

Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality

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Abstract The plurality of models of ultimate reality is a central problem for religious philosophy. This essay sketches what is involved in mounting comparative inquiries across the plurality of models. In order to illustrate what advance would look like in such a comparative inquiry, an argument is presented to show that highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality are inferior to a number of competitors. This paper was delivered as a keynote address during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords God · Ultimate reality · Comparative philosophy · Anthropomorphism · Mystical theology · Apophaticism

Introduction

The phrase “models of ultimate reality” (or “ultimacy models”) immediately suggests the plural, constructed, and approximate character of all thinking about ultimate realities.¹ 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 curious and creative, gripped by fascinating instincts and motivations, and typically immersed in great traditions of religious philosophy.

These imaginative constructions are also conditioned by the prodigiously diverse contexts in which they are first created and then received and transformed. Their social

¹I will 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. And in some traditions, reflection on ultimate reality is regarded as secondary, and as a distraction from pursuing the ultimate paths that lead to liberation; this is true of some forms of Buddhism.

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embodiment leaves models of ultimate reality vulnerable to exploitation for the sake of the social control for which religion is justly famous. Witness the likelihood that, if a model of God as a black man 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 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). 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 philosophers who prize referential adequacy in their models. Some models survive the tests of time and experience. They are not always popular—witness mystical theologies of ultimacy as blinding darkness, God beyond God, reality beyond comprehension—but they 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, re-configured 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 in 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. In fact, 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. 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 after-effects 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 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 cannot 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.

The three prepositions in the title of this essay correspond to its three major sections. 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 will involve exploring 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 ambitiously 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. But there is sufficient space to show in some detail how the practices

of looking behind, between, and beyond models of 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 found 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 all models of ultimate reality are anthropomorphic, strictly speaking, 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 Siva 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 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 thoughtfully 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.² 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.³

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 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.⁴

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.⁵

Fourth, cognitive psychology can devise experiments that disclose the presence of cognitive reflexes 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 reflexes 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 eye-witness nor any forensic data that can place a particular motivation or cognitive

²See, for example, Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (London: John Chapman, 1854) and *The Essence of Religion: God the Image of Man; Man's Dependence on Nature the Last and Only Source of Religion* (New York: A. K. Butts, 1873); Karl Marx, *Marx on Religion*, John Raines, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1933). Sigmund Freud offers several takes on unconscious psychic structures relevant to the psychological origins of religion, including *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: J. Cape & H. Smith, 1930), *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1928), and *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939).

³An excellent survey is Patrick McNamara, *Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion*, 3 vols. (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2006). The three volumes are titled *Evolution, Genes, and the Religious Brain*; *The Neurology of Religious Experience*; and *The Psychology of Religious Experience*.

⁴Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁵This 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; see *On The Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859): 184.

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.⁶ 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 divides the sources of cognitive error into cognitive determinants and motivational and social determinants.⁷ 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 do.

These cognitive vulnerabilities are well understood by charlatans and magicians, who exploit them for personal gain and entertainment, respectively.⁸ The field of behavioral law and economics studies human cognition and behavior in relation to the legal and economic systems, and tries to determine how a full understanding of the strengths and liabilities of human cognition should affect regulation of these systems.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Cross-cultural

⁶For example, see Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁷See Thomas Gilovich, *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

⁸A classic magician's expose is James Randi, *Flim-Flam: Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and other Delusions* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1982).

⁹A good survey of some of the issues in behavioral law and economics surrounding cognitive error is the symposium on *Homo Economicus, Homo Myopicus, and the Law and Economics of Consumer Choice* in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 73/1 (Winter 2006). For example, Jeffrey J. Rachlinski, “Cognitive Errors, Individual Differences, and Paternalism” from that symposium (207–229) focuses on whether and how the legal system should make paternalistic allowance for cognitive error.

