the ability of touchstones to link one with the sacred encounters of one’s past is not the primary source of their meaningfulness, but rather their ability to engage and direct one’s course in the present moment. In this regard, Friedman insists that “a touchstone of reality is either present or it has ceased to exist” (24).

Just as Buber insists that all encounters with the Thou possess a sense of immediacy that conceptualization tends to detach one from, so too for Friedman one must be wary of overly abstracting from the experience of directly engaging touchstones.

“Touchstones of reality are like insights, except they are closer to events,” he writes. “An insight arises from a concrete encounter,” he continues, “but we tend to remove it too quickly and completely to a plane of abstraction” (23). As a result, cautions Friedman, “like any existential truth,” a touchstone “remains true only insofar as it is again and again tested in the stream of living” (25).

In this regard, Friedman is also concerned that touchstones not be considered primarily in symbolic or archetypal terms. “Touchstones of reality are not universal ideas shining above history and above our own lives,” he insists, but rather “are existential realities that remain meaningful only insofar as they are shared, witnessed for, and made living again in the present” (59). In this way, he continues, “Our touchstones of reality are themselves the bond between absolute and particular, the embodiment of symbol in the lived lives of actual persons” (*Via Humana* 45).

As an approach to the religious dimension of life, Friedman suggests that focusing on the idea of touchstones of reality can keep one “close to the concrete reality, without pursuing theology at the expense of the fully human or humanism at the expense of closing man off from the nameless reality that meets his meeting with everyday life” (*Touchstones of Reality* 232). Maintaining that “it is the event itself that again and again gives rise to religious meaning,” he insists that “only out of that meaning, apprehended in our own history and the history of past generations that we have made present to ourselves, do religious symbols and theological interpretations arise” (233).

Like the other four theological frameworks described in this chapter, Friedman’s concept of the touchstones of reality offers a profoundly useful way of interpreting the sacred dimension of one’s personal mythology. Of course, as is equally true of the other

four approaches, Friedman's framework emphasizes certain aspects of the experience of the sacred while ignoring or arguing against others. Indeed, in the process of comparing and contrasting these five approaches, it becomes evident that there are areas of both considerable compatibility and significant disagreement among them as to the nature and significance of sacred experience. Still, even in those areas where these frameworks appear to be in conflict, it is possible to see such differences in approach as complementary rather than antagonistic. In the end, whether exploring the numinous content of one's dreams, considering one's archetypal experiences as hierophanies, inquiring into the nature of one's ultimate concerns, tracking one's encounters with the other as Thou, or reflecting on the evolution of one's network of touchstones, one is likely to discover new facets of the sacred dimension of one's personal mythology.