

## Chapter 1

# DREAMING

### INTRODUCTION

HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOTHING IF NOT IMAGINATIVE. WE DREAM INTO REALITY cultures and technologies, languages to activate them, moral worlds to regulate them, and theories to understand them. Some of our most socially potent dreams concern ultimacy, the creative root of life, and the end of all our striving. These dreams yield conceptual models of ultimate reality, animating religious traditions and offering existential orientation to individuals. Our dreams of ultimacy make meaning by effing the ineffable. But are such dreams, and the conceptual models of such dreaming, to be taken seriously? Or are models of ultimate reality more akin to the confusion of the dreamer upon waking in the living world? At those half-awake moments, the artificial clarity of dreams evaporates leaving us with the muddle of collapsed pretensions to profound insight. It is the Cheshire Cat vanishing, leaving visible merely a wry smile hovering in the air.

The main reason for thinking that we should approach the conceptual fruit of our ultimacy dreams with a wry grin, and certainly with humble suspicion, is that there are so many models of ultimate reality, producing the impression of intractable conflict. This is why the plurality of models of ultimate reality is a central problem for religious philosophy. I think the key to evaluating our ultimacy dreams is comparative inquiries across the plurality of ultimacy models. Here I present a comparative argument to show that highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality are inferior to a number of competitors. Our ultimacy dreams are conceptually more robust, in this view, when they are less in thrall to our reflexively anthropomorphic cognitive habits of mind and more responsive to reality on many scales, within and beyond ordinary human experience.

There is no pretension to one perfect dream implied here, corresponding to a conceptually unassailable and unquestionably superior model of ultimate reality. But there is reason for confidence that we do not dream of ultimacy in vain, and that our dreams can truly engage us with the spiritual depths of the waking world.

The phrase “models of ultimate reality” (or “ultimacy models”) is not common usage. I wish it were. I prefer to speak of “ultimacy models” rather than “God models” because I am most interested in ultimate reality and think that God is a valuable but potentially parochial name for it. Of course, sometimes God is treated merely as a component of ultimate reality, as in Alfred North Whitehead’s thought, rather than synonymous with it. Those are instances of God language being used to talk about something other than ultimate reality, and further reasons to prefer the phrase “ultimacy models.” In some traditions, of course, reflection on ultimate reality is regarded as secondary, a distraction from pursuing the ultimate paths that lead to liberation; this is true of some forms of Buddhism, for example. “Ultimacy” would be a serviceable comparative category in such cases, but here I am focused on conceptual and linguistically expressible models of ultimate reality. (These preferences for comparative categories reflect the conclusions of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project; see Neville 2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

Speaking of ultimacy *models* immediately suggests the plural, constructed, and approximate character of all thinking about ultimate realities. That such thinking produces manifold theories and portrayals of ultimate reality is the first fact of comparative religious ideas and a central problem for religious philosophy. The people who make these models are dreamers, to be sure, but they are also curious and creative, gripped by fascinating instincts and motivations, and typically immersed in great traditions of religious philosophy through their specialized discourse communities.

These imaginative constructions are also conditioned by the prodigiously diverse contexts in which they are first created and then received and transformed. Their social embodiment leaves models of ultimate reality vulnerable to exploitation for the sake of the social control for which religion is justly famous. I reckon that, if a model of God as a black person had been widespread in the early American colonies, African slavery in America would have been impossible to rationalize the way it was by some sincere Christian theologians. Yet the embodiment of religious ideas also allows models to illuminate and liberate questing souls in generation after generation. Witness the frequency with which artists portray Jesus with the facial features of local cultures.

Because of social embodiment, models of ultimate reality are subject to correction in a disorganized process of practical and conceptual testing against the ultimate reality that is actually engaged and registered in human life (such as it is, and in principle it may be nothing more than the totality of everything in reality as a whole, or the engageable parts of it). Some models fail under the stress of what amounts to a process of natural selection of ideas. For example, the shadowy yet potent idea of God as a white man shattered under the weight of experience. That is slightly encouraging for empirically minded philosophical theologians who prize referential adequacy in their models. Some models survive the tests of time and experience. They are not always popular. Indeed, all of my favorites—mystical theologies of ultimacy as blinding darkness, God beyond God, reality beyond comprehension (see Wildman 2017)—are especially unpopular. But these survivors (both my favorites and their competitors) are imaginatively stimulating, conceptually robust, flexible, plausible, and practical to a superior degree. They can be theoretically elaborated into comprehensive and consistent systems of thought. They are repeatedly rediscovered within a single tradition, and their core instincts almost always appear, reconfigured and re-weighted, in every tradition of religious philosophy. These are the Great Models, the ultimacy models with which every student of religious philosophy must come to terms. This essay addresses how to manage the plural and constructed character of the Great Models.

Some religious philosophers explain the persistence and recurrence of the Great Models by allowing that they are all more or less true—theoretically true as well as found to be true-in-practice within many hearts and minds. They then seek ways to manage the problem of plural conflicting models, usually relying on concepts of perspective-taking or inclusion, superiority or sublation, to explain how Truth Might Be One even though Models Are Many.

