Religious Truth in the Six Traditions

A Summary

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7.1 Religious Truth: Our Categories and Their Justification

In this chapter, attention shifts from making sense of first-order religious ideas and what it means to speak of their epistemological and performative truth to the second-order accounts of religious truth that we encountered in the religious traditions we studied. Anticipating our (contemporary) theory of religious truth in chapter 8, a conversation between it and what the various traditions have to say about religious truth ought to be possible. In this conversation the extent to which our theory takes account of the various traditions' insights into religious truth should be evident and adjustments and improvements should follow. Such a conversation does not simply begin, however, thereupon to be instantly effective. On the contrary, a precondition for success in such a conversation, according to our method, is self-consciousness about the manner of our appropriation of the data from the religions we have studied. This self-consciousness is expressed especially in the flexible organization of the data from the religious traditions by comparative categories—categories hard won in the
exhausting if not rigorous process of mutual torment that we have come fondly to think of as comparison. With the usual debates and worries, therefore, by the end of our third year we had tentatively settled on a richly nuanced set of subcategories for spelling out various dimensions of the general category of religious truth. The three categories are the nature of truth as an epistemological problem; the expression of truth in scripture and other forms, considering issues of revelation and authority; and the cultivation or embodiment of truth.

As Haq showed in chapter 6, the three subcategories are not easily kept apart, and in fact are interwoven in such a way that, at least in Islam, little of significance can be said in regard to one without also making reference to the others. So, for instance, the classical epistemological or lexical explanation of truth (\textit{Siddq}) requires that for a claim to be true it must not only correspond to its object but be sincerely intended by the claimant (6.2). The sincerity of the claimant in making the claim true is deeply involved in moral and religious embodiment of truth, as Haq points out (6.3). In the language of our theory in 8.1, making truth claims in this context is a speech act that typically includes among its felicity conditions both the epistemological truth of the interpretation expressed in the claim and the performative truth (especially as sincere and appropriate intentions) of the act itself. Islam is relatively unusual in the lengths to which it goes to spell out felicity conditions for truth speaking and truth doing, distinguishing while entangling epistemological and performative truth. We take this to be a result of a sophisticated philosophical tradition with an emphatic legal emphasis whereby felicity conditions were naturally conceived at multiple levels and simple propositions were thought of as extreme abstractions potentially masking ill-will. Other traditions we studied exhibit the merging without the same degree of explicit philosophical framing. Despite this widespread entanglement, their distinction in various ways—rarely at the level of definition, as in the case of Islam—makes it possible to organize our comparisons according to the three subcategories.

In chapters 8 and 9 of \textit{Ultimate Realities}, we discussed in detail what is meant by the justification of such categories. We noted the importance of not relying solely on the “what seems obvious to us after a long while” approach to justification. That works better in a mixed group like ours than with an individual theorist, to be sure, because the degree of cross-checking and the chances of noticing parochial readings—leaving aside the compassionate yet colorful ways we have discovered to point such lapses out to each other—are much greater. Nevertheless, that essentially phenomenological criterion for the adequacy of comparative categories is still vulnerable to bias; even groups have blind spots corresponding to shared assumptions about what is obvious and we did not have the luxury
or problem of an even larger and more diverse group. As important as it is, therefore, phenomenological reasons for categories need to be supplemented with other lines of justification.

There are at least four other ways of justifying comparative categories. Two of these are more conceptual in character and correspond to insights registered in philosophical and archetypal approaches to comparison. They are: (1) accounts of what is conceptually feasible that are capable of explaining why some ideas recur and others don't show up at all; and (2) accounts of the structured relationships among ideas that are capable of explaining why some transformations of ideas occur with more frequency than others. With regard to these two lines of justification, we claim with the philosophers, mystics, and archetypal theorists that there are genuine limits on what ideas tend to work for religious traditions and that no amount of historical analysis can help to explain the preponderance of ideas of that sort. The other two ways are more historical and contextual in nature and express the wisdom garnered over the years from the historical approaches to the study of religions. They are: (3) accounts of social, biological, and historical circumstances that are capable of explaining why certain religious ideas originated when and how they did; and (4) accounts of origins of social, biological, and historical circumstances that are capable of explaining why certain religious ideas transform in the flux of events in some ways and not others. With regard to these types of warrant for our comparative categories, we claim with the historians and sociologists that knowing the range of the conceptually feasible from the first two kinds of accounts does not begin to settle the question of why a religious tradition realizes particular possibilities and not others. An answer to that question requires an understanding of specific features of the relevant contexts within the blessed rage that is the history of cultures and religions.

This chapter makes use of these lines of justification in a variety of ways. In all our treatment is rather uneven, with a bias toward the conceptual rather than the historical, reflecting the competencies and limitations of the authors, though this bias does not reflect our interests because all four lines of justification strike us as vital. With regard to the first, the main conceptual justification for our threefold set of subcategories is the theory of truth presented in the following chapter. It is there that we distinguish between epistemological truth and performative truth, noticing how various are the felicity conditions that apply in any given case. Epistemological truth corresponds directly to our first category; performative truth is parsed into two categories in this chapter with important variations in felicity conditions due to the differences between sacred texts and personal or communal forms of piety. With regard to the
second line of justification, our analysis in chapter 8 of the connections between epistemological and performative truth explains why it is that our three categories are entangled yet distinguishable, as rehearsed above. It also explains why a tradition giving one dimension of religious truth special prominence is likely to find itself trying to find ways to make more room for the others, too, perhaps in very different ways. With regard to the third and fourth lines of justification, we freely acknowledge our weakness in this area. We will be content if the reader notices our use of them as this chapter unfolds, beginning with our appeal to the legal style of Islamic philosophy as a key historical condition for its peculiarly integrated theory of religious language.

