

## PART ONE

# Approaching the Ultimate

So much depends, of course, on what we mean by God. If transcendence is indeed a surplus of meaning, it requires a process of endless interpretation. The more strange God is to our familiar ways, the more multiple our readings of this strangeness. If divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.

—Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*

### DEFINING “ULTIMATE REALITY”

Robert Neville organized a forum some years back in which a collection of religious studies scholars met regularly to discuss three different comparative topics—religious truth, the human condition, and ultimate realities. Each forum culminated in the publication of a collection of essays on the respective topics.<sup>1</sup> The volume entitled *Ultimate Realities* (2000c) was, in some ways, an inspiration for this book. At the outset, Neville acknowledges the challenge of defining precisely what this comparative category meant for the participants who specialized in different traditions, cultures, and time periods. Some scholars expressed serious reservations about whether a universal category of “ultimate reality” even exists; after all, the assumption of some normative meaning may be yet another example of cultural imperialism similar to the assumption that “religion” is a universal category, even when a number of cultures have been shown to have no equivalent term for it. Such are the hazards of comparative studies like this one.

For those coming from cultures influenced, if not dominated, by monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), it may appear quite obvious that what we are talking about when we speak of the Ultimate or Ultimate Reality is “God.” Writing of Judaism, for example, Anthony Saldarini notes that there are several meanings of ultimacy, *all of which apply to God*: “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 to the limitations of human life.”<sup>2</sup> So in every possible sense of “Ultimate Reality”—whether divine being, divine reality, or ultimate goal—God applies. Similarly, Paula Fredriksen notes that God within the Christian tradition is the “foundation and goal of everything” (2001, 61). And Nomanul Haq observes that Ultimate Reality within Islam is “the deity itself with all its standard Abrahamic divine attributes, including eternity and transcendence” (2001, 76). While all of these scholars acknowledge a wide range of similes, metaphors, and symbols used to depict God—some personal and anthropomorphic, others apophatic in character—in the end, they all agree that God is the Ultimate within each tradition—“something stable, fixed, and objectively out there,” to use Haq’s words (169).

Scholars specializing in other traditions, particularly those of South and East Asia, expressed strong objections, however, to God as a universal model for Ultimate Reality. Chinese religions scholar Livia Kohn, for example, concludes her essay by emphasizing the fundamental difference between the Chinese context and that of the three major monotheistic traditions: “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” (2000, 32).

While I will certainly problematize this monolithic representation of God, Kohn emphasizes that the nature of the Dao, another possible candidate for Ultimate Reality within Chinese religions, is “not a cosmos-transcending being, principle or power”; rather, it is better understood as that principle that supports the process of change symbolized by the waxing and waning of *yin* and *yang*. Ultimate Reality in this context might justifiably be identified as this fundamental cosmic

process; or it might be defined, as Kohn asserts, as the actualization of harmony with that reality *in human life* (2000, 11).

Voicing the perspective of “Hinduism,” Francis Clooney emphasizes multiple ways Ultimate Reality might be conveyed. Expressing the orthodox view of *brahman*, the Vedic texts define Ultimate Reality as “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” (2000, 95). In short, it is the alpha and omega of all reality; but it is not generally perceived as a creator being. On the other hand, in the many theistic traditions of Hinduism, Ultimate Reality *is* personal, can be invoked by proper names, and may appear in perceptible form (162).

Finally, David Eckel argues that Ultimate Reality within Buddhist traditions is best approached “through considering how it might be actualized in human experience.” The reason is that within Buddhism, reality is a process, not something static, stable, or substantive. Therefore, the very question “*what* is Ultimate Reality?” is fundamentally misguided. The more appropriate *religious* or perhaps better *soteriological* question, Eckel asserts, is “*how* [does one] catch something ultimate in the flux of things?”<sup>3</sup>

Given these challenges in merely defining the category for this comparative study, I am persuaded by Neville and Wildman’s compromise resolution. They define Ultimate Reality as “that which is most important to religious life *because of the nature of reality*” (2000, 151; emphasis added). In doing so, they recognize a distinction between an *ontological* Ultimate Reality like God within monotheistic traditions or *brahman* within classical Hinduism, on the one hand, and an *anthropological* Ultimate Reality defined in terms of the ultimate goal sought, on the other. This allows us, Neville observes, “not only to examine how people in some religions relate ultimately to what is ontologically ultimate, but also to how ultimacy functions in religions such as some forms of Buddhism where it is ultimately important to realize that there is no ontological ultimate” (2). In the end, Neville entitled the volume *Ultimate Realities* to reflect the multiple ways traditions might envision ultimacy.

