

Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992; reprint ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

46. Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Christian-Jewish Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 33-65.

7

Comparative Conclusions about Ultimate Realities

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7.1 Defining the Vague Category

We come to understand the respects in which we compare the traditions only at the end, if then. "Ultimate realities" as the vague category of comparison means something like this: *that which is most important to religious life because of the nature of reality*. Each part of this statement needs to be glossed.

First, "religious life" is a phrase intended to finesse the question of the nature of religion until our discussion in the next volume, on religious truth. For most practical purposes we can say that the ultimate is what is most important *for human life as such*, letting religion be defined in terms of those aspects of life that relate to the ultimate or to what is most important. But there might be some purposes for which it is worthwhile to contrast religion as one dimension of life with others such as the political, the cultural, the aesthetic, the moral, and so on, and for those others what is most important might not be what the religious traditions say is ultimate. The traditions themselves differ in how they relate religion to the other parts of life. And the very definition of religion as a (social? spiritual? cultural?) phenomenon is a matter of contemporary contention.

So let this remain as a finessing phrase until we have discussed how the traditions say human beings should relate to ultimate realities.

"That which is" is intended to be vague with respect to the kind of quantity or unity claimed to be ultimate. Judaism and Islam assert the singularity of the ultimate in no uncertain terms. Christianity is problematic, especially to Muslims, with its doctrine of the Trinity, although Fredriksen limits her discussion in chapter 3 to the earliest stage in Christianity when its conception of God had not been differentiated from that of Judaism. Vedānta Deśika's Nārāyaṇa is described as wholly unified—but then has a spouse!—and Clooney does not much unpack that or treat it as a problem (because Deśika does not in that text). Eckel's ultimate in Madhyamaka, emptiness, is not a thing but rather a quality of things when understood truly rather than conventionally. Ultimate reality in Chinese religion as described in chapter 1 on the one hand can be whatever various religious virtuosi take it to be, and on the other hand is a kind of ontological mother that turns out to be non-being (*wuji*), which itself might be more like a quality of drawing on the power of the rest of the world rather than one's own reserves. All of these things can be encompassed within the vague notion "that which is."

"Most important" signifies our appreciation of the approach to ultimacy embodied in Tillich's conception of ultimate concern, an approach that is willing to allow practice and soteriological issues to shape conceptions of what is taken to be ontologically ultimate.¹ What is most important can be the Holy that demands a response, as in the West and South Asian monotheisms. But it can also be whatever it is that alleviates suffering, as in Buddhism. The discussion of Chinese religion makes clear that many people do not really care much about what is most important, and leave that to the virtuosi. Importance is determined by factors from at least two sources, the ultimate realities taken to be important, and the human condition that shapes concerns. Our phrase is vague enough to allow for all our examples.

"Because of the nature of reality" means that the religious thinkers' identifications of what is most important are not functions solely of subjective whim or arbitrary preference but of what the religious cultures take to be the nature of the case. Madhyamaka Buddhism says that in the nature of things, understood ultimately, there are no things with own-being, and that reference to ultimate emptiness cannot be like conventional reference to conventional things. This is because reality is this way, which is the positive point in Eckel's account fending off nihilism. The radical monotheisms take the nature of God to be the reason why God is most important, the ultimate reality, for people and communities. Chinese religion, as represented in chapter 1, might not take the nature of

reality as ultimate to be a thing or a quality, but it does take the orientations of virtuoso religiosity to be what they are because of the nature of that peculiar kind of causation in which the ultimate of non-being pervades things. Only by reason of the nature of the Dao, variously conceived, is religious virtuosity, variously structured, the way it is. Our comparative category says that the reason our traditions identify what is most important the way they do is that they take the importance to be rooted in the nature of reality. This unites the ontological and anthropological sides of our category.

"Most important to religious life" is vague with respect to how the religious traditions say people should respond. Fredriksen details the quest for purity and holiness; Kohn and Miller discuss models of the sage and the perfected. Saldarini and Haq specify various forms of worship and obedience as crucial to the response. Clooney and Eckel focus on the knowledge of ultimate realities. In concrete practice all these and other modes of response are likely to be found in all the traditions. Our category is vague enough to encompass them. Our specialists' studies have not dwelt with much specificity on the modes of response beyond the intellectual, though it was often a topic of discussion in our meetings; it is a comparative category of considerable importance needing study in its own right.

"Ultimacy" is linked to a series, or at least to approaching a boundary. It might mean first cause, last goal, final truth, most real, or that which is most wanted when people sort their wants.

"Reality" has its medieval European meaning of things being what they are so that human judgment might be right or wrong about them. This is obvious enough when things are taken to be objects over against knowers, such as a God or ultimate ontological source such as Dao or *wuji*. But even when the distinction is denied between a judging subjective consciousness and the realities judged, as it is in the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka Buddhism described in chapter 6, the emptiness of that distinction is what is real, and to make something real of that distinction is false except for conventional truth.

So our task in this comparative chapter is to say how the various traditions and texts studied specify that which they take to be most important for religious life because of what they take the nature of reality to be. The next section summarizes those specifications. Then 7.3 puts those specifications together in a complex concept of ultimate reality indicating some ways in which the traditions reinforce, contradict, or overlap one another in what their ideas affirm about ultimate realities. Section 7.4 refocuses the issues with respect to how ultimate realities are actualized in human experience.

The task of this summary and conclusion is daunting because of the diversity of approaches taken by our specialists. Chinese religion, Judaism, and Islam are presented in terms of centuries of development, with the specialists taking pains to point out the diversity within each of those traditions. Much of the discussion of Buddhism turns on a contrast between the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools of Mahāyāna. The presentation on Hinduism takes up a single text in the context of its author's religious culture and treats that as an exemplification of general characteristics of Hindu conceptions of ultimate realities. The presentation of Christianity focuses on a period so early that its conception of the ultimate had not diverged from its other contemporary sects of Judaism of which it was one, and picks up on early Christian concepts such as purity, ritual holiness, and blood sacrifice, the first two of which have diminished importance in subsequent Christian developments. To bring all these together is a bit like mixing apples and oranges, in terms of the claims made. Nonetheless, bearing in mind the very selective representations of our traditions, the comparisons are interesting.

They are all the more interesting, in fact, because of the tension generated by our rereading of the specialists' papers for the sake of enriching our comparative categories comparatively. As Clooney pointed out in commenting on an early draft of this chapter:

... it is clearly in your interests to have stable and comprehensive claims about each of the traditions, and that's why you clearly like the Kohn/Miller piece, for instance. But since it will clearly strike the readers that some of us—e.g., Paula [Fredriksen] most noticeably and then too myself—don't research and write in that way, you might as well make some good come out of it. I.e., these volumes are interesting in part because people like you and people like me are both contributing to them, such that we are claiming that different ways of writing and thinking can come together. In all three volumes, my essays intend to "touch" upon imbedded and pervasive Hindu ways of thinking/ways of speaking—by picking up on one or several Hindu voices and tracing from there threads to a wide variety of other conversation partners. That's why I used Deśika's *Īśvarapari-cheda*—because attention to it puts one in touch with multiple Hindu and Indian ways of thinking about ultimate reality. But I am also claiming that advances in this area are, in the Indian context, almost essentially controversial, argumentative. Description is therefore always partisan, and descriptions of Hindu thinking subverted by the arguments about which is the real Hindu viewpoint, and whether/how it can be put into words and discussed (without or with reference to privileged revelation, etc.). I suspect that Paula is demonstrating similar sensitivities, and so too others to a lesser extent.

As you have written your chapter, though, you treat the specialist essays as data bases for theorizing. But the specialist's viewpoint is, or can be, that theory and data are more intricately interwoven, so that the act of describing ultimate reality according to one or another tradition is itself a virtuoso act, and thus you can't get away with an innocent project of theorizing from "specialists' conclusions."

As I said, since readers will notice all this anyway, you would do well to add a meta-level to your conclusions, showing consciousness of your interplay with the specialists.

Done! The readers should note that Clooney's comments were made on a draft that contained just about all of the self-conscious qualifications that are expressed in the earlier pages of this chapter. Still, the tension remains. The sensibilities of some of the specialists are indeed different from ours in the matter of making claims stable enough to build upon.

Allowing differences in sensibilities, we still suggest that Clooney's falls within the scope of our overall method. Several quick points illustrate this. First, any real comparison requires saying what the comparison is, not merely tracing out what touches what; all the specialists' chapters in this volume do this. Second, we hope it is clear that our conclusions in the present chapter, even when expressed as hypotheses for further investigation, are matters that extend beyond the kind of comparisons drawn out in the specialists' papers. Third, our method has repeatedly emphasized the dialectical interplay between formulations of comparative categories, descriptions of specifications, and the summing up of the comparisons; of course, this is a kind of intellectual work with its own excellence. That we (Neville and Wildman) are virtuosos at the task remains to be seen! Fourth, we admit the difficulty of establishing authoritative voices for any of the traditions, who represents the true Hinduism, Daoism, or Christianity; most of the traditions ring with accusations of heresy and error. As mentioned, Eckel urges us to cite only individual authors; Clooney points out that the text of Vedānta Deśika he cites in this volume is very different from other texts by Deśika. The question is whether a text can be described so as to have representative force beyond itself for a strand of a tradition, or whether it speaks only for itself alone. Comparison is possible in either case, and the ideas compared might be interesting. For our purposes, however, the former is more to the point because it addresses questions brought to the comparison by people interested in the traditions, not only in the single texts. Clooney and all the other specialists note both the particularity of the texts they cite as well as a considerable representative function.

