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978-0-521-33159-3 - A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind

N. Ross Reat and Edmund F. Perry

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In *A World Theology*, a Christian theologian and an atheistic Buddhist philosopher examine five major world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – to demonstrate that each is a particular expression of a central spiritual reality shared by all humankind. They argue that the differing concepts of ultimate reality in these religions can be understood as symbolic expressions of a common spiritual reality that transcends the bounds of any one religious tradition.

The book begins by identifying and validating three essential characteristics of ultimate reality that are affirmed by each of the religions considered – undeniability, desirability, and elusiveness. Employing a novel concept of “symbolism,” the authors develop a paradigm within which to examine sympathetically and concisely the varying expressions of ultimate reality encountered in the world’s religions. After a discussion of the successes and limitations of atheistic critiques of religion, they systematically pursue this paradigm by examining the most important intellectual, moral, mythological, and spiritual symbols encountered in five major religions.

The authors explain both the differences and the essential commonalities of these religions, and argue that the religions are mutually complementary rather than contradictory. Without undermining the identity or integrity of individual religions, this book points the way toward integrating the respective messages of the world’s religions in a comprehensive and systematic manner that constitutes world theology – religious thought that is informed by the faiths of all humankind but dominated by no one of them.

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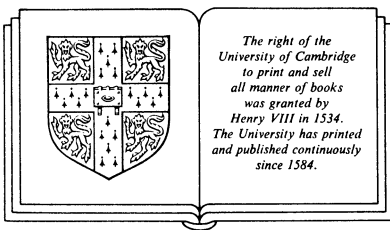
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We dedicate this book to our mothers
GENEVIVE H. REAT and RUBY GRIFFIN PERRY

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Preface

For over ten years N. Ross Reat and I have worked together on *A World Theology*. Dr. Reat began his academic career in my “Religion in Human Experience” class at Northwestern, and I take pride in that fact; on this project, however, we have worked, from the outset, as colleagues and peers. Dr. Reat initially composed the bulk of our manuscript – the introductory first chapter and the chapters on Atheism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, while I wrote the chapters on Judaism and Christianity. Although he was living in Brisbane, Australia, and I in Evanston, Illinois, we maintained close contact and a constant exchange of mutual, constructive criticism throughout the project, at considerable expense in airfares and telephone bills. Because of our close collaboration, we share responsibility for the entirety of the book.

The first inspiration for this book came in 1979 in a telephone call from a Methodist bishop, Charles Wesley Brashares, then retired, now deceased. In that call, at 2:30 A.M., Bishop Brashares proposed that I write a book that would take full account of the best that people in all religions have said about their experience of “the phenomenon called God,” the bishop’s expression for ultimate reality. Quite some time later Dr. Reat and I discussed with Bishop Brashares our concept of a global theology and received his encouragement. We record here our gratitude for his vision of a theological statement informed by the religious affirmations of humans universally.

Among our numerous academic colleagues, we single out the Venerable Professor Emeritus Walpola Rahula of Sri Lanka for special acknowledgment. In the confidence and informality of his friendship with my family since 1964, I have learned most of what I know about Buddhism and a great deal about the phenomenon some of us call God. As an undergraduate student, Ross Reat began his Buddhist studies in Dr. Rahula’s classes during Dr. Rahula’s tenure as the Bishop Charles Wesley Brashares Pro-

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fessor of Religion at Northwestern University. Since that time, Ross too has maintained a close personal and professional relation with “Rahulji.”

We requested and received technical information on various points of scholarship from Professors Vincent Cornell, John Hunwick, Richard Kieckhefer, and Manfred Vogel. Thanking them sincerely, we hasten to add the obvious: We alone are accountable for what appears in our text. We have ineffable gratitude to Elizabeth Stegner and Erik Webb: The speed and high quality of their typing and word processing took a lot of anxiety out of our labor and gave our finished manuscript a professional appearance.

We thank the Cambridge University Press editorial staff who have worked patiently and supportively with us over the five years our manuscript has been under contract. Finally, in advance, we thank our readers, especially those who will give us the benefit of their critical comments, whether published or in private communication.

Edmund F. Perry

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Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya
B.U.	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad
C.U.	Chāndogya Upanishad
D	Dīgha Nikāya
Kena	Kena Upanishad
Khp.	Kuddaka Pāṭha
Lk	Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra
M	Majjhima Nikāya
Mk	Madhyamika Kārikā
Mu.U.	Muṇḍaka Upanishad
Q	Qur'ān
Ṛg	Ṛg Veda
S	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Sp	Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra
T.U.	Taittirīya Upanishad
V	Vinaya Piṭaka