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978-0-521-33747-2 - A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind  
N. Ross Reat and Edmund F. Perry

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## CHAPTER ONE

## The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind

Openly or secretly, all people believe their lives have meaning and purpose. Even the most cynical, in unguarded moments, betray a tacit conviction that their lives have significance exceeding biological survival and the pursuit of pleasure. This conviction is the essential message of all religions, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. To this extent at least, all religions are in agreement.

Moreover, all religions attempt to express this conviction by viewing human life against the backdrop of a nonmaterial realm. All of the major world religions, and many of the so-called primitive religions, assert that it is in this nonmaterial realm that an ultimate reality is to be found. The present book argues that this conclusion – that ultimate reality is a non-material reality – is unavoidable for any thinking human being with sufficient opportunity to ponder human existence.

In pursuing this argument, we examine five world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and show that they are *different expressions of the same valid ultimate reality*. In doing so we construct a “world theology” along the lines proposed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *Towards a World Theology*.<sup>1</sup> In essence, Smith proposes that henceforth normative religious thought must be informed by the faiths of all humankind and dominated by no one of them. The days are past when religious thought could adequately serve humanity by championing the religion of a single civilization.

In the present age of instant global communications, rapid global trans-

1 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). Although indebted to Smith's work, we do not adopt his suggestion that religions should not be personified. We do accept his observation that religions do not exist; only religious people exist. Strictly speaking, one should not say “Buddhism asserts,” but rather, “Buddhists assert.” We have chosen to follow conventional usage and employ both types of statement.

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portation, a massive global economy, entwined global politics, and potential global annihilation, the desirability of worldwide religious understanding is self-evident. Therefore those who read this book will not be wasting their time. Its reading may, however, require concentrated effort because, in the first place, much of the material will be unfamiliar to most readers, and in spite of our efforts to achieve simple and straightforward communication, the concepts involved remain somewhat demanding. Second and more important, our determination that this book be globally informed requires that our readers temporarily suspend some of their most cherished convictional judgments, whether the bias of these judgments is for or against religion.

The results of our research require that we acknowledge at the outset that the ultimate reality to which five world religions commonly point *does not exist* in any conventional sense of the term. It is neither empirically verifiable nor logically demonstrable. It is, however, a universal and necessary *reality* of the human condition. Anyone who honestly and consistently observes one's own *behavior* has to admit to being influenced by a nonmaterial ultimate reality, which each of these religions affirms. To admit this, as one must, and yet to deny the reality itself would be such a radical self-alienation as to be untenable.

This is not to say that one must affirm or should embrace any of the traditional modes of response to this nonmaterial ultimate reality. The various organized religions may well have enough negative qualities that one would be well advised to steer clear of them. The five religions we have examined, however, have at least one positive quality in common: Each addresses in a coherent and systematic way a fundamental reality of the human condition. All people, not only religious people, grant at least implicit assent to the same nonmaterial ultimate reality commonly expressed by Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The unavoidability of this assent makes this reality as influential as any existing thing, logically demonstrable truth, or empirically verifiable fact.

### The Phenomenon Some Call God

The argument in this chapter concerns human necessity, not logical or empirical demonstrability. It exposes and analyzes the human necessity of a nonmaterial ultimate reality. This ultimate reality is a *phenomenon some call God*. Others have different names for it: Allāh, Brahman, Nirvana. The five religions we have examined elaborate extensively and distinctively upon it, yet none of them claims to capture it in its entirety. None of these religions will regard our argument as a validation of its entire concept of ultimate reality, but neither can any of them deny that

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the phenomenon we describe is central to its own concept of ultimate reality.

When we use the term “valid” we do not intend “verifiable.” We use the word, as most dictionaries define it, to signify “well founded, reasonable, and defensible.” By using the term “phenomenon” we do not imply the objective existence of God or indeed of ultimate reality by any name. The original Greek roots of the term “phenomenon” justify our using it to mean *anything that causes human experience*. We use the term “reality” as a synonym of phenomenon. Obviously, one cannot observe other people’s experience to verify its content. We can observe their behavior. Therefore, our working definition of the synonyms phenomenon and reality is *that which influences human behavior*, whether existing or not. Many things may influence human behavior – may be real – and yet not exist. In the present sense of the term, for example, ghosts assuredly are *real*, because some humans experience them, and the behavior of these people is influenced thereby. These ghosts are phenomena even though they may not exist.

