

Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries

Editorial

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Introduction to Topical Issue “Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries”

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While traditions give quite different accounts of ultimacy, they do report encounters, experiences, and epiphanies that are taken to be of the ultimate and that provide evidence for the nature and availability of the ultimate. Otherwise, it would not be obvious what claim they had to be revelatory or disclosive of the ultimate. Tradition and religious authorities can be appealed to but they derive their validity from the revelations and enlightenments. Epistemically, religions do not just float on air or the stilts of social convention. When the theologian steps beyond the boundaries of received beliefs, the question of marks of ultimacy becomes even more acute. Even the pluralist must ask which religions, and which texts, practices, and iconic figures from those religions, bear the marks of ultimacy. The student of comparative religion need not ask that question, but the theologian must.

The foundational revelation and enlightenments, if valid, required recognition of ultimacy. Moses and St. Paul, Mohammed and Buddha and Ramakrishna made judgments about the validity of their experiences, and we in turn make judgments about theirs. As we encounter Jesus or Krishna or the Dao De Ching, we sometimes feel that we ourselves recognize the glimmer of ultimacy there. So there are (at least) two levels of experience here: the original revelation and the theologian encountering it. Both experiences are evidential and need to be weighed epistemically. Theology is not just an intellectual exercise in solving theological puzzles; if it has life blood in it, there is a story to tell. Why is Augustine’s *Confessions* one of the most widely read works in theology? It is an account of one man’s journey in looking for and scrutinizing marks of ultimacy. In fact, we too may have an epiphany as dramatic and illuminating in its own way as the revelations we are studying.

That is the point of view behind the Call for Papers, and it is sharply and interestingly challenged by Paul Michael Hedges (*Encounters with Ultimacy?: Autobiographical and Critical Perspectives in the Academic Study of Religion*). He begins with the “beating heart” of his spiritual and intellectual journey – a dramatic, “un-English” religious experience, somewhat reluctantly told. It was, he says, “perhaps the most powerful and intense experience of my life.” To describe it, the phrases “unburning fire” and “pure and unconditional impersonal love” come to mind, he says. It was “not something that my conceptual world could really handle,” and, when asked about it he claimed to have “felt nothing” and told no one. Hedges reports accounts in various traditions that seemed to be of the same sort of experience.

Hedges then explains how he came to doubt the experience, which “could simply have been the release of various chemicals.” He doubts whether “mystical” experiences should count as evidence of ultimacy. In fact, he doubts the meaningfulness of experiential terms for academic analysis. In the course of his discussion, Hedges takes up many topics at the cutting edge of discussion, including the ongoing debate over constructivism, Charles Taylor’s social imaginary, the importance of the reflexive turn, the

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role of autobiographical confession (personal approaches and academic approaches are "not separable," he says). A strength, but also perhaps a weakness, is that he has come to view his experience as a datum, as if he were a butterfly under glass, to be studied to see "how 'insiders' make sense of their own journeys." His version of the hermeneutics of suspicion becomes an almost Cartesian program of doubt. About whether his own experience was an insight into marks of ultimacy, he asks, "how would I or anyone else know that it was or was not?" We should always be critical, he says, of any claims to ultimacy and of our own suppositions about knowing what they are and how to recognize them. In fact, he concludes, "we have no access to ultimacy" and should doubt that it has "any analytic usage." While he does not doubt that such experiences exist, we are able to discuss "only the discourse that surrounds them."

Other contributors, unaware of Hedges' contribution, effectively take up the challenge. Jeffery D. Long (*Encountering the Ultimate in the Bhagavad Gita: An Experience of Pratyabhijna (Recognition)*) also begins with a personal experience, one which he does *not* discount: finding a copy of the Bhagavad Gita at a flea market when he was fourteen years ago that, even in the quote on the front, specifically addressed his spiritual crisis after his father's suicide. This he views as "an encounter with the ultimate reality as mediated by a sacred text." The experience led this American Catholic to convert to Hinduism, which, to his mind, is counterevidence to the constructivist thesis.

Long asks the epistemic question: in any given case, how does one know? He brings to bear on the question the realism (but within doxastic practices) of William Alston, the Kantianism of John Hick (but emphasizing marks of validity shared across traditions), and other sources (Carl Sagan, Fritjof Capra). Long subjects his own encounter to various tests of ultimacy and reasonableness (about the Afterlife, for example), and the internal marks of the encounter itself, as he carefully retells the entire experience ("not unlike that of receiving an electric shock, though not at all unpleasant, and a sense of deep peace").

Long also sought conceptual tools for articulating this sort of divine encounter in an intellectually rigorous and theologically revealing way. The following four ideas speak directly to his experience. First, from the Kashmir Saiva tradition, the idea of pratyabhijna or "recognition" of the divine presence dwelling within oneself; from the Advaita Vedanta tradition, the idea that the divinity within us is finally our very own Self; from the Vaisnava tradition, in which the Bhagavad Gita is a central text, the idea of a personal deity who intervenes in history and the lives of His devotees; and finally, from the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead, the idea of a divine lure drawing entities toward the optimization of their experiential capabilities, which Long sees as the conceptual mirror of Ramakrishna's both/and approach to claims about ultimate reality. Finally, he argues that, in line with theology without walls, the marks of ultimacy cannot be limited to one's own tradition.