We would do well to heed the advice of Francis Clooney, who cautions against striving for a “stable or comprehensive” claim about the Ultimate within *any* religious tradition by highlighting the “multiple

Hindu and Indian ways of thinking about ultimate reality” (2000, 154). While “Hinduism,” as I shall emphasize, raises very particular challenges for being understood in monolithic terms, there is considerable variability in all of the traditions we shall explore. Consequently, Ultimate Reality is a fluid category not just *between* but also *within* traditions.

Now that I have defined our category of analysis in appropriately flexible terms, allow me to introduce several methodological lenses I will employ in this study.

### THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The phenomenological approach to the study of religion traces its roots to a twentieth-century branch of philosophy labeled phenomenology developed first by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Husserl endeavored to strip philosophical inquiry of its biased assumptions and preconceptions that, according to him, distorted its findings. He developed a philosophical approach that did not seek to *explain* human experience but merely to describe the data of experience *as they appear to human consciousness*. Thus, the name of his method derives from the Greek word *phainomenon* or “that which appears.” Husserl’s approach was governed by a number of methodological guidelines, many of which came to be adopted by scholars of religion such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), Joachim Wach (1898–1955), and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986).

The phenomenological approach was meant to address some of the perceived problems and biases inherent in earlier approaches that were deemed too “reductive.” Scholars like Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim were accused of “reducing” religion to a psychological (Freud) or sociological (Durkheim) function.<sup>4</sup> Influenced as they were by Darwin’s theory of evolution, Freud and Durkheim sought the origin of religion and claimed to have found it in the functional role it served. Insightful as these and other theories were, they were deemed far too simplistic and reductive in their conclusions about the role religion plays individually and socially. So the phenomenological method is, first and foremost, descriptive. It rigorously endeavors to *describe* phenomena of experience. In doing so, it employs what Husserl called *epoche*—derived from the Greek verb *epoché*, meaning to hold back—a suspension of

judgment. Scholars employing this method try to “bracket” out all presuppositions and preconceptions regarding the phenomena being studied. The objective is one of *understanding* over against *explanation*. A traditional insiders’ approach to religion might be to explain or rationalize the truth of a religious claim—God exists *because . . .* or this doctrine is true *because . . .*; or, as in the case of “outsiders” like Freud and Durkheim, religion is a human creation *because . . .* In contrast, the phenomenologist brackets questions of truth or causality and endeavors, rather, to describe and understand religious experience *as it manifests itself phenomenologically*. This is not to say that these bracketed questions cannot be revisited later. Richard Kearney rightly notes that “what we leave outside the brackets of suspension we can gain back again a hundredfold after we return” (Kearney 2010, 167).

In reality, this ideal of *epoché* or bracketing is virtually impossible to achieve, and prominent practitioners of this method have been criticized for holding their own hidden assumptions about the existence of an Ultimate Reality or the nature of religious experience, for example. The goals of this method are what interest us here, however. James Livingston describes the objectives of this method succinctly as follows:

The goal of phenomenology is to portray religion in its own terms as a unique expression, a reality not to be reduced or explained in other—for example, psychological or sociological—terms. To avoid intruding judgments of value or truth into the descriptive task, the phenomenologist must remain detached and impartial. Yet insightful description and interpretation require a genuine feel for and empathy with religious experience. Phenomenology thus represents the effort to *re-experience* a certain religious phenomenon’s essential character or structure. (2004, 40)

As we study different conceptions of the Ultimate, we shall employ this method by trying to describe as objectively as possible the phenomenological dimensions—textual, archeological, historical, and so forth—manifested by each tradition. Moreover, we will suspend the question of “truth” regarding any and all beliefs, practices, doctrines, and so forth, of the traditions we encounter.

One final dimension of the phenomenological method, as it developed in the study of religion specifically, is a comparative one.

In describing the various phenomena of religion, this method seeks to identify common patterns, categories, and structures (morphology), which can then be used to compare and contrast different religious traditions—not in an effort to determine which is better or truer but rather to develop a deeper understanding of religion as a dimension of human life. Typical categories of comparison, as they have developed within the discipline, include myth, ritual, symbol, sacred text, cosmology, and, yes, conceptions of the Ultimate. In other words, in studying various descriptions of religious phenomena, scholars have identified common, almost universal, categories. All religious traditions seem to embrace certain myths of origin, for example. All seem to include sacred rituals—forms of practice that are repeated periodically. And within these phenomenological categories further comparative structures have emerged. Typical subcategories of conceptions of the Ultimate would include animism, polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, and so forth. In the conclusion of this study, I will offer additional categories of comparison and analysis.

