

The International Journal for Field-Being

The Personal and the Impersonal in Conceptions of Divinity

by **Robert Cummings Neville**

Boston University
Boston, MA, USA

IJFB, Vol. 1(1), Part 1, Article No. 3, 2001.

Citation URL: <http://www.iifb.org/ijfb/RCNeville-1-3>

- ¶1. One of the most perplexing phenomena for comparative religion is the diversity with which religions represent what they take to be ultimate. On the surface, this appears to be a problem between religions. The West Asian monotheisms, for instance, represent the ultimate as a god, a singular being who creates the world and interacts with it and with people, as illustrated variously in their common text, the Hebrew bible. East Asian Daoism and Confucianism, by contrast, represent the ultimate by the Dao, or Heaven, or Principle. South Asian Hinduisms can be sorted into personalistic theisms with one or several gods and also into transpersonal, even transdeterminate religions, such as Advaita Vedanta. Observing this variety, it makes sense to wonder whether the representations of the ultimate are even about the same thing, indeed, whether there is such thing as the ultimate, or several ultimates. Mahayana Buddhism, especially Madhyamaka, would go so far as to say that there is nothing ultimate, and that even to consider that question is to get into ontologizing trouble.
- ¶2. Upon closer inspection, however, the diversity is not so much among the various religions but within them. The West Asian monotheisms all have a strong anti-idolatry streak that militates against personalistic imagery. Moreover, as the conception of the created cosmos expanded to include everything imaginable, the transcendence of the creator became more and more abstract in representation. Jewish Kabbalistic thought, Christian philosophical theology from Origen to Thomas Aquinas to Paul Tillich, the Muslim debates between the Asherites and the Mutazilites—all suppose that God is not a Big Guy in the Sky. And yet, all related their abstract representations of God to biblical imagery. Thomas Aquinas' simple, unrelatable, pure Act of Esse was conceived as the Father of Jesus Christ whose mother was Mary the Virgin. The functional reality of Christian religious symbolism puts those things together, and the Christian reference to the ultimate cannot be understood without sorting and connecting those personal and impersonal representations.

- ¶3. Similarly, the actual practice of Daoists and Confucians populates the imaginative world with magically powered sages and legendary emperors, heroes, and ancestors. Devotion to superlatives of human action and personality is as powerful in East Asia as any Christian's friendship with Jesus. Mahayana Buddhism, for all its abstracted reference to emptiness and form, to pure Buddha-mind, and indeed to the lack of any own-being in ultimate reality, still fosters the cult of Guanyin. Similarly, the variety of Hinduisms does not sort out by personal versus impersonal representations, but each within itself has both.
- ¶4. How can this variety internal to each religion be accounted for? The most obvious hypothesis is to distinguish between popular and sophisticated versions within each religion. Plain folks do not bother with the abstract reasoning that drives anthropomorphic representations to greater and greater transcendence. And sophisticated thinkers either distance themselves from folk religion or treat its symbols as merely metaphoric. Surely there is some truth to this hypothesis. It has an analogue in the maturation process whereby children move from childish imagery, often concrete and personalistic, to more abstract representations. Moreover, new converts to a religious path often begin with rather literalistic acceptance of concrete imagery and only slowly, sometimes through several generations, come to appreciate the nuance and play of religious symbols, including those that are abstract and impersonal. Nevertheless, though there is some truth to the popular religion versus sophisticated religion hypothesis, it is not an adequate explanation. In every religion, very sophisticated thinkers who use impersonal representations of the ultimate are also devoted to the ultimate in ways that use highly personal representations. Zhuxi, whose metaphysics of Principle and Material Force is among the most abstract and sophisticated in the Confucian line, codified family rituals for communing with the dead in ancestral traditions reaching back to the original mandates of heaven. Thomists believe that the Pure Act of Esse is God the Father, perhaps even the Holy Trinity.
- ¶5. Another hypothesis with much truth is a developmental one. The Axial Age religions of East, South, and West Asia arose in contexts in which gods of nature, particularly sky gods such as Shangdi, Indra, and Yahweh formed the representational orientations of worship and religious conception. Slowly but inexorably in those three main traditions universal conceptions of the world emerged, and human beings were conceived to be in relation to that universal context or its ground or way (I apologize for the fact there is no tradition-neutral language for describing this). But the traditions varied greatly in locating the center of their metaphoric symbolic systems. Some fixed on the early highly personalistic images, and others on later impersonal, even anti-personal images.