7.2 Specifying the Category

7.2.1 Chinese Religion

Kohn and Miller characterize ultimate reality in Chinese religion as "harmony and transcendence and their actualization in human life" (1.1.2). They call this a matter of order and thus distinguish this complex tradition both from those that would characterize ultimate reality as a being beyond the distinction of order and matter and from those (usually the same) that would place ultimate reality beyond, or at least on the boundary of, the ordered cosmos. Constructing the artificial phrase "ultimate reality" in Chinese (*jishi*), they argue that it is an oxymoron because ultimacy is a transcendent ideal for harmony, and reality connotes hard, limited, and solid stuff. The question for ultimacy in Chinese religion is precisely to transcend reality in that sense. So the best characterization of ultimate reality for the Chinese, Kohn and Miller argue, is that it is *ideal* harmony and transcendence that needs to be made real through actualization in human experience. They point out that human experience is so various that what one person finds ultimate, that is, transcendent and harmonizing, is likely not to be ultimate for another.

All of this is true of ultimate reality, they say, because of the nature of the Dao. The Dao is not a cosmos-transcending being, principle, or power, "but rather infinitesimal, the faintest, most imperceptible of breaths, the darkest shade of light, the smallest possible contrast which, in its infinite fractal-like recursions, multiplies to constitute the shocking wealth of cosmic power. This is the ultimate mystery of Dao: that subtle void and intangible formlessness should be the root of all becoming" (1.2.1). For human beings to access this infinitesimal subtlety is to gain great power (1.2.2), whether it be political, cognitive, or spiritual. The human religious project then is to surmount the limitations of ordinary bodily and sensate life and acquire sensitivities to the Dao that are transcendent and harmonizing relative to one's sphere. This is a puzzle, however, because it is not clear how what is so differently harmonizing and transcendent for various people always comes down to infinitesimal, subtle, and intangible formlessness. Could it be that in construing ultimacy as the harmonizing and transcendent Kohn and Miller are interpreting it only in respect to its very formal element of being the object of ultimate concern, as Tillich would say? Would they agree that some candidates for harmony and transcendence, for instance, getting richer than anyone else, are materially foolish? Is not the Dao the only way to transcendence and harmony?

Kohn and Miller treat the Neo-Confucian text of Zhou Dunyi, *The Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate*, as a metaphysical

analysis of Dao. That text begins with the phrase, "non-being [and also] the great ultimate." Kohn and Miller do not read these as complementary, or dualistic, as do those scholars who want to deny transcendence in Chinese culture. Rather, pointing out that non-being is not a thing, they say it still has a kind of priority: "from non-being is created great ultimate" (1.2.3). Non-being is not a substance and does not act, yet positive reality arises by means of the slightest steps from it, and somehow because of it. Moreover, according to their interpretation of Zhou, the political, religious, and spiritual hierarchies of China are all characterized by this infinitesimal beginning, or beginning in vacuity. To be in touch with this vacuity, or infinitesimally fecund Dao, is thus the ideal to be realized in actual life.

Yet, contrary to their claim that the Dao as ultimate is only ideal, it would seem that accessing the Dao, regardless of how intangible it might be compared with eating spiced cabbage or pushing a cart through the mud, is the ideal precisely because the ontological figure of least-being arising from vacuity is the true ontological causal ground of affairs. Not to be in touch with this is to be relatively powerless, not merely unideal. To put the matter another way, not only is there the temporal causal process of qi alternations in nested patterns of various sorts, there is also an ontological "process" in which the organization of qi in the interchanging elements is based on yin returning from yang, which extends from Taiji, which emerges from non-being. What seems ultimate in their account of Zhou is not nonbeing by itself but rather the hierarchy of everything insofar as it is dominated by non-being and therefore in principle accessible to subtle human control from top to bottom. As Kohn and Miller say, it is not non-being or Dao by itself that is ultimate, but that as present in the hierarchy of things down to one's own body and social practices.

Medieval Daoism envisioned the situation differently. "To begin with, creation in medieval Daoism is not a smooth transition from the nameless and invisible Dao to a formed and physical world but the active involvement of a creator God" (1.4.1). Laozi is the Dao, yet is not "completely immersed in this undifferentiated cosmic soup, but 'contemplates' and 'views' it," exerting some control over it. Kohn and Miller say that "with this dual nature" Laozi "represents the bridge between the unformed cosmos and the existing world and thus stands exemplary for the ideal of the ultimate perfected who has transformed his physical and sensory being into a state of primordality and rests at the root of the cosmos—not in its utter chaos, however, but in its pure realm of heavenly spontaneity" (1.4.1).

This is the medieval Daoist ideal of human realization. Kohn and Miller treat this expression of the ultimate as a metaphoric or symbolic

personification, though they do not say that what it personifies is the ancient conception of the Dao or the Neo-Confucian conception of the hierarchical generative relations among non-being, Taiji, yang/yin, the elements, and so forth. Rather, they suggest that it is an ontological expression of the subjective conception of harmony and transcendence in "the overcoming of the sensory field and sensual modes of experience in favor of something nonsensory, something intuitive, spontaneous, immediate, an experience that goes beyond feeling and seeing and thinking into a state of no-mind, no-perception, and no self" (1.5). Although they tend to emphasize the diversity of the human ways to this harmony and transcendence, speaking sometimes as if it were nothing but a human method, they are nearly clear in the end that the human method or Dao is normative because there is in fact "the invisible and intangible cosmic realm of nonbeing and nonaction" with respect to which one can live and perceive (1.5). They are only *nearly clear* in this regard because often their hesitancy about straightforward ontological commitments to the Dao or to *wu/taiji* seems to be little more than an allergy to what they take to be substance philosophy, as if the ontological ultimate has to be a static substance. Their last sentence is: "The ultimate in Chinese religion is a process of realization and experience, part of the world yet not accessible with worldly means, and thus the opposite of the Western concept of God, which is substantial and static, entirely beyond the world, and accessible only by transcending the world completely" (1.5). Anne Birdwhistell, in comments arising from the conference discussion, points out that many would claim that the Chinese have no conception of nature or the cosmos without humans, that the Chinese view is always from an admitted human perspective. The question is whether this is because of nature, thereby defining the human in relation to the cosmos as well as vice versa, or a mere reduction of nature to the human sphere alone.

7.2.2 Judaism

Saldarini's presentation of ultimate reality in Judaism appears to begin from the opposite angle to Kohn and Miller's presentation of the notion in Chinese religion. That is, God is the ultimate reality in Judaism and the many divine things or appearances discussed in the tradition are metonyms for the ultimate deity. There are several meanings of ultimacy, all of which apply to God, according to Saldarini. God is the uncaused creator of everything else, the goal of existence, the ground of intelligibility or wisdom about the world, superlative excellence, and goodness. The ultimacy of God is perceived or conceptualized in contrast with the limitations of human life (2.1).

From the human perspective God as ultimate is sought to give unity and coherence to life in a context that often looks chaotic. This primary emphasis on order is like that noted in Chinese religion. The God of Judaism is strongly affirmed to be independent of the world, however much God is known in and through the various functions of ultimacy (as creator, goal, etc.). Whereas the Chinese seem to start with a solid conception of nature, transcendence beyond which is sought in the extension of nature merely to its intangible and usually unnoticed fineness, the Jews do not think of nature without the human and they think of neither without relation to God (2.2.1).

In the biblical representations, "although God is the ultimate cause and goal of the universe and in principle unlimited by human history, functionally speaking God is always limited and his actions relativized by human responses from creation to judgment at the end of history" (2.3). Sometimes God is represented metonymically as having a body, other times as manifest in different things such as burning bushes and pillars of fire. "The Hebrew Bible, like the New Testament, Qur'ān, and many Hindu devotional texts [and we might say like medieval Daoism], portrays God as a personal force in the world and human life, using a variety of poetic and narrative literary forms. However, the Bible subtly qualifies its sense of God's immanence and intimacy by emphasizing God's power, glory, wisdom and 'strangeness'" (2.3). Rabbinic representations emphasize God's transcendence by explicitly delimiting God to roles in stories or to the exercise of judgment and mercy relative to human beings. This in turn gives rise to mysticism in which God's transcendence is focused as both revealed and hidden; highly specific elements, such as a divine body or vehicle, are taken to be symbolic of something far more transcendent. Whereas Chinese religion sometimes starts with the ultimate as distant and unreal except insofar as actualized in experience, and moves in its medieval period toward metaphoric personalization, the Hebrew Bible moves oppositely from highly personified symbols to breaking those symbols through holy strangeness to mystical transcendence. (In other respects, the Chinese take the ultimate as ever-present Qi, or Dao.) In Maimonides, theoretical knowledge of God is set over metaphors and anthropomorphisms; it is "the only kind of knowledge able to give reliable knowledge of God," and that indeed is in part through the *via negativa* (2.7).