The uncritical materialism currently in vogue tends to dismiss as invalid and trivial anything that does not exist as a material reality.<sup>1</sup> Uncritical materialists may assert that in examining ultimate reality as nonexistent we are dealing with a “mere concept,” a “figment of the imagination.” Some materialists, of course, are not uncritical, and recognize that there may be dimensions of reality that materialism does not address. They may doubt this but nonetheless remain open to perspectives other than materialism. We see no compelling reason why critical, open-minded materialists should reject the position we set forth in the following pages.

We acknowledge that ghosts may indeed be figments of the imagination. Some nonmaterial, nonexistent realities of human experience, however, are not at all imaginary. On the contrary, they are fundamental and obvious realities of human consciousness. The number three, for example, is nonmaterial and does not exist. One can never point to something and say “There is three itself.” One can only indicate examples that point to the reality of the number three: three coconuts, three rocks, three fingers. Nonetheless, three is not *merely* a concept. Even the most brutish human, having gathered three coconuts and gone to sleep, would be perturbed to wake and find only two. Three is a universal reality of the human condition, a phenomenon some call three; others have different names for it.

We will show that the phenomenon some call God is exactly analogous to the phenomenon some call three in the following ways: (1) Neither the phenomenon some call God nor the phenomenon some call three is material; nonetheless both phenomena are universal realities of human experi-

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ence. (2) Although one cannot locate either phenomenon itself, one can specify examples that point to these phenomena. (3) Although neither phenomenon exists, neither is trivial; neither is a “mere concept” or a “figment of the imagination.” In fact it is impossible to imagine human consciousness or to explain human behavior without recourse to the phenomenon some call three and the phenomenon some call God. Such universal *phenomena* definitively shape human experience.

Conceptual phenomena, such as the number three, are not the only nonmaterial realities that are universal in human experience. Most emotions fall in this category. Consider for example fear. It may indeed be the case, as some scientists claim, that fear and all other emotions are caused by hormones and electrical impulses in the nervous system. If so, this means that fear has a material cause. Nonetheless, fear itself, as experienced, remains a nonmaterial reality. It may be possible some day to control a person’s emotions in a laboratory, but it will never be possible to put fear itself in a test tube. Upon reflection, it is clear that the whole of human consciousness as such comprises nonmaterial phenomena. Scientists may be able to map out in the human nervous system the causes of many of these phenomena, but the phenomena of consciousness as experienced will remain forever in the nonmaterial realm. Along with the physical similarities that allow us to identify *Homo sapiens*, the universal similarity of our experience of nonmaterial realities allows us to identify our common humanity. The implicitly recognized commonality of our experience of nonmaterial realities is definitive of what it is to be human, every bit as definitive as physical characteristics and genetic makeup. One of the most fundamental of these realities is a phenomenon some call God.

The universality in human experience of the phenomenon some call God allows us to formulate a valid concept of ultimate reality. We show that the five religions we have examined implicitly express the phenomenon to which this concept refers. This is to say that the *ultimate referent* of each of these religions points toward, but does not encompass, an *ultimate reality* that they all affirm in common. Our findings may apply to other religions as well, but we will show that at least these five religions share a valid central reality, which each discloses inadvertently in its symbolization of its own *ultimate referent* – Allāh, Brahman, Dharma/Nirvana, or God. All religions are not the same; however, a common, fundamental reality informs and inspires each of the major world religions we examine. The differing doctrines and practices of these religions may be regarded as divergent expressions of the same central reality. This suggests that philosophical critiques of religion are effective only when directed against the terms in which a religion expresses its divergent elaboration upon this central reality. These terms of expression, the doc-

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trines and practices of an individual religion, we regard as *symbolic expressions* of the central reality that these five religions share.