The phenomenological approach, as insightful as it has been for the study of religion, inclines toward a somewhat static analysis of religious phenomena in that it tends to minimize the social, historical, political, and economic factors that may impact *how* and perhaps even *why* religious beliefs and practices are conceived, transmitted, and come to prevail or disappear in any given sociohistorical context. In our effort to better understand how conceptions of the Ultimate evolve over time, I shall employ an interpretive model sketched by Peter Berger in his classic text *The Sacred Canopy*.

PETER BERGER, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION,  
AND THE SACRED CANOPY

In 1967, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann coauthored *The Social Construction of Reality*, a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the sociology of knowledge (1967). Inheriting the mantle of the Enlightenment and subsequent figures who left a strong imprint on the discipline of sociology such as Marx, Durkheim, and Max Weber, they essentially argued that all human knowledge, including ideology, philosophy, science, art, and so forth, is a human product. Over time,

this humanly created “world” may become part of objective reality that is, in turn, internalized by subsequent generations. But in its origins, it always derives from human consciousness.

In the same year, 1967, Berger published *The Sacred Canopy*, which essentially takes the premise and findings of the first book and applies it to an analysis of specifically religious phenomena—hence the title. The summary that follows is based largely on the first two chapters of this now well-worn classic.

“Every human society,” Berger begins, “is an enterprise of world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise” (1967, 3). Culture, society, and religion are all part of the human enterprise of world-building according to Berger. This world-building capacity of humans derives out of necessity and is, more specifically, a distinctive feature of humans within the animal realm. “The non-human animal,” Berger contends, “enters the world with highly specialized and firmly directed drives. As a result, it lives in a world that is more or less completely determined by its instinctual structure” (5). This animal world is essentially “programmed” into the genetic constitution of a given species. Moreover, it is largely locked in and only marginally subject to adaptation. In contrast, the human instinctual structure at birth is “both underspecialized and undirected toward a species-specific environment” (5). Humans are “curiously unfinished at birth,” lacking a given relationship to the world (4). Thus, we *must* create our own “reality”—our own world of meaning and purpose.

This process of world creation is in many respects unstable. Or put positively, it is inherently vibrant but must be maintained, otherwise the culture will disappear altogether. As Berger emphasizes, “The cultural imperative of stability and the inherent character of culture as unstable together posit the fundamental problem of (humanity’s) world-building activity” (6).

Berger describes the ongoing maintenance of culture as a dialectic, delineated in three steps, which he labels externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization is the “ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity” of humans (4). This externalization includes the language, institutions, social structures, ethical values, religious doctrine, and so forth. All aspects of society and culture, Berger contends, are a product of this externalizing process—hence, the title of his first book with Luckmann: *The Social Construction of Reality*.

Objectivation is the process by which this externalized world becomes objective reality itself—"a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves" (6). In other words, humans forget that the sociocultural reality they are born into was a reality they themselves—or their predecessors at least—created. As a nonmaterial example, Berger cites language: "man invents a language and then finds that both his speaking and his thinking are dominated by its grammar" (9). Japanese, a language I struggled to learn for many years, offers a good example here. There are three possible verb forms, depending on whom you are addressing. The honorific form is meant for those of higher social status—your boss at work, for example, or customers in a retail store if you're the shopkeeper—thus, the incessant "Irrashimase" (May I be of service to you, O honored customer?) as you pass through a department store or even enter a 7-Eleven-type convenience store. A second verb form, the standard form, is meant for those of equal status. And the third, the direct form, is for those of lower or very intimate status—children or very close friends, for example. Other languages have similar structures, but the point is that imbedded in the Japanese language is a well-defined social structure and the imperative that one be aware of the relative status of those to whom one is speaking. In this way, the language embodies the social structure—clearly one created by humans—that is "just there" for those Japanese who grow up in the culture.

Finally, internalization, the third step in this dialectic, is the process by which we are socialized into the objectified reality. As Berger writes, it is "the process by which a new generation is taught to live in accordance with the institutional programs of the society" (15). Once established and internalized, the structures of meaning and value act back upon the social group. "Man produce values," Berger emphasizes, "and discovers that he feels guilt when he contravenes them. Man concocts institutions, which come to confront him as powerfully controlling and even menacing constellations of the external world" (9). In the aforementioned example, Japanese society creates its language, embedded with its decidedly hierarchical vision of society, which is then internalized by each subsequent generation. "Society is a dialectic phenomenon," Berger observes, "in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer" (3).