The purpose of this summary chapter is not to enumerate the various ways by which our traditions and the texts studies specify the nature of religious truth, although some of that will be found here. The specialists' chapters do that admirably themselves. The purpose rather is say in some cumulative sense what religious truth is, as that might be found from our traditions, making explicit the comparisons among them and with our own theory in chapter 8. We shall focus on the three subcategories in turn, beginning in section 7.2 with consideration of the nature of truth as an epistemological problem, which is also involved with ontological and cosmological matters as illustrated in chapters 1, 3, and 6 especially. Subsequently we shall turn to religious truth in texts (7.3) and religious truth as a matter of cultivation or embodiment (7.4). Finally, section 7.5 deals with a theme turned up by all of our specialists: religious truth as contrasted with error, deceit, and failure. This gives us a convenient way to become more specific about some of the felicity conditions that apply to various kinds of religious truth.

Reflecting on the specialists' chapters in this volume, it becomes clear how fortuitous was the choice of the earlier two topics, namely, the human condition and ultimate realities. What one takes the human condition to be makes a great difference in how one relates to reference, meaning, and interpretation. Significant differences are registered if you think that human life, and hence its truth claims, are constantly changing and relating to similarly changing things; or that human life is fundamentally unified and stable so that the appearances of changing consciousness and objects is only illusion; or that life needs to escape suffering by abandoning identification with things that appear stable but are not, including oneself. So also with differences among conceptions of ultimate realities, both ontological and anthropological (oriented toward some religious quest). The specialists' chapters in this volume have been written with many back-references to their treatments of the human condition and ultimate realities in the earlier volumes.
7.2 Religious Truth as an Epistemological Problem

With these goals and this plan in mind, we shall consider several spectra of positions on the nature of truth as an epistemological problem. One concerns reference, and its poles are static reference on one end and dynamic on the other. A second concerns meaning, and its poles are that religious truth is close to ordinary truth on one end and on the other that religious truth is extraordinary or esoteric. A third concerns how interpreters treat the religious claims with which they engage reality, as propositions at one pole or as holistic enactments at the other. It is already clear from these spectra that discussion of religious truth as an epistemological problem will lead naturally into other dimensions of religious truth. Reference, meaning, and interpretation are thematized in chapter 8.

Consider first the spectrum regarding reference. Kohn and Miller (1.2.1) emphasize a strong contrast between static and dynamic theories of truth. Although there are not many candidates for static theories as they depict them, their emphasis on dynamic truth is powerful because they conceive both the object of truth and the interpreting claims of truth to be dynamic. The cosmos and the Dao are in flux, and therefore the ways to refer to them need also to be in flux. Thus, they reject the views that there are stable ultimate realities such as the Dao or stable goals for human religious perfection. In order to keep track of these ultimates, cognition itself needs to play from one form to another, working indirectly. Because the form of true religious interpretation in China, according to Kohn and Miller, is skillful practice, not the assertion of a logically formed proposition (1.2.1), mastery of indirect speech is part of skilled practice for religious thinkers and writers.

Even in the Chinese case, however, there are limits to the double-duty dynamism. Factoring in the higher levels of truth, Kohn and Miller point out that one who knows ultimate truth is like the hub of a spinning wheel, itself “at rest in the center of all, one with the cosmic openness at the root of creation” (1.2.2). This being “at rest in the center of all” is at least a relativizing of dynamism. The Confucian emphasis on the rectification of names also needs treatment before the Chinese case is settled with respect to dynamism and static elements of truth.

But at the opposite end of this spectrum are the religions of India that assume a double-duty theory of static truth, at least in religion at the higher levels. As Clooney has argued throughout the seminar, supported by Eckel, what is really real is supposed to be beyond change, and if something can be shown to change, that is an argument against its full reality. Moreover, the way to know the static reality is with a static mental
act like a perception or intuition. Inference and some other forms of knowing might be unavoidable, as chapter 3 indicates; but perception, even intuitive perception, is what is most adequate to a static really real reality.

The two religions of India we studied, Hinduism and Buddhism, draw different morals from this. The former defends the reality of static ultimates and the validity of intuitive perception or realization. The latter claims that there are no ontologically ultimate static realities and that suffering arises from people's clinging convictions that there are. Buddhism itself has a spectrum of opinions on this point. Eckel in chapter 3 has nicely contrasted the Yogacāra view that only the intuitive perception of the moment is real and, being static, is swept away with time, with the Madhyamaka view that there is not even that much static reality or realistic perceptive cognition.

Between these poles are the monotheistic faiths that do not allow univocal stasis or univocal dynamism in either objects or truth claims that refer to them: the eternal is also temporal. In various historically related ways, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam affirm that God is somehow eternal and beyond change, and yet related dynamically to human beings in revealing, judging, and eschatological ways. By the same token, each of those faiths claims that there are laws, or doctrines, or revealed commandments that are stably true, even if subject to interpretation. Yet all would claim that our understanding of these is finite and ready for revision, as in ongoing commentary, understanding awaiting heavenly vision, or human law (fiqh).

All the positions across the spectrum of reference illustrate the three forms of reference (8.3): iconicity, indexicality, and convention, with some limiting cases. The very idea of contrasting the static and dynamic with regard to religious theories of truth supposes that at least some ideas, if not the very form of assertion or claim, is iconic with reality. Kohn and Miller, in fact, argue that because reality is dynamic, proper claims about it should be dynamic too, and therefore it is a good thing that Hansen has shown that Daoism, and Chinese language more broadly, provides a dynamic way of referring with claims of deference and skillful practice. Claims in Advaita Vedānta, and perhaps other forms of non-dual Hinduism and Buddhism, and in some monotheistic mystical traditions, are thought to be wholly iconic to the exclusion of indexicality or convention, with no difference whatsoever between the reality and the intuitive cognition of it.

Similarly, to the extent that religious claims become nearly exclusively performative, matters of skillful practice that are completely ethical and not theoretical, their reference comes close to being wholly indexical.
When this is carried to an extreme, as in Zhuangzi, the conventional elements in truth are denigrated and used only indirectly to point to the appropriate action. In those strands of monotheistic faiths that stress the paradigm of the Word of God and view that Word as incomprehensible by ordinary human rationality, the emphasis on the conventionality of religious claims can be extreme.