¹⁰A classic work on the psychology of buying is Frank Nicosia, *Consumer Decision Processes* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966). Also see Scott Plous, *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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

¹¹On different cultural styles of cognition, there is a host of evidence; for example, see R. E. Nisbett, K. Peng, I. Choi, and A. Norenzayan, "Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic versus Analytic Cognition," *Psychological Review* 108/2 (Apr 2001): 291–310. Work on the cross-cultural recurrence of basic forms of cognitive error is less common. A. Tobena, I. Marks, and R. Dar, "Advantages of Adaptive Bias and Prejudice: An Exploration of their Neurocognitive Templates," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 23/7 (Nov 1999): 1047–1058 provides a theoretical account of the possible evolutionary advantages of certain forms of cognitive error, building on empirical cross-cultural evidence for cognitive bias.

¹²For an integrated evolutionary perspective on cognitive error, see Martie G. Haselton and D. Nettle, "The Paranoid Optimist: An Evolutionary Model of Cognitive Biases," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10/1 (2006): 47–66.

¹³See, for example, Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴For a classic introduction to evolutionary psychology, see Jerome Barkow, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). One of the best discussions on evolutionary psychology and religion is in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27/6 (Dec 2004): 713–770, which focuses on Scott Atran's "Religion's Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion" (713–30).

¹⁵Among the most recent examples of this excitement, see Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Viking, 2006); and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

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?¹⁶

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),¹⁷ the memorable character of minimally counterintuitive beliefs (aiding the perseverance of religious beliefs),¹⁸ and hypnotizability and dissociation (the bases for colorful religious experiences and psychosomatic placebo healing effects).¹⁹ Evolutionary psychologists debate the circumstances surrounding the evolutionary origins of each of these factors. But the consensus is that religious beliefs and behaviors are

¹⁶For an example of the view that true religious beliefs are adaptive, see William Ramsey, "Naturalism Defended," in James Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002): 15–29. For an example of the view that false religious beliefs are adaptive, see Michael Bulbilia, "Nature's Medicine: Religiosity as an Adaptation for Health and Cooperation," in McNamara, ed., *Where God and Science Meet*, vol. I: 87–121.

¹⁷For a key discussion on cognitive universals and culture, see the discussion on the topic in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21/4 (Aug 1998): 547–609, which focuses on an article by Scott Atran on "Folk Biology and the Anthropology of Science: Cognitive Universals and Cultural Particulars" (547–69).

¹⁸The key experiments include those reported in J. L. Barrett and M. A. Nyhof, "Spreading Non-natural Concepts: The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1 (2001): 69–100. In relation to religion, one of the key works is P. Boyer and C. Ramble, "Cognitive Templates for Religious Concepts," *Cognitive Science* 25 (2001): 535–64.

¹⁹A leading work on the role of hypnotizability and dissociation in the origins of religion is James McClenon, *Wondrous Healing: Shamanism, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002).

combinatorial side-effects of all of these cognitive traits, rather than the primary cause of their adaptation.²⁰ 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 this fact 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 under-developed. Few philosophers know their way around the world's religious ideas. Most intellectuals who do feel at home in multiple religious traditions are

²⁰For a compact summary of the case, see Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "Religion is not an Adaptation," in McNamara, ed., *Where God and Science Meet*, vol. I: 159–79.

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 need 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 constructions of 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.²¹ This sort of comparative inquiry is particularly important in relation to models of ultimate reality

²¹See Ivan Strenski, “The Only Kind of Comparison Worth Doing: History, Epistemology, and the ‘Strong Program’ of Comparative Study,” in Thomas Athanasius Indinopulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges, eds., *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?*; Numen History of Religion Series (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006): 271–92.

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 to Tambiah, from Tyler to Wierzbicka, from Durkheim to Berger, and from Weber to Huntington.²² 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.²³ In South Asia, it is sparked by ancient formal debates between Buddhist and Hindu philosophers and produces competing philosophic schemes such as those of Vedanta that are both inspired by the Upanishads and aim to register the truth of every other perspective on ultimate reality.²⁴ 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, Tanabe, and Nishitani.²⁵

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.

²²See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1900); Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Edward Burnett Tyler, *Primitive Cultures: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: Murray, 1873–1874); Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930); and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²³See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Robert Cummings Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991).

²⁴Śaṅkara (mid-8th 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 *Bhagavadgita*, which were formative for much subsequent Indian philosophy, including in its comparative aspects.

