Introduction

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“Ultimate Realities” is perhaps the most obvious topic to Westerners for comparing religious ideas. It is the topic of God, or gods, or why some religions such as Buddhism do not have gods, or rather have so many that they are not associated with ultimate reality. Sophisticates such as we in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project realized quickly that defining religion in terms of God expresses a monotheistic bias. If religion is first approached anthropocentrically, in terms of salvation, enlightenment, and release from suffering, ultimacy need not be construed ontologically but perhaps only in terms of what is most sought. Indeed, perhaps what is ontologically ultimate is too far away to be religiously interesting to people dealing with their own existence. These complications are explored at length in this volume.

We began our project discussion of ultimate realities by changing to that phrase from “ultimate reality,” which was in the initial design of the project. That initial category of ultimate reality in the singular came from the assumption in Christianity that God is the object of ultimate religious concern and that it is important to compare various ideas of God and what alternatives there might be to conceptions of God—an assumption congenial to a number of religious perspectives besides most forms of Christianity. The category of ultimate reality is obviously fruitful for
comparison. Clooney here (chapter 5) examines a discussion of God (Nārāyaṇa) as the creator of the world on which all else depends. Salda-rini (2) discusses the God of Israel as the creator of the world and goal of human existence, and Fredriksen (3.1) says the first Christians assumed the Jewish view of God as the ultimate reality and are interesting rather for what they say about Jesus. Haq (4) treats God as the ultimate reality in Islam and raises both epistemological and metaphysical questions about it. Kohn (1.1-2) discusses ultimate reality in Chinese religion explicitly in relation to theistic conceptions of God, as well as in other ways; Eckel (6.3, note 22) cites Tu Weiming as likening the Confucian notion of Heaven to God. Eckel himself (6) affirms the ontological status of ultimate reality as being a central point of debate within Buddhism and points out (6.4) that for the Mādhyamikas, from the standpoint of conventional truth, “ultimate reality can be equated with the Buddha.” So, the initial plausibility of the category of an ontological ultimate reality is borne out in what our specialist colleagues take to be important for their traditions, and the diverse ways of speaking about ultimate reality construed ontologically can be traced with great interest.

Nevertheless, in saying that God or ultimate reality (so as not to prejudice the ontological ultimate theistically) is important for religions it was claimed that this is because ontological ultimate reality is the object of ultimate religious concern. “Ultimate concern” is Tillich’s phrase for the form of human orientation to what is ontologically ultimate. A very different focus on ultimacy arises if the topic is what is most important in human life, or in its religious dimension. If we examine ultimacy as a human project, we might even get a handle on what the religious dimension of life is, though that is not our topic here. The study of anthropological ultimate realities allows us not only to examine how people in some religions relate ultimately to what is ontologically ultimate, but also to how ultimacy functions in religions such as some forms of Buddhism where it is ultimately important to realize that there is no ontological ultimate, or at least nothing ontological to refer to ultimately. So our second ultimate reality is the orientation and drive of the religious path, the project of sagehood and perfection (1.1.3), the quest for God (2.2, 2.5-7), the mediator between God and humans (3.2-4), the mystic path (4.7), and the bodhisattva’s path toward liberation (6.4).

Ultimate realities, in the plural, refers to ontological ultimate reality (which may itself be plural) on the one hand and anthropological ultimate reality (which also may itself be plural) on the other. But concretely they constitute one topic, not two or more. We found again and again that we could not talk about one without talking about the other. There is only one vague category in play here—ultimate realities. Kohn (1.1.1)
cites Eckel in describing the category as "the order of the cosmos itself and the actualization or realization of that cosmic order in human experience." The subcategories by which this is spelled out, for instance, creation of the world from something or nothing, whether there are finally two truths about the ultimate or only one, whether religious perfection separates one from the ordinary or returns one to it, and so forth, all take their meaning from the roles they play within that larger vague category.

We try hard in this volume not to assume that we know what the ultimate realities are and then cite which aspect this or that text or tradition reveals. That is made easier by the fact that we (the entire group) are in severe disagreement among ourselves on that question as well as on the question about whether we can know much about ultimate realities anyway. Nonetheless, there is a difficulty in principle with our efforts to be fair, and this difficulty needs to be mentioned here.

What we have learned from this is that religious ideas cannot be compared except with a heuristic theory of what religion is, what is important, and what ought to be looked at. Of course, we are not speaking of a fixed, dogmatically held theory of religion, which would be worse than useless, but of a flexible interpretation of religion just specific enough to yield tentative and revisable criteria for detecting what is important in religion and so for suggesting what we curious comparativists should invest our time in studying. In the present state of the discourse, however, there is no general agreement on a "theory of religion," certainly not among us. This topic is reviewed in detail in the volume, Religious Truth, chapter 9.