Berger labels this socially constructed world, which orders experience, the *nomos* (Greek for law, convention). One might also adopt the more conventional term, worldview. While this *nomos* or worldview serves many different functions, Berger contends that its primary purpose is to serve “as a shield against terror.” Anthropologically speaking, humans crave a sense of meaning “that appears to have the force of instinct.” Humans, Berger writes, “are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality” (22). The ultimate danger is a sense of anomy or meaninglessness. Thus, Berger dramatically contends, “every *nomos* is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle” (23). Given the existential importance of a plausible *nomos*, Berger emphasized the imperative of its conservancy. A given worldview requires a social apparatus for its maintenance. Institutions, officials, and teachers, of one sort or another, are integral to this process. In the end, the *nomos* must achieve, according to Berger, a sense of “taken for grantedness.” It is here that religion enters into the picture.

“Religion,” Berger writes, “is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established” (25). By sacred, we mean some mysterious and awesome power that is perceived to reside in certain objects of human experience. The parameters of its scope are dependent on the culture. But its role in traditional cultures, Berger emphasizes, is critical to the maintenance of a plausible *nomos* in that it often provides for its ultimate validation. Just think of how God, in the Judeo-Christian traditions, sanctions cosmology (a picture of the universe), anthropology (human hegemony in the world), social structure (slavery, women’s rights, priestly authority), political structure (divine right of kings), ethical norms (just read Leviticus), a view of death and the afterlife, and the list goes on.<sup>5</sup> Berger concludes the first chapter of *The Sacred Canopy* with this memorable synopsis:

It can thus be said that religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building. Religion implies the farthest reach of man’s self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings. Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, *religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.* (27–28; emphasis added)

The next chapter goes on to analyze the important ways religion—through institutions, doctrine, and ritual—legitimizes broad aspects of traditional culture. As Berger writes, “Religion legitimizes social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference” (33). The remainder of the book confronts the modern predicament in which the discoveries of science, Enlightenment thought, postmodernism, and so forth, are undermining the received “Judeo-Christian” worldview. Writing in the late sixties, a time of significant social chaos and alienation, Berger predicts (wrongly, he would later admit) an unstoppable trend toward secularization and the diminution of religion in Western society.

Again, this *nomos* includes all aspects of society and culture, material and nonmaterial. What we conventionally call “religion” is but one dimension of the established worldview. In traditional cultures, however, it is a critically important dimension. Why? Because it often provides the ultimate legitimation for many other dimensions of culture. Where it pertains to the specifically religious or sacred dimension of a culture, we shall qualify it with the adjective “sacred.”

In an effort to make this theoretical model a bit more concrete and accessible, I often ask my students to picture a remote volcanic island inhabited by a very “primitive” tribal group. One night, the islanders awaken to a horrific explosion; the earth shakes, their feeble straw huts collapse, and the night sky is strangely illuminated by the light from fiery lava gushing from the mouth of the volcano that towers over the small island. The lava flows ominously down the side of the volcano, destroying everything in its path. By the end of the day, the survivors, huddled on a part of the island covered in ash but untouched by the waves of lava, quake in shock as they behold the carnage before them. Assuming, for the sake of this thought experiment, that this tribal group had little culture to speak of prior to this horrific experience, we could certainly imagine that they are all asking themselves, why did this happen? Over time, the idea arises—from who knows where; perhaps from someone’s dream—that there is a sacred being with a not so predictable temperament residing within the volcano. Like the gods of thunder, rain, wind, and rivers in other cultures, this one too is increasingly personalized. The survivors tender ritual offerings in the hope that they will pacify the potential fury of the deity within.

This is an example of the externalization step in Berger's dialectic model. Over time, as generations come and go, the externalized idea that there is an anthropomorphic deity residing within the volcano becomes objectified fact. No one questions his or her existence. It is confirmed each time the volcano rumbles or, worse, erupts. Moreover, this belief is internalized through the socializing process of each new generation. Stories are told; ritual offerings, with great pomp and circumstance, are presented on the first of each month. The process does not stop here, however. As Berger emphasizes, the dialectical process is ongoing. Perhaps gods linked to other natural phenomena—thunder, rain, the ocean, and so forth—are “externalized,” and soon a pantheon of deities resides in the sacred cosmos surrounding the islanders. At some point, the group encounters inhabitants of other islands who believe in a different set of gods. These too are integrated into their own divine cosmos. In short, the objectified sacred *nomos* is always being adapted. It never remains fixed. As the group encounters new experiences, unexplained phenomena, or peculiar beliefs or practices of other communities, they must somehow reconcile these new phenomena with their own belief system in order for it to remain plausible. New ideas are externalized and, over time, become objectified and internalized by the community. In this way, the process is never ending and the objectified reality never remains fixed.