### Symbolic Expression and the Ultimate Referent

Our use of the phrase “symbolic expression” requires explanation. The meaning we intend for it has a strong bearing on our understanding of the religious data we investigate. This specific meaning is based upon a widely accepted distinction between signs and symbols. Symbols, like signs, point to something beyond themselves. Unlike signs, symbols participate in the reality to which they point. For example, the ringing bell, red light, and dropped barrier at a railroad crossing are *signs* that point to a coming train. Of course, these signs may activate accidentally and give an erroneous signal. If, however, one looks down the track, one may see the light on the front of the train’s locomotive, or without looking one may hear the locomotive’s whistle. Like the signs of the crossing, the locomotive’s headlight and blowing whistle point beyond themselves and indicate the approach of the locomotive. The locomotive’s light and whistle, however, are more convincing indicators than the paraphernalia at the railroad crossing. The light and whistle are part of the locomotive to which they point. They illustrate what we mean by *symbols* first of all because they participate in the reality to which their functioning points. Furthermore, when one sees the light and hears the distinctive sound of the train’s whistle, one knows two things. One knows that at least a locomotive is near, and that one should make whatever personal decisions are appropriate when a train is coming down the track.

In our use, then, *a symbol points beyond itself to a larger reality in which it participates and whose larger dimensions it makes present and known*. We regard the doctrines and practices of the religions we have researched to be symbolic expressions of spiritual realities to which they point, in which they participate, and whose presence they make known for personal response or reaction. Analogous to the whistle or light on the locomotive, the cross on a church altar points to Jesus’ crucifixion, which in turn, in certain circumstances, points to, participates in, and makes present for personal decision the reality of God’s redeeming love. The cross on the altar is, in the terminology of our analysis, a symbolic expression of the spiritual reality that Christians identify as God’s redeeming love. The redeeming love of God points, of course, to the larger reality of God, the fullness of which constitutes Christianity’s *ultimate referent*. Each of the religions has its analogous symbolic expressions for its *ultimate referent* and, like the cross and redeeming love, all of these symbolic expressions are effective within their respective provenances.

In explaining each religion, we treat four types of symbolic expression:

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intellectual, moral, mythological, and spiritual. We find these four symbolic expressions in each religion's teachings, doctrines, and practices. Each type of expression has its own distinctive aim and means. Intellectual symbolism appeals to the intellect by argument, evidence, or proof. It intends to convince the mind of the reality, character, and decisive significance of the religion's ultimate referent. Moral symbolism appeals to the conscience and intends to induce the will to behave in accord with the character of the religion's ultimate referent. It makes its appeal by illustrating the negative consequences of behavior that differs from the religion's character and the positive results of behavior that reflects its character. Mythological symbolism appeals to the imagination with images of power, grandeur, and sublimity. It intends to evoke awe toward the religion's ultimate referent. Spiritual symbolism engages the whole person by presenting the religion's ultimate referent as decisive for the person's present existence and eventual destiny. It intends to secure personal commitment to the ultimate referent of the religion in question.

We have found that the symbolic expressions with which various religions represent their *ultimate referents* intimate other, more universal dimensions of their ultimate referents. These intimated dimensions indicate the possibility, if not the necessity, of reconceptualizing the ultimate referent of each religion so that its universal validity is no longer obscured. In exposing the larger dimensions of a religion's ultimate referent and its symbolic expressions, we do not intend to discredit either its ultimate referent or its symbols in their respective contexts. In an open forum of debate, however, where unbelievers and adversaries are given a fair hearing, the beliefs and practices of individual religions often lose credibility. The central, shared reality to which the beliefs and practices of each religion point can maintain credibility in such a forum. Although widely varying and often conflicting in relation to each other, these systems of belief and practice disclose themselves under investigation to be symbolic expressions of the same *central spiritual reality*. Recognition of this, we believe, will facilitate understanding among the religions and will validate rather than discredit their respective claims to express ultimate reality.

### The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind

We identify the phenomenon some call God as the *central spiritual reality of humankind*, aspects of which are disclosed by the ultimate referents of the five religions dealt with in this book.

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## Definition

*Central:* This phenomenon is “central” in two senses. It inheres in the center of each of the individual religions we have examined, and it is the common, albeit unrecognized, center from which these religions diverge. The religions we have examined may be viewed as divergent symbolic expressions of this central reality. These divergent expressions are meaningful and evocative in their given cultures, but not universally valid. The central reality to which they all point is universally valid.