Other religious philosophers reject inquiry into ultimate reality as fatuous and futile. They argue that inquiry exchanges existentially vibrant engagement with ultimate reality for an absurdly arrogant evaluation process in which philosophers decide on matters that necessarily lie beyond the powers of human reason. Either pick a tradition and invest in it and its internal intellectual debates, they urge, or else make a Museum of Models that, like an art gallery, permits the capacious soul to appreciate each one as a unique testimony to the depth and wonder of life. I prefer to think of this museum in more dynamic terms, as an array of excellent dancers, representing both living spiritual insights and ideas preserved in philosophic traditions whose members are devoted to commentary and debate in the terms of their finely honed linguistic habits. Investing in a single tradition and appreciating many traditions can be practical and honorable ways

to manage the problem of plural models. In either case, however, the comparing inquirer's theoretical and existential problem of *reconciling* conflicting models remains unresolved.

Still other religious philosophers feel dismayed by the moral priorities of the comparing inquirers, the mono-traditional investors, and the multi-traditional appreciators. These responsible worriers see the aftereffects and side effects of religious ideas as they are embodied in institutions and activated in social contexts. They decry all impractical philosophy, and impractical religious philosophy above all, as wrongly putting the philosopher's pleasurable pastime before the world's pain, or as blindly supporting the vested interests of religious institutions when trenchant critique would be more appropriate. And they particularly hate having their viewpoint labeled, framed, and hung in the Museum of Models where steely critical edge yields to the infinite nausea of perpetual legitimate contrasts.

Finally, some religious philosophers take a maximally modest road. They avoid inquiry and morality, and they scrupulously confine themselves to analysis. These analytical ascetics try not to construct anything. They aim instead to police the constructions of others, looking for signs of structural weakness and making design refinements. They are often mono-traditional investors engaged in intricate logical analysis and defense of their local tradition's beliefs. Some are comparativists moving around the Museum of Models like art critics. However they operate, they remain faithful to their modest creed and deny themselves the dangerous thrills of imaginative construction and inquiry.

Most religious philosophers can't help themselves. Each just tends to be a comparing inquirer, a mono-traditional investor, a multi-traditional appreciator, a responsible worrier, or an analytical ascetic. The best of them can see virtues in every way. But most *have a way*, emerging from the exquisite tangle of nature and nurture that defines preference in human beings, even philosophers. Such philosophic preferences run deep and rarely change more than once in a lifetime, if at all. For better or worse, I am drawn most strongly to the way of the comparing inquirer. I recognize the viability of other ways and appreciate their virtues. But I experience the plural, constructed, and approximate character of all models of ultimate reality intellectually as a puzzle to be solved, and existentially as an invitation to engage ultimate reality through thinking and feeling and acting toward a solution.

I consider this preliminary *confessio* essential for avoiding wasteful conflicts about God talk within religious philosophy that arise due to stylistic variations. Openly acknowledging our preferences as such honors the wisdom of other ways and prompts us to take seriously their criticisms of us. In my case, I need to deal with criticisms of comparing inquiry as a futile and fatuous effort to control the

uncontrollable, a tiresome and ugly attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible, and a morally confused evasion of philosophic responsibility. Here I merely acknowledge the plurality of approaches and associated criticisms and proceed.

I divide my thoughts on this theme into three sections in what follows. Looking *behind* anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality refers to evaluating them through understanding their origins as imaginative constructions. This will involve assessing the prodigious capabilities and subtle liabilities of human cognition, and taking account of evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and social-historical context. Poking around *between* anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality refers to gaining traction for inquiry by means of critical comparison of the relative strengths and weaknesses of various models. This will involve thinking through the logical requirements of comparative inquiry and illustrating it in relation to highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality. Moving *beyond* anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality refers to a comprehensive coordination of the Great Models in some wider intellectual scheme. This calls for a mystical theology that relativizes and relates models while explaining the senses in which they truly express ultimate reality—both through describing it more or less accurately and through enabling people to engage it more or less authentically.

My approach here is two-leveled. On one level, I describe a method to support comparative inquiry into the plurality of models of ultimate reality. On another level, I articulate a particular ultimacy model, one whose special virtue is to make sense of the diversity of the Great Models, and whose corresponding liability is its lack of concrete intelligibility. Given the space available, in some places I gesture toward arguments that cannot be presented (see Wildman 2017 for further details). But there is sufficient space to show how the practices of looking behind, between, and beyond our model-like dreaming about ultimate reality are philosophically feasible and fruitful.

### BEHIND ANTHROPOMORPHIC MODELS OF ULTIMATE REALITY

God does not speak and think in Arabic or Hebrew, in Sanskrit or King James English. Claims to the contrary are incoherent in an amusingly self-canceling way. Thus, if there is supernatural revelation at all, upon reception it must be pressed into temporally bound, culturally conditioned, and linguistically limited forms of thought. In fact, my working hypothesis is that there is no supernatural revelation, because there is no supernatural being to convey it, and no supernatural

realm to house it. Rather, revelation is best understood as present in every moment of human insight, in the depths of nature, and in the emergence of intense value that nature supports. But whether or not I am correct about this, ultimacy models do not just drop from another realm into this one, packaged and polished. We *make* our ultimacy models, under the impact of many influences and experiences.