Consider now the spectrum regarding meaning. At one end is the view that religious truth is rather like ordinary truth. Clooney in chapter 2 develops this at great length for certain positions within Hinduism. Perception is the most reliable means to ordinary truth, even though it needs to be supplemented by other forms of knowing. What distinguishes religious from other truth is the object, not the knowing. This position is not characteristic of all forms of Hinduism, obviously, certainly not the non-dual forms in which the non-dual perceptive intuition (if that is how one characterizes realization of the non-dual) is extraordinary and is contrasted with the māyā of ordinary perception.

Moving along this spectrum we come to various positions that suppose that the religiously important truth requires some special development in the interpreter so that it is truth at a higher level. Eckel, in chapter 3 and in Ultimate Realities, chapter 6, as well as The Human Condition, chapter 3, elaborates a subtle interpretation of several versions of the Buddhist “two truths” doctrine that distinguishes conventional from enlightened truth. The distinctive contribution of some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the distinction of these two truths from the conventional standpoint and their identification from the enlightened standpoint. Kohn and Miller (chapter 1) discuss the improved knowledge of “perfected” people, noting that there are many different schools in China that encourage somewhat different senses of perfection. Saldarini (chapter 4, and also chapter 2 in Ultimate Realities) notes the special skills developed by rabbis in the Talmudic tradition, and also the esoteric knowledge both of philosophers such as Maimonides and Kabbalists. Fredriksen explores the movement in Augustine from unlettered faith (Monica) to rhetoric, from there to bad philosophy (the Manichees), to good philosophy (Platonists and Neo-Platonists), and to the Christian philosophy, which affirms that true wisdom has more to do with what you love than what you know in the other philosophic senses. As a result, unlettered Monica turns out to have the higher truth of love rather than the mere lower truth of sophisticated cognition. This is something like a Mahāyāna Buddhist identification of the most sophisticated with the least, though also something different from that insofar as Christian movement to the higher truth is a refocusing and intensification of love and attachment, whereas the Buddhist trajectory is opposite. Fredriksen also significantly notes
Augustine’s conviction that true knowing of the highest sort requires a heavenly vision with a heavenly body, and that all finite earthly philosophical or theological expressions of truth, no matter how well-guided by love, are fallible and at best proleptic. All of this shows what has appeared frequently in our work, namely, that felicity conditions for epistemological truth in religious matters forcefully draw other dimensions of religious truth into the picture.

Consider finally the spectrum of means of engagement, that is, the things that might be true of reality when interpreted. The spectrum runs from propositions to holistic enactments. Several of our authors insist that religious truth is not propositional. Kohn and Miller do so from the standpoint of their interpretation of Chinese language, to the effect that it is not subject-predicate propositional and is instead to be understood in terms of performance. But the significance of this is not always clear. After all, it can be said in Chinese that the cat is on the mat. Can anything religiously important be said in Chinese propositions? One way of identifying a proposition is by asking whether it has a negation, for example, “the cat is not on the mat.” Kohn and Miller cite the beginning of the Daode jing, a negative proposition: “The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao.” The meanings of some of the terms in this phrase are controversial, but a claim is made nonetheless, even if in propositional form different from the subject-object propositional form of Indo-European languages. Or consider the claim made by some Neo-Confucians that Dao is Li (Principle), not an easy proposition but a proposition nevertheless with direct religious significance.

Others of our authors are quite comfortable with a propositional form for religious truth claims. Clooney in chapter 2 and even more in Ultimate Realities, chapter 5, discusses religious truth claims in scholastically formed, precise propositions, understood across competing schools. Eckel also emphasizes debates among schools in propositional form, especially in the work of Bhāvanīvēka, beginning in The Human Condition chapter 3. Augustine, the subject of Fredriksen’s chapter, argued philosophy propositionally, and is regarded by many to be the founding forerunner of Medieval Christian scholasticism. Saldarini discusses religiously important propositions in both rabbinic disputations over the law and in Jewish philosophy. Haq discusses law, Islamic Aristotelianism, and the creative Islamic philosophy of al-Ghazālī, all of which involve propositional assertions of religious importance.

We conclude that all of our traditions are friendly to the propositional form for religious claims in certain circumstances. The circumstances have to do with the existence of a sufficiently public and universally accepted context that the myriad qualifications of the propositional form in
interpretation, noted in 8.2, can be taken for granted. This flexibility of felicity conditions with regard to the truth of religious claims in propositional form appeared in all of the traditions we studied. In the scholastic Hindu-Buddhist debates, the contexts of formal argumentation and a history of interaction make the religiously significant propositions, for instance, that “God (the Lord, Īśvara, Nārāyaṇa) exists” rather like “the cat is on the mat.” Medieval Jewish-Christian-Muslim scholasticism is similar. Legal and commentarial traditions can also reach such contextualized stability. Kohn and Miller represent the Chinese religious tradition as being unfriendly to such stable contexts, with its insistence that thought like the rest of reality is on the move. They are right (1.2.1) that the Chinese school of logicians, with its attempt to formulate propositions so that yes or no affirmations can be made of them, was never popular with either Daoists or Confucians. Perhaps they underplay the Confucian conviction that proper harmony with the Dao requires the rectification of names, although they would be correct to say that rectified names rectify use rather than automatically give rise to rectified propositions. Their fascinating discussion of the Chinese sense of connectivity established through the replication of patterns in different parts of reality, and macro-microcosmically, seems to stand at odds with verbal propositions; but what they say of the use of those patterns has an uncanny analogy to the early Wittgenstein’s theory of facts and propositions. Admitting that there are few scholastic contexts in China outside of Neo-Confucianism for the widespread agreement on univocal meanings for religiously important propositions, it still can be said that, where those contexts exist (for instance, in Han or Song Confucianism), religious truth has happily been claimed by means of propositions.