Jeremy Hustwit (*Four Ways to Another Religion's Ultimate*) examines how it is possible to recognize ultimacy across traditions. While sensitive to the arguments for pluralism and particularity, he argues that "other" religions are not wholly other because "appropriating the other is the most basic operation of the human understanding." "There are no boundaries, not really," he says. Deeply steeped in the hermeneutic tradition, Hustwit provides a sophisticated explication of the processes of interpersonal understanding that unfold under the "fusion of horizons" central to Gadamer's thought. The crucial epistemic capacity is the ability to exercise Aristotle's phronesis or practical wisdom, "street smarts" that enable us to read a situation and "compile the million intangibles into a sound judgment." The rules cannot be prescribed, but the skillful judgments can hit the mark. By extension, phronesis can enable us to recognize ultimacy in other religions. Hustwit provides a careful account of the processes involved in reading, "fusing with the text's otherness", and allowing one's self to be reshaped by the text. Here he brings in Ricoeur's emphasis on personal transformation.

Turning in another direction, Hustwit argues that, historically, "some phenomena correlate heavily with revelatory moments." He focuses on four phenomena that illuminate the problem. First is David Tracy's notion of a religious classic. Classics are "texts, events, images, persons, rituals, and symbols which are assumed to disclose permanent possibilities of meaning." Every religious classic is "already a transreligious classic." "I can detect a classic by the quality of the reaction it provides. The experience is startling, inspiring, or disruptive." Hustwit compares these traits of texts with mystical experiences.

Second is, drawing on Freud, the uncanny, *unheimlich*, that which is both unfamiliar (not-at-home) and that which is no longer hidden (not-in-home), an experience often invoked by recognition of the ultimate, signalling transformative revelation, “the thumbprint of an ultimate.” Third is appropriative metaphor, the most basic operation of human understanding, which explains how interpretation can produce novel content. We are not trapped within our conceptual schemes; “novel content is somehow able to ingress.” Hustwit provides a subtle account of how our horizons are enabled to expand. The fourth, the “signifying cosmos,” allows intimate and transformative experiences to occur beyond language, as in mystical experiences. Since Hustwit holds that “truth cannot exist beyond language,” he raises the question of how a person does interact with “stuff beyond the pale, i.e., content that defies language and cannot be understood.” Here he uses Tracy’s concept of limit experiences, such as death. “That ineffable limit circumscribes a reality that, while experienced differently, has a common source.”

Finally, Hustwit tackles the question: Should we pursue transreligious recognition? He takes the question seriously and carefully discusses and disarms a series of objections, ethical as well as conceptual. He also offers a positive argument for interreligious engagement. “No person or institution participates in an absolute horizon. Each of us is only able to see a refracted and fragmented picture of the whole. Likewise, the signifying cosmos is present to all in roughly equal degree.”

Joyce Anne Konigsburg (*Conditions for Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries*). She also starts with a personal experience, in high school biology class, when she had an “aha moment” in which she glimpsed the universe as “completely interrelated and well-ordered far beyond my imagination and comprehension,” as an encounter with ultimacy. In ordinary space and time, she says, a religious experience occurs between an ordinary person and ultimacy which is symbolically mediated through text or another medium. During such an encounter, ultimacy invokes a “response or calling, which alters the person’s perception and future actions.” She also uses Tracy’s notion of a classic text whose “excess of meaning” demands constant interpretation and bears a kind of timelessness. Examples include, not only religious texts, but literature and music.

Konigsburg discusses “hindrances” to encounters with ultimacy, such as “trying too hard” to discover the divine, trying to force an experience. These efforts may result in false spiritual experiences. Other problems, especially in the transreligious context, involve problems of translation, lack of understanding of other traditions, reading only intellectually so that one misses “the subtle nuanced whispers” of ultimate reality. “Approaching the text without joy, passion, and imagination limits it to an academic comparative exercise rather than a transformative experience.”

There are positive conditions as well. “Rather than submit to complete passivity, placing oneself in a prayerful or spiritual state achieves a calm active potential for engaging the divine.” She has other recommendations as well, including the sensitive use of spiritual imagination and *Lectio Divina*, that provide useful contributions to the literature on spiritual discernment, which should, after all, not only be about detecting invalid experiences but the proper condition for having a valid encounter. All these techniques and attitudes are useful within one’s home tradition as well as for texts and practices across the boundaries.