One of those influences is the all-too-familiar fact of finitude. Whether it is fights with loved ones, failures of imagination, the frustrations of sickness, or the finality of death, finitude pervades the human condition. Even if religious traditions are right that there are ways to overcome the bizarre and bad ways we deal with our finite existence, there is no escape from finitude as such. This piece of practical knowledge is directly relevant to how religious philosophers should assess ultimacy models: they must embrace a thoroughgoing fallibilism. While we may be able to minimize imperfections through disciplined effort and technical expertise cultivated in specialized discourse communities, all models of ultimate reality bear the marks of their finite makers, like DNA within organisms.

The marks of the human condition on ultimacy models include the conceptual defects that we associate with anthropomorphism. But strictly speaking all models of ultimate reality are anthropomorphic to some degree, because they are human constructions and limited by the human imagination. So our concern is really with *excessive* or *careless* anthropomorphism rather than with anthropomorphism *as such*. Like other forms of theoretical excess, excessive anthropomorphism is not always easy to detect. Much religious symbolism is self-consciously anthropomorphic, as when Michelangelo portrays God as a bearded man reaching out to enliven Adam, or when Hindus portray Śiva as a many-armed man dancing in a ring of fire. The world of religious symbolism is replete with obviously anthropomorphic imagery that promotes spiritual engagement, and there is nothing naïve about a lot of it. Moreover, some philosophic models ascribe to God characteristics that are obviously derived from human experience, such as feelings, intentions, plans, and powers to act. But the philosophers who do this argue that this level of anthropomorphism is appropriate and indeed necessary to make sense of the claims made about God in the religious traditions whose narrative structures they attempt to elaborate in formal philosophic terms.

We can minimize anthropomorphic defects by paying careful attention to the way we make ultimacy models and the purposes served in the making of them. Historians and sociologists have traditionally played the leading roles in helping philosophers become aware of how contextual factors and group interests influence ultimacy models. The theological rationalizations for American enslavement of Africans I mentioned above reflect this type of awareness. The

so-called masters of suspicion, among whom I would count Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), speculated about hidden psychic motivations and social reflexes at work in the origins of ultimacy models prevalent within religion (see Feuerbach 1854, 1873; Marx 2002; Nietzsche 1933; Freud 1928, 1930, 1939). In recent decades, the sciences bearing on human cognition have come to the fore with evolutionary insights into the cognitive factors playing a role in the imaginative construction of ultimacy models (see the surveys in McNamara 2006; Wildman and McNamara 2010).



All explanations for the origins of religious ideas are inevitably speculative to some degree. Consider a few examples. First, the historian's smoking-gun evidence for origins would be a document in which a philosopher states his or her reasons for introducing a particular ultimacy model. But that is not decisive. Saint Augustine's autobiographical account in *Confessions* of the motivations and reasoning surrounding his shifting conception of God is subject both to what could be made conscious and to what he was prepared to make public (Augustine 1991).

Second, the human sciences can explain how the idea of God as a personal being attentive to every detail of our lives and purposefully active in the world serves the interests of strengthening corporate identity of certain religious groups—those groups that prize the spiritual ideal of a personal relationship with God and the moral ideal of a holy life lived transparently before a divine judge. But the fact that there is a fit between a particular model of God and the identity needs of a particular group probably bears more on the survival value of that model than on the motivations for creating it in the first place.

Third, the cognitive sciences can take us behind the scenes of human conscious awareness into the realm of unconscious motivations rooted in cognitive structures that were originally selected for their fitness-conferring benefits or that are side effects of other characteristics that were evolutionarily advantageous. But we are left guessing about the evolutionary scenarios that make sense of these claims about human cognition. This is a version of the widespread critique of unverifiable “just-so” stories to explain selection of traits in evolutionary biology. The most famous example is probably Charles Darwin's fanciful narrative of how a species of bears hunting insects while swimming could evolve through natural selection into a whale-like mammal (Darwin 1859, 184).

Fourth, cognitive psychology can devise experiments that disclose the presence of cognitive tendencies but it, too, can only speculate as to how they

figure in the construction of models of ultimate reality. People routinely exercise their freedom and their rational capacities to resist their basic reflexes in every domain of life, including the cognitive and religious domains, so the sheer existence of cognitive tendencies is not decisive for an interpretation of the origins of ultimacy models.

These examples show that the philosopher seeking an understanding of models of ultimate reality by analyzing the processes relevant to their creation has a peculiar evidence problem. We have circumstantial and hearsay evidence everywhere we turn, and neither a single eyewitness nor any forensic data that can place a particular motivation or cognitive reflex at the scene of the creative crime. Yet we do have a *vast pile* of circumstantial evidence, and it can be interpreted as pointing in roughly the same direction.

The recent excitement surrounding the study of religion using cognitive science and evolutionary psychology derives from the sheer weight of this corroborating evidence (classic works are Atran 2002, Boyer 2001, but the literature extends back a full decade before those works). Religious philosophers now know vastly more about influences on the creation of ultimacy models than at any point in the past. Philosophers analyzing, comparing, or constructing models of ultimate reality should keep in mind the following three considerations, each of which looks behind the scenes at the way we think and express our thoughts.