The reference here to scholastic contexts, however, underscores the central point in our own theory of religious truth as far as epistemological matters are concerned. Truth claims are made in interpretations and the qualifications of reference, meaning, and the various contexts of interpretation are all part of the felicity conditions for truth claims. Where those qualifications can be taken for granted, the truth claim can be treated as a proposition, that is, as a syntactical assertion whose terms and structure are defined by a semiotic system. Where those qualifications cannot be taken for granted, the very identification of the truth claim itself must make reference to more than its propositional form, even if a proposition is used in expressing it.

The other end of this spectrum, then, is the situation in which the religious truth claim consists in the entire interpretive act, including the registration in the interpreter of what is important in the object as represented by the ideas involved. If something is claimed truly, then the
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interpreter is different from what would be the case if the claim were not true but false, or if the claim were not made. The difference is the actual carryover of what is valuable or important into the interpreter in the intentional respects. The result of having the truth about the religious object is to be rightly oriented and related to that object, at least in the respects in question. In this sense, any religious truth is “enacted in religious lives” (1.2), namely those of the interpreters.

We insist in 8.2 that interpretation is an intentional engagement of reality, with give and take, including the carryover of something important from reality into the interpreters. Enactment of truth, or “embodiment” as some of our authors put it, thus has to do with the differential ways that true ideas shape the dynamics of engagement. Moreover, one of the most obvious felicity conditions of whether something is true is whether acting upon it integrates one better with reality, discriminating real distinctions of fact and importance. A religiously learned person ought to have poise and adaptness in dealing with life in its religious aspects. Pragmatic tests of this sort can be simple or complex. If Chinese culture is as dynamic as Kohn and Miller say, and we agree with them, then religious adaptness can be tested in many ways large and small. If the religious object is a ritual, a true knowledge of it will be displayed in its performance. If the religious object is a divine ground or creator who transcends subject-object distinctions and with which human beings cannot obviously interact, the pragmatic tests of dynamic engagement are far more complicated. Still, as Fredriksen reminds us for Augustine, a true knowledge of God proves itself in shaping the devotee to love God aright. We believe that all the religions we studied would agree with something like our thesis that religious truth is the carryover of what is important in the religious object into the interpreter so that this registers in and rightly relates the interpreter to the object. Identifying the religious “claim” which is said to be true depends on whether some or all of that larger dynamic interpretive engagement can be bracketed as assumed. So we suggest that all of our traditions occupy all the positions along the spectrum from religious truth as proposition to religious truth as skillful action or performance. It should be noted that this spectrum is different from the one to be discussed below concerning the degree to which interpreters need to be perfected in higher learning in order to enact or embody certain truths.

7.3 Religious Truth as Expressed in Sacred Texts and Objects

Kohn and Miller (1.3) give the most fulsome catalogue of expressions of truth, distinguishing words, syntax, sounds, signs, talismans, and charts, as well as scriptures. All of these have analogues in most of the religions we studied, though few were focused on by the other authors. Many fascinating questions arise about the senses in which mantras, music, mudras, and maps might be true. For instance, in what respects are they iconic, indexical, or purely conventional? How can they be wrong? Most of us would agree that there are religiously important ideas in music. Clooney has written an important book on Mimamsa ritual. By stating the subject matter of this project to be the comparison of religious ideas, however, we discouraged thorough pursuit of these questions, taking for granted that ideas are something like words and are expressed in texts rather than scores. What is most fruitful to interpret here, therefore, is the problematic of scriptures, their alternatives, and their authority.

Our discussions demonstrated that each religious tradition we studied has a multitude of approaches to scripture. This is not to say that every tradition has some expression of every possible approach. But it is to acknowledge that few if any approaches are the exclusive preserve of any one tradition.

In Ultimate Realities, chapters 2 and 4, it was pointed out that for some elements of Judaism and some elements of Islam, the Torah and Qur’an respectively are ultimate realities, part of or definitive of divinity. Christians have generally thought that the New Testament is a human testimony to divine revelation in Christ, perhaps guaranteed in its accuracy by God; but “God in Christ” and not the Bible is usually taken to be the Logos, the true Word. The inclusion of scripture, or a scripture-archetype, within divinity is a complication for the theologies of these monotheistic faiths that like to think of their divinities as pure and simple. Nevertheless, that extreme approach to scripture has been part of reflective piety in those traditions, and perhaps also in some Hindu attitudes toward the Vedas and in some medieval Daoist construals of the heavenly origin of their scripture.

A more common approach has been to take scriptures to be authoritative because they are related to the foundations of things or are themselves cosmically founding. Thus, it is more common in Judaism and Islam to regard scriptures as dictated by God than to see them as themselves as aspects of divinity. As Fredriksen points out, the earliest Christians were Jews and followed the Jewish belief in this respect, however much they interpreted the Septuagint differently from other Second Temple Jewish groups. Because of their origin, scriptures according to these approaches have an absolutely trumping authority over other sources of religious knowledge. Without being regularly assumed to be of divine origin, some Hindu schoaol give all of the Vedas that absolutely trumping authority, and some, for instance, Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, accord only the Upaniṣads that authority.
The problem with trumping authority of course is that it has to be interpreted, and the interpretations themselves are rarely held to have that same trumping authority, especially when they conflict with one another in diverging commentarial traditions. Nevertheless, there are strong as well as weak claims made for the authority of the interpretations. Fundamentalisms in all the traditions assume that their interpretations are literally true of the scriptures. Most traditions also recognize, however, that interpretation itself is ambiative. Some go so far as to say that God guides the interpretation with greater or lesser control and hence certainty; this is frequently asserted by Christians regarding the Holy Spirit. Others say that some finite and fallible yet authoritative institution, for instance the rabbis, the Christian bishops in council, or the legal scholars in Islam, provide decisive interpretations. Most of our traditions recognize that specific commentators become authoritative because their intelligence, wit, penetration, clarity of expression, or personal piety make them charismatic in some sense, and attractive to followers who treat their commentaries as founding or advancing a school.