The *nomos* or worldview, as we have noted, involves all aspects of society and culture including social structure, morality, political authority, and so forth. The manifestations of culture—art, literature, music, mythology, ritual practices, doctrine, social mores, among others—are the means by which the *nomos* is maintained and transmitted from one generation to the next. For anyone born into tenth-century BCE Israelite culture, women, like cattle and sheep, were deemed the property of men. This was objectified fact, not only to the men of the tribe but to the women as well. Every practice and belief of the culture reinforced this “objectified” social reality. Eighteenth-century Europe would reflect a modest improvement in the status—social and legal—of women, modest being the operative word. But again, few would have questioned the received view that women are inferior, in all ways measurable, to men. And how many, in the southern United States prior to the Civil War, questioned the assertion that blacks are not fully human? This view too was part of the objectified *nomos*. In each

case, voices emerged to challenge these received views. At some point, the *nomos* began to crack. The proclamations of courageous “prophets” like Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King were *externalized*, to use Berger’s terminology, and gradually integrated into the objectified *nomos*. This is not to say that racial and gender prejudice no longer exists—the transformation of the objectified reality is measured in generations, not years. Indeed, the slow nature of the objectifying process might explain, to some extent, the incongruity between generations in the election of Barack Obama as president. The younger generation, conditioned by a different, more progressive *nomos*, was far more likely, statistically speaking, to pull the lever for a black president. Their parents—and, even more so, their grandparents—who had internalized a very different social *nomos*, were far more reluctant.

These are but two examples, sacred and secular you might say, meant to illustrate the dialectical process that Berger presents. One could pick any dimension of culture and trace its evolution over time in a particular community or context. Of course, the process is infinitely more complex than three simple steps because there are an infinite number of interrelated factors impinging upon any society’s worldview. Moreover, these examples also accentuate the fact that there is often a multiplicity of *nomi* operating in any culture at any given time. It is impossible to speak of a culture’s *nomos* monolithically.

Berger highlights two elements critical to the maintenance of the religious dimensions of a society’s *nomos*. One is subjective, the other social. The subjective function of the *nomos* is to fend off “the terror of meaninglessness.” Thus, Berger emphasizes the importance, even necessity, of the “sacred canopy” to make sense of death, unjust suffering, and the like. If the explanatory function of the *nomos* is not being fulfilled—if it does not provide a pragmatic structure for making sense of the vicissitudes of human experience—then it must eventually be adapted or replaced through the dialectical process. A second aspect, vital to the “reality-maintaining task of religion,” is the necessary social structure and support system, as it were. This would include the institutions and community of any given religion, for example. Berger describes this critically important “plausibility structure” this way:

Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective (as common, taken-for-granted facticity) and subjective (as facticity imposing itself

on individual consciousness), depends upon *specific* social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question. Conversely, the interruption of these social processes threatens the (objective and subjective) reality of the worlds in question. Thus each world requires a social “base” for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This “base” may be called its plausibility structure. (45)

In order for the religious—or any other—aspect of a *nomos* to function properly, it must be taken for granted as fact. This is just the way the world is, a believer might say. But ideas do not maintain themselves in a vacuum. They require social processes to be sustained. Christianity would not survive without the institution of the Church, its priests/ministers/lay leaders, or, at a minimum, a supportive social group of self-identified believers and practitioners. Kinship, companionship, and community networks are also important elements of the plausibility structure. Berger cites the example of pre-Columbian Peruvians whose religious world was dependent upon the social world of the Incas. When the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro (1478–1541) conquered the Incas, killed their last sovereign emperor Atahualpa and most other leaders, he destroyed the “plausibility structure” necessary to maintain their reality. Of course, many other examples could be cited here. The central point is that subjective ideas and beliefs, in and of themselves, are not sufficient to maintain a religious worldview. Social structures of many different kinds are necessary as well. This holds true for the adoption or spread of a religious worldview as well. For example, to say that so many South Americans and now Africans have gravitated toward and converted to Christianity because it provides a more plausible structure of meaning is to ignore the central role of colonialism and the power of the Church. Dimensions of a *nomos*—religious, ethical, social, and otherwise—are as often imposed through sociopolitical processes as they are “chosen” for their plausible structure of meaning. This is the insight of much postmodern thought.