- ¶6. So, for instance, the editing of the main part of the Hebrew bible took place around the time of Jeremiah, in the late seventh century BCE. Jeremiah and his contemporaries Ezekiel and Isaiah had a high view of God as creator of the vast cosmos and Lord of all nations. They also were in close contact with Egyptian and Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian religions. They were sufficiently distant from the immediate imagery of the two accounts of creation in Genesis, the first rather impersonal and the second very personal, to include them both together. This is to say, they adopted personalistic images of varying degrees of concreteness. The book of Job, somewhat later in authorship, is quite clear in using personalistic imagery for God and his heavenly court in explicitly literary ways, all the while making the point that God transcends even moral categories and that humans have no place to stand to categorize God. Christian theologians of the second century of the common era employed the abstractions of Greek philosophy to argue that God creates not only the form of the world but its matter as well. The point is that the fixation on personalistic biblical imagery came at a time when there was strong consciousness of the move toward transpersonal if not impersonal imagery.
- ¶7. The case was the opposite in China. The symbolic representations of the Dao, Heaven, and Earth in the classic books of Daoism and Confucianism are rather impersonal. In calling attention to the human in contrast to the ultimate and metaphysical, Confucius broke rather explicitly with the anthropomorphic conceptions of the objects of sacrifice. Only in notions such as that of the mandate of Heaven is there much resonance with the willful Shangdi. Whereas the very idea of propitiary sacrifice supposes something like a personal object of sacrifice, and the mirroring resonance of ordinary parents with the emperor as parent and in turn with Heaven and Earth as parents supposes some notion of ultimate personhood, the rhetorical center of Confucianism and Daoism is resolutely impersonal. Even the notion of personhood in early Chinese thought does not give much place to consciousness, which is so important in South and West Asian religions.
- ¶8. South Asian religions often do not have a single rhetorical center, like the anthropomorphic in West Asia and the impersonal in East Asia. Rather, they employ several nodes with considerable equanimity, including the Vedic, Upanishadic, sometimes the categories of the orthodox and heterodox philosophic schools, and sometimes devotional materials, for instance in the cults of Siva and Krishna, down to eighteenth through twentieth century interactions with the West occasioning new ways of thought. The Vedanta of Ramakrishna is a nineteenth century phenomenon, distinct in rhetoric and piety from Shankara's or Ramanuja's.

- ¶9. The historical development hypothesis helps to sort the imagery of the ultimate in the main traditions, so that we would expect personalistic imagery in West Asian religions even when the point is being made that God is beyond that, and impersonal imagery in East Asian religions even when waiting upon the mandate of heaven. But that hypothesis does not explain much. Why did the West Asian religions fix on personalistic imagery even when they had moved to a position when they might have employed impersonal rhetoric? Why did the East Asian religions fix upon the impersonal even when they had to repersonalize it? The answers to these and related questions lie in detailed historical studies that go far beyond the general historical development hypothesis itself.
- ¶10. Another helpful hypothesis might be called a semiotic approach. Its thesis is that concrete imagery, especially personalistic imagery, is closely tied to context, and when it is extended beyond its immediate context, it might become misleading or false. At the other extreme, when thinkers with one rhetorical system meet those with another, they need to find terms for communication that bridge their contexts. The easiest way to do this is with relatively abstract terms, terms that hopefully catch the heart of what each of the communicating rhetorical systems means but without the context-dependent concrete imagery. Thus in the context of Israel's flight from Egypt, Yahweh can be represented concretely and with few qualifications as a great warrior; as the creator of the foundations of the universe in Job, however, Yahweh's warrior qualities are but a distant metaphor. Religious thought tends to theology and philosophy as it develops terms that remain steady in meaning across many contexts, seeking universality of communication. And yet, the devotional lives of individuals are highly contextual. Therefore the same person can use concrete, and perhaps highly personal, devotional images in worship, prayer, and meditation, while also using philosophical abstractions in the debating hall and classroom. Sophisticated religious traditions have lore in practice and thought that keeps straight the contextual nature of concrete personalistic imagery. The Axial Age religions arose at a time when empires were bringing together many local cultures and forcing such questions as whether one's own ancestral storm god is the same or different from one's new trading partner's. The imperial situation in the Han Dynasty, the contemporary empire building in India, and the Roman empire, fostered what, in its polite moments, we today would call inter-religious dialogue, and that produced the great philosophical or theological systems of communicative abstractions. Although this hypothesis throws light upon much of the way religious thinkers think, it does not quite register the passion with which religious representations are held. Religious people believe their ideas are true, and their symbols refer accurately, if with partiality, to the ultimate.