Throughout the whole of Judaism, according to Saldarini, God is understood to be ultimate not only in relation to a series or hierarchy but also by being absolutely unique. This uniqueness was expressed by Maimonides and later more explicitly by Hermann Cohen in the Western philosophical language of being, showing that God is not categorizable as

a being, or in a genus *being*. Judaism's language about God is thus personalizing and anthropomorphic, on the one hand, and also insistent on God's difference from all these ideas. "Although a rich variety of similes, metaphors and symbols are used of God, they all revolve around God as a person who participates in human society and history and especially in Israel's life. Despite the overwhelming use of anthropomorphisms, at each step of the way, in almost all expressions of God's reality, power, activity, mercy and justice, the tradition persistently insists that God is not really like humans. God is greater, more powerful, not subject to human limitations and in the end beyond complete human comprehension" (2.10).

7.2.3 Christianity

Fredriksen's sharp focus on the Christianity of the New Testament period leads her to note that those Christians' conceptions of the ultimate, God, were not different from those of most of their non-Christian Jewish contemporaries. In both cases, God was thought of as foundation and goal of everything (3.1). What was new and interesting about those Christians, she argues, is their extending to the Gentiles the promise of God to Abraham; in particular, Christianity extended to the Gentiles a kind of holiness or non-profanity required for participating in the sacrifices before God. Thus, Paul and slightly later writers used the images of holiness and sacrifice to interpret how Jesus had transformed the situation of Gentiles in reference to God. We shall return to this in 7.4 when considering in more detail what the religions say about relations to the ultimate.

7.2.4 Islam

Haq's presentation of Islam draws much from the comparative context of our discussions. On the one hand Islam is in "both inherent and historical family resemblance with certain rationalizing religious trends in Judaism," and thus for Islam ultimate reality is conceived "as something stable, fixed, and objectively 'out there'—ultimate reality was the deity itself with all its standard Abrahamic divine attributes, including eternity and transcendence" (4.1). (Saldarini does not much stress the eternal part, so important for Islam.) Moreover, God as ultimate reality is never to be confused with the created world. On the other hand, God is the creator of the world and thus must be expressed in it in some way, particularly as the divine will bears upon human personal and political realities. Ibn 'Arabī goes so far as to diminish the importance of the Creator/created distinction in favor of understanding the world to be the mani-

festation of God, such that God is really and truly present in the world (4.7). Haq asks whether this is like the more imminent ultimacy in Buddhism and Chinese religion (4.1).

The Qur'ān is primarily concerned with the moral implications of God as ultimate reality, but also stresses the absolute contingency of the cosmos on God, which "establishes the absolute centrality of God in the entire system of existence" (4.2). "The cosmic order, so it appears from the Qur'ān, is a fully integrated system in which every created entity—that is, all-other-than-God—takes its assigned place in the larger whole according to its *amr* (divine command); the cosmic order had its own autonomous laws (again: *amr*, pl. *awāmir*), and, indeed, it embodied God's signs. . . . In other words, the cosmic order has *no* rational, moral, or ontological ultimacy" (4.2). It derives its reality, structure, and significance wholly from God. Moreover, God is the infinite within which every other dimension of reality is possible.

Yet the Qur'ān treats God as "an overwhelming personality" (4.3), describable or knowable by the ninety-nine names. Haq singles out four important ways of understanding this. First is the way of piety in which the names are used to orient one's thinking to God without asking about any metaphysical puzzles. "The pious simplicity of early Islam had taken God's Names as given, with all their glaring mysteries and dark veils, to be understood not analyzed, to be found not demonstrated" (4.3). The doctrine of divine names was developed in contrast to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that Muslim thinkers understood to represent God as insufficiently unified. Does this mean that the names signify attributes that introduce diversity into God? The second position, characteristic of the Mu'tazilite position, denies the real reference of the names or attributes and says God is beyond all names, using the logic of *tanzih* or denial of likeness. The third position reverses the second and finds God expressed throughout all creation, with the divine nature manifest in the many created things, a position stressing the logic of *tashbih*. The fourth balances the second and third in a conception of unity, *tauhid*, which stresses that God's unity embraces the world as well as the transcendent divine nature. Although the cosmos has no independent existence and depends entirely on God, its coherence expresses the divine unity.

Islamic thought about ultimate reality thus has a wider range of types than is characteristic of Jewish or very early Christian thought, including not only the simple acceptance of the symbols for their personal and social value but also serious philosophical wrestling with the problem of the one and the many in God. Saldarini attributed that concern to Greek thought, of which indeed Islam was an heir.

7.2.5 *Hinduism*

Clooney's presentation of the Indian religions' views on ultimate reality is twofold: a set of general characteristics expressed at the beginning (5.1) and the analysis of a particular version of that in a part of a book by Vedānta Deśika. As to the former, his characterization of ultimate reality is identical to that given by Saldarini for Judaism and by Haq for Islam (with Fredriksen's slice of Christianity not distinguished from Judaism). In "the literate and sophisticated Sanskrit-language traditions of Hindu orthodoxy" (5, n. 1), "Ultimate Reality is that which cannot be surpassed; that from which all realities, persons and things come, that on which they depend, and that into which they return upon dissolution" (5.1). Clooney proceeds to say that for his Viśiṣṭādvaita school, knowledge of ultimate reality is the means to know everything else and to achieve liberation. "In theistic traditions, this Ultimate Reality is personal, can be invoked by one or more proper names, and can choose to become accessible in perceptible form," again a set of conditions held in common with the monotheistic traditions. Clooney says that tensions about how to make sense of all this, tensions of the sort already encountered in the religions discussed so far, sometimes lead to argumentative discourse and this is what he examines in the work of Vedānta Deśika (1268–1369), a follower of Rāmānuja who was born in the same year as Zhou Dunyi, 1017, twenty years before Avicenna died.

Vedānta Deśika's understanding of Nārāyaṇa as Lord is neatly summarized by Clooney and that need not be repeated here. Two points are worth stressing for comparison's sake. The first is that Vedānta Deśika follows the Viśiṣṭādvaita model for the relation between Brahman (Nārāyaṇa) and the world, namely, that the world is the body of Brahman, the agential, conscious self. Thus, the world is wholly dependent on Brahman for its material body and its internal agency. In many respects this body-soul analogy is close to Ibn 'Arabī's view that the world is the expressive manifestation of God, and like it is close to pantheism. Whereas Ibn 'Arabī still asserts the independence and completeness of God apart from the manifestations in creation, Deśika opts for the soul-body identification and rejects Śaṅkara's attempt to preserve the wholly simple or nondual character of Brahman in irrelevance to the multiplicity in the world. This introduces the second point to stress in Clooney's account, namely, that Deśika defines his position dialectically, by sharpening his differences with neighboring philosophies. Clooney contends that Indian religions express many variations on the general position sketched at the beginning of his chapter, each of which is subject to argumentative defense against the others, as Vedānta Deśika attempts in this text. But

Clooney carefully avoids any assessment of Deśika's arguments, or any possible counter-arguments, and so does not comment on whether the distinctions between the various schools are real alternatives or are capable of being integrated into more inclusive views. Nor does he comment explicitly on the viability of the terms used in the arguments, only on their historical significance, and so he makes no claims about whether they constitute what logicians today would call well-formed formulas to express and draw inferences about ultimate reality as affirmed or assumed in the traditions of Deśika or his opponents. An assessment of the terms of the debates and the arguments for the various positions would have to connect the thirteenth-century arguments with contemporary conceptions of intelligibility, which Clooney approaches in the comparison with Richard Swinburne. We and our contemporaries, for instance, are puzzled by Deśika's claim that the existence of the Lord is better affirmed from Scripture because logical inference is never certain enough. Does Deśika believe that the interpretation of Scripture is more certain than logic? He seems as contentious about how to interpret Scripture as he is about how to interpret efficient and material causes. We shall return to the issue about philosophy and interpretation in 7.4.

7.2.6 *Buddhism*

David Eckel's presentation of Madhyamaka Buddhism on ultimate reality in one respect is very like that of Kohn and Miller on Chinese religion, namely, that ultimacy is best approached through considering how it might be actualized in human experience. And the reason for this in both cases is that reality ultimately is processive, not static, stable, substantive, or fixed. Therefore the religious question is not so much "what is ultimate reality?" as it is "how we can catch something ultimate in the flux of things?"

Eckel begins with an epistemological consideration of reference and suggests that Madhyamaka Buddhism denies reference to real things. Reference, however, is construed as referring to things that have stable identity of their own, at least for a split second. He says that Madhyamaka and Yogācāra thinkers insist that the claims about emptiness refer to reality. Things *really are empty*, according to both schools. This is the working assumption as they go about debating just what the emptiness entails, for instance, whether there has to be something emptied, as the Yogācārins would say.