Some readers may find disturbing Berger’s overt assertion that religion is a “social construction”—a system of symbols, ritual practices, and doctrines created by humans. This is not the same as saying, however, that religion is completely made up, false, or delusional. Indeed, Berger makes no claims about the nature or existence of some Ultimate

Reality like God. In an often-overlooked appendix to *The Sacred Canopy*, he addresses the theological implications of his study directly.

Thus sociological theory must, by its own logic, view religion as a human projection, and by the same logic can have nothing to say about the possibility that this projection may refer to something other than the being of its projector. In other words, to say that religion is a human projection does not logically preclude the possibility that the projected meanings may have an ultimate status independent of man. Indeed, if a religious view of the world is posited, the anthropological ground of these projections may itself be the reflection of a reality that *includes* both world and man, so that man's ejaculations of meaning into the universe ultimately point to an all-embracing meaning in which he himself is grounded. (180)

In other words, it is inherent in the sociological method to study religion as a social system that, like all symbol systems, is a by-product of the human mind. To deny the created status of the sacred symbols, texts, rituals, and so forth would be futile. However, this does not necessarily mean that no transcendent or Ultimate Reality exists. Indeed, in other writings, Berger affirms such a reality.<sup>6</sup> But resolving this "theological" dilemma, he goes on to note, is not his job *as a sociologist*. Nevertheless, in this brief appendix, Berger offers a suggestion to his theologically minded colleagues using mathematics as a model. "Without any doubt," he writes, "mathematics is a projection onto reality of certain structures of human consciousness. Yet the most amazing fact about modern science is that these structures have turned out to correspond to something 'out there'" (191). Even though scientific systems are clearly created by humans, few claim that science is mere illusion. In a similar manner, to say that religion is a human projection is not to deny categorically that it could derive from an authentic experience or encounter with some transcendent or perhaps even immanent reality. It is just that if and when there is such an experiential encounter, it will inevitably find expression through the available language and symbols of the one doing the experiencing. Moreover, we might add, the linguistic and symbolic system through which this experience is articulated will itself be governed by the social, historical, and cultural

circumstances of the experience. It is in this sense that one can say that all forms of human expression are contextually contingent.

### *Amending Berger*

In the years, even decades, following the publication of his classic, Berger has been criticized from several directions delineated succinctly by the eminent sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow. First, many contend that Berger's notion of plausibility structures does not go far enough in highlighting the role of social institutions in shaping religious beliefs. Extensive research now exists that establishes beyond question correlations between "specific types of beliefs and variations in social class, region, family structures, political system, etc." (Wuthnow 1986, 137). Second, Berger's emphasis on individual subjectivity—the need for meaning in the face of the hardships of life—is beyond any empirical measurement. Hence, the tendency in more recent sociological research is to focus on the role of empirically observable language and discourse in shaping and reflecting social trajectories. Finally, the underlying assumption that seems often to inform Berger's approach is that people generally act rationally "like amateur philosophers," as Wuthnow puts it, when it comes to religion (140). The "sacred canopy," more than anything else, is treated as a kind of philosophical system. In addition to the influences of social systems and discourse, as noted earlier, this emphasis on the cognitive also minimizes the role of emotion, ritual, and empathetic community, for example, as noncognitive responses to or ways of dealing with tragic experiences of life. In short, Berger's dialectical model is often deemed too simplistic and overly existential in its philosophical assumptions.

These criticisms suggest a healthy degree of caution in attributing changes in or even endurance of the *nomos* of a given culture at any given time to its capacity (or lack thereof) to provide existential meaning. We should be constantly mindful of the social, political, and even economic forces that impinge on the maintenance or abandonment of some dimension of a culture's worldview.

Despite the various drawbacks and shortfalls inherent in Berger's theoretical approach, I still find his dialectical model useful as a heuristic tool for making sense of the evolving nature of religion, in general,

and concepts of the Ultimate, in particular. It is often the fact, as I will try to show, that new “externalized” ideas and conceptions about God, for example, seem to address a cognitive dissonance related to a particular place and time with respect to the established “sacred canopy.” Over time, possibly centuries, the new idea gains followers, gradually comes to be seen as a plausible option, and eventually supersedes or functions alongside the older model. As Robert Bellah famously reminds us, “nothing is ever lost” (2011a, 13). Also, I will not argue that the triumph of one concept is always attributable to its cognitive persuasiveness—social, cultural, economic, even political factors are invariably vital in this process—but meaning, too, often plays an important role. So in addition to the phenomenological method, which Berger himself employs, I will utilize Berger’s dialectical model as a second interpretive lens through which to make sense of the evolving conceptions of the Ultimate that we shall encounter in the traditions we explore.