First, human reason is a powerful tool for interpretation, but it does have limitations that are relevant to assessing models of ultimate reality. Psychologists have documented these sources of cognitive error, complete with examples of the resulting mistakes in ordinary life. Psychologist Thomas Gilovich (1991) divides the sources of cognitive error into cognitive determinants and motivational and social determinants. Under cognitive determinants, he explains how misperceiving and misinterpreting random data can produce “something out of nothing,” as when people see the Virgin Mary in a toasted cheese sandwich. He describes how misinterpreting incomplete and unrepresentative data can yield “too much from too little,” as when people believe that horoscope predictions are accurate. And he points out how the biased evaluation of ambiguous and inconsistent data can leave us “seeing what we expect to see,” as when we remember unjust treatment more strongly when it confirms our expectations of the person in question.

Under motivational and social determinants, Gilovich explains how motivational factors leave us “seeing what we want to see,” as when gamblers firmly believe in special systems that actually do not work. He shows how the biasing

effects of secondhand information lead us into “believing what we are told,” as when people believe gossip more when they have no hard evidence one way or the other. And he demonstrates how exaggerated impressions of social support render us vulnerable to “the imagined agreement of others,” as when drinkers believe that many more people enjoy consuming alcohol than non-drinkers believe.

These cognitive vulnerabilities are well understood by charlatans and magicians, who exploit them for personal gain and entertainment, respectively (a fabulous magician’s exposé is Randi 1982). The field of behavioral law and economics studies human cognition and behavior in relation to the legal and economic systems, and it tries to determine how a full understanding of the strengths and liabilities of human cognition should affect regulation of these systems (a good survey of some of the issues in behavioral law and economics surrounding cognitive error is Rachlinski 2006 and other essays in the same symposium; Rachlinski focuses on whether and how the legal system should make paternalistic allowance for cognitive error). Research on marketing effectiveness recognizes that one of the factors in buying decisions is cognitive bias, and that advertisers can exploit it to maximize the impact of advertising dollars (on the psychology of buying see Nicosia 1966; also see Plous 1993). Cross-cultural research suggests that these cognitive, motivational, and social determinants of cognitive error appear across cultures, as do certain logical fallacies that derive from them, even though they are expressed quite differently according to the well-attested result that cultures support markedly different styles of cognition. There is a host of evidence on different cultural styles of cognition (see Nisbett, Choi, and Norenzayan 2001). Work on the cross-cultural recurrence of basic forms of cognitive error is less common, but there are good theoretical accounts of the possible evolutionary advantages of certain forms of cognitive error, building on empirical cross-cultural evidence for cognitive bias (see Tobena, Marks, and Dar 1999). In fact, education and experience appear to be more important factors than cultural differences in explaining variations in vulnerability to cognitive error, even though cultural factors remain important. This suggests both that many forms of cognitive error are genetically rooted (perhaps because they were adaptive in certain circumstances) and also that these vulnerabilities can often be regulated and controlled under the right conditions (for an integrated evolutionary perspective on cognitive error, see Haselton and Nettle 2006).

It takes decades of education to train human minds to recognize and allow for these cognitive liabilities. Many people remain vulnerable to many of the determinants of cognitive error and routinely fall prey to logical fallacies. This fact, allowing for variations in personality and cognitive style, underlies the prevalence

of superstition in all cultures (see Vyse 1997). Even rigorously educated people sometimes have difficulty extending to their ordinary lives the carefully honed critical-thinking skills that they habitually apply in the area of their special expertise. This is probably because the signals that alert us to cognitive error are plentiful in an area of expertise (such as engineering) but are weak or missing in some domains of life (such as religion).

This rapid survey does little more than open the book of lessons that intellectuals must draw from cognitive science. But it is enough for religious philosophers to conclude that they must scrutinize all models of ultimate reality for the effects of human vulnerability to cognitive error.



Second, beneath the manifestations of cognitive error lies a causal story about how we got this way through the evolutionary process. This portrayal of emergent reasoning and interpreting abilities in the human species is currently far from complete (a classic introduction to evolutionary psychology is Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992; one of the best discussions on evolutionary psychology and religion is Atran 2004). But already numerous thinkers have sensed that it promises leverage on the various evaluative questions that philosophers like to ask about human beliefs and behaviors (see Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006).

It turns out that the path from an evolutionary account of human cognition to a philosophical assessment of the reliability of religious beliefs is extremely complicated. Everyone agrees that a predisposition to religious beliefs and behaviors is widespread among human beings. Some say it is exclusively cultural with no genetic component; this view is implicitly present among the many religious thinkers who ignore evolutionary psychology. Some have interpreted this predisposition to religion as evidence for the adaptive value of religious beliefs and behaviors, and they then go on to fight about what this means for the truth of religious beliefs: does their adapted quality make them productive illusions or reliable hypotheses? (For an example of the view that true religious beliefs are adaptive, see Ramsey 2002; for an example of the view that false religious beliefs are adaptive, see Bulbulia 2006.)

I judge the expert consensus on this question currently to be somewhere between these relatively extreme views. Many of the cognitive operations involved in producing religion are evolved traits, but most or all of those traits evolved for reasons other than religion. That is, religious beliefs and behaviors are *side effects* of those traits. Religious side effects can be secondarily adaptive and maladaptive, and have proved to be both in various selective contexts. They can also

be valuable or dangerous, and true or false, and usually are all of these things in various respects all at once.