²⁵See, for example, Kitano Nishida, *A Study of Good* (Tokyo: Print Bureau of the Japanese Government, 1960); Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy of Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

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.²⁶

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 data sets 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 data sets available for 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 them. Meanwhile, they would probably want to deemphasize 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

²⁶For a good example of this sort of comparative inquiry in action, see the three volumes of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project: Robert Cummings Neville, ed., *The Human Condition, Ultimate Realities, and Religious Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). For an account of the method of that project in comparison with other methods in comparative religions, see Wesley J. Wildman, "Comparing Religious Ideas: There's Method in the Mob's Madness," in Thomas Athanasius Indinopulos, Brian C. Wilson, and James Constantine Hanges, eds., *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?*; Numen History of Religion Series (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006).

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.²⁷

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

²⁷See Wesley J. Wildman, “Comparative Natural Theology,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 27/2&3 (May/Sep, 2006): 173–190. For a heuristic sketch of this method at work in relation to God Models, see Wesley J. Wildman, “Ground-of-Being Theologies,” in Philip Clayton, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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, 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 praṭītya-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 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.²⁸

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

²⁸See an example of this sort of stalemate sketched in Wesley J. Wildman, "From Law and Chance in Nature to Ultimate Reality," in Fraser Watts, ed. *Creation, Law, and Probability* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

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 will explain why as an illustration of how comparative inquiry might progress, even if it is only a small step.

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. 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 non-personal 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. Nevertheless, religious philosophers have more reason than ever to move beyond highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality.

Richard Dawkins recently published *The God Delusion*, in which he argues that personal theism is almost certainly false.²⁹ He thinks that we believe in a personal, attentive, active deity only because we are psychologically predisposed to see signs of intentionality even where there is no intentional agent at work, and because we lack the courage to examine our assumptions about the relevant data. Recall the analogy with the person who runs away from rustling bushes, fearing a stalking tiger. Dawkins thinks we should get a spear for protection and poke around to see what is actually in the bushes instead of talking ourselves into believing in the lurking tiger without hard evidence. When we do investigate, we find not a tiger but merely the empty wind, playing tricks on our minds.

This is a blunt and incautious application of evolutionary psychology to belief in a personal God. To stay with the tiger analogy, we know that we are likely to jump to conclusions about the tiger, and also that we are likely to be afraid of inspecting the rustling the bushes even with spear in hand and friends in tow, but none of that means there is no tiger. This has been the theistic answer to projection theories of religion for centuries, and it works here too. Unfortunately, Dawkins' detailed philosophical arguments fail to register even the most elementary philosophical insights into the nature of God. He treats God as one cause among many, for example, rather than as the First Cause.³⁰ Now, the first cause model of God may or may not be coherent, and it certainly is not a part of the popular understanding of God as an active person, but simply neglecting it in favor of making God essentially an omnipotent creature means that Dawkins is attacking a version of personal theism that virtually no reputable philosopher or theologian has ever espoused. This is the so-called straw man fallacy grown to massive proportions—the straw T-Rex fallacy, perhaps. The best versions of personal theism effortlessly escape this attack, as do most other ultimacy models.

By now it is clear that I am one of the critics of Dawkins who actually agrees with his negative conclusions about the most popular forms of personal theism. Unfortunately, it is a case of, “with friends like this, who needs enemies?” He never takes seriously a view of ultimate reality other than highly anthropomorphic personal theism, and the resulting parochialism is not helpful for moving beyond anything except his book. This illustrates why it is vital to set up the sort of comparative inquiry I have described, with relevant theoretically articulated models of ultimate reality vying with each other relative to explicitly stated comparative criteria.

Of course, the enormous complexity of comparative inquiry is not sexy in the way Dawkins fans would require if they were to invest time reading about it. It is so complex that it makes even the probabilistic natural theology arguments of Alvin Plantinga or

²⁹Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

³⁰For a typically lively philosophical review of the book, which does not hesitate to show how paper-thin the argument is, see Alvin Plantinga, “The Dawkins Confusion: Naturalism ad absurdum,” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 13/2 (March/April, 2007): 21ff.