For Buddhism, Confucianism, and at least classical Daoism, there are no scriptures with absolute authority of the sort attributed to the Qur'an. Buddhism is explicit in rejecting the Vedas and Upaniṣads. Yet the Buddhist sūtras became authoritative in a less absolute way as defining interpretations of the Way upon which schools are based. The Buddhist "canon" of several hundred books is too long for anyone to study completely and the sense of its authority, as well as its content, varies from school to school. Buddhist sūtras function in liturgical practice and as intellectual centers of gravity, calling forth commentaries, much like West Asian scriptures for which more authority is claimed. There are West Asian theologians, especially since the European Enlightenment, who regard the Bible and Qur'an to be authoritative in non-absolute sense, one among many sources of religious knowledge.

The classics and Four Books of Confucianism, and the Daodejing and Zhuangzi of Daoism, have a great though not absolute authority; they are not always treated as trumping authorities. Rather they are treated as sources of insight and enlightenment, guidance and inspiration. They are frequently cited to bolster a position, and when used in refutation, are used indirectly. Taken to be classic repositories of wisdom, they are the subjects of many commentaries, and the origins of diverse commentarial traditions. The notorious split within Neo-Confucianism between the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang schools is symbolically centered over the interpretation of the Great Learning, one of the Four Books. But the competition is over how best to edit and interpret the ancient scripture, not over whether the opponent is wrong because in contradiction to scripture. Although our conversations frequently mentioned scripture, and the question of the authority of scripture was mentioned, especially in conjunction with Saṅkara's argument for Advaita Vedānta, scripture was not as important a topic for our discussions of truth as might be expected. Issues of authority, particular scriptural authority, have been important for most of our traditions, indeed for all if one counts criticism and rejection of authority. Yet our discussions, perhaps affected by European Enlightenment impulses about what counts for truth, sought out appeals to reason and experience more than appeals to scripture. Perhaps our comparative conversations were more in sync with Saldarini's reflections on Judaism in modernity (4.6) than we would have liked, had we been more aware of the texture of discussion at the time. All this was true for our group, despite our tendency to focus on premodern texts.

One more issue needs to be raised about expressions of truth. Both in this volume and in the previous ones a wide variety of genres of religious writing have been discussed. These reflect at least the current research interests of our specialists, if not their abiding preferences regarding expressions of religious truth. Kohn and Miller love parables, pictures, and how-to manuals. Clooney loves theological digest books and student guidebooks. Fredriksen loves theologians who twist in the winds of diatribes. Saldarini and Haq are intent on synoptic visions of diverse genres connected through time. Eckel loves stories. These genres are manifested in all our traditions. All involve propositions of some sort or other and all suppose existential affects on those who participate in them. But a special mention needs to be made of story.

Eckel from the beginning of the project has been sensitive to the difference between religious truth contained in metaphorically potent stories and that expressed in more philosophic forms. The construction of the entire project has had a philosophic, systematic metaphoric base. That is part of the reason that the organizing principles of The Human Condition and its summary chapters presenting hypotheses for further study were called "Confucian." His own expositions of Buddhism have included not only philosophical analyses and diagrams but also many stories. He argued that the entire approach to the human condition ought to be framed around the story-form of the search for a soteriological goal, such as the release from suffering. In the present volume he not only tells the marvelous story of Angulimala, which is cited by several other authors, but also the story of how he told a story in Ultimate Realities about translating the Dalai Lama. What is it that makes good stories so powerful? What are the felicity conditions for such stories? When, why, and how are they true?
The narrative form of understanding is intriguing. It is also awkward because it usually involves an allegorical translation of the story into a moral for hearers; yet allegory is unpopular these days among hermeneutical thinkers. Narratives stand at the cusp of mere particularity and universality. On the one hand, narratives particularize their participants and call attention to the particularity of situations and meanings. They give particular directions or templates for how to act and that makes their interpretation a matter of particular, actual, response. This accords with several Buddhist senses of “suchness” and is illustrated by Eckel’s chapter for this volume that emphasizes the rejection of universal conventional meanings in favor of the particularity of dharma arising in consciousness (Yogācāra), if even that (Madhyamaka). On the other hand, important stories have applicability far beyond their apparently historical form. “Once upon a time” means “and for you too, perhaps.” Narratives provide frames in terms of which others think of their own lives as having something like that narrative form.

In shaping responsiveness, narrative both presupposes broad applicability and drives its hearers toward particular responses. Thus, the felicity conditions for narratives—the conditions under which they are true—blend universal and particular elements. One way of breaking this down further is to say that narrative conjoins the typological with the personal, and then to parse felicity conditions into those two categories.

On the one hand, then, to be true at the typological level, stories must be representative. They achieve this especially by focusing their themes on universal human experiences such as birth, death, friendship, family, sickness, adventure, suffering, or war. Their faithful recounting of the feelings associated with and consequences of decisions taken in such contexts make up one sort of felicity condition; the hearers of stories need to recognize themselves in the story in one way or another. Identification is one precondition for the story to have potency for personal change. There is an obvious downside here: human beings are fully particular, “thiness” as Duns Scotus, the Christian medieval realist, called them. Sometimes what is religiously important to a person is what is absolutely particular and unique, or a typical event in its absolutely unique aspect of being “mine”; consider birth and death.

On the other hand, to be true at the individual level, stories must evoke more than constrain response, through making space for the hearer to identify with and interpret the narrative in his or her own, unique way. Even though a person’s true story might not be generalizable, stories retain their effectiveness through allowing each individual hearer to read their own true story into the narrative structure. This is one kind of felicity condition that balances the felicity conditions for the typological, universal side. Another kind of felicity condition on the individual side bears on the concreteness of stories. Particular and interesting characters are the best way to do this; they make for the best stories. There is a downside here, too, and it is the confusion that can be induced by the narratives eschewal of abstractions, even if abstractions are truer in respect of descriptive accuracy. For instance, God in narrative has a finite role, and all of our religions that refer to an ultimate as God either assert that God is beyond finite roles or is not to be understood in narrative form. People can undo such suggestions, juxtaposing contradictory stories then depending on a communal context within which such narrative tensions can become thoroughly absorbed.

