Religious Truth is the third and concluding volume of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, following The Human Condition and Ultimate Realities. Although this volume can stand alone as a treatment of its topic and a commentary on our comparative project, its most exciting contribution lies in its conjunction with the other volumes. The three volumes together constitute a trajectory of the development of comparative understanding and habits of mind. Together they record a diversity of approaches to comparison that we have integrated in the project, sometimes unwittingly.

Moreover, the chapters by each of the specialists in the three volumes—chapters 1–6 here—can be read as something like continuous essays or monographs extending from one volume to the next; this was not the initial intention, but it is manifest in the back-references in so many of the specialist essays here. The result is an extended treatment of a central Chinese approach to comparing religious ideas in the three essays by Livia Kohn with James Miller, an analogous treatment of Hindu approaches in the essays by Francis Clooney, S.J., Buddhist approaches in the essays by David Eckel, and so forth with the rest.

This volume, then, read in conjunction with its predecessors, The Human Condition and Ultimate Realities, is far richer than had been imagined at the outset of the project. The original intent, ambitious enough, was to present comparative studies of some central ideas from six religious traditions on three successive topics (namely, the human condition, ultimate realities, and religious truth). We had hoped that increasing erudition in one another's subjects, mutual adaptation of comparative habits of thought, and steadily enhanced comparative lore would arise from
successive treatments of these topics, and that hope has been fulfilled. It became apparent early on, however, that formulating the comparisons itself expresses a point of view, and the summary chapters in *The Human Condition* were labeled “Confucian” in only partial jest. Subsequent volumes, especially this one, have been much more explicit about the perspective from which summary comparisons are made. Now it is clear that the specialist essays, looking retrospectively to their antecedents by the same authors, constitute other perspectives for comparison. They interweave the wool of the summary comparisons across the topics with six kinds of warp for comparisons developed through from other perspectives. The warp is not systematic, but perhaps is all the richer for that.

The topic of religious truth from the beginning took shape in our minds under the following two interpretations. On the one hand we asked what representatives of each of the traditions said about religious truth, and indeed each tradition has many different representatives. This interpretation takes religious truth to be a topic within each tradition. Our approach worked by analogy with our approaches to the human condition and ultimate realities, asking how representative ideas or texts from each tradition specify the vague topic.

On the other hand we asked in what senses the affirmations or suppositions of the various traditions might be true, which of course means that we have in mind a theory about various senses of truth that has contemporary viability. Recognition of this side of the ambiguity forced us to take responsibility for some of the philosophical suppositions and leading ideas of our comparative inquiry, a recognition previously forced upon us in chapter 8 of *Ultimate Realities*. These two interpretations of the topic of religious truth are distinguished here in the separate treatments in chapters 7 and 8, the first of which treats religious truth as a topic within our traditions and the second of which treats truth as a topic for thinking about the traditions.

The lesson about the need for explicit philosophy is worth dwelling on. We had begun the project with the unspoken assumption that, because comparative hypotheses ought to arise empirically and dialectically out of the data, contemporary philosophical considerations could only add an unwanted bias. We are as sensitive as anyone to the charges that philosophy cooks classifications and comparisons, charges that have been leveled by “scientific historians” at phenomenologists of religion from Hegel to Eliade. Yet our wariness of philosophy was strange: all the project participants are philosophically sophisticated, several (Clooney, Eckel, and Haq) focus particularly on philosophical elements in their traditions of specialty, and Wildman and Neville are plain philosophers of religion (well, as plain as one can be after participating in a project such
as this). Only when we came to draw out comparative hypotheses in *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 8, did it become clear that the integration required for explicit comparison demands something not contained in the data alone (assuming that the data could ever be received pure, which they cannot). Merely to show how the different traditions say different things about the topic is not yet to make comparisons. Genuine comparison requires saying explicitly how religious ideas differ and how they are the same, where they overlap and where they are mutually irrelevant, in what their importance lies, and what connections among them are trivial. Precisely because the traditional texts and thinkers have usually not already made those comparisons, the comparisons involve adding something new. “Reading the texts together” is often something new, as Clooney points out. Within our project, however, and within the larger dynamic of recent comparative studies of which our project is a part, much of what is new is philosophy. And where the traditions have already engaged in comparison, as in the texts discussed by Clooney (chapter 2) and Eckel (chapter 3) here, they have done so philosophically.