*Spiritual:* Our use of the word “spiritual” is not a special pleading for exemption from the critical standards of intellectual discourse. “Spiritual” indicates that which pertains to human aspirations and needs beyond material sufficiency. The term “spiritual,” as we see it, refers specifically to aspirations and needs that relate to the meaning and purpose of one’s life as a whole and entails the freedom and responsibility to pursue this meaning and purpose. Circumstances from birth and accidents of various kinds deprive some human beings of the freedom and responsibility necessary to pursue the meaning and purpose of their lives in the present world. The behavior of these deprived people does not contribute data applicable to our study. The nature of their spirituality does not belong to our inquiry. We note that every religion we know makes an effort to provide some meaningful interpretation of these special humans and their relation to the phenomenon some call God. Our investigation inquires into the behavior of humans who are spiritual in the sense that they have sufficient opportunity to ponder human existence and sufficient freedom to participate responsibly as independent agents in their own existence. For humans who have the opportunity to behave with responsible freedom, the phenomenon some call God exercises influence on their pursuit of meaning and purpose.

*Reality:* The term “reality” indicates, to repeat, *that which influences human behavior*, whether existing or not, whether material or non-material. Use of the terms “reality” and “phenomenon” does not imply that the central spiritual reality of the major religions is an objectively existing thing. Rather, the central spiritual phenomenon is a reality in the sense that it influences human lives. As we have already acknowledged, in this sense ghosts are also real. Whether or not they exist, they influence those who experience them. Similarly, only some people are influenced by God. All people, however, are influenced by a central spiritual reality. This phenomenon is *a universal reality of the human condition*.

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## Essential Characteristics

Our examination of five religions has disclosed that although they vary greatly in doctrine and practice, they all affirm and express three essential characteristics of a central spiritual reality. These essential characteristics are *undeniability*, *desirability*, and *elusiveness*.

These characteristics constitute the substance of the *world theology* that we construct. This construction is in essence the formulation of a concept of ultimate reality that fulfills two necessary requirements of any world theology worthy of the name: (1) Admissible concepts must be common to many, if not all world religions. (2) Admissible concepts must be valid in the specific sense that they are *well founded*, *reasonable*, and, in a universal forum of critical discourse, *defensible*.

We list these requirements in this order because in practice world theology proceeds from research on the religions to formulation of concepts. For the sake of clarity in our presentation we deal with the second requirement before the first by demonstrating three things in this chapter and the next: (1) A nonmaterial, ultimate reality that is undeniable, desirable, and elusive is *well founded* in human experience universally. (2) It is *reasonable* that human beings respond to such a phenomenon. (3) The three characteristics – undeniable, desirability, and elusiveness – define a concept of ultimate reality that is defensible in a universal forum of critical discourse. We satisfy the first requirement of world theology by demonstrating in Chapters Three through Seven that the phenomenon these characteristics identify is affirmed by five major religions.

Because we have researched and formulated our concept of ultimate reality in accordance with these two requirements, it is a *mediating*, *valid*, and *validating* concept. It *mediates* among widely varying symbolic expressions of ultimate reality by allowing us to demonstrate that each of them *points to* the same phenomenon, the same reality of human experience. It is *valid* because we can demonstrate that all people, not only consciously religious people, are influenced by a spiritual reality that is central in their lives, whether they recognize it or not. Being itself valid, this concept *validates* many of the symbols of the five religions by enabling us to establish that the reality to which they point is universal in human experience. The significance of undeniable, desirability, and elusiveness will become clearer as our argument and then our comparative study proceed. By way of preliminary definition, however, we offer the following.

*Undeniability*: Each of the five religions we have examined holds that its ultimate referent cannot effectively be denied. Nonbelievers may, of course, deny the ultimate referent affirmed by any religion and may offer



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valid arguments to refute that religion's concepts of ultimate reality. As a result, concepts of ultimate reality may change. For believers, however, denials of ultimate reality itself lack any real force. For religious people, other realities *derive their meanings* from the ultimate referent of their religions, not vice versa. Therefore the ultimate referent that a religion affirms cannot effectively be denied, for its adherents, by appealing to other realities. It is the ultimate norm of verification for the people who affirm it. For example, the Christian doctrine of creation by God has been altered by scientific explanations of reality, but Christian certainty of God has not been diminished.