### *Mark Taylor and Dialectical Evolution*

Mark Taylor offers an insightful and nuanced framework through which to trace this dialectical process, at least in terms of understanding the evolution of a religious system of symbols. He argues that in order to comprehend any religious system, one must address the interrelationship between the theological (God), anthropological (human/self), and the cosmological (world) dimensions. “The way in which God is imagined,” Taylor writes, “determines the way in which the self and the world are conceived and vice versa.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the webs of the network have synchronic and diachronic axes, which means they are codependent and coevolving; synchronically, the symbolic network “is a function of its similarities to and differences from other religious alternatives available at a given moment in time”; diachronically, “every religious position is also temporally and historically situated—it grows out of a past that shapes it and anticipates a future that can transform it” (23). The well-known Copernican Revolution will serve to illustrate this process well. By decentering the Earth (and humanity, to some extent) from its lofty perch in the cosmological picture, Copernicus sparked new theological and anthropological imaginings that eventually yielded the Enlightenment and scientific revolution.

To say that culture and religion, a part of culture, evolve is to borrow from the biological model of evolution. Since Darwin, we know that biological life adapts over time based on Darwin's "principle of natural selection." All organic life—plants, insects, birds, and mammals—is constituted by a collection of genes that are constantly mutating. Those random mutations that contribute to the survival of a species become increasingly common until eventually all varieties of the species carry what was at one time a genetic anomaly. Or, perhaps, an entirely new species emerges. In a similar manner, one can think of religious systems, as one aspect of culture, as a kind of coherent "being" embedded in a particular historical, geographic, and cultural context. To the extent that the system fulfills the needs of the social community, it will survive. However, if circumstances change—if the social group begins to suffer under the oppression of another group, if competing systems challenge the very premises of the religion, if critical beliefs are proven false—then the religious system must adapt in order to survive. New concepts—"ideological" genes, as it were—may mutate and, if they address the threats, may indeed survive. In short, parallels to the adaptations that contribute to the survival or even proliferation of a biological species can be discerned in the adaptations of cultural systems.

Of course, there is a key difference. Biological evolution, at least prior to human manipulation of the biological world, takes place randomly. Animals and plants do not *intentionally* change some genetic aspect of themselves in order to survive in their environment. Giraffes did not "choose" to develop a long neck so they could reach higher vegetation; that genetic anomaly survived, out of an infinite number of other genetic anomalies, because it better suited the given environment. Cultural systems, on the other hand, are the product of human intention, creativity, and imagination. In the case of religions, leaders, thinkers, and devotees themselves may create new concepts or forms of practice to intentionally adapt to a foreseen challenge. Or, some inspired prophet may receive a new revelation prompting an entirely new religion that flourishes.

There is another problem that the model or analogy of evolution raises, one that has been highlighted in criticisms of the comparative method in religious and anthropological studies in particular. For early scholars like James Frazer and William Robertson Smith, to speak of a religion or some other aspect of culture "evolving" was to make

valuative judgment. As Robert Segal notes, “What comes earliest is lowliest; what comes latest is highest” (2001, 347). This was an operating assumption of much comparative scholarship that sought to categorize the stages of religious development, from magic to religion or from primitive to modern. In many such schemes, Western scholars conveniently “discovered” Christianity to be the culmination of this evolving process. But evolution, in biological terms, does not necessarily lead to “progress.” Genetic mutations may evolve in ways that make a species *less* suitable for their environment. So while we generally think of evolution as a linear process, some “grand progressive ladder,” it is actually more like a tree. *Homo sapiens* is not at the culmination but more accurately “one of many branches on the tree.”<sup>8</sup>

In this comparative study, I will be examining evolution *within* religious traditions—the evolution of Christianity or Buddhism, for example. Given the multiple forms of Christianity in the world today, wouldn’t the analogy of a family tree make more sense than a singular line of development? In both cases (Buddhism and Christianity), multiple forms coexist, in fact. So please keep this qualification in mind as we proceed.<sup>9</sup>

The dialectical model introduced by Berger is one way of conceptualizing this evolutionary process. The reimagining and *externalization* of a new concept of God, for example, is analogous to the genetic anomalies in a given biological species. As previously noted, the problem is that Berger excessively emphasizes the significance of existential meaning in interpreting *why* a particular idea survives and becomes popular. Meaning is indeed a central function of religion, to be sure. But meaning is not the *only* determinative factor. Indeed, brute force and the power to control discourse may be more significant than meaning in many instances. The fact that most South American countries practice Catholicism is not necessarily because the Catholic system made more sense than the indigenous religions that preceded it. In most cases, the spread of Catholicism was but one dimension of the colonialization of South America. The colonial authorities often compelled natives to drop their own religious practices and adopt Christianity. After a few generations, who remembers?

