The terms ‘symbol,’ ‘symbolic,’ and ‘symbolism’ are staples in the modern study of religion, occurring consistently in influential definitions as well as in historical, social scientific, literary, and philosophical studies that explore particular contexts in detail. This prevalence has in part to do with the very construction of the category religion, a term that evolved out of Christianity to encompass an enormous field of highly diverse data spanning ideational, psychological, and sociocultural arenas of human existence on a global level. As Sherry Ortner has written in an influential article that consolidates anthropological perspectives, major or ‘key’ symbols can be seen as entities that both “operate to compound and synthesize a complex system of ideas” and are also “vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable into orderly action.”¹ From a literary perspective, Peter Struck’s treatment of ancient Greek literature leads him to designate the symbol to be “a form of representation that has an intimate, ontological connection with its referent and is no mere mechanical replication of the world, that is transformative and opens up a realm beyond rational experience, that exists simultaneously as a concrete thing and as an abstract and perhaps transcendent truth, and that conveys a unique density of meaning.”² Ortner and Struck’s views are likely to resonate strongly with most scholars of religion since symbols figure prominently in secondary literature, both as components in the religious systems we study and as conceptual tools that we deploy in the modern scholarly enterprise of making sense of religious data.

In this essay, I argue that the question of symbols and their interpretation by religious actors holds a particularly important place while considering

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¹ Ortner, On Key Symbols 1340.
² Struck, Birth of the Symbol 2. I am grateful to Richard Martin for the reference to this work.
ideas and practices pertaining to Persianate societies during the approximate period 1400–1700 C.E. The period was host to significant religious innovation, whose effects can be seen in the production of new religious perspectives such as messianic movements and other syntheses involving Ṣūfism and Shi‘ism in particular. If we take symbols as being integral to religious systems, we should expect to see in this period, as we indeed do, the production and elaboration of new symbols or thorough reimaginings of old ones that correspond with the new systems.

Going one step beyond this empiricist observation, I suggest that religious outlooks generated in the period 1400–1700 C.E. project a new attitude toward the very understanding and operation of symbols as aspects of religious worldviews. Existing studies (Babayan, Moin) have suggested that religious systems from the period evince a particular investment in the material rather than the unseen spiritual sphere as the paramount theater of religious enactment. This is reflected in the perceived immediacy of the apocalypse, in messianic movements with military agendas, and in social formations focused on bodies rather than ideas. In a corrective to this understanding, I suggest that what is new in the period 1400–1700 C.E. is not the greater emphasis on the material as such since, ultimately, all religious systems are enacted materially in conjunction with imagined non-material realms. Rather, what is distinctive here is a new attitude toward symbols as mediators between the physical and the metaphysical. In religious literature from the period, authors display a cognizance of the nature and purposes of symbols and actively deploy this knowledge in their prescriptions for action. This point leads me to suggest that the period may be said to contain a significant epistemological shift that pertains to both the construction of knowledge and the social enactment of religious ideas, processes in which symbols play critical roles.

The attitude toward religious symbols I see articulated in the types of Islamic materials I will survey below bears a strong resemblance to the way modern scholars have understood religious symbols as parts of intellectual schemes elaborated since the nineteenth century. In saying this I have no wish to make an anachronistic argument that would proclaim early modern Persianate societies to have been intellectually modern avant la lettre. Rather, I believe that the striking similarity of intellectual constructions between the Islamic and modern western contexts can help us clarify the specificity of new religious developments as an aspect of the historical evolution of Islamic ideas and practices. Furthermore, this exercise may help in thinking about some connections between religious