For example, the adapted cognitive skill of pattern recognition probably evolved largely because facial recognition was highly adaptive for early homonids. Once in place, that cognitive skill was co-opted for many other pattern-recognition tasks. The resulting side effects contribute to activities we value such as art and mathematics, and they also produce some of the cognitive liabilities described above, which are due to overactive pattern recognition. Similarly, cause-detection and intention-attribution systems probably evolved because they helped us get a head start on stalking predators that cause rustling in bushes. But the side effects of these adapted systems include overactive imaginations that cause us to run away from bushes when wind rather than anything dangerous is doing the rustling. “Better safe than sorry,” we say. When conditions allow, we can poke around in the bushes and see that there is nothing there after all, much as a child sensibly and courageously looks under the bed to rule out the presence of feared monsters. When resources to correct beliefs resulting from our cause-detection and intention-attribution systems are *not* readily available, however, we can quickly fall prey to superstition, to beliefs in intentions behind historical events, or to beliefs in causes behind coincidences.

Other evolved traits that play a role in the production of religious beliefs and behaviors include cognitive universals (underlying folk psychology and folk biology and what can be called “folk religion”; see Atran 1998), the memorable character of minimally counterintuitive beliefs (aiding the perseverance of religious beliefs; see Barrett and Nyhof 2001; Boyer and Ramble 2001), and hypnotizability and dissociation (the bases for colorful religious experiences and psychosomatic placebo healing effects; see McClenon 2002). Evolutionary psychologists debate the circumstances surrounding the evolutionary origins of each of these factors. But the consensus is that religious beliefs and behaviors are combinatorial side effects of all of these cognitive traits, rather than the primary cause of their adaptation (see the summary in Kirkpatrick 2006). This consensus is persuasive chiefly because religion is far too complex to be reduced to just one of the relevant cognitive factors.

If this consensus is correct, those arguing for religious beliefs either as false illusions or as true adaptations invariably depend on a dramatic reductionism to close the gap between the multi-trait complexity of religion and the single-trait explanation they typically need in order to clinch their philosophical case. To assess the reliability of religious beliefs, we must negotiate an intricately contoured landscape joining the evolutionary depths of the oceans of biology to the

heady peaks of theoretically expressed models of ultimate reality. The details of the landscape matter; they prevent a simple settlement of the truth and value questions surrounding models of ultimate reality. The challenge for theoretically elaborated ultimacy models is to account for those details. As we shall see, that is an important criterion for adequacy in a process of comparative inquiry.



Third and finally, regardless of available cognitive resources, religious beliefs and behaviors emerge in culturally conditioned and socially charged ways. This fact of life is extremely obvious when one is on the wrong side of someone else's religious orthodoxy or encountering religion in a foreign culture. Yet the same fact can be almost indiscernible when one is at home in a local religious environment. No matter how invisible they may seem, religious ideas can be socially explosive. Attempting to take responsibility for this fact of life introduces moral complexities into the task of religious philosophy.

Consider an analogy. The Union of Concerned Scientists urges scientists to take moral responsibility for their research. Some scientists resist these urgings, arguing that the social effects of their research are someone else's problem—say, corporations that develop technological applications. But this smacks of laziness and blame-shifting, comes the reply. In the same way, religious philosophers must do their part to take responsibility for their work with ultimacy models, and not award themselves a free pass and blame retail religion for the consequences of the religious ideas they discuss. How can religious philosophers take responsibility for the social and psychological potency of ultimacy models?

If we abstract religious ideas from their social contexts for the purposes of analysis, then we should pay attention at some point to the effects of the abstracting move, so as to acknowledge that those ideas are embodied social realities and not mere theoretical abstractions. If we take up a God idea for discussion, we should pay attention at some point to the ways that the selected idea has been present in morally dubious exercises of political power, and to the psychological effects, both positive and negative, of that God model. These kinds of responsibility-taking have become the primary task of a rather large group of theologians and philosophers concerned with the psychological and social effects of ultimacy models. They point out that the model of God as King of a Kingdom can silently but improperly legitimate certain forms of political organization, or that the model of God as Father can reinforce stereotypes about men and women. Even if this kind of analysis is not the primary obligation of every religious philosopher, it should at least figure somewhere in the mix of tasks undertaken; that is part of the meaning of professional competence in our context.

I welcome the growing sensitivity to the social power of religious ideas among religious philosophers. But another kind of sensitivity—to the plurality of models of ultimate reality—continues to be underdeveloped. Few philosophers know their way around the world's religious ideas. Most intellectuals who do feel at home in multiple religious traditions are anthropologists focusing on religious practices, sociologists focusing on social change, or historians focusing on cross-cultural interactions, rather than philosophers focusing on the truth and value of the ideas themselves. The effect of this lack of familiarity with the conceptual and religious Other is often a parochialism that makes philosophical work seem quaintly irrelevant to the outsider. Not all religious philosophy must concern itself with the plurality of ultimacy ideas, to be sure. But what is the rationale for excluding alternative ideas of ultimate reality when they are directly relevant to the philosophical point under debate? Unfamiliarity does not count as a rationale for neglect; nor does lack of expertise. These are merely signs of the need to do more homework.