Finally, Mark Taylor offers a useful definition of religion that incorporates this dialectical nature of religion. “Religion,” he writes, “is an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and

acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure” (2007, 12). Religion is thus constituted by two interrelated movements: “one that structures and stabilizes and one that destructures and destabilizes” in a kind of “quasi-dialectical rhythm” (13). As we trace the evolution of the Ultimate within each tradition, I will endeavor to highlight this principle. As new conceptions emerge, they necessarily challenge and destabilize existing conceptions. Moreover, they often conceal an effort to subvert existing social, political, and religious power structures.

We now move to a third interpretive lens—imagination.

### IMAGINATION

Imagination is a—perhaps *the*—critical faculty of the mind in the ongoing human quest for the divine, I suggest. In other words, imagination is the source for metaphors, narratives, and doctrines of God that are constantly reproduced in the dialectical dance of culture. This use of “imagination” will no doubt suggest to some an assumption that “God” is a figment of our imagination. But this would be to misunderstand seriously my use of the word “imagine.” We have all heard it said of a creative child, “She has a wonderful imagination,” which is to say, she has an extraordinary capacity to create her own world of “imaginary” friends, circumstances, and happenings that, of course, *do not really exist*. In this sense, J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter book series, also has a wonderful imagination. While this use of the term “imagination” is not incorrect, it does not properly reflect what many philosophers since the eighteenth century have identified as *the* most important and powerful capacity of the human mind. What follows is a brief history of imagination in Western philosophical discourse.

Early observers linked imagination with mythology and pejoratively characterized it as irrational thinking. Prominent in oral cultures, it was linked to memory since emotionally laden myths that coded beliefs were easier to memorize. Plato associated imagination with the image-making or mimetic capacity of the mind, a capacity decidedly inferior to the rational capacity to discern ideal forms. Although Aristotle recognized the creative capacity of imagination, he still saw it as reproductive. That is, imagination can only take preexisting images within the mind to create other concepts and ideas. According to this

understanding, Kearney observes, “imagination remains largely a reproductive rather than a productive activity, a servant rather than a master of meaning, imitation rather than origin” (1988, 113). This mimetic and decidedly narrow interpretation of imagination persisted through the medieval period and beyond. Indeed, it was not until Hume and Kant that a measurably different understanding emerged.

The Scottish empiricist David Hume (1711–1776) perceived imagination to be the broader capacity of the mind to see or envision that which is not available to the senses. As a simple example, when an object of our vision is temporarily blocked by a passing train or the lights go out in a room, imagination is the capacity of the mind to “see” the persistent image. Hume’s theory of imagination is considerably more nuanced than this and even extends to the mind’s ability to categorize objects of perception. In short, Hume extends the sphere of imagination beyond mere image-making to the critical role of thinking. But Hume still assessed imagination rather critically because all of our *unempirical* beliefs about the world and the way it is structured are engendered by imagination. True knowledge, for Hume, derives from empirical study and analysis.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) represents a radical turn in the Western philosophical assessment and understanding of imagination by, in part, pushing its influence even further back to the a priori operations of consciousness. Kant asserted that what we perceive, and thus what we can empirically know, is *already* schematized by imagination. “What we experience,” as Keiran Egan puts it, “is the world already structured by the imagination” (1992, 21). Moreover, imagination includes the creative capacity of the mind to generate ideas that transcend the world encountered by our senses. Thus, Kant distinguished between empirical or reproductive imagination and transcendental imagination. The former depends on the association of images and ideas that exist in our memories. It is the capacity of the mind to process experienced reality through the categories of consciousness already present. The latter is constructive or creative in function. It is the capacity of the mind to reformulate and create *new* categories of consciousness, to process the reality experienced—particularly when that reality seems in tension with the established schemata of consciousness. Thus, Kant perceived in the operative function of imagination a productive or creative capacity to reformulate and reconceptualize some aspect of our understanding of the world and human experience.