### 7.4 Religious Truth as Cultivation and Embodiment

We have met with claims about the cultivation and embodiment of truth several times in this chapter. Let us now distinguish more precisely between two problematics that might have reference here. One is the point we have noticed for all or most religious truth claims, indeed for any interpretation affirming something to be true or false, namely, that the interpreter is affected by having the truth. The effect might be minimal, such as filling in information of the sort the interpreter expects to deal with; or it might be profound, learning something that transforms thinking theoretically or transforms life practically. We have argued so far that because interpretation is engagement, it develops and perhaps alters how the interpreters are oriented toward the world. In religious matters, religious truths alter how the interpreter is oriented to ultimate realities in respects in which the truth claim stands for them.

The other sense of cultivation and embodiment supposes the first but has to do with how the interpreter’s character is enriched, elevated, and transformed by some means or other so that it is possible for higher level truths to be registered. This is, a person’s spiritual character needs to be developed in certain ways if reality is to be interpreted in certain higher level respects. The discussion of the spectrum of meaning ranging from ordinary to esoteric truths in 7.2 marks out some of the issues about the different levels of meaning. The topic here is the transformations of character required for the extraordinary levels to be accessed. Our topic is sageliness, or saintliness in regard to the attainment of truth. In some traditions it is said that the yogis actualize or realize the truth.

Kohn and Miller use the location “the perfected” to describe any number of models of spiritual growth. In Chinese religion, the human condition is conceived to be in full continuity with the rest of the cosmos.
Ultimate Realities, chapter 5, not all apprehensions of religious truth claims need to involve more than learning or appreciating arguments. In this sense not all transformations involved in truth claims are very great, nor does the transformation require a renunciation from the finite to the infinite. However, his discussions of Advaita Vedānta in The Human Condition and in this volume indicate that a transformation of soul of vast proportion is required to enter into (or discover its) non-dual relation to the rest of things. Clooney has argued that the act of reading texts, which might seem to be minimally transforming existentially, in fact can lead to vast transformative changes characteristic of non-dualist experience or bhakti devotion. 

Judiasm, Christianity, and Islam are alike in encouraging one family of transformations, namely, from ordinary shortsightedness to appreciation by faith of the presence of God in some finite Word, for instance, in the Torah, Jesus Christ, or the Qur'an. Perhaps it is fair to say schematically that this transformation has two steps. The first step is to come to appreciate the word or its representation as being authoritative. The second is to be able to see (feel, hear, understand) the divine to be present in the Word. Although there are many paths through these transformations, they do not seem to be distinguished according to religious tradition. All the traditions acknowledge that acceptance of authority might simply be a matter of growing up in the traditional culture, or a conversion from a different attitude toward the authority. All have some version of priority of will to knowledge, as in “faith seeking understanding.” All also acknowledge that faith in the authority of the Word can be built up through argument and incremental understanding. Each of the traditions urges that practice with the symbols recognizing authority can lead to increasing adeptness with them in engaging the Word in question as authoritative. They also agree that the transformation to the point of recognizing the authority can be effected by something quite different from the symbols of the authority itself, a shock, or even sudden insight about something else entirely.

The second step, taking the divine to be present in the authoritative Word, differs among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam according to their different conceptions of the divine. On this, see The Human Condition, chapter 7, and chapters 1–6 of Ultimate Realities. The transformations of soul required to see the authoritative Word as the dwelling of God might be differently described in the three traditions, but they all involve enhancing aptitude with the symbols of the Word and God so as to experience them as characterizing the same reality. This is not a matter of logic alone, for the logical assertion of the presence of the divine in the Word is not difficult. What is difficult, a matter of great skill and spiritual maturity, is to experience them as characterizing the same thing. Such a
transformation is more likely to be called an intensification and purifica-
tion of piety than an advance in learning, though it is still the acquisition
of a higher level of truth.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are also alike in having mystical tra-
ditions that advocate transforming the soul so as to be able to glimpse in-
finitive divinity. We mean “infinite” here in a vague sense simply to denote
religious objects characterized as transcending candidate finite determi-
nations. The mysticisms are apophatic. The three traditions differ within
themselves as well as among themselves in modeling the infinite. The
Neo-Platonic model is perhaps most common, especially as it has been
elaborated in the “perennial philosophy.” It provides a clear way of
thinking about the infinite and how it might relate to finite things that
emanate from it. Creation models are common to the three traditions,
though there are several of these. In the mystical path, the required trans-
formation of soul is that the mind must somehow become able to appre-
hend the infinite with both the kataphatic structure of the path and the
apophatic denial of final determination at once. This is done for some by
using complicated metaphysical theories as interpretive signs, by others
using highly metaphoric conventional signs as in Kabbalah, and by yet
others by transforming the cognitive intentionality to something like devo-
cion or love that takes an infinite object. This last is what Fredriksen
ascribes to Augustine, for whom final knowledge is not possible in this
body but is required to be in some (celestial) body.

Bearing in mind the Chinese case particularly, the perfected “vision” is
not only a cognitive truth claim but also an existential one. That is, the
sage lives in greater atunement with all things bearing on the ultimate,
with greater powers of accomplishment in ordinary affairs as well as he-
roic engagements of the ultimate. As Kohn and Miller point out, there are
different schools concerning what the content of these powers and their
objects are.