I am designating these three considerations as *lessons* from cognitive psychology, from evolutionary psychology, and from religious studies, respectively. I have argued that anyone wanting to construct or analyze models of ultimate reality in rigorous and responsible fashion cannot afford to ignore these lessons. When absorbed, like nutrients in soil, they add a flowering self-awareness to disciplined philosophic effort. This awareness exquisitely complicates the model-construction process by triggering self-doubt and causing us constantly to inspect our best thoughts for unacknowledged influences. But it also makes thinking clearer and more realistic. It heightens the ability to understand alternative models, eliminates many wasteful theological disputes, and creates space for reasoning to play an honorable role in authentic philosophical debate rather than functioning merely as a tool for blindly legitimating socially potent dreams about ultimate reality.

#### BETWEEN ANTHROPOMORPHIC MODELS OF ULTIMATE REALITY

So much for looking behind ultimacy models. Can we say anything about what goes on between them? What I am calling the Great Models of ultimate reality are like tectonic plates. They cover the indirectly experienceable surface of ultimate reality, which serves as much to hide what is going on below as to define an interesting landscape for intellectual and spiritual exploration. It is at the edges of the

plates, where they grind with inconsistency against one another, that we learn most about the dynamism below the surface.

Comparing ideas of ultimate reality is partly a matter of paying close attention to areas of conceptual friction. The purposes of comparing religious ideas vary greatly. Sometimes the aim is simply to create a database of information for others to use, for which purpose the ideal of neutrality serves as inspiration to be approximated through constant vigilance. At other times the aim is one of social control and the accuracy of the comparison secondary to the power it confers on people who make use of it, as when the comparative category of “religions of the book” allows Muslims to rationalize their extending of courtesies to adherents of certain other religions. The proper philosophic purpose of comparing religious ideas is to adduce a penetrating hypothesis about a religious topic, to stabilize that hypothesis by connecting it to the available data that articulate it, and to test the hypothesis against that data so as to refine it or else discard it for a superior hypothesis (see Strenski 2006). This sort of comparative inquiry is particularly important in relation to models of ultimate reality because there is so little logical and conceptual leverage for dealing with their intricate pluralism outside of comparison.

Wielding comparison of religious ideas and practices to formulate and test anthropological and sociological hypotheses has a long and lustrous history. Theories both justly famous and rightly infamous have sprung from the fevered minds of Western scholars infected by knowledge of multiple cultures and religions, from Frazer (1900) to Tambiah (1990), from Tyler (1873–1874) to Wierzbica (1992), from Durkheim (1954) to Berger (1967), and from Weber (1930) to Huntington (1996). Comparative inquiry exists in all of the major philosophic traditions. In the West, it arcs from the comparative argument at the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, through Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles* and Hegel’s lectures on world history and world religions, to the comparative religious philosophies of John Hick and Robert Neville (Aristotle 1982; Aquinas 1955; Hegel 1984; Hick 2004; Neville 1991). In South Asia, it is sparked by ancient formal debates between Buddhist and Hindu philosophers and produces competing philosophic schemes such as those of Vedānta, which are both inspired by the Upanishads and aim to register the truth of every other perspective on ultimate reality. (Śaṅkara in the mid-eighth century CE set an example of expounding the Upanishads while taking account of opposing schools, including Buddhism, Jainism, Samkhya, and Vaisheshika; see especially his commentaries on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, which were formative for much subsequent Indian philosophy, including in its comparative aspects.) In the East Asian

context, comparative religious philosophy is rooted in the internal diversity of Chinese religion, in the migration of Buddhism from India, and in the modern encounter with the West. Its modern high points include the writings of Kyoto School thinkers such as Nishida (1960), Nishitani (1982), and Tanabe (1986).

A key question for the comparing inquirer is whether comparison, inspired by these longstanding traditions, can confer leverage on philosophical questions about the value and truth of models of ultimate reality. Some say no. The case against the viability of comparative inquiry is obvious: comparison is good for organizing and understanding religious ideas, at best, but it has no power to control philosophical interpretation that aims to detect what is true and valuable among religious ideas. This case is compelling, as far as it goes. But it does not penetrate deeply into the potential importance of comparison for philosophical inquiry.



We can spend our lives listing models of ultimate reality, with their intricate theistic and non-theistic variations, noting cross-cases and exceptions, recording contextual and historical conditioning factors, and still get nowhere in a philosophical inquiry. It is only when we introduce criteria for evaluation that our comparative database becomes an asset for inquiry. Comparative inquiry refers not to sheer description under a rubric of comparative categories, therefore, but to the artful use of comparison both to make criteria for evaluation count for inquiry and to expose those criteria to rational scrutiny (see Neville 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Wildman 2006c, 2017).

We can think of philosophically elaborated models of ultimate reality as large-scale hypotheses. For example, we might posit a theory of ultimate reality built around a model of a personal divine being with intentions, conscious states, and powers to act in the world. Such hypotheses can be tested against the considerations we have discussed—cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, comparative religions—among others. But it is difficult to decide how good our hypothesis is in such tests until we put it alongside an alternative hypothesis and compare how well the two handle the various considerations available to guide testing. For example, we could put the personal theism hypothesis alongside the quite different ground-of-being hypothesis and compare how they handle the data, piece by piece. At the simplest level, this is what is meant by comparative inquiry.