We not only have a method for comparing religious ideas, explained in detail in chapter 7, we are constantly evaluating it. Testing the method is just as important for us as sharpening, changing, or inventing tools is for the sculptor. An important phase of testing the method is self-evaluation of our project. Our first year's topic, the human condition, was exciting at the time the project focused on it and extraordinarily frustrating subsequently in drawing and writing up conclusions. This was because, in developing our collaborative habits of learning from one another, we concentrated on the first two moments of comparison, that is, the elaboration of the vague categories—wild and fun philosophy—and the specification of them with examples from the various traditions—many "golly-gee-whiz" experiences for each of us. For many of the specialists, this was a crash-course seminar in various forms of unfamiliar philosophy and theology, while for the generalists it was a crash-course in history of religions. Most of the specialists, too, were beginners in at least some of the other traditions, though no one, it turned out, was expert only in one. What the seminar failed to do was to integrate the specifications in the language of the comparative categories so as to lay
out important comparisons. That fell to Neville after the fact. The concluding chapters of the volume reporting that year’s discussion, *The Human Condition*, feel external to the preceding evidentiary chapters and the comparisons drawn there reflect Neville’s own take on what the specialists had said and not said. In retrospect, it seems that our group could not have short-circuited this slow process of coming to substantial comparisons, and it is worthwhile pointing out what is good about that fact.

First, we learned that uncommon erudition is required for comparative conversation that none of us had coming from our own disciplines. Partly the erudition is simply finding out a lot about what the others know so that no one has to talk down to be understood. This point has consequences for graduate education in religious studies: special disciplines ought to be supplemented with knowledge from other disciplines so that a public for comparative thought is possible. Another part of the erudition we had to acquire consists in creating a language and set of intellectual habits through the history of our own discussions. This is not a private language but a somewhat new discourse. The discourse holds within it the embarrassment of ideas that turned out to be silly, comparisons that were premature, cautions that proved excessive, and a good nose for what smells promising. Especially, we found ways to relate things that would not have occurred to us before the seminar. Although doubtless a function of excited *hubris* as well as seasoned experience, most of us now look upon many of the other comparative conversations in which we have participated as a bit innocent.

Second, we discovered during the first year how true it is that comparative categories cannot be imposed from the top but need to be formulated and reformulated in terms of what is discovered in the specifics. We began like most scholars today with an acute consciousness of the fact that comparison has been dominated by conceptions of religion from the West. Our project topics, the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth, are clearly *at least* Western categories. One of our questions about them was how exclusively Western they are: can they be applied in the comparison with non-Western religious traditions? Indeed, the categories are all found in Christian thought and we were worried, especially in light of the history of comparative ventures, that this in itself might bias the understanding of Judaism and Islam. So in just about every seminar we asked whether the text or tradition under discussion would call for the reformulation of the comparative category, and if so, how. The upshot was to make the comparative categories increasingly vague, so as to be specifiable by an ever more surprisingly diverse group of religious commitments. In their vagueness, the categories became increasingly more precise about what they could include as specifications and what not.
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Third, and related to the second point, we came to appreciate the force of the claim that religions and texts need to speak in their own voices, their own rhetorics, their own intellectual and practical styles, and we saw that this must be registered in the specification of the categories. After marveling at the genuine diversity of expressions, we took great pains to talk about how our presuppositions about the human condition, and again this year ultimate realities, might bias our interpretations of the texts and traditional positions. We found it important to be able to appreciate and enjoy the differences before we tried to understand how they relate to one another. In particular, we aimed to make sure that we looked at the specifications from several angles to guard against bias and simplified treatment. These angles were their intrinsic expressions, their theoretical implications, the ways the world looks from their standpoint, and their practical implications. We called these “phenomenological sites of analysis.”

Yet at the end of the first year we were rather stuck at the virtues mentioned so far and were unable to spell out stable comparisons as a group. The result was that Neville constructed a grid from the categories that had emerged during the first year’s work as most useful for parsing the human condition, and then filled in what each tradition or text had to say about the position on the grid, adding comparisons with each new tradition. In each case he looked at the specification from the standpoints of the four phenomenological sites. These conclusions at least give the appearance of being wonderfully systematic.

These comparisons were based on categories that bubbled up from our first year’s conversations, they were presented systematically and from several points of view (the phenomenological sites), and they were reflective of what Neville takes to be stable comparative hypotheses worth further investigation; that is all good. Nevertheless, they remain externally related to the preceding arguments. The specialists’ chapters made few explicit comparisons. Moreover, their discussions were not coordinated regarding the levels of specificity and vagueness, with the result that Neville often had to change the focus of what was cited from the specialists’ chapters, making their claims either more specific or more general, so as to render them relevant to one another in the same respects. Thus, his conclusions not only asked questions of the traditions and texts they themselves did not ask—and answered “for them”—he asked and answered new questions of the specialists’ representations of their material. The result was that Neville’s views sit alongside the separate views of the others, as if the concluding comparative hypotheses were the result of another specialty and not of the collaborative work. To be sure, his views on the comparative topic were formed largely through the group’s work.
in the seminar. But they still are more external than we had hoped because the goal of the project is to build a concrete collaborative understanding of the topics as parsed by our traditions and texts.