7.5 Religious Truth as Opposed to Error, Deceit, and Failure

This survey of various dimensions of religious truth as we encountered
them in our study has involved distinguishing between the sorts of
things that can be true (e.g., claims, texts, transformations) and also
specifying the sense that truth has in each case by describing the applic-
able felicity conditions. In concluding this chapter, we revisit the ques-
tion of felicity questions from another angle, namely, explicit discus-
sions of them provided by the religious traditions themselves. One way
that felicity conditions for the various dimensions of religious truth are
often registered in the religious traditions we studied is in terms of its op-
posite or lack. All the specialist chapters, in one way or another, charac-
terize religious truth in such terms. Kohn and Miller (1.2-4) make the
strong claim that the opposite is not error so much as failure to attain the
mark, the inability to develop an appropriate level of performance. “Fai-
ure to attain the mark” is one of the Christian words for sin (hamartia).
This comes from the view, prevalent in several traditions, that the most
important religious truth is the one in which the person or community is
transformed so as to “be in the truth,” or, as in the case of Chinese reli-
gion, to behave truthfully in religious matters.

In this section we shall distinguish three generic opposites to truth,
corresponding to our major subcategories of religious truth. The oppo-
site of epistemological truth is error, of truth in expressions deceit, and of
truth in embodiment failure.

In epistemological truth, an interpretive idea is supposed to carry over
what is important in the object into the interpreter in the respect in which
the idea represents the object. If it does carry over the value, it is true, and
if it does not, it is false. Truth is thus a dyadic value: either true or false.
To use the Aristotelian language, a claim is true if it says of what is that it
is and of what is not that it is not.

Immediately upon saying this we must admit qualifications. Given the
complexity of most religious truth claims, the best we can hope for is that
the interpreted claim is partially true, true in some ways but not others, in
some contexts but not others, limited by apparently countertruths, and
so forth. Fortunately the theory of religious truth in chapter 8 gives us a
precise way of specifying these qualifications. It is helpful to list the kinds
of qualifications that apply in principle, although chapter 8 will have to
be consulted for the explanations of the qualifications:

- A claim might be true in one context but not in a slightly different context
  because all truth claims are concretely contextualized in interpretations.
- A claim might be true in its intellectual but not in its practical interpretation.
- A claim might be true in its practical but not in its intellectual interpretation.
- A claim might be true in the abstract context of theory but not in broader
  contexts.
- A claim might be true insofar as it shapes a community but false in theory
  and unimportant in devotions.
- A claim might be true for a specific devotional use but dangerous for the
  broader community and absurd in theory.
- A claim might be true for the right referent but false for a slightly different
  referent that is easily mistaken for the right one.
• A claim might be true for some secondary referents but inexpressive for others.
• A claim might be true on one level of meaning but not on others.
• A claim might be true within its own symbol system in isolation but false when overlaid on or resonating with other systems.
• A claim might be true in some respect but not in others, and these might be confused.
• A claim might be true in a limited domain of application but not when generalized.
• A claim might be true generally or vaguely, but not specifically in ways that carry over what is important.

If one were to sort through all these qualifications and still be able to ask the yes-no question, then the truth claim is simply either true or false. The opposite of truth is to be in error. One of the purposes of theological inquiry in all religious traditions is to sort the special confusions in these qualifications and to be able to frame genuinely determinable theological questions. The beauty of scholastic traditions is that they confront these qualifications head-on. The faithfulness of their beauty is that, after all the qualifications are specified and the truth question asked, the resultant expression is likely to be so complex and pallid that nobody gives a damn and many people suspect they fail to contain the living waters.

Islam is particularly meticulous in distinguishing between heretics and infidels. A heretic is someone who presumably had access to the true interpretations, perhaps even in their existential complexity and intensity, and nevertheless declare some truth idea false or a false idea true. The heretic is in a genuinely dyadic situation, though all the qualifications mentioned above might provide mitigating circumstances. An infidel is one whose religious ideas either are not up to interpreting the religious object in the relevant important respects or are so alien as to fail to affirm what is true (according to the tradition) because the ideas that would carry over what is true are missing in that person. The infidel thus is in a triadic situation of not having the right meanings at hand; of course, the reason for this might be voluntary rejection of the preferred ideas, and so on.

In expressive truth, the failure to be true is to deceive, that is, to mislead the interpreter. The ideas appear to be true when used to interpret the object, but in fact carry over the wrong thing. This is an extremely complicated issue when considering different genres of theological ideas and different kinds of religious expression. We did not spend much time on this except to discuss narrative, philosophical, and metaphorical expressions. Each can be deceitful or misleading. Deceit suggests an intent to mislead, which might not lie behind every wrong expression. But even if there is no personal intent, a person misled by an expression will think himself or herself deceived, if only by their own gullibility.

The question of authority for expressions is particularly intertwined with deception. In a foundational sense, a misplaced authority has the deliberate element that transforms an innocently misleading word to a deceptive one. This is why, in traditions that lay great stock in the authority of scriptures, disagreements about authority so easily become vitriolic; a scripture that turns out to have no authority after all has been a deceiver in claiming authority, and those deceived sense themselves also to have been betrayed. Whoever persuaded the interpreter to accept the authority in the first place has been a deceiver, even if that person as interpreter is also deceived. The transformations of mind previously discussed involved with accepting authority are also subject to being revealed to be deceptive.

In the long run, deceit in expression is primarily a function of error in epistemological truth. But not entirely so. If expressions are inadequate to carry over what is important, that might not be a function of a choice between expressions (dyadic error) but a failure of imagination. It is imagination that provides the meanings that allow people to engage reality in various respects, and if imagination is pale or puny, the available expressions are deceitful about what they claim to carry over. Strangely, the failure of imagination was rarely discussed explicitly in our seminars. Rather, we generally assumed the posture of defending the imaginative constructs typical of our texts or figures, which invariably tended to be every bit as rich as one would expect of traditional classics.

The opposite of cultivating or embodying truth is neither error nor deceit but failure to attain to the interpretive form and activity required to access the religious object in the relevant respect. In one sense, this is a simple point. The religious object is what is it (our traditions disagree about what that is) and the religious ideas, symbols, theories, and other signs are adequate to carry that across to an interpreter who is ready. But the interpreter in question is not ready. The partner is there, the music is playing, but the person cannot dance. In the technical language of our theory of religious truth, the interpreter in question is not a secondary referent of the relevant ideas, so the applicable felicity questions are not met.