Hugh Nicholson (*The Illusion of Agency as a Mark of Ultimacy*) does something striking. He actually develops and argues for a single decision mark of ultimacy, for which he finds grounding both in theological traditions and in neuropsychology. Nicholson’s personal story begins when, just out of college, he read a book by a man who had encountered the south Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, a remarkable Indian holy man. Then, when Nicholson first starting teaching at an Iowa college, he had an esteemed senior colleague who, as a boy, had visited the Maharshi. It was like meeting someone who had heard a sermon of St. Paul, he says. He found Yale philosopher Louis Dupre to have a similarly uncanny presence and authority. Dupre introduced him to the Christian mystics, which led to the study of Meister Eckhart. Thus Ramana and Eckhart were his starting points.

Holding a physicalist worldview, Nicholson expresses discomfort with the metaphysical overtones of the Call For Papers – the language of transcendence, encounter, and ultimacy. For him, there is no “non-physical order of reality” that “breaks in on, or reveals itself to, the natural world.” Nevertheless, Ramana and Eckhart “continue to edify and inspire me.” His theological challenge is how to reconcile the

two aspects. It seems that “naturalism does not exclude a kind of transcendence.” He ponders Eckhart’s statement that “you ought to go completely out of your will.” Eckhart recommends a “poverty of will” so extreme that one gives up even “the will with which he wants to fulfill God’s will.” In a similar vein, Ramana responded to his mother’s entreaty to give up his renunciation and return home by writing: “What is not meant to happen will not happen, however much you wish it. What is meant to happen will happen, no matter what you do to prevent it.” When a disciple asks whether to renounce his home, Ramana replied, “If that had been your destiny, the question would not have arisen.”

Interestingly, there is a parallel between these insights and Nicholson’s current interest in the theory of “apparent mental causation” articulated by the late Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner. Wegner held that the apparent link between a conscious intention and a voluntary action is contingent. In fact, both reflect underlying mental events not available to consciousness. The result is “illusions of control.” The “myth of conscious will” – the idea that conscious thought causes action – breaks down. Like Ramana and Eckhart, the normal paradigm of intentional action is rejected. Opening one’s soul and allowing it to be filled with God results in choiceless action, which Eckhart calls “living without a why.” Like Wegner, Ramana argued that “there is no rule that action should depend upon a sense of being the doer.” Nicholson proposes that giving up intentional action constitutes a mark of ultimacy.

As if those parallels were not surprising enough, Luther’s famous debate with Erasmus on free will provides another. While the philosopher defends conscious freedom of the will, Luther, though far from a mystic, objects to the implication, as he sees it, that we can contribute to our salvation, at least a bit, without the need for divine assistance. Free will is a threat to divine grace. Rather, Luther says, “we are so seized as a saw or an ax would be handled by a carpenter.”

Nicholson finds similar parallel positions among the New Atheists and deepens the theological analysis by discussing Gordon Kaufman’s discussion of limit experiences, to which Nicholson adds the experience of the illustory character of one’s sense of agency, which he finds to favor an impersonal conception of ultimacy.

Susan Bratton (*“The Mass on the World” on a Winter Afternoon: Contemporary Wilderness Religious Experience and Ultimacy*) provides a close examination of a phenomenon more familiar than understood: encounters with ultimacy in nature itself. Bratton argues that the mere enjoyment of natural scenery, however sublime, falls short of encountering ultimacy. She draws on surveys of visitors to wilderness areas who sense grandeur, wonderment, an emancipation from materialism, and a modified perception of the meaning of “things.” Church-goers describe their experiences in terms of a God who is close, caring or providential. Non-church-goers speak of peace, harmony, non-ego, and simplicity.

Bratton reports a hike during which she and a friend read aloud Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s “The Mass on the World,” a mass the scientist developed when isolated in the desert of Ordos in Inner Mongolia: “I your priest will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world.” The Mass celebrates Christ as the universal origin, “the divine influence secretly diffused and active in the depths of matter, and the dazzling center where all the innumerable fibers of manifold meet.” “For me, my God, all joy and achievement, the very purpose of my being and all my love of life, all depend on one basic vision of the union between yourself and the universe.”

The two friends were scrambling toward Husky Gap when something happened. “I stopped because of a tremendous feeling of presence, as if the entire cosmos were opening and the very essence of the mountains surrounded and infused us. The light was fading, yet I perceived it as more vivid and intense.” Her friend had also halted. There wasn’t much of a view, although she was “looking out across the ridges as if in awe.” “The overwhelming presence locked us to the spot.”

Bratton compares this experience to those reported by authors such as Evelyn Underhill. She argues that sacred texts can “open doors to perceptions of universal order of the divine.” Teilhard’s text makes the world itself “God’s own altar.” The bread is human toil and the struggling of all life and “this wine, our pain, is more, I know, than a draught that dissolves it.” A text like Teilhard’s can “bridge the gap” between a mere nature experience and an encounter with ultimacy.

In these papers, encounters with ultimacy are celebrated, characterized, and also challenged. All authors report pivotal moments in their own spiritual development, but some distance themselves from

them subsequently. For others, a hermeneutics of suspicion is replaced by an epistemics of trust. The experiences, even as they are subjected to scholarly analysis and comparison, are taken, not only as existentially gripping, but as evidential with regard to ultimate reality. This collection is a foray into the epistemology of ultimacy.