- ¶11. The final hypothesis I want to put forward addresses the issue of truth, and it can be called the ontological-anthropological continuum hypothesis. It claims that there is a spectrum from the highly personal to the highly transcendent and impersonal in religious symbolism, and that a profound perception of or engagement with reality lies at each end of the spectrum, each pulling its own way. To take the ontological pole first, the ultimate is engaged as ontologically ultimate, the most real, the encompassing, the ground of things. Because of the variety of different representations of ontological ultimacy, there is no one neutral way to say this. But I suspect that the dialectic behind the ontological ultimate is concerned with contingency and its ground, and often with the possibility of diversity and unity. Some paradigmatic ontological representations are the Dao that cannot be named being the mother of the Dao that can be named, Isvara as creator of the world, Brahman as the reality behind or within the illusion of difference, God as Creator, the Neo-Platonic One, the Thomistic Act of Esse, the Scotistic creator whose will makes even the divine nature, Schleiermacher's absolute dependence, and Tillich's ground of being. The ontological dialectic of the contingent and its ground lies behind the critique of idolatry in West Asian religions, the distinction between reality and appearance in South Asian religions, and the search for the ultimately harmonizing or centering in East Asian ones. To engage the ultimate ontologically in this way thus pulls representations away from the personalistic, which always seem contingent, toward the more transcendent. Even when the transcendent ground is represented as supreme consciousness, as in Ramanuja's theology for instance, it is a mightily impersonal consciousness.
- ¶12. The other pole of the spectrum I call the anthropological by which I mean how the ultimate is viewed from the standpoint of human need, will, and devotion. The bhakti elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, especially Pure Land, represent the object of worship as personal not because they believe personality is descriptive of that object, but because the worshipper needs to treat the object as personal in order to present himself or herself with the most heartfelt needs. Even in Buddhism, for which there is no ontological object to whom to pray, petitionary prayer is appropriate, for instance to Avaloketeshvara or Guanyin. In East Asian religions the cultivation of proper orientations to things so as to effect harmony and power is often achieved through visualizations of gods and sages; medieval Daoism even makes that a barter relation. In West Asian religions a person needs total purity or honesty, that is, expression of the most heartfelt need and desires, in order to approach God: the primitive address to God is to beg for life, whatever life might mean in the context. Of course in all these traditions there are ritual strains for which the existential inner-heart language I have used is inappropriate. Some argue that this sense of personal interiority is both late and Western. But I suspect the contrary, that it is both primitive and pervasive. The anthropological pole attends to what is most real for persons and their needs, and justifies personifications of the ultimate as the object of religious address and worship without necessarily taking those personifications to be descriptive. A way of saying this in terms of semiotic theory is to note that whereas the ontological pole valorizes

symbols that are iconic or descriptive, the anthropological pole valorizes symbols that are indexical or reorienting and personally transformative. Just as the ontological pole pulls symbols down the spectrum toward the impersonal, the anthropological pole pulls symbols down the other way toward the personal.

- ¶13. My intention in these brief remarks has been to muse on the muddle of personal and impersonal symbols for the ultimate that characterizes the main religious traditions that have survived into our time. I have offered several hypotheses, each of which has something to contribute to understanding. The popular versus sophisticated religion hypothesis lifts up a level of religious phenomena especially pertinent to scholars of religion who have to get along with their mothers. The historical development hypothesis articulates some of the relations among personal and impersonal symbols in terms of historical conditions that fix the center of balance in religious tradition's choice of images for the ultimate. The semiotic hypothesis sorts the symbols according to concrete context dependence versus universality of communication and freedom from having to qualify claims by context. The ontological-anthropological spectrum hypothesis shows how the religious imagination is pulled in two different directions by two different ways of engaging the ultimate, each with its claim to a kind of truth. I hope these hypotheses constitute a beginning for inquiry into how the ultimate can be so variously and vigorously symbolized.

END NOTES

ISSN 1548-6001

Professor Lik Kuen Tong, Ph.D., Editor
Professor Curtis R. Naser, Ph.D., Co-Editor
Professor Theresa Dykeman, Ph.D., Managing Editor

IIFB - Fairfield University - Fairfield, CT - 06430
Tel: (203) 254-4000 Ext. 2857, 2851 Fax: (203) 254-4074
lktong@iifb.org -- cnaser@iifb.org -- <mailto:cnaser@iifb.org>

Site Design by [Commonwealth WebWorks](#)
Database to Web Programming by [Eidos Virtual Web](#)
Powered by *ColdFusion*