This is not especially surprising. Some philosophical scheme, most often an interpretation of religion or of the religious, inevitably guides the selection of religious data, categories for making comparisons, and criteria for adequacy of comparisons made. The function of philosophical interpretations of religion needs to be carefully managed to avoid ideological distortions; this is a concern that grows stronger as self-consciousness about comparative method increases. In view of this, we decided to be explicit about introducing philosophical considerations and to build our concluding comparative hypotheses around them. Hence, the discussion of a contemporary theory of religious truth, chapter 8, follows the summary of our comparative hypotheses in chapter 7. In this instance, the philosophy arises from the work of Neville and Wildman, with the others signing on in varying degrees of enthusiasm and diffidence.1 Readers should understand that, although every chapter here has been shaped by discussions involving everyone, each is the full responsibility of the authors indicated. Great relief was expressed when we realized that the integrating summary chapters of this and the other volumes do not have to be consensus documents or the result of votes as in the Jesus Seminar; they are contributions reflecting the judgments of their authors under the influence of the group.

The previous volumes of this project detailed the philosophical conception of comparison that has guided our inquiry and which in turn has been modified and developed in the course of that inquiry. Readers interested in the short version should consult *The Human Condition*, chapter 1; a longer version is in *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 8. On the relation of
our conception of comparison with others, see *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 9. For a survey of the various uses of categories, including comparative categories, see *Ultimate Realities*, chapter 10.

The shortest possible version of our conception of comparison is the following. In any comparison, the things compared are compared in some respect. The “respect of comparison” is a vague category. So, for instance, to compare religious traditions or texts in respect of what they say about the human condition is to treat the human condition as a vague category that is made specific in different ways by what the traditions or their representatives say about it. The same is true in regard to comparing traditions and their ideas with respect to what they take to be religious truth. Comparative categories, then, need to be identified in three ways: in their vague form that applies neutrally to all the things under comparison, as specified variously by the things compared, and summarily so that it is possible to see just what the category is as integrating the comparisons. In *The Human Condition* we clearly understood the first two moments of identification, distinguishing the vague categories from their various specifications. But there we did not get very far past the listing of different specifications in the direction of full-blown comparison. We attempted to remedy that in the conclusions to *Ultimate Realities* and again in this volume.

The upshot of this threefold identification of comparative categories is that our comparisons are hypothetical and vulnerable to correction in three senses. The identification of the vague category by itself is an ongoing process. So many natural and easy articulations of supposedly neutral notions of the human condition or ultimate realities turned out upon investigation to be grievously biased. Only toward the end did we arrive at relatively settled opinions about the respects in which we were making comparisons. If this is so, then the specifications themselves are only hypothetical and always subject to further refinement and revision. An ongoing problem for us has been to settle upon just how representative a given text or thinker might be for a tradition, noting the diversity within each. Finally, our comparisons are hypothetical in the forms in which they attempt to sum up what we know about the comparative topic after we have seen it variously specified.

Because comparisons have the form of hypotheses for further investigation, it is impossible to stress too much the importance of vulnerability to correction. Instead of seeking well-entrenched conclusions we seek hypotheses that are stable as a result of our inquiry but ready for correction where they are wrong, misleading, or partial without proper qualification. Comparisons do not stand alone but are part of a process. We view this project as a segment in a much larger comparative process regarding the understanding of religion.
We divided the topic of religious truth into three subcategories. One is epistemological truth, embracing such themes as how we know, the meaning of knowing, criteria for knowledge and argument, and so forth. A second is scriptural and revelational truth with attendant issues of authority and interpretation. A third subcategory is truth-in-practice where the focus is less on claims, affirmations, and suppositions, and more on realizing truth, manifesting truth, and living in the truth. All of the specialists' chapters in this volume treat these three subcategories—under the titles of "the nature of truth," "expressions of truth," and "cultivation and embodiment of truth"—and make comparisons from the standpoint of their specific texts or traditions. They are sorted more clearly in chapters 7 and 8.

Throughout our project we have been aware of many contested issues in defining our framing subject-matter, religion. This is an aspect of the role of philosophical schemes in guiding selection of data and categories, mentioned above. Is there such a thing as religion? Or only religions? If the latter, how can we tell what counts as a religion? Is Marxism a religion, as Tillich claimed? We decided early on to treat Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism(s) as "Chinese religion," not even "Chinese religions." Our principal reasons there were their common suppositions and their close interactions both historically and in the lives of individuals. What is at stake in all this?

On the one hand, there is nothing wrong with arbitrarily choosing to study comparatively the traditions, texts, and figures that we have—we make no pretense at all to completeness regarding comparative religious ideas, or even comprehensive representation of any of our religious traditions. On the other hand, there are normative issues that have been operative throughout the study, often unconsciously. If we compare religions in some respect, we suppose that this topic is important to all of the religions compared in that respect. Does that comparative category or respect of comparison thus constitute a defining mark of religion? Is it important or religiously defining for every tradition to determine itself with respect to the human condition, to something ultimate, and to truth? Is there a religious dimension to aspects of reality and life that also have nonreligious elements? Just what is religion, such that there are religious ideas that might be true about the human condition and ultimacy? Chapter 9 below attempts to sort some of these issues.

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