Richard Swinburne seem massively over-simplified.³¹ Nevertheless, without a comparative framework, crucial alternative hypotheses are routinely neglected. This leads to fatal flaws in arguments assessing the probability of hypotheses about ultimate reality, including those familiar from Dawkins, Plantinga, Swinburne, and others. Showing that personal theism is significantly more probable than a flattened out kind of atheism that stubbornly refuses to explain existence and value might well be possible; in fact, I think it is not difficult. But this achievement offers precious little support to personal theism when we never bother to calculate the probability of its competitor hypotheses among the great models. This can only feel like a significant accomplishment to religious philosophers who do not care about the entire Museum of Models but want to focus only on one model, defending it from attacks. There is a place for that. But such arguments say almost nothing about the adequacy of the model being defended. It is much more difficult to compete with robust competitor views of ultimate reality than with Dawkins' metaphysically innocent atheism. Plantinga and Swinburne should choose tougher opponents.

Highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality perform sub-optimally not only in relation to the data from the scientific study of religion and from our experience of suffering; they also prove disappointing in relation to the data from comparative religious ideas. Views that can subsume other models within them—say, as perspectives or as interpretative slices—offer the best explanations of the profusion of ultimacy theories in the museum of models. Highly anthropomorphic personal theism is relatively ill-suited to this because its personalist metaphysics operates with highly determinate categories, such as intention, awareness, and action, and thus tends to bluntly contradict alternatives. But a number of other views can subsume personal theism in a way that explains the data of personal theistic religious experience by rendering the key metaphysical categories of personal theism in symbolic terms compatible with their own. This occurs in advaita Vedānta and ground-of-being theism. Sometimes the subsuming view retains the metaphysics of personal theism and implants it within a larger metaphysics that adds a God beyond God, as in the perennial philosophy.

This leaves strongly anthropomorphic God models such as most forms of personal theism in roughly the same position logically and philosophically that they are in religious practice. These ultimacy models achieve plausibility within communities that engage ultimate reality deeply and authentically through them. Criteria for plausibility are carried along and nurtured both within traditions of religious practice and within philosophical subcultures. When exposed to the wider world of ultimacy models, philosophers and ordinary religious folk alike experience the energizing potential of the wider view and also the corrosive effects on familiar criteria for plausibility. As a result, some religious folk set out on a journey in search of a view of ultimate reality that can make better sense of this wider range of experience. Some philosophers likewise invest energy in the kind of comparative inquiry that I have been describing, trying to move beyond highly anthropomorphic personal theism even while trying to do justice to its capacity to foster authentic engagement with ultimacy. Other religious folk never feel the plausibility problem of their restless kin, or else they will it to one side and nestle into the comfortable and beautiful intricacy of their existing beliefs, and once again much the same is true for some religious philosophers.

³¹For example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

It is easier to look beyond highly anthropomorphic ultimacy models once we truly realize that there are plenty of compelling alternatives. In fact, the neighborhood of the edifice of personal theism is less like New York harbor hosting the glorious and lonely Statue of Liberty, and more like the hills of Easter Island gracing numerous vast and portentous stone statues with uncertain meaning. It was an Easter-Island vision of plural religious practices and beliefs that probably inspired the Upaniṣads, with their affirmation that Brahman is One—behind, between, and beyond all, both identical with the human spirit and utterly transcending it, grounding and uniting everything that is. The same vision powers the perennial philosophy's attempt to coordinate all of the models of ultimate reality into a hierarchy perfectly suited to accommodate the vast range of spiritual personalities and inclinations, with each soul tending toward the loftier, trans-personal models as it commutes through the samsaric cycle of lives.³² It is a vision of the wealth of religious imagery for God that inspired many of the apophatic mystics to declare that ultimate reality is beyond all imagery, and also to articulate trajectories of visualization that propel the imagination as far as possible in the direction of wise and true engagement with God before lapsing into inevitable silence.