How do we know when one hypothesis fares better than another? The superior hypothesis in respect of the data from evolutionary psychology is the

one that best explains why we should expect that data to emerge. The standards for good explanations then have to be sorted out, but typically they include applicability, adequacy, coherence, consistency, and sometimes pragmatic considerations such as ethical consequences, aesthetic quality, or spiritual appeal. Then there is the question about which data sets to prize most highly; answering this question produces comparative criteria for the inquiry. For example, proponents of the ground-of-being hypothesis would probably want to emphasize the importance of the data from evolutionary psychology because ground-of-being theism is effortlessly compatible with it. Meanwhile, they would probably want to de-emphasize data from religious popularity contests, because the ground-of-being view feels spiritually disappointing to more people than find it spiritually compelling. I suspect that proponents of the personal-theism hypothesis would want to rank these two criteria oppositely to match its own weaknesses and strengths. The two sides may not be able to agree on the importance of such comparative criteria, but the argument is there to be had in a process of comparative inquiry, whereas it is often utterly obscured in other forms of argumentation about ultimacy models.

Here is another example. Suppose we place the hypothesis of God as omnipotent creator alongside that of the cosmic moral dualisms of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. We could compare them relative to the two criteria of offering a solution to the problem of evil and solving the problem of the one and the many. We can quickly see that absolute moral dualisms handle the problem of evil spectacularly well but stumble on the problem of the one and the many, whereas the advantages and disadvantages are reversed in the case of omnipotent creator theism. Then the question becomes whether it is more important to have an intelligible solution to the reality of evil or a compelling resolution of the problem of the one and the many. That can be debated in the same way that models are.

The various comparative criteria serve initially to emphasize some patches of the relevant data over other patches. But after the hypotheses have offered their explanations of a patch of data and the explanations have been compared for quality, the comparative criteria actually serve to rank hypotheses as better and worse. Consider the following comparative criterion: "an adequate theory of ultimate reality makes sympathetic sense of the most refined philosophical thinking about ultimacy within the world's religious traditions." This criterion would initially select out a patch of data from comparative religions for the various competing hypotheses to explain. But when the explanations are in, the same criterion tends to prefer hypotheses that are compatible with a broader array of ultimacy models. Personal theism stumbles on this criterion but several

competitors, including the ground-of-being hypothesis, leap over it naturally. This would narrow the field of excellent contenders in the competition for the best explanation of all relevant data, to the detriment of the personal-theism hypothesis, unless its advocates could argue that this particular criterion should be revised or demoted to an unimportant position. This is why proponents of hypotheses fight over comparative criteria. Unfortunately, much of this fighting over comparative criteria usually goes on under the radar, whereas comparative inquiry helpfully forces it out into the open.

I am describing a comparative framework for a process of inference to the best explanation of all relevant evidence. In reality, there ought to be many competing hypotheses, not just two, though pair-wise consideration of hypotheses is a way to keep the process manageable. Regardless of how comparative inquiry is organized, however, inference-to-best-explanation arguments in religious philosophy are only as good as the comparative infrastructure that articulates and supports them. I have argued elsewhere that this constitutes an unfamiliar comparative style of natural theology that does not fall prey to the much-trumpeted weaknesses of traditional natural theology (Wildman 2006a, 2006b).

Comparison is not neutral, any more than description or interpretation or evaluation are neutral. Rational inquirers are perpetually working in the middle of relatively unexamined premises and heavily scrutinized conclusions. They move their attention about to test what seems problematic in their conceptual environment and to detect bias and distortion, but they are always in the middle. In particular, they always *begin* in the middle of descriptions of religious beliefs and practices that reflect existing traditions of interpretation and translation, constantly refined and corrected by experts. Comparisons make use of categories that are vulnerable to ideological distortions and empirical failures. The attentive inquirer cannot delay beginning until the relevant data is perfectly well organized and impartially interpreted; there never would be a beginning.

It follows that centralizing comparison offers no clean shortcuts for philosophical inquiry; it is the scratchy way through the densest thickets of the forest. But comparative inquiry is the only realistic way to overcome philosophical parochialism. It is also the only way to mount inference-to-best-explanation arguments in religious philosophy that register the relevant data, include the relevant competitor hypotheses, and expose the relevant argumentative criteria to examination. In short, comparison forces the philosophical construction of ultimate realities to do justice to the data of religious ideas and practices, rather than artfully dodging the data for the many reasons we might be inclined to do that.



My ventures into the forest of comparative inquiry have involved confronting an array of theoretically robust models of ultimate reality. These are the Great Models. They include the most sophisticated versions of personal theism, such as those of Rāmānuja and Augustine, which are the most obviously anthropomorphic offerings among the Great Models. Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta is there, along with Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka portrayal of the ultimate way for human beings, and the ground-of-being theory already mentioned. Trinitarian theism is present, with its striking postulate of internal relational structure within the divine (Augustine represents that, too), along with the still more differentiated moral dualisms of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, and perhaps also the unresolved radical pluralism of ancient polytheism without a High God to keep order. The Chinese vision of the Tao, whose structured spontaneity flows through all of reality, would be there, along with more recent models of ultimacy as a fecund interplay of principles of order and chaos. The Neoplatonic One in eternal self-differentiation would be there, along with Aristotle’s Prime Mover, Plato’s valuational ultimate, and the highly structured medieval Great Chain of Being. And there would be others besides these, with some models having more in common with models from alien traditions than with other models from their own tradition. For example, within Western philosophical traditions, the ground-of-being viewpoint has more in common with Advaita Vedānta and even Madhyamaka and Philosophical Daoism than with the personal theism with which it has coexisted for millennia.