In another sense, of course, the point is not simple at all when we ask how and why the interpreter is unready and what our traditions say about this. Persons unconnected with the religion might be unready for any number of reasons. Here we are concerned with people intending to engage the religious object in respect of a perfected level of truth, and who fail. There are two general sources of the failure noted in
our religions, and they might be combined. One, characteristic of theistic religions whose cultic practices include petitionary prayer, is that the religious object has not yet revealed itself to the interpreter. Grace is needed, and the interpreter simply has to wait. Something like this is always involved when the interpreter prays for vision or success in relating to the ultimate. The other source of the failure is some fault in the interpreter. Such faults also can be of two general types, the negative limitations of being stuck in the ordinary unenlightened world and the positive but still limited failure to advance far enough in the religion's yoga of spiritual perfection. Roughly this corresponds to the distinction between those who have not committed themselves to the religion's path and those who have.

For our purposes, investigating the failure of the intention to achieve a high level of truth, the second group is the more interesting. All the cultic apparatus of a religion—its worship, spiritual practices, studies, and religiously organized family and community life—are aimed to enhance religious virtuosity. This is the center of gravity of George Lindbeck's interpretation of religions as cultural-linguistic systems: life within those systems is shaped and intensified so that the symbols and ideas become more and more meaningful and effective, increasing the capacities of the people to engage the world in their terms. For our present interest, it is perhaps necessary to distinguish those elements of a religion's cultural-linguistic system that are for everybody—ordinary Daoists, Buddhists, Brahmins, Jews, Christians, Muslims—and those for adepts. All the traditions we studied have both kinds, often in multiple versions not coincident with one another. Within a cultural-linguistic system there are many elements the practice of which is aimed to foster spiritual perfection, including diet, exercise, travel, meditation, study, rituals, and prayers of many kinds. Among these are elements that involve interpreting the ultimate and religiously related matters with the ideas of the faith that are claimed to be true. Focusing on cognitive perfection, as we are here in our concern for religious truth, readiness to engage reality at the higher levels of truth requires practice with the idea for doing so. Unreadiness in this context means that the interpreter has not achieved sufficient competence with the ideas that might carry over what is important in the respects they engage the object.

In many instances, failure to attain the spiritual competence to engage reality at the level of the higher truths is a combination of both sources, the gracious and the personal. In Ultimate Realities, chapter 3, Fredriksen detailed the problematic of impurity disqualifying persons from approaching the divine, and construed the dynamics of early Christianity to be the purification of those persons through Jesus Christ, who was the purifying sacrifice. Once purified and made acceptable, Christian devotees still need to practice holiness and go on to perfection. Although her discussion focused on the purification and making holy of all believers rather than the spiritual perfection of saints, her point expresses the complex interaction of the two sources. Her particular example is Christian, indeed Jewish, in its emphasis on ritual purity. Something like that interaction takes place in some forms of Buddhism, however, when the gracious giving of the Dharma is combined with the monastic search for enlightenment. Medieval Daoists celebrate their scriptures that introduce the esoteric way; even Confucians construe purity to be very important, and emphasize the presence of Heaven in human nature as the ground of the human connection with the Dao, a heavenly nature the pursuit of which is education.

The fact that the opposite of truth in embodiment is failure to attain to interpretations at the higher levels of truth emphasizes the dynamic quality of interpretive engagement of reality. To be rightly related to ultimate realities, ontological and anthropological, is to be oriented a certain way, to be able to do certain things, to be in touch with reality in rarely interpreted but important respects, and to comport oneself appropriately. Although our studies stress this most in regard to Chinese religion, it is true for all the traditions we studied in different ways. What this means for religious ideas, in terms of our theory of truth (8.3), is that there are important indexical references in their interpretation, references that connect with and point the interpreter's behavior to the religious realities. The proper connections and the appropriate pointings correspond to the various felicity conditions for religious truth in all its manifestations.

Notes

1. In chapter 9 of Ultimate Realities, the second volume of our series, we argued that all four lines of justification taken together with phenomenological insights and the pricing of vulnerability to correction jointly constitute a comparative method that profits from and overcomes the weaknesses of existing approaches. In several chapters of the first volume, The Human Condition, we argued for a particular conception of comparative categories and for a particular way of understanding their relation to one another and to the tentative results of comparison in terms of a dialectic of vagueness and specificity. In all three volumes we tried to put this method into action with, we think, varying degrees of success. The first volume's comparative efforts emphasized mainly the dialectic of vagueness and specificity and the ability of a mixed group of experts to get the phenomenological description correct. There we distinguished various sites of phenomenological importance by which we were able to achieve a kind of fairness of description without having to resort to all of the philosophically
problematic intricacies of phenomenological methods such as Husserl's. While that discipline became an ongoing feature of our group practice, the second volume stressed more the justification of our comparative categories along lines other than faithful phenomenological description, intimating theories of ultimate realities in the process. Now, in the third volume, an explicit attempt is being made to use the comparative material for building a theory of religious truth, even while the awareness of phenomenological considerations and lines of justification for our operating categories remains high.


3. We say they would agree with something like our theory if they had in fact engaged our theory. But they have not. Most Western interpreters of religious truth suppose, for instance, that the kind of "thing" that can be true is an intentional object of the sort Frege analyzed. Our naturalistic theory of truth, emphasizing causation, rejects the entire Fregean project, and instead accounts for intentionality as a high level kind of interpretation associated with consciousness. The claim so common in many religions, that truth is in behavior, attitude, passion, and other forms of embodiment, is not at all paradoxical on our theory, though it seems merely metaphorical on Frege's.


6. Although we did not explore it much, the question of nominalism (only particulars are real and stories are the only good way to generalize beyond them without falling into arbitrary convention) versus realism (universals or common natures or patterns are real and can be ingredient in individuals) is of great importance for understanding expressions of religious truth.


8. See The Human Condition, chap. 2

9. See Kohn and Miller in Ultimate Realities, chap. 1.


11. See Kohn and Miller's chapter in The Human Condition, chap. 3.