This leads to a strong comparative remark. In the religions of South Asia, including Buddhism but also the various schools of Hinduism, especially those of Vedānta, a candidate for ultimate reality is assumed to be eternal in the sense of being stable and unchanging, unaffected by passing

things, and admitting of internal distinctions only with difficulty. In this context, Mahāyāna Buddhism is led to deny reality to the self and other objects of potential reference. In Chinese religion, by contrast, reality is assumed to be in constant flux so that what is ultimate about it needs to be the little nothings that spark the spontaneity of the changes, or the Big Nothing that lies at the heart of the Great Ultimate from which the motions of yang and yin structure the things that change. In Chinese religion the question for ultimacy is how order comes with the spontaneity. In the Western philosophic traditions, Platonists side with the East Asians in affirming the ultimacy of concrete change and abstract principles of order, whereas Aristotelians side with the South Asians in assuming concrete stable unchanging unity as the ground for change. Christianity and Islam have been affected by both the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, and their conceptions of God have been internally various because of that.

Eckel focuses on the debate between the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism to illustrate the complexity of the claim that things are ultimately empty, which he says (6.4, last sentence) amounts to the claim that they are contingent and finite. Moreover, there is nothing that is not empty—no underlying Brahman, no substantial Dao, no creator God. The contention is over whether we should say with the Yogācārins that we have learned the truth of emptiness and therefore should acknowledge the quasi-substantial reality of our previous ignorant selves and of the truth that we learned, or rather with the Madhyāmikas that we must abandon the detritus of the quest itself including its conception of the enlightened self and the dharma. Eckel sees that Madhyamaka purism in this regard is not nihilistic; it would be so only if one held to the belief that reality has to be substantial. If you abandon all substantialism, however, what is left is the changing of things and the pragmatic groupings we place on them for the interests of life, and many of these changing things are good. The rhetoric of Madhyamaka (and Yogācāra, too, on this point) is oriented to the denial of substantialist assumptions. This rhetoric of denial conditions expressions of Ultimate Truth. If one carries through the Madhyamaka project and abandons that rhetoric, however, the Conventional Truth of pragmatic life is positive; it is authentic to say that Nirvana (the Ultimate Truth) is samsāra (the conventional one now freed of substantialists assumptions).

7.3 Comparing within the Category

This section sums up our discussion so as to give some concrete expression to the category of ultimate reality and lays out some general comparisons

in terms of this category with as much thoroughness as our highly selective study allows. The comparisons we make take the form of two generalized schemas, which we call "spectra" of views of ultimate realities (7.3.1 and 7.3.2), together with an attempt to explain the schemas. What is meant by "explanation" in this context is discussed in 7.3.3, and then a philosophically oriented part-explanation is offered in 7.3.4 followed by a discussion in 7.3.5 of its consequences for religious symbolization of ultimate realities.

7.3.1 *Comparative Spectra*

The first comparative generalization sustained by our investigations is that ultimate realities are conceived in both ontological and anthropological terms (understanding the latter to refer to human experience, not a human-oriented cosmology). That is, ontological conceptions of ultimate reality are productive of some religious symbols, other symbols express the striving after that which is of ultimate importance to human beings, and these two sources for symbolization of ultimate realities vary in their respective importance among our traditions. All of our traditions make use of both sorts of sources for symbolization; in fact, each is internally diverse with regard to how subtraditions prefer or balance the two sources. The resulting spectrum reflects the types of balance achieved. Some traditions, such as many forms of Buddhism, tend toward symbolization drawn from the anthropological conceptions of ultimate realities while others, such as many forms of Christianity, tend toward symbolization drawn from ontological conceptions of ultimate realities. Some traditions, such as Islam, seem in their mainstream varieties to be relatively even-handed in their drawing on the two sources for symbolizing ultimate realities.

Much has been said about this spectrum already in the introduction and in several of the specialists' chapters and so more comparative detail at this point serves no useful purpose. However, we return below (7.4) to the anthropological source for symbolization with some comparative detail, which serves as a complement to the mostly ontologically oriented topics that are explored next.

The second comparative generalization is that in all of our traditions, if not in all the specific texts examined, we have found a spectrum of representations of the ontological ultimate. The spectrum ranges from earthy personifications to principles and philosophic representations so transcendent as to be beyond much if any positive knowledge. As was the case for the first spectrum, in each tradition there are a few portions of the second spectrum that more or less dominate the rhetoric and metaphors for speaking of the ultimate. In each tradition there are also pressures

registered within each position on the spectrum to relativize or qualify that position and to move elsewhere on the spectrum.

The religions we studied all have their origins in the Axial Age revolution (if you count Christianity and Islam's origins in Exilic and early Second Temple Judaism) in which various forms of polytheism were subordinated or made "merely symbolic" relative to some unifying principle mirroring a unifying conception of the cosmos. In the main, the Sky God won and was then reinterpreted. The process of reinterpretation took many directions, governed by different symbolic systems and internal dialectical moves. Somewhere in that process, the traditions took their primary metaphoric or rhetorical reference points and then tended to take shape around those formative decisions.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam never abandoned the highly personalized language of God that was so apt during Yahweh's days as a Sky God who travels with his people. Their primary scriptures represent historical stages at which God was understood also to be creator of the universe, not merely a personal force within the cosmos. Nevertheless, despite the transcendent universality of a creator of everything else, central elements of the rhetoric of these traditions represent God as a personal being relative to other personal beings within a field of interaction. Both Saldarini and Haq note the references in their traditions' scriptures to God's body, for instance, though in Judaism and Islam it is only parts of the body and not whole bodies that furnish symbolic material for God. By the first centuries of the common era, Judaism (in Philo) and Christianity (in the Johannine writings, Origen, etc.) had incorporated Greek philosophical thinking into their consideration of what it means for God to create, judge, govern, and fulfill the world. They understood perfectly well that God was not a "Big Guy in the Sky," and made that point in stressing the difference of God from human persons, as Saldarini emphasizes. Yet, except for some theologians and religious philosophers, most thinkers in these traditions continued to use the personal language, knowing it to be personifying. The strong influence of philosophy on theology in the medieval period in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity created languages in each tradition with extraordinary diversity and richness. Yet in each case the intermixing of the philosophical with the personalistic ends of the spectrum was highly qualified: for instance, by the insistence on Qur'anic language and law in Islam, by the failure of orthodoxy to embrace Maimonides in Judaism, and by the Reformation insistence on the language of scripture in Christianity.

In China, by contrast, the dominant rhetoric of what Kohn and Miller identify as Chinese religion came from a later period in which the personifying elements of Shangdi, the Sky God, had been superseded by

non-personal principles such as Dao and Heaven, later Heavenly Principle. Julia Ching and others have shown the resonance of the personalizing ancestry in Daoism and Confucianism.² But the personal rhetoric has been dampened except in such notions as the "Mandate of Heaven" and heaven's personal power.³ It was not until well into the common era that Chinese medieval Daoism became highly personalized.

The religions of South Asia, by contrast with West and East Asia, have managed to carry along many portions of the spectrum mixed together. Nothing is more philosophically abstract than the conceptions of Nirguṇa Brahman in Advaita Vedānta, and yet that tradition has highly personalized representations of Brahman as Lord (i.e., as Īśvara). Vedānta Deśika's text treats the Lord as the object of scholastic philosophical categories on the one hand and as married to a goddess on the other. The candidates to which Buddhists deny ultimate reality embrace both the personal and the more abstract. Mahāyāna Buddhism itself, in its distinction between the two Truths, both of which are true, illustrates the parallel between the personalism of Conventional Truth and the abstract dialectic of Ultimate Truth.

Thus, to summarize, whereas the traditions of West, East, and South Asia all have representations of the ultimate ranging from the highly personal to the abstract, transcendent, and philosophical, with denials of the literalness of finite references to the ultimate, they differ in rhetorical centers. The West Asian religions are centered in the personifying rhetoric and need to relate the more philosophical talk back to that. The East Asian religions in their intellectual moments are centered in more universalistic and philosophical rhetoric, tending to look on the personifying elements as superstitious, save in a few instances, such as the late development of medieval Daoism. Both West and East Asian traditions engage in theological or philosophical analyses that are even more abstract than their principal rhetorical symbols, and both include apophatic affirmations. The South Asian traditions have a much broader rhetorical center, or perhaps no center at all, carrying along both personifying and abstract symbols through many contexts of thought, community practice, and devotion. This can be baffling to those accustomed to the rhetorical centers of West or East Asia, who can view the South Asian rhetoric as either too superstitious or too negative and apophatic to be either personally or philosophically satisfying. Eckel's account of Western scholars struggling to distinguish Madhyamaka from nihilism illustrates this. It would be interesting to complicate this generalization with studies of crossovers, for instance, the move of Buddhism to East Asia or the transformation of Christianity implied in the Tang Dynasty translation of the Prologue to the Christian Gospel of John as "In the beginning was the Dao."

Intriguing questions arise about the differences among the religions concerning the spectrum from personifying to philosophical. There may be some truth in the obvious suggestion that the more personal end of the spectrum appeals to popular religion whereas the more philosophical appeals to sophisticated thinkers and writers. Surely the worlds of popular religion in all the traditions have been filled with spirits toward whom people comport themselves; even contemporary Jewish-Christian-secular North America is fascinated with angels, and often with devils. There are sophisticated Buddhists deeply devoted to the cult of Guanyin, however, and Christian Thomists who know that God is the Act of Esse and that Mary is his mother. An hypothesis will be presented in 7.4 to the effect that the more personalizing metaphors function in devotional contexts and the philosophical ones in contexts defined quite differently. Popular religion tends to be devotional, and hence always receptive to personifying symbols, whereas only sometimes is philosophically articulate religion devotional. Not all devotional symbols are personifying, however; witness most mystical traditions.