Christian certainty and the similar certainty found in all religious persons is not unreasonable. It reflects the fact that it is impossible to live our a human life without at least implicitly affirming an ultimate spiritual reality. As we explain more fully below, the *undeniability* of a central spiritual reality is in essence an expression of the human necessity of affirming meaning and purpose in one's life as a whole. The behavior of all people, not only religious people, bears witness to the universality of this affirmation.

To be sure, each religion characteristically denies the concepts of ultimate reality found in other religions. These religions agree that the central reality of true religion is undeniable, but they disagree sharply as to what it is that is undeniable. Regardless of how irreconcilable such disagreements may seem, there remains an overall agreement among major religions that the central reality of true religion is an *undeniable* reality. This means that undeniability is universally affirmed to be a characteristic of ultimate reality.

Two considerations, then, attest *undeniability* to be a characteristic of ultimate reality: The behavior of people in general bears witness to this *undeniability*, and five major religions affirm it.

*Desirability*: Each of the religions we have examined holds that the ultimate referent it affirms is ultimately desirable. For religious people, other realities, in addition to deriving their meaning from an ultimate referent, also *derive their value* from such a referent. Therefore the ultimate referent that each religion affirms cannot effectively be devalued by appealing to other realities. It is the ultimate valuational norm for the people who affirm it.

Again, this is not unreasonable on the part of religious people. Humans by nature evaluate in absolute terms much of what they experience. No human confines this evaluation to judgments such as "A is different from B" or even "I prefer A to B at this particular moment." Instead, all humans sometimes conclude, whether they express it or not, "A is better than B." This conclusion, that A is better than B – for example, that

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democracy is better than communism or vice versa – implies some ultimate standard of desirability that *A* approaches more nearly than *B*. Proponents of democracy or communism may or may not appeal overtly to such a standard in arguing their cases. They may argue instead on the grounds of freedom of choice or the greatest good for the greatest number. Such arguments, however, also presuppose an ultimate standard that freedom approaches more nearly than regimentation or which the greatest good for the greatest number approaches more nearly than the greatest good for a privileged few. Regardless of the outcome of such arguments, their very existence implies universal, though often pre-conscious, assent to an ultimate standard of desirability. The behavior of all people, not only religious people, attests the universality of such an ultimate standard.

Each of the religions we have examined holds that its ultimate referent serves as an ultimate standard of desirability. As in the case of undeniability, the religions disagree among themselves as to what precisely is ultimately desirable, and they tend to deny the desirability of ultimate reality as expressed by other religions. Nonetheless, these religions agree that the central reality of true religion is an ultimately desirable reality. *Desirability* as a characteristic of ultimate reality is commonly affirmed by the religions we have examined, and is validated in human experience in general.

*Elusiveness*: Each of the religions we have examined recognizes that its ultimate referent eludes human grasp, that it exceeds human comprehension and control. Each religion admits that its doctrines do not fully comprehend its ultimate referent. Moreover, each of these religions admits to a “missing link” in its scheme of salvation. There is a universally recognized gap, unbridgeable by human effort alone, between the world and the ultimately real. Each religion we have examined admits that its ultimate referent eludes both its doctrines and its practices. Recognition of the elusiveness of any reality conceived to be ultimate is self-evidently reasonable.

We have noted that each religion characteristically denies that the ultimate referents of other religions are undeniable or desirable. It is perhaps ironic that they tend to highlight and ridicule expressions of elusiveness in other religions. For example, in Christianity the necessity of grace and faith exemplify the elusiveness of God; some critics from other religions ridicule grace as indicating lack of nerve, and faith as indicating gullibility. Still, each religion asserts that true religion must recognize the elusiveness of ultimate reality. This recognition is self-evidently valid if one grants in any sense the possibility of an ultimate reality.

Having briefly defined the central spiritual reality that five world re-