Demonstrating the possibility or basic intelligibility of these models is not required here; much more than mere possibility is already acknowledged when we grant these views a place among the Great Models. Arguments about the probability of ultimacy models remain relevant, at least in principle. And a large and diverse range of less familiar types of arguments enter this comparative inquiry. For example, whereas we commonly find people arguing over whether personal theism can hold out against scientific reductionism, we rarely encounter debates over whether the *pratītya-samutpāda* metaphysics of *śūnyatā* or the substantial *jīvan* metaphysics of dvaita *Vedānta* does a better job of accounting for what is known from evolutionary psychology about human nature, and how both compare with personal theism and the ground-of-being theory in that respect. Comparative inquiry opens up worlds of philosophical debate that cross cultures in new ways and place new demands on the religious philosopher. It’s a new kind of dreaming about ultimate reality, I guess—one especially suited to philosophical theologians.

It seems that the process of comparative inquiry threatens to become extremely unwieldy, even if it proceeds pair-wise or chunk by manageable chunk. Nevertheless, it is worth asking about its overall prospects. Differentiating better from worse among the Great Models is sometimes feasible, at least in the sense that some models handle entire sets of key comparative criteria significantly better than their competitors. But the chances of identifying a clean winner overall are profoundly uncertain. I conjecture that a few of the Great Models—the Very Great Models, if you like—turn out to be roughly equivalent. What does this mean? Relative to a fairly large set of key comparative criteria, all of the Very Great Models do fairly well, and arguments to promote a favorable subset of those key criteria above others are not decisive, to about the same degree in all cases (see an example of this sort of stalemate sketched in Wildman 2007).

We might complain that, if the results are of this sort, then comparative inquiry yields far too little return on our investment. We might long for the good old days of simple arguments over the sheer possibility of a favored model of ultimate reality, and indeed there is a place for such arguments. But the point here is that this kind of comparative inquiry is precisely as complicated as the subject matter demands. Any other approach inevitably short-circuits the real challenges and produces an artificial triumph, thereby violating the comparing inquirer's fundamental values of open inquiry. This sort of comparative inquiry is not for everyone, but for those who want to pursue it, nothing simpler or more convenient or less demanding can get the job done.

## BEYOND ANTHROPOMORPHIC MODELS OF ULTIMATE REALITY

With this we come to the final preposition: *beyond*. Many religious philosophers have no interest in moving beyond highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality. I think we need to move beyond them, however, and I'll explain why as an illustration of how comparative inquiry might progress, even if it is only a small step toward making sense of our ultimacy dreams.

In the comparative inquiry I am describing, the more obviously anthropomorphic versions of personal theism are less proficient at explaining many important chunks of data than a lot of other ultimacy models. In fact, I suspect that the highly anthropomorphic models, including most forms of personal theism and polytheism, are not among what I earlier called the Very Great Models, which are the finalists in this drawn-out comparative dance competition. The comparative criteria that most strongly favor anthropomorphic ultimacy models are related to what makes them popular—they are concretely intelligible and inspiring for human life, they promote dramatic and minimally counter-intuitive reconciliation

narratives, and they offer a strong basis for hope in the continuation of individual consciousness after death. But these are also the kinds of virtues that any popular model of ultimate reality would have, according to cognitive psychology and evolutionary psychology, because they directly reflect the cognitive biases of the human species.

If you believe our cognitive biases are adaptations that evolved specifically because they promote *accurate* religious beliefs—not just *useful* beliefs but *true* beliefs—then those biases confer likelihood on popular anthropomorphic religious beliefs such as highly anthropomorphic personal theism (see Barrett 2011, 2012). In that case, you can frame the psychological data so as to confirm personal theism and other highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models. But if you are convinced, as I am, that religiousness is not the primary drive for the evolution of human cognitive traits, and that their application to religion is an evolutionary side effect, then the correspondence between human cognitive bias and the popularity of highly anthropomorphic forms of personal theism is more troubling. In this case, the *prima facie* likelihood is that highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models reflect cognitive error more than reliable belief.

Of course, there are less heavily anthropomorphic ultimacy models that are also less popular and more intellectually compelling than highly anthropomorphic forms of personal theism. For example, some models of ultimacy combine personal characteristics such as intentionality, awareness, and activity with nonpersonal characteristics such as non-temporality, impassibility, and immutability. There is a serious problem of coherence in such models because intentionality seems to require temporality, awareness seems to contradict impassibility, and activity seems to entail mutability. This is why these models are so markedly different from the popular forms of personal theism all over the world. Moreover, these models must face daunting theodicy challenges to their coherence. Nevertheless, providing the coherence problems are addressed—and vast traditions are devoted to doing this—I think that this sort of not-highly anthropomorphic personal theism has a place among the Very Great Models.

Long before evolutionary psychology came along, many thinkers had noticed the psychologically suspicious quality of highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models. This is why most ancient philosophers, from Greece to India to China, treated popular mythologies as superstitions. This is also the instinct of the Masters of Suspicion that I mentioned earlier. And the same instinct is now amplified in the contemporary scientific study of religion, with the beginnings of a sturdy empirical database where once there was only speculation. None of these arguments can ever *rule out* personal theism or polytheistic mythologies.