The yielding of imaginative theoretical and spiritual exertion to ultimate silence is a kind of philosophic failure, obviously. But this silent failure is celebrated by apophatic mystics in all traditions. For them it confirms and comforts. This strikes many other religious folk as an absurd embrace of the irrational. They can no more imagine feeling satisfaction at conceptual fracturing of God ideas than they can appreciate the apophatic mystic's ideal for the afterlife, which is to be a dewdrop slipping silently into the sea. But there is nothing irrational about it. For the apophatically minded religious philosopher, there is a great deal to say, and much theoretical intricacy to negotiate, prior to lapsing into silence. Just as apophatic mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius promote spiritual trajectories, however, so apophatic religious philosophers recognize better and worse in models of ultimate reality. This defines what it means to go beyond highly anthropomorphic views of ultimate reality. Let's ponder this point for a moment.

The apophatic mystic's positive way of naming, the *via positiva*, organizes ultimacy images from the most noble to the least adequate. The associated spiritual discipline involves meditating on each image, slowly blanketing the conceptual wall with the whiteness of silence by affirming ultimacy in everything, eventually even the least likely and most repulsive thing. In the world of religious philosophy, this is akin to organizing the museum of models of ultimate reality to conform to a working hypothesis about relative value, while allowing that even the least valuable model conveys some truth.

The apophatic mystic's negative way of denial, the *via negativa*, organizes literal ultimacy images from least adequate to most adequate. The associated spiritual discipline involves denying those images in that order, so as to remove any hint of exaggerated claims to adequacy of such models, even the most authoritative and sacred among them. Silence arrives through the gradual elimination of cognitive content. In the world of religious philosophy, the sort of comparative inquiry I have been advocating can be construed in much the same way as the *via negativa*, though less linearly.

Apophatically minded religious philosophers recognize the virtues of theoretically articulated ultimacy models as intellectual avenues for potentially authentic engagement with ultimate reality. But they advance arguments for why some should be denied as more inadequate than others, corresponding to the mystic's organization of denied images from

³²See Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

least adequate to most adequate. The arguments take the comparative form that I have described. While never decisive, those arguments do permit the philosopher to envision the complicated inquiry in the form of a dynamic conceptual field of comparative play—perhaps in much the same way that a coach imagines a football play unfolding, or a choreographer pictures a dance. This vision includes provisional diagnosis of better from worse models, all relative to arguments over comparative criteria—a diagnosis always subject to correction.

If indeed there is a “last group standing” these models are, for the apophatic religious philosopher, not so much the decisive victors as the last words before death—artful words, memorable, and filled with solemn significance as befits a lifetime of striving for wisdom. But just as we would select our final words with great care, circumstances permitting, so well-supported judgments about relative superiority among the world’s great models of ultimate reality is a weighty matter. The last models standing cast long shadows over their fallen companions, framing them and interpreting them in highly particular ways, before they, too, fall before light inexpressible. I have indicated why I think that highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality are not among the last group standing—the very great models. But I also think that evolutionary psychology guarantees that nothing in religion happens without those highly anthropomorphic constructions, and thus that their existence is a condition for the possibility of the emergence of more adequate understandings of ultimate reality.

In the final analysis, perhaps the multi-traditional appreciators are correct and the entire vast museum of models, unanalyzed and unorganized, is the better way to go. It seems to be the humbler way and it certainly is easier than the way of the comparative inquirers. But the erotic lure of curiosity and ultimate longing drives comparing inquirers to seek out the grand encounter of great models in a drawn-out competition that serves their truth-seeking impulses. Think of it in football or ballet or gladiatorial or conversational terms; it makes little difference. The complex outcome is not for everyone but I think it does have the considerable virtues of welcoming every model with a stake in the conversation, including all data that is pertinent to evaluating models, keeping track in an optimal way of the precise logical import of every argument made, and forcing claims for the likelihood of any given model to take honest account of the eager alternatives standing nearby ready to play or dance or attack or talk, depending on the analogy. Provisional decisions involve artful equilibration of numerous competing factors, as always in life. But the comparative inquirer makes those decisions with fair confidence that everything vital to the decision is at least showing up somewhere in the process. And that is all too rare in the history of religious philosophy.