The externality of the conclusions to our project at that stage is not a bad thing, as frustrating as the writing and group discussions of the first volume's conclusions were. In fact, it marks the distinction between the degree to which the specialists were comfortable in talking about their subjects in conjunction with others, and the degree to which the generalists understood comparison to be something over and above a listing of various things the different texts and traditions have to say about the human condition. It now seems to have been an unavoidable and helpful stage in our growing corporate consciousness.

Our purpose in this volume is, by contrast with the first volume, to take all three steps in comparison as a group. Most of all, this involves attempting that last step, the concrete interpretation of the category of ultimate realities and its subcategories in terms of what we have learned through exploring its specifications. Furthermore, unlike in *The Human Condition*, here we derive our explicit comparisons from the specialists' concrete re-representations of ultimate realities. The form of chapter 7 in this volume is thus not a grid of comparisons but an essay.

Some obvious limitations need to be called to mind for the record. First, we have by no means made an exhaustive study of how even the six traditions we examine treat ultimate realities. Our scattered specifications are almost like random spot-checks in a field so vast that it is hard to be sure that we have a fair sample. In many respects our specifications are accidental, reflecting the current interests and predilections of our specialist authors. We have made an effort in the specialist chapters however, to provide both a general representation of the tradition at hand as well as an analysis of a particular text, locating that text in its peculiar place in the tradition. Moreover, this volume reflects a far greater comprehension than was evident in *The Human Condition* of how and why the specialists choose the texts or authors they do. Because our specifications are not exhaustive, or even very many, it is difficult to say much in general about how religions treat ultimate realities. But we can say what the material we have studied says about ultimate realities.

Second, that we (Neville and Wildman) employ our own biases and perspectives in constructing a concrete representation of ultimate realities and drawing comparative hypotheses is inevitable. Describing ultimate realities in their own terms but as specified by our texts is a process of translation that requires creative imagination. The translation goes from one language to another (few of the texts we examine use phrases such as "ultimate realities" though our authors in each case discuss how
that phrase might apply). But it also goes from specific to vague levels of discourse and back again. Moreover, drawing out the specific comparisons, determining what to relate to what in which precise respect, involves selection. All this requires what Aristotle would have called “hitting upon a third term,” or what Jonathan Z. Smith has called a bit of “magic.” There are two saving features regarding this limitation, however. One is that our biases and perspectives have now been formed in significant measure by the seminar in all its features. The other is that our conclusions are vulnerable to correction. The version here itself is the product of criticisms of early drafts by the seminar, and we anticipate many shifts and amendments when other scholars put our conclusions in the context of their work.

Third, the classic philosophical dispute between nominalism and realism was present in our discussions, not only of the importance and reality of vague categories, so important for our theory of comparison, but also in another context. How do traditions “say” what they say? Eckel, citing the authority of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, insists that traditions as such do not say anything. Only individual authors within traditions, or particular texts, say things about ultimate realities. In deference to this nominalism, we tried, especially in The Human Condition, to avoid writing that “Buddhism says x about the human condition whereas Hinduism says y.” Rather we would write “Nāgārjuna in the Madhyamaka Buddhist school says x whereas Śaṅkara, in the Advaita Vedāntin, says y.” Neville, on the other hand, an unrepentant realist, insists that ideas are general and that it is the society or tradition that says things, through individuals as tokens. Of course particular texts have a singularity, an haecceity, that distinguishes them from one another within the tradition, and important texts modify the tradition. Yet the discourse is that of the community, the tradition; the individual authors are important to the degree that they express or modify the tradition. Perhaps no single author says fully what the tradition itself is saying with its complex and interpersonal, usually intergenerational, play of assertive signs. For the realist, “Nāgārjuna says x” is a metonymous abbreviation for “Madhyamaka Buddhism (as shaped by Nāgārjuna) says x.” Of course there is truth on both sides, and also error. The balance lies somewhere between the view that there are a great number of religious authors distributed by loyalties through six traditions and the view that the traditions with their assorted means of influence speak through their writers. And the associated limitation is that we allow more messiness around what or who has ideas in this volume than we allowed in The Human Condition.

The specialist chapters here (1–6) are ordered with the following rationale. The first is Kohn’s because it is most explicit about the internal
diversity in the notion of ultimate realities, and because it is one of two
that does not interpret the ontological side of ultimate reality theistically.
We want to prevent theism from preempting the discussion of ultimate
realities. Then by contrast we move to Saldarini's paradigmatically theis-
tic study of Judaism, and thence to Fredriksen who, as already men-
tioned, says the first Christians simply assumed the Jewish theism of their
time and concentrates instead on the ultimacy of Jesus. Islam follows his-
torically of the Abrahamic faiths, as represented in Haq's chapter.
Clooney's discussion of Vedânta Deśika comes next as an even more
scholastic theological discussion of theistic attributes than Haq's treat-
ment of the attributes of Allah. The specialists' chapters conclude with
Eckel's return to the breadth of the question of ultimate realities charac-
teristic of Kohn's chapter, and his careful methodological reflection on
the whole of our discussion. Our chapter of comparative conclusions
about ultimate realities follows the specialists' chapters, and the final
three chapters deal with methodological considerations. Chapter 8, in
particular, lays out the philosophical method of comparison with the dis-
tinctions between vague and specific categories.