As we describe in *The Human Condition* (1.3), the first of our three criteria for successful comparison of religious ideas is that there be genuine commonality in the vague categories presupposed in a comparison. One of the contentions in this book is that determining whether there is genuine commonality is inevitably a philosophical task, at least in part. To show that a vague category legitimately enables a comparison of actual similarity between apparently different religious ideas, or a comparison of actual difference between superficially similar ones, involves the construction of a philosophical interpretation of those religious ideas. This interpretation must be rich enough to show how the vague category comprehends the ideas that specify it and explain why the various specifications are voiced differently. Such an interpretation could also succeed in ruling out superficial similarities as not actually genuine by showing that there is no philosophical affinity between them despite possible verbal resemblance.

To provide such a philosophical interpretation, we contend, is to furnish the beginnings of an explanation for comparative generalizations. The two spectra described above stand in need of this kind of explanation so that we can be assured that the generalizations are in fact important ones, that they offer stable insight into the character of religion and the ideas to which religions give birth, that they can reliably be used in subsequent analyses of religious ideas, and that they have been rendered as specific as possible for the sake of efficiently exposing them to correction. Indeed, explanations of this kind are an essential component of achieving the stability and vulnerability that we demand of comparative generalizations.⁴

The philosophical aspect of these explanations is but one of several. A fuller description of the structure of the explanations needed to justify comparative generalizations is as follows. First, there needs to be a delimiting of possibilities whereby plausible religious ideas of the sort relevant to the comparative generalization are identified. For example, ultimate reality is more plausibly construed as a cosmic battle between forces of good and evil than as a Volkswagen with a toothpick glued to the rear-view mirror. Other views may be even more or even less plausible than these are. The delimiting of possibilities must give an account of what ideas are most plausible and why. It is possible to explain variations in plausibility by appealing to purely conventional causes. Alternatively, as we (Neville and Wildman) prefer, an explanation might assume that our ideas are made more or less plausible by something about the world and not just by our constructions of it. However that goes, a delimiting of possibilities that includes an indication of the more plausible ideas and the reasons for their greater plausibility is the first step in explaining comparative generalizations.

Second, there needs to be an account of the dynamic logical connections among ideas, using "logical" in the broad sense as related to conceptual structure. We noted above that the metaphoric symbol systems focused at any one place along one of our spectra tend to qualify themselves and reach out toward other places on the spectrum. The personalizing symbols obviously push toward transcendent definitions to avoid making the ultimate too mundane an object. The push works the other way too. When conceptions of the ultimate are too transcendent or abstract, they are recalled to the human project by which their objects are approached, and then often to more nearly personalizing forms. These "pushes" are expressions of dynamic logical connections among the symbolizations of ultimate reality.

Hegel's logic was intended to generalize simple, *ad hoc* accounts of the conceptual relations underlying changing ideas,⁵ which was a bold move in an important direction. With most subsequent interpreters, however, we think Hegel was overoptimistic about the capacity of ideas to dictate their own development on the basis of their internal structure. He was also insufficiently realistic about the contingencies of history wherein the power of circumstances can sometimes dominate the influence of logical structure in the ever-shifting flux of ideas. Explanations justifying comparative generalizations need much less than Hegel offered on the logical side and much more than he gave by way of historical analysis. With this, we move to the third and fourth phases of explanations for comparative generalizations. Both are at least partly historical in character and each is naturally connected to one of the first two phases.

Third, then, there needs to be a genetic analysis of the specificity of symbolic representations of the religious ideas in question. In many cases reliable information for analysis of origins is scarce. Nevertheless, even speculative reconstructions of formative moments early in the history of an idea can make a contribution. Such speculative reconstructions can make use of historical, social, psychological, neurophysiological, environmental, and other considerations. For example, the beginning of a genetic analysis for the second spectrum might make reference to the difference between popular and intellectual religious interests, as was suggested above.

Fourth, and finally, there needs to be analyses of the circumstances that accompany the key shifts in symbolic representation during the history of the relevant religious ideas. Again, these analyses would make use of all of the considerations relevant to the genetic analyses just mentioned. Typically, however, there would be greater emphasis on historical events such as wars, invasions, migrations, trade, and cultural exchange.

Constructing a fully developed justification for a comparative generalization is quite a daunting task—and what is said above already presupposes the complex process of comparison that gives rise to hypothetical comparative generalizations in the first place. Nevertheless, the goal of justifying comparisons can be satisfied by nothing less, especially when the importance of the comparison is a matter of concern. Is it worth the trouble? It is hard to say in advance; after all, the question is equivalent to asking about the value of the entire project of comparative religious ideas. In some cases, it might finally prove impossible to decide between competing justifications, which would be an argument in favor of not bothering so hard with justifications the next time. Now and then, however, some comparative generalizations, especially as made vulnerable by the explanatory justifications offered for them, might become generally accepted because of the power of one of those justifications to build consensus among experts. That kind of stability, though always provisional and in search of correction, is of inestimable value for both the academic field of religious studies and for understanding religion itself.

In what follows, we make no attempt to provide a comprehensive justification for the two spectra we have introduced as examples of comparative generalizations. Rather, focusing on the second spectrum, we take the first two of the four steps described above: a delimitation of possibilities and an analysis of the logic internal to the dynamism of change in symbolizations of ultimate realities. We shall depend on remarks made in passing throughout this chapter to hint at how the last two steps might be taken. Even the two steps we do take are no more than shuffles because there are equally promising lines of argument that we do not explore,

such as the logic of temporal flow and the logic of spatial extension, among others. Nevertheless, what follows is a partial justification for the comparative generalizations we have articulated as a result of our group's comparative work together.

7.3.2 *The Logic of Contingency*

We propose the following hypothesis. All the traditions suppose that at least human life, if not the cosmos, is contingent and dependent on ultimate causes other than itself. In the fact of this contingency, all the existential questions—of life and death, despair and happiness, meaning and vanity, suffering and peace, ignorance and liberation, as well as sheer wonder at existence—get expressed in many modes and levels. There is a structural logic to contingency according to which ultimate references addressing the existential questions can be classified. This logic moves the attempt to represent ultimate reality from one place on the spectrum to another, finally across all.

There is no completely neutral way to express the logic of contingency. If the hypothesis is right, then most of the representations of ultimate reality express it, or illustrate parts and angles of it. The following is a contemporary philosophic attempt arising from the concern to be fair to the religious positions studied. It is, of course, as historically contextualized as any other philosophic argument. It also presents the logic of contingency in some detail and thus may be difficult to digest for some readers. Moreover, its abstractness is mind-numbing to those who do not delight in philosophical play. Those primarily interested in other topics may wish to skip this section and return to it below. The main point has already been outlined and the purpose of a philosophical reflection in the context of a comparative generalization was described above.

What is contingency? What makes something contingent? There are two seemingly different answers. One is that contingency is being *this* rather than *that*. The other is that contingency is being *something* rather than *nothing*. These are connected in the fact that to be something (rather than nothing) is to be this something rather than some other thing. So the originating question of contingency is what it is to be determinate, this rather than that. Our hypothesis is that to be determinate is to be a harmony with two kinds of features, conditional and essential. The conditional features are those relative to the other things with respect to which the thing is determinate. These might be causal conditions, for instance, or logical or formal conditions, spatio-temporal connections, and so forth. The notion of conditional feature is very abstract and is illustrated

in any tradition's representations of relations. Essential features are those by virtue of which the thing integrates its conditional features so as to have its position or own-being and not to be reducible to the other things in relation to which it is determinate if it is itself. Essential features might be subtle spontaneous acts of self-integration, of the sort Kohn and Miller attribute to the Dao, or continuing genetic codes that integrate an organism's interactions with the environment over time, or moral norms that integrate a person's actual and ideal life. The traditions have many variants on these distinctions between conditional and essential features, including explicit denials of them.

If a thing is determinate by virtue of being what it is over against something else (doubtless many other things), the question of its contingency is the question of how it is possible for it to be together with those other things. The question of this togetherness is deeper than might be expected. On the level of cosmic or intraworldly connections, things are together by virtue of their conditional features; they condition one another. In order for any conditioning to be possible, however, the several things must be together at a deeper ontological level in which their essential features are together. This is because the things as harmonies of conditional and essential features could neither condition nor be conditioned without their respective essential features by virtue of which they integrate their conditions. And yet their respective essential features are precisely what is not constituted by the connections of conditional features. Nāgārjuna saw this point in his critique of motion and causation: if a thing is the result only of antecedent conditions (*pratītyasamutpāda*), then it has no essential features to allow it to stand apart from those conditions and no change is possible from the antecedent to a consequent. No antecedent condition can be the ownbeing of an event or temporal thing. The nihilist interpretation of this is that there is no own-being at all, hence no change or causation, hence no real temporal things. The positive Buddhist interpretation is that events do happen with the spontaneity of the moment, a kind of evanescent essential rising-and-ceasing that makes temporal flow and causation possible and in fact is the basis for speaking of particularity. Because of the South Asian assumption that being has to have permanence, the spontaneity of the moment cannot be called being, or own-being, however it functions essentially. To put the point another way, more general than temporal flow, true relation requires true otherness, and true otherness cannot be reduced to relations alone, for there would be no realities to be related. For the sake of the hypothesis, let us call this deeper togetherness the ontological context of mutual relevance.

The question of contingency then becomes, what is the ontological context of mutual relevance? Perhaps the most obvious suggestion comes

from the rhetorical shape of the notion of context, namely, that it is simply a bigger context than that constituted by conditional features, a vaster context that includes the essential features of everything as well as the conditional ones. Let the Earth and its affairs be explained by the greater Heavens of which it is a part! Yet there are two difficulties with this line of thought. If the larger context is itself determinate, something specific over and above the things contained within it, then there is a problem with how its own essential features are together with the things it contains; an even larger context would be necessary and an infinite regress results. If the larger context is not determinate, however, then it reduces to the things it contains, which were the very things needing explanation in the first place concerning how their essential features could be together.

A more plausible suggestion for the ontological context of mutual relevance, in fact developed in one form or another by all our traditions, is to say that the things of the world are together because they are simply made to be that way, with all their spatial and temporal relations. The ontological context is the act that creates them as related to one another with their conditions and essential features. The metaphors of contingency itself come from this suggestion. How are we to understand this ontological creation?

What all of our religious traditions did in their ancient roots was to parse the meaning of creation in cosmogonic myths in which one of the pantheon is symbolized as the creator and organizer of the whole, like a king who brings order by force and law by command, or like a potter who creates vessels. Each tradition brings a rich array of metaphors for creators. But the same dialectic that limited the suggestion of bigger and bigger contexts pushes at these symbols. If the creator God is determinate, by analogy or otherwise, then he [*sic*] seems to fall within the world of things created and the *real* creator is more transcendent. Pushed to its conceptual purity, the notion of ontological creation required to account for the possible togetherness of related but different things includes three interrelated notions. One is that the creative act is an asymmetrical move from nothing to the specific determinate character of the world. Creation is a real making of something new. The second is that the creation is made out of nothing; for, if there were something determinate out of which creation is made, that would have to be determinately related to what is created, and an even larger context for mutual relevance would be needed, a creative act behind the creative act. The ultimate source cannot be anything determinate. The third is that the creative act issues in the determinate world. The world is simply the terminus of the creative act; it has no medium of its own within which to float apart from its

ontological creation. The world is also specific. Although there are complicated issues about whether the world could have developed otherwise than it did, this model of creation locates the specificity of the world in the act of creation.

Act of creating, indeterminate source of the act, determinate product of the act: these are the notions making up the larger notion of ontological act by virtue of which serious contingency can be conceived. The determinate state of affairs in which there is an ontological act of creation is among the things created; in theistic language, only by creating the world does God become creator, or anything else determinate. Apart from actually creating, there is nothing, no God who is a being with inner intentions, no substance with potentialities, no secretly pregnant non-being. For if there were something back there or behind the act, it would be determinate and hence in need of ontological relation to the determinate things it creates, requiring a deeper ground, and so forth. This is the ratchet that drives the dialectic of transcendence. The creative act itself is singular, encompassing all possible diversity within its product, including its own constituent notions. It is also eternal in the sense that all temporal connections are among the things created.

7.3.3 *Religious Representations of the Logic of Contingency*

The logic of contingency is complicated, and different traditions focus variously on different parts. Spelling out some of these foci can indicate the comparative nature of the way the traditions articulate the ultimate, each with at least parts of the spectrum from the highly personified to highly abstract, transcendent, and apophatically asserted. Begin with the elements of the idea of ontological creation itself.

Consider the asymmetrical making in the act of creation. The West Asian theisms are very clear that the world depends wholly on God's creative act. God alone is real, as Haq points out for Islam, and the reality of the world is derivative from God's reality. But because of the personifying metaphors that tend to treat God as *a being* in West Asian religions, the asymmetry tends to move from a fullness of being with no internal differentiation—expressed in the unity theme in Islam as well as Judaism and Christianity—to a determinate world. But to distinguish a wholly unified and simple beginning point for creation from nothing at all is extremely difficult. Although West Asian religions have many strong variants on the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, they often are mixed with emanationist themes in which the act of creation is the diminishment of the source, or introduction of negation into a prior fullness. Emanationism is asymmetrical, but in reverse of the creation of novelty.

Chinese religion, by contrast, is resolutely asymmetrical in its notion of the advance toward novelty. The Daoist themes of infinitesimal acts of spontaneity and Zhou Dunyi's progression from non-being to the Great Ultimate, to yang, to yin, to the base elements, and thence to the ten thousand things, both illustrate the moves from nothing to something by the least complicated possible steps. In contrast to the West Asian emphasis on the unity of the source of the creative act, Chinese religion focuses on the presence of novelty-making spontaneity in each and every occurrence, all coordinated so that the unitary flow of the Dao is realized. The brahmanical religions of South Asia share the problematic of the creation of the contingent world, but focus more on the source rather than on the creative act, and this makes a major difference from the others.

Consider the focus on the source of the creative act rather than the act itself. Like the West Asian religions, the South Asian developed monotheistic rhetoric out of the polytheism of the Vedas. But whereas the West Asian religions carried on strong notions of individual subjectivity for the creator, and hence particular intentionality, the brahmanical religions transmuted subjectivity to consciousness, indeed consciousness as pure and essentially undifferentiated by objects of consciousness. This was clearly articulated in the ancient Sāmkhya texts distinguishing *puruṣa* from *prakṛiti*. Clooney's text acknowledges consciousness for Nārāyaṇa.

Far more than either West or East Asian religions, however, the South Asian focus on the source of the creative act and the product rather than the act itself. Picking up on Haq's point that for the more mystical elements of Islam, only the source is really real and the world has derivative reality (or even unreality when considered by itself), the brahmanical religions and Buddhism place an overwhelming emphasis on the reality of the source. Because it is the source of all matter and change, the source apart from that derivation is beyond matter and change, and any determinate complexity. The traditions divide into the dualistic and non-dualistic responses to the overwhelming and exclusive reality of Brahman, and still seek a middle ground. The apparently dualistic Vedāntins such as Vedānta Deśika, for instance, say that Brahman is not so without qualities that the finite world, its matter, motions, and thoughts cannot be the action of Brahman, who is the material cause of the world. The non-dualists, emphasizing even more the transcendence of Brahman over any determinateness marking differences, say that the world of diversity is not quite real, *māyā*, though it is the context of life.

On the other side, the South Asian traditions emphasize the presence of divinity in finite things, divinizing shrines and holy places, as well as holy people. Where West Asian religions get anxious about idolatry, the South Asian are generous with and tolerant of divine vitality in just

about any thing one might focus on. The "I am" sayings of Kṛṣṇa in books 9 and 10 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are classic statements. Buddhism radicalizes the focus on the immediacy of the dependent world. It emphasizes contingency in every sense just as much as any other tradition; but with its focus on the suchness of what is contingent, it finds nothing behind that. The Buddhist schools differ widely in their interpretation of temporal process and what if anything endures through that. But they agree that any specifiable thing, including the whole if they allow reference to that, is radically contingent on something other than itself. But by the logic of contingency, there is no thing on which they are dependent. Subordinating concerns for the asymmetrical act of creation, Mahāyāna Buddhists search for ways to talk about process as if it had no enduring being of its own, the recognition of this being enlightenment about the true meaning and reality of the life of change and liberation from the sufferings that come from expecting some reality to depend on. Madhyāmikas and other Buddhists would not describe the logic of contingency as the contingent nature of the creator; that is theistic talk. They would rather say that this is ultimate truth, the moral of which is that the determinate world, such as it is, is the only thing that is determinate. Having attained that ultimate insight, we should forget the logic of contingency because it only points to nothing beyond the determinate world, and attend to freedom within change. Whereas the theistic religions employ the rhetoric of a transcendent being to describe the absolutely indeterminate source as it would be apart from creation, Buddhism employs the rhetoric of denial of transcendent reality to make the same point. No less than the other religions, Buddhism has multiple scales of personifications of its angle on the creative act or, rather, its emphasis on the dependent product of that act.

Our hypothesis about determinateness also suggests comparative points, illustrated somewhat in the texts we studied.

That things are *harmonies* of features means that part of their ontological contingency consists in their order, the plan or pattern according to which their features are together through time. Harmonies are harmonies of harmonies and themselves play roles in other harmonies. Many traditions say that creation is the source of order, or that the overcoming of chaos is part of ultimate reality. Kohn and Miller say this for Chinese religion, and the first creation story in Genesis can be interpreted as an account of ordering chaos (though it also can be interpreted as an account of the arising of any determinateness whatsoever).

That things are harmonies of a plurality of *features* means that part of their ontological contingency consists in the fecundity, creativity, and diversity of their components. Many traditions represent ontological

creation in the spontaneity of diversity, and suggest that orders or patterns are somewhat temporary and easily upset. This is close to the ontological picture Kohn and Miller draw about Daoism, and also to the Mahāyāna emphasis on *pratītyasamutpāda*. Most of our religions have strains of nature romanticism and mysticism. Of our specialist chapters, only Clooney's treatment of Vedānta Deśika's text lacks that; Clooney does say that Deśika's Tamil works might lead in that direction.

That things are harmonies of *essential* and conditional features means that part of their ontological contingency consists in existential particularity, position, place in space and time, and in the singularity and uniqueness of each thing. Religions testify to this in symbols for the reality of the creator or creative energy within the soul, closer to us than our jugular veins, the presence of the Dao in our own spontaneity. Some of the forms of South Asian religions that focus principally on the source of the determinate world (derivatively real or merely apparent) deny or deflect attention from the inner core of singularity in persons. But others, such as the Viśiṣṭādvaita school of Rāmānuja and Vedānta Deśika, emphasize the divine core of each individual's consciousness and action. If we are extremely scrupulous to avoid saying that one's essential features are real in the sense of enduring entities, Madhyamaka Buddhists might not be averse to admitting that the evanescent reality of our moments, seen for the empty realities they are and however framed across time and space pragmatically, are ultimate.

That things are harmonies of *essential* and *conditional* features means that part of their ontological contingency is their position in life, society, and the cosmos as webbed by their conditioning connections. No individual, nor place, nor event, nor job, nor community, could be what it is without its conditional features; therefore all the things with respect to which it is determinate are as much a part of it as its essential features, and its contingency is in those defining connections. Human beings always face the distinction between the actual set of connections and ideal ones, and this provides a special kind of conditional features situating people in the world. In *The Human Condition* we defined that condition in part as living under obligation. Theistic religions, insofar as they are committed to divine intentionality, interpret this in part as providence. Chinese religions represent the mandate of heaven and the sagely task of finding one's normative destiny. For the religions of South Asia we studied, the normative contrast relative to conditional features is between the ignorance that distorts those conditions and the enlightenment that reveals what is real (if anything) in them.

This hypothesis about the logic of contingency points out several focal points for the development of symbols for ontological creativity and the

ontological dependence of the world. The focal points mentioned here are the creative act itself, its source, its product (namely, the world), the order of the world as consisting of harmonies, the plenitude of the world consisting of the components of harmonies, the essential features of harmonies, and the conditional features. As the religions develop symbol systems taking off from one focal point rather than another, they seem to exhibit different logics. That difference is apparent when one traces their representations' relative places on spectra running from personifications to abstract symbols testifying to the logical elements themselves, especially to the emptiness or indeterminateness of the source apart from that of which it is the source. Yet because there is a coherence to the elements in the logic of contingency, religions exhibit pressures to give expression to logical elements that do not fit easily with their dominant symbol systems. Thus, all say something (including negative things) about the asymmetrical act of making the contingent world, about the source of that on which all depends, and about the character of determinate dependency itself, including the harmony of own-nature and relation. To be sure, the religions often say different things about these elements. But they have symbols to address them all, or exhibit tensions in those symbols seeming to exclude or neglect important elements.

To give a summary expression to what the religions we studied say about ultimate reality: It is this complex of ontological contingency and creativity. Each element in this logical complex has been construed as a finite/infinite complex. It has its own determinate finite logical structure, and yet without that structure's contribution, there would be no determinate world. So the world is radically contingent upon each element, and without that element there would be nothing, complete indetermination, the infinite. Moreover, the elements hang together logically, although there are few concrete religious symbol systems that put them all together coherently. So the overall religious worldviews that are assumed in both thought and practice by representatives of the world religions are taken as complex icons for the ultimate. Constructed together into a comparative category, they present an extraordinarily rich but logically coherent collage of visions of the ultimate, that which is most important because of the nature of reality.

7.4 Relating to the Ultimate

The discussion of ultimate realities requires a dual perspective, we found, an ontological one, as the topic would seem to require on its face, and the perspective of the human religious search for the ultimate. The discussion

in the previous section attempted to dwell on the first with a frankly ontological model for making the category of ultimacy concrete. Even there, however, we referred frequently to how people find the logic of contingency in the elements of their own lives and perceptible world. Now we need to switch the perspectives and come at the problem of the ultimate as a task of religious life.

The organization of this section shall use the three categories of religious virtuosi introduced by Kohn and Miller, the philosophical, the practical, and the mythical. These are ideal types defined by the uses of symbols, not classes of persons: the same person can be a philosopher, a practical mystic, and a weaver of myths. The interest here is not in describing three kinds or dimensions of religious life. Rather it is to study three kinds of uses of religious symbols of the ultimate. In some respects it is true to say that they signify three kinds of symbols of the ultimate: philosophical, practical, and mythical. Alas, culture is not always that neat. Sometimes the philosophical virtuosi are constrained to work with highly personified symbols at the other end of the spectrum from the philosophic; Saldarini's discussion of Judaism and Haq's of Islam illustrate this abundantly. Sometimes practical self-transformers are stuck with airy philosophical terms such as "Dao" and need to supplement this with fantastical images of charcoal furnaces in their viscera. Sometimes mythic worldviews need to combine kataphatic imagery of heavenly bureaucracies, angels and spirits, and supreme creators with consorts, with apophatic denials of anything determinate whatsoever in the source of everything contingent.

The result is that we need to examine not just the different kinds of symbols but the different uses of the symbols, because the same symbol might be used philosophically, practically, and mythically. The purpose of the use in each case, as we have seen, is the actualization of the ultimate in human experience.

7.4.1 *Philosophical Virtuosi*

We can begin with the philosophical virtuosi because they have been discussed so much already (being most like ourselves!). The philosophical realization of the ultimate in human experience is the understanding of it, the conceptual understanding expressed in representations that can communicate the understanding to others. To this end, philosophy seeks representations that are universal and do not have to be qualified by context or perspective, and that themselves can be used to contextualize other symbols. To say with the Jewish psalmist that God is the rock of salvation is not to make a philosophic remark, even though few are likely to ask

next whether God is sedimentary or igneous. To say with the Hebrew Bible that God is a person is also not to make a philosophic remark once it is realized that God's "person" is not like any other person, that God is strange and beyond all such categories. But to say that God is not in a genus and is creator of everything that is, and can also be personified as the object of prayer and the controller of history, is to speak philosophically, as Maimonides did. That Maimonides and Cohen have never been taken to heart in Judaism, always somewhat marginalized, illustrates the point that Judaism does not emphasize philosophic virtuosity.

There are at least four kinds of philosophic representation or modes of thought, all aiming to speak without the need for further contextualization and qualification. The first and most obvious is the development of categories for describing and explaining the ultimate. Vedānta Deśika is a straightforward practitioner of this kind of philosophy, operating in a context in which his conversation partners worked on developing and refining the same categories (he also wrote in other genres). Islamic concerns over whether the plurality of names of God imply diversity within God also illustrate philosophy as categoreal thinking, thinking that explains by reference to a system of categories. The second kind of philosophic thought is dialectical in which there is a process or sequence of thought such that categories at earlier stages are transformed or reinterpreted at later stages. The Buddhist debate between the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka interpretations of the move from conventional truth to ultimate truth back to conventional truth is an example of dialectical thinking. The truth value of dialectical assertions is extremely sensitive to the position in the sequence of the dialectic. What is true at one stage ("it is not a mountain") is false at another stage.

The third kind of philosophical strategy to escape further contextualization and qualification is the use of irony. With irony, switches in context and taking-back kinds of qualifications are already built in to the philosophic position. Zhuangzi was the master ironist in philosophical Daoism, though the whole of Daoism stresses ironic presentation. The Prologue and Epilogue of the Book of Job are deliberate ironies, and Kierkegaard played ironically with categoreal philosophy. The fourth strategic philosophic use of representations of the ultimate is apophatic theology, the assertion of some characterization and then the demonstration that the referent is really beyond that characterization so that it does not apply simply or completely. Apophasis requires a positive moment, usually the assertion of a system or worldview as iconic of reality. But then it shows how this does not apply to the deepest reality. Apophatic theology is sometimes just modesty about the limitations of any representations. But in the hands of mystics, it often takes the form of tracing signs of the

ultimate from immediacy in the world back through the causal processes by which the ultimate is expressed and diversely manifested, to the source that is beyond any determinate characterization as it is realized that any proposed characterization is derivative, not native to the source as such.

The four kinds of philosophic approaches to incorporate a true understanding of the ultimate rarely are separated. Most thinkers exhibit several. Perhaps Vedānta Deśika in the text studied here is purely categorial and Zhuangzi purely ironic. The others are mixtures. Narrative thought can never be philosophical except in the form of irony, because it always requires a narrative perspective that can be qualified by other perspectives on the narrative (for instance, the Egyptians' or Canaanites' view of the Exodus, the Jews' view of Jesus as Messiah).

7.4.2 *Practical Virtuosi*

Kohn and Miller, followed by Haq, describe the practical virtuosi as those who transform themselves so as to actualize or better relate to the ultimate. They limit their discussion to individuals, associating the process with mysticism and the attainment of personal powers in spiritual or political matters. We should also note that the ultimate is approached practically by communities as well as individuals, as when Jews attempt to conform their lives to Torah, or Muslims to the Qur'ān, or Confucians to something like a good family structure in all segments of society.

The most direct analysis of the practical approach to realizing ultimate reality is Fredriksen's study of sacrifice imagery in early Christianity. In late Second Temple Judaism of which early Christianity was a branch, "realizing ultimate reality" did not mean esoteric communion with the divine but rather proper participation in the sacrificial life of the community because that is what God had said to do, with many specifications. In order to participate in the sacrifice (in many different forms and degrees of participation, usually for men only), Jews were required to be pure and holy. Although not subject to Levitical purity laws like Jews, Gentiles were taken to be profane by definition, and Paul used the images of sacrifice (and there are many) to argue that Christ had transformed the Gentiles from profane to holy.

Because the Gentiles had their own related sacrifice traditions and understood their lives to require sacrifice in order to be rightly ordered, they too could understand and be restored by appropriating Christ as the sacrifice, Paul thought. The result is that, having been made holy by Jesus Christ, those who appropriate Christ by participating symbolically in the eucharistic sacrifice, by imitating Christ, and by many other means, are brought to God and then need daily to practice living in holy

ways where the sacrificial eucharistic life of the Christian community is the appropriate way to be before God. Fredriksen emphasizes the collage organization of Paul's sacrifice metaphors—they do not fit together as a consistent set of categories, but as a mutually reinforcing set of variations on the theme of sacrifice as the life before God made possible by the restoration of purity and holiness. As Fredriksen says (3.1), "We have to stop thinking theologically, and instead think sacrificially. Purity, holiness, separation, blood, flesh, eating: these orient us in the first-century understanding of the new reality wrought in Christ."

What is most striking in Fredriksen's account is that the restoration of purity and holiness is a real change in the individuals, also manifested in their community as participants in Christ. The change is not merely an alteration in God's intention about sinners, as the later *Reformationsproblematik* would debate. It is a real change in the individuals. Moreover, it is the historical life of Jesus that accomplishes the change, along with the faithful appropriation of Jesus's sacrifice. Although the senses in which Christianity, and Judaism, are "historical" religions are very complicated, the sacrifice theme in Christianity that Fredriksen develops is plainly historical: Christians "realize" God as ultimate by relating historically to the historical Jesus.

Buddhism, Islam, and certain schools of medieval Daoism are historical religions in the sense that their dharma or revelations were delivered by historical personages and the organization of their institutions has historical connections with those founding persons or events. But the practical orientation to the ultimate in all those cases is not to an historical figure such as Jesus but to patterns or powers contemporary with practitioners and universally available at any time (at least since the revelation).

Practical virtuosity is to transform individuals (and/or communities) so as to realize what is most important to religious life in those individuals and communities. Sometimes the transformation is involved in philosophical virtuosity. Some philosophically sophisticated concepts cannot be grasped thoroughly without an elaborate yoga of transforming the soul's capacity for understanding. Meditative practices often focus on this kind of intellectual transformation. All the traditions we studied have schools of mysticism in which spiritual formation means the transformation of soul so as to be able to appropriate the ultimate by means of symbols that do not work without the special formation. Mysticism, as noted above, can focus on the ultimate in the immediacy of contingent existence, in the power of the act of creation, and in the depths of the abyss out of which the creative act emerges (i.e., nonbeing). The dominant kinds of practical transformation to realize the ultimate in our religions, however, were not the intellectual mystical type.

The Chinese religion described in practical terms by Kohn and Miller exhibited the types of the sage and the perfected. The sage might encompass philosophical understanding but was known for special powers and shrewdness of judgment. The perfected, especially in medieval Daoism, developed special powers of influencing people and things, and also of extending life. In both cases this is because adepts are able to access the spontaneous creativity of the Dao.

In the cases of Judaism and Islam, and some forms of Christianity later than Fredriksen examined, the practical transformation is to conform human individual and communal life to divinely established patterns for such life, as in the Torah, the Qur'ān, or the image of God in human beings or the ideal church community. In all these cases symbolic systems are in tension for connecting the ideal patterns for human being with the ultimate transcendent God; somehow they are identical, but without compromising the radically asymmetry of the creator and created, or the unity of God and the diversity within the patterns for human life.

In the case of Buddhism, the transformation of the self is liberation from the bondage of ignorance by realizing the emptiness of things, with emptiness interpreted variously among the schools. Madhyamaka is one of the most intellectual of schools, and Nāgārjuna is widely interpreted as writing his philosophy for soteriological purposes.⁶ The practical purpose of all religious activities shaped by symbols of the ultimate—chanting, meditating, liturgies, working, wrestling with koans and angels, as well as thinking philosophically—is liberation. All are considered "expedient means" to liberation rather than descriptions of ultimate reality. Whereas philosophical virtuosity might aim at realizing the ultimate in understanding, Buddhist practical virtuosity aims at liberation regardless of the descriptive accuracy of the symbols. In fact, many Buddhist symbols are wild and fantastic, surely not descriptive even in a sense that can be explained as metaphors. Gory gods and goddesses are intended to scare the complacent, not look like Buddha-mind or emptiness.⁷

The Buddhist case illustrates very clearly the fact that in the practice of transforming persons and communities, the payoff is not in description or explanation but in actually connecting with, entering into, or conforming to the patterns of the ultimate. How that is actualized depends on the ways each tradition of practice relates to the elements in the logic of contingency—the immediacy of temporal diversity, the power of the creative act, the nothingness of the source, the order in contingent things, the diversity of their components, the existential specificity of their ownbeing, and their place in the network of the cosmos and human history.

7.4.3 Mythical Virtuosi

Whereas philosophical virtuosi attempt to develop ways of thinking about the ultimate that minimize contextualization and qualification, mythical virtuosi seek representations that make sense of why a tradition's practices are supposed to work. They provide both the rationales for the practices and the levers of correction and development in new circumstances. Practices and mythologies develop together. When a tradition has an important philosophical element, the mythology needs to incorporate that. Often that incorporation means that the philosophies are required to provide an interpretation of the mythic symbols. When philosophies introduce indigestible elements into the mythology, as has happened when they mediated the modern scientific worldview to all the traditional religions, the mythologies become problematical and new virtuosi are needed. What Kohn and Miller mean by mythical virtuosi overlaps with what many contemporaries mean by theologians.

Realizing the ultimate through mythology has not been an important theme of these discussions. Kohn and Miller touched on it in connection with the medieval Daoism's divinization of Laozi as a way of envisioning the cosmos so as to make sense of Daoist internal and external practices. Philosophically, that is associated with the creation theme, as they note. Saldarini discussed the uses of mythic thinking in connection with the symbols of early rabbinic and medieval mysticism. Fredriksen focused more than the others on mythology in her discussion of divine sacrifice and its relation to the practices of the early Christian community, but found Paul and the other New Testament writers to be incomplete or incoherent in the development of a consistent set of myths of atonement. Haq stressed the tensions between taking the names of God without analysis and providing those analyses, but without suggesting that either approach by itself can integrate all the symbols. Clooney's discussion of Vedānta Deśika is relentlessly philosophical except for the repeated reference to Nārāyaṇa's consort, Śrī, which is not explained either mythically or philosophically. Eckel's traditions of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka Buddhism are replete with a rich mythology of gods, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas, but he did not treat that in depth.

Perhaps the reason for the sparing treatments of approaching the ultimate through mythology is that it really is a question for the next topic in this series of comparisons: religious truth. How is mythic truth different from philosophical? By being on the personifying end of representations of ultimacy rather than the philosophic end? Hardly, for the philosophic representations often bear upon practice and thus need to be represented within the mythology. Is mythology a slightly out-of-date form of thinking

for our religious traditions? Are they formed fundamentally through a rejection of mythopoeic thinking, so that already their myths from the beginning are under deconstruction? These are all serious questions that need to be addressed under the general rubric of religious truth. And they need to be answered before much can be said about how mythology is a way of realizing the ultimate in religious experience.

Notes

1. Tillich's most famous discussion is in his *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), volume 1, Introduction, section 4. In that place he defines two "formal criteria" for theology. The first is, "the object of theology is what concerns us ultimately." The second is, "our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being." The content of theology, for Tillich, has to do with determining what ought to be the object of human ultimate concern, what is worth that concern rather than of only preliminary worth. His existentialist elements appear in the discussion of being determined in being or not-being. In *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), chap. 2, Neville uses something like this idea in claiming that objects of serious (ultimate) religious reference are finite/infinite contrasts that are construed as determining elements defining our world as such. The idea of ultimate concern is particularly important for our group who represent both traditions pointing to ontological realities as ultimate and traditions, especially some forms of Buddhism, that say that realities ought not be objects of ultimate or religious concern.
2. Julia Ching and Hans Küng, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).
3. As Anne Birdwhistell has commented in *Transition to Neo-Confucianism: Shao Yung on Knowledge and Symbols of Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).
4. See *The Human Condition*, section 1.1.
5. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 3 vols., ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press): vol. 1, *Introduction and the Concept of Religion* (1984); vol. 2, *Determinate Religion* (1987); vol. 3, *The Consummate Religion* (1985).
6. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967).
7. Neville, op